

SENIOR FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP PREVIEW

# Clash of All-Ireland champs dominates first round action

Newly promoted Oughterard get ready to throw down the gauntlet to Corofin

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KINGPINS Corofin and newly promoted Oughterard meet in the battle of the All-Ireland champions this weekend but, right across the board, there are numerous mouth-watering fixtures to kickstart the 2020 Galway senior football title race.

Two of the big hitters in recent years have been Mountbellew/Moylough and Annaghdown - the latter's 2019 campaign aside - and, even at this early stage, it is a massive game for both sides.

Indeed, there is little or nothing between many of the teams contesting the opening round of fixtures, which begin with the clash of Claregalway and Killannin at Pearse Stadium on Friday evening.

Both of these have performed admirably in the senior grade over the last two years, with Claregalway advancing to last year's quarter-finals and Killannin missing out on the knockout stages on scoring difference in 2018 and '19.

While Corofin are firm favourites to retain their title - which would complete an astounding eight in a row - the county intermediate championship is nowhere as clear cut and the majority of teams will harbour genuine aspirations of securing the honours.

Naomh Anna, Leitir Móir and Killakerin, the two sides demoted from senior in 2019, will go close while Oranmore/Maree, Cortoon Shamrocks, Kilkerrin/Clonberne and Dunmore MacHales will also not be far away. For IFC games, see fixtures.

## FRIDAY

Claregalway v Killannin (Pearse Stadium, 7:30pm)

• Streamed by Galway GAA. BOASTING a clean bill of health, Killannin, under new manager Frank Noone, will be eager to lay down a marker early in this campaign. While the Sweeneys, Patrick and captain Cathal, and Johnny Heaney are their marquee names, they have plenty of other notable players around the park to make an impression.

It will be interesting to see how Claregalway will deal with the loss of Danny Cummins (Australia) given his influence in attack. After winning the U20 championship in 2019, they have young talent bursting

through, but they will still look to Brian O'Donoghue and Sean Moran to provide the leadership.

Verdict: Claregalway.

## SATURDAY

Moycullen v Micheál Breathnach (Pearse Stadium, 2:30pm)

• Streamed by Galway GAA. DESPITE suffering the heartbreak of two consecutive county intermediate final defeats, Micheál Breathnach find themselves back in the senior ranks. The return of Fiontán Ó Curraoin from injury is a big boost and, with the likes of Fiach Ó Bearra and Sean Denvir in their side, they will be competitive.

However, even without Galway's Peter Cooke (abroad), Moycullen look to hold the aces in the two Kellys, Sean and Paul, Gareth Bradshaw, David Wynne and captain Dessie Conneely. Throw in emerging talent James McLaughlin and Daniel Cox, and Don Connellan's out-fit look a fair proposition.

Verdict: Moycullen.

An Spidéal v Barna (Moycullen, 4:30pm)

LONG term injuries Conor Curran and Declan Walsh are back in training for Barna, although this game may have come too soon for them. Although without several quality players, they still have many performers of note among their ranks, including Galway U20 duo Sean Fitzgerald and Oisín Gormally.

A breath of fresh air to the senior championship in 2019, An Spidéal proved they can mix it with the best. Without sharpshooter Antaine O'Laoidh (shoulder) for much of that campaign, his return will bolster a side that is marshalled superbly from the back by goalkeeper Magnus Breathnach.

Verdict: An Spidéal.

An Cheathru Rua v Milltown (Pearse Stadium, 5:30pm)

• Streamed by Galway GAA. INJURIES were An Cheathru Rua's undoing in the latter stages of their group campaign last year - suffering two heavy defeats - and, already, they have been hit with another big one with Oisín Ó Gríofa sidelined. That said, it is still within them to cause an upset.

For Milltown, who have a neat blend of youth and experience, Darren Mullahy, Ciaran Blake and Terence Godwin are



Oughterard players Robert Gill, Phillip Gibbons, Daniel Kenny, Joseph Clancy, Ryan Monaghan, Thomas Finnerty and Patrick Walsh celebrate their All-Ireland club intermediate football triumph at Croke Park last January. Can Tommy Finnerty's charges drive on in the senior ranks this year?

injury concerns. There have been no retirements or emigration and with the likes of James Kavanagh and Sean and Cathal Blake leading the charge, they should be in good fettle for this one.

Verdict: Milltown.

Tuam Stars v Caherlistrane (Tuam Stadium, 7:30pm)

2019 county finalists Tuam Stars are without Brendan Mashengele (UK) but the return of Seamus Kelly and Alan O'Connell from Australia is a boost to manager Tommy Carton. They have no injury concerns. Dara Ó Ruairc, Gary O'Donnell, Jamie Murphy will lead the charge.

Under manager Larry Bane, who returns for a third occasion, this will be the first time since 1999 that Cormac Bane (retirement) will not feature for Caherlistrane. In addition, Cein D'Arcy (ankle), Stephen Burke (hamstring) and Kyle O'Neill (shoulder) are all in a race to be

fit. Verdict: Tuam Stars.

## SUNDAY

Corofin v Oughterard (Pearse Stadium, 2:30pm)

• Televised by TG4. KINGPINS Corofin have numerous concerns, most pressing being Ian Burke (ankle), Ronan Steede (knee) and Martin Farragher (hamstring). Added to this, Michael Farragher and Bernard Power have only returned recently to training following injuries. Tony Gill (collarbone) is a long-term absentee.

After claiming the All-Ireland intermediate club title in January, Oughterard's ranks have swelled with an influx of players from underage and further afield. It gives manager Tommy Finnerty selection headaches, but his squad looks a strong one going forward. Backboned by the Tierneys, Monaghans, Lees and Walshs, Eddie O'Sullivan

captures the side. Verdict: Corofin.

Salthill/Knocknacarra v St. Michael's (Pearse Stadium, 5:30pm)

ST. Michael's Keith Ward, who is carrying an injury, will miss this game through suspension after his red card against Moycullen in last year's quarter-final. They will also be without Alan Glynn, a long-term injury concern. Shane Connaughton, Damian Connaughton, captain David Cunnane, Eddie Hoare, Frank Daly and Jamie Downes offer plenty of experience.

Salthill/Knocknacarra are boosted by the return of several players, none least the talented Evan Murphy from a cruciate injury. Sean Armstrong is also back for 2020 while former Mayo panellist Alex Corduff (transfer) is a new addition. Cathal Sweeney, Eoghan Tiney and Robert Finnerty ooze quality.

Verdict: Salthill/

Knocknacarra.

Mountbellew/Moylough v Annaghdown (Tuam Stadium, 6pm)

• Streamed by Galway GAA. MOUNTBELLEW/Moylough's John Daly is out for the year after dislocating his knee, which requires an operation. A major blow for club and county. Two other big names, Joe Bergin (retired) and Cathal Kenny (transferred), are also no longer involved. They still have quality in Michael Daly and Barry McHugh.

No more than Mountbellew/Moylough, Annaghdown will have to play out their year without a key player in Ciaran Duggan (knee). In defence, emerging talent Ciaran Potter has fitted in seamlessly while, up front, Damien Comer and Frankie Burke remain their greatest threats. A difficult one to call.

Verdict: Mountbellew/Moylough.