

GAA ALL-IRELAND INTERMEDIATE CLUB FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP SEMI-FINAL

# Fitness and heart central to semi-final success – Finnerty

Oughterard boss praises his side's second half display

By Billy Coss

THE journey is sometimes more important than the destination. For the Oughterard footballers, that old adage certainly rings true of their pathway to Croke Park. It's rarely been without incident and tight scrapes, but they've shown courage, character and have in the words of their manager Tommy Finnerty "become men" along the way.

Dumped out in the group stages of last year's Galway Intermediate Football Championship, the collateral damage as An Spidéal and Micheál Breathnach advanced to contest the final, Oughterard's potential was never in doubt.

This campaign, they negotiated several nervy moments and flirted with the exit door more than once - most notably Kilkerrin-Clonberne in the round-robin phase and Micheál Breathnach in a pair of epic county finals - but they survived, prospered and their reward is a trip to the theatre of dreams on Saturday week.

Never, during their 10-match run, were the odds so stacked against them as they were taking on Templenoe on Saturday afternoon. Kerry clubs have dominated the championship, winning six of the 16 titles on offer and this year's representatives were on paper stacked with quality, including four members of the Kingdom team that lost last year's All-Ireland final in Tadhg Morley, Gavin Crowley and brothers Adrian and Kilian Spillane.

Oughterard weren't cowed by the challenge, however, and in what has become their calling card, delivered a superb second half before coming through a tight, nerve-jangling finish.

"This didn't just come as a once-off, hard-fought performance from Oughterard," explained Finnerty outside a jubilant winning dressing-room.

"In our two county finals with Micheál Breathnach, we kept coming back and today it was the same. I think that our fitness levels are at a very, very high level. We're playing much, much better in second halves. That game today we went in 7-5 down at half-time, I knew in the first county final

with Micheál Breathnach we were 5-3 down at half-time and we kicked 11 points in that second half against the breeze so that's the level of fitness that's within our group. You can be fit and you can break all the records on GPS systems but it comes down to heart and when that dirty ball breaks on the ground it's between you and the guy beside you, you have to just win it."

Goals are worth their weight in gold in winter slugfests like Saturday, and Oughterard's ability to come up with one and keep them out at the other end was decisive. In the final quarter alone, they kicked 1-5 and conceded just three points.

Afterwards Finnerty paid tribute to two of his leading lights: Paul Walsh, scorer of the match-defining goal the 47th minute, and also 'keeper Jordan Waller who delivered another very assured display between the posts.

"Paul is a fantastic player. He's one of the most talented players in our club. He's twice a Galway minor and you don't play two years in-a-row with the Galway minors unless you're very talented, and that is Paul Walsh.

"Jordan has had a fantastic



OUGHTERARD manager Tommy Finnerty.

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year. For me, he's a top, top 'keeper. His kick-outs, his handling, his decision-making and also being so constructive with his backline, always keeping them in check and never being negative, always building the confidence of the backs that are protecting him."

Croke Park in a fortnight's time then. Did Finnerty, an All-Ireland minor winner at the venue with Galway in 1986, ever envisage it when

taking over as manager two years ago?

"I actually did and I'm not saying that in a cocky way. I gave out the calendar for the year to them and the last date I had on the calendar was the All-Ireland semi-final. There was no need to put the final down because if we won that game we were in the final."

Keeping feet on the ground presents his next assignment ahead of a date with Magher-

acloone of Monaghan who emerged convincing winners over Louth's Mattock Rangers.

"That's the management's job and we've done it to date but it's easy to do. These guys managed themselves during the Christmas and New Year celebrations. They're easy to handle. We've turned a corner with this team. I said before the culture was a problem. It's no problem now. These guys are men now, they're men."

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## 'We liked being the underdogs'

By Billy Coss

AFTER joyous scenes with their hardy band of supporters followed their win over Templenoe, Oughterard players and management drew breath and attempted to put words on their achievement of toppling the red-hot favourites from Kerry and sealing a first trip to Croke Park in their history.

No silverware was on offer in Kilmallock, of course, but memories from such a famous day will be cherished fondly, even more so if they go on to account for Monaghan's Magheracloone at GAA headquarters on Saturday week. For Ronan Molloy and Jordan Waller, two of their standout performers on Saturday, and indeed all year, it was a special

occasion for a team who defied some considerable odds to turn over the Kerry champions.

"We're going to Croke Park, it's just surreal," said Waller, who turned in another superb display between the sticks for Oughterard.

"It hasn't sunk in, I just can't believe it. We knew we'd the players to do it. I know the bookies might not have given us a chance today but we never, ever bought into that and thankfully hard work paid off in the end.

"We liked being the underdogs. Nobody gave us a chance, but we knew ourselves what was going to happen today. We were going to Croke Park, it was as simple as that. We shocked them because they did not know what was coming. We hit them strong. They probably haven't been tested like that all year. They walked

through Kerry and walked through Munster. We're a second half team and we just knew it was in us."

Defiant in defence and inspirational with his forays forward, Ronan Molloy has epitomised so much of what Oughterard have been about this season. Along with the Monaghan brothers, Ryan and Cian, Molloy formed a dominant half-back line who kicked four points between them and were instrumental in their come-from-behind victory.

"An unbelievable feeling," said Molloy afterwards. "We're a small town out in west Connemara. We were up against it today, we knew it, but deep down we knew we could do it. We knew we had to put in a performance to dig it out and everyone gave 110 per cent from start to finish and that's what told. Two points down at half-time, we

regrouped and said we were going to give it everything. Fitness and hard work told in the end for us.

"The whole town is up here today and it's an unbelievable feeling. For 30 local lads there, from under-7s all the way up to go from intermediate to senior level and now to play in Croke, it's a dream come true. You only dream of this stuff. It's going to be some feeling up there playing, putting on your green and white for Oughterard."

RONAN Molloy starred in Saturday's win over Templenoe.

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