

SPORT

GAA ALL-IRELAND INTERMEDIATE CLUB FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP FINAL

Oughterard bidding to defy the odds one more time

• Magheraclone of Monaghan await in Croke Park final

By Billy Coss

SÉAN Kelly's tenure as Uachtarán Cumann Lúthchleas Gael from 2003-'06 will be forever linked with the relaxation of Rule 42 and Croke Park opening its doors to soccer and rugby - a ground-breaking moment in the Association's history.

Further highlights from the Kerry native's legacy came with the inaugural Christy Ring and Nicky Rackard Cups, but also establishing the All-Ireland Junior and Intermediate Club Championships which gave lower grades their day in the sun and provided every club in the country with a pathway to Croke Park.

Cork and Kilkenny have developed close to a monopoly in the hurling competitions, winning more than two-thirds of the silverware on offer. The counties clashed on the double last weekend with Tullaroan and Conahy Shamrocks taking two more titles Noreside.

Their football equivalents have been far more democratic in comparison, and Saturday will see four clubs drawn from all four provinces descend on the capital for an undercard to the Allianz Football League Division 1 opener between Dublin and Kerry.

At junior level, Na Gaeil from Kerry meet Wexford's Rathgarogue-Cushinstown (3.15pm) before Oughterard and Magheraclone Mitchells go head-to-head in the All-Ireland Intermediate Club Football Championship final (5.15pm). Galway versus Monaghan clashes are a rarity in championship football, regardless of the grade, and it has all the ingredients to be an open, up-tempo decider between two attack-minded sides.

Pitched into the Galway championship's 'Group of Death' for a second straight year, Oughterard emerged by the skin of their teeth against Clifden, Micheál Breathnach and Kilkerrin-Clonberne. Caltra and Dunmore MacHales were dispatched ruthlessly in the knockout stages, before a pair of epic finals with Micheál



OUGHTERARD forward Paul Walsh takes on Flach Ó Béarra of Micheál Breathnach during their Galway Intermediate Football Championship final replay at Pearse Stadium.

PHOTO: SEAN RYAN | SPORTSPHOTOJIE

Breathnach went almost two and-a-half hours and required penalties to find a winner.

Outside the county boundaries, there's been no limit to their ambition and both Tusk Lord Edwards from Roscommon and Mayo's The Neale were taken down with sensational second half displays in Connacht. That's been their calling card all campaign and was the difference yet again when defying the odds in a rousing semi-final win over Templenoe from Kerry. It's been quite a journey, to put it mildly.

Saturday's opponents, Magheraclone Mitchells, are located close to Monaghan's borders with Cavan, Meath and Louth, and arrive with a unique and well-publicised backstory. They were forced from their club grounds in September 2018 after a disused, old gypsum mine collapsed and caused a sinkhole that would cost them their pitch, clubhouse and community centre. Some nearby homes were also rendered out of bounds.

On the back of one major blow came another. Relegation from senior football followed soon after, but they've bounced back impressively as a club and as a team. Annaghminnon Rovers provide a temporary home 20 minutes up the road in Louth and a free-scoring victory - a facet of their season - over Donaghmoynne in the Monaghan final confirmed a return to the top-flight.

Their Ulster odyssey took in wins over O'Brien's Foreglen from Derry and Down's Glenn John Martins before Tyrone's Galbally Pearses were accounted for in the final. They've been shooting the lights out on a consistent basis and after trailing Louth's Mattock Rangers by a goal shortly after the interval of their All-Ireland semi-final, sent over 17 points in a devastating second half display.

Former Farney great and 2007 All-Star Tommy Freeman kicked eight points that afternoon and is their best-known player. Recently retired Monaghan footballer

Gavin Doogan provides plenty of impetus from midfield and landed four points. Other names to watch out for include Paudie McMahon, scorer of 1-4 in the Ulster final, as well as Jamie, Barry and Allan Kieran, all sons of manager James Kieran.

Oughterard are bidding to become only the second Galway intermediate football club to win at GAA headquarters, and the third overall when you factor in the Oranmore-Maree hurlers' superb success 12 months ago. Caherlistrane (2006), St Michael's ('09) and St James' ('11) all tasted final defeat, while Moyculen remain the sole winner against Dublin's Fingal Ravens in 2008.

Defensively, Oughterard were superb against Templenoe two weeks ago. Jordan Waller kept his sixth clean sheet of the campaign, while Ciaran Hanley, Liam Moran and team captain Eddie O'Sullivan held a much vaunted inside line to a very respectable tally. Marquee forwards like Killian Spillane from

Templenoe, and indeed The Neale's Tommy Conroy in the Connacht final, have been well-contained and a similar outcome will be needed against Freeman and co.

Oughterard's half-back line trio of Ronan Molloy and the Monaghan brothers, Ryan and Cian, have been magnificent all season, but particularly in that semi-final. They're mobile, athletic and driving forces for the team. Such is their attacking threat, they've amassed 3-25 between them over 10 matches. Cian Monaghan has 2-13 of that total.

Enda Tierney and Eric Lee have been influential figures all campaign, and along with PJ McGauley and the returning Daniel Kenny will be major players in the middle third battleground.

Nobody has stood taller than Matthew Tierney who is still eligible for U-20 football and is sure to be in the plans of Dónal Ó Fátharta and possible even Padraic Joyce this spring. Between clutch frees, penalties and a major threat from open play, the NUIG fresher has amassed a tally of

4-45 on the road to Croke. His left-footed free-taking from distance is another important string to Oughterard's bow, just as the placed ball striking of his older brother, Enda, next on the scorers' list with 0-25, is from the right. Niall Lee has clocked up 1-20 to date, while Paul Walsh (1-9), Patrick Walsh (2-6) and Brian Lambert (0-5) have put their shoulder to the wheel with valuable scores and plenty of hard graft into the bargain.

Oughterard are above average Galway winners. Their potential was well signposted locally and they delivered Galway and Connacht titles marrying substance with a fair degree of style along the way. Every question has been answered emphatically and they're a team that should be well-suited to the fast track of Croke Park.

Magheraclone have been installed as favourites, albeit marginal ones, but they're coming up against opponents that have been defying the odds all campaign. Who would bet against Oughterard doing it one more time?

VERDICT: OUGHTERARD

Routes to the Final

OUGHTERARD

GALWAY SFC

| | | |
|---|---------------------|-------------------------------|
| D | Clifden | 0-9 to 0-9 |
| W | Micheál Breathnach | 1-14 to 3-6 |
| D | Kilkerrin-Clonberne | 0-16 to 0-16 |
| W | Caltra | 3-15 to 3-6 |
| W | Dunmore MacHales | 3-18 to 0-6 |
| D | Micheál Breathnach | 0-14 to 0-14 |
| W | Micheál Breathnach | 0-19 to 1-16 (5-4 on pens) |

CONNACHT SFC

| | | |
|---|-------------------|--------------|
| W | Tusk Lord Edwards | 2-16 to 1-8 |
| W | The Neale | 1-16 to 0-11 |

ALL-IRELAND SEMI-FINAL

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| W | Templenoe | 1-12 to 0-12 |
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MAGHERACLOONE MITCHELLS

MONAGHAN

| | | |
|---|----------------|--------------|
| W | Tyholland | 4-16 to 3-9 |
| W | Monaghan Harps | 4-12 to 0-14 |
| W | Corduff | 0-23 to 1-17 |
| W | Emyvale | 1-13 to 1-9 |
| W | Donaghmoynne | 2-17 to 1-12 |

ULSTER

| | | |
|---|--------------------|--------------|
| W | O'Brien's Foreglen | 3-10 to 2-10 |
| W | Glenn John Martins | 0-13 to 0-7 |
| W | Galbally Pearses | 1-15 to 0-13 |

ALL-IRELAND SEMI-FINAL

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|---|-----------------|-------------|
| W | Mattock Rangers | 0-24 to 1-5 |
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