

Constitution prevail in regal contest

CONSTITUTION 13
ST MARY'S 9

FROM the moment the visitor entered the Temple Hill Ground on Saturday there was an awareness of great expectation and anticipation. The inaugural All-Ireland League first division match in Cork whetted the appetite, with Constitution and St Mary's College, two clubs renowned for their competitive instincts, in opposition.

On the field, there was an urgency and dedication of purpose about the play that was a clear indication that both clubs deemed victory as imperative. At the end of a tremendous contest, it was Constitution who had prevailed, just about, with four points to spare.

One could scarcely have asked for a more auspicious opener to the national league, a match that contained all the wholesome elements of competition, a regal contest played in difficult conditions. A vigorous wind blew a disconcerting path down from the city end of the ground. There were a few heavy showers to add to the hazards, but nothing to dampened the full hearted endeavour on the field or the marked enthusiasm in the stand and on the terraces.

Michael Bradley, the Constitution captain, bore the countenance of a satisfied man a half an hour after the finish. It was a satisfaction tinged with relief. The flame must now be rekindled for another assignment on a distant field. Constitution must travel to Ballymena next Saturday. They will make that journey more comfortably with two points in the bank.

St Mary's, meanwhile, left for Dublin with nothing to show for a great second half performance which might have given them at least a division of the points. The merit of the tremendous second half performance by St Mary's is put in perspective by reference to the interval scoreline.

Constitution won the toss and elected to play into the wind in the first half. It looked as if the hard labour of their task had been performed when at halftime they led 4-3. It might have been more. Their forwards had played well, Donal Lenihan had made his mark with a lovely clean catch from a line-out and an unstop-

RUGBY

Edmund Van Esbeck

able surge for a try in the 12th minute.

St Mary's could make little impression. Nor was their use of the wind marked by shrewdness, nor accuracy of execution in their tactical kicking. They got a penalty in the 27th minute, taken twice, as the ball fell over as Stephen Hennessy made his run up. Constitution charged forward. Hennessy picked up and tried a drop at goal and missed. Referee Stephen Hilditch ordered the kick to be retaken. Hennessy kicked the goal. Such had been the trend of play the incident looked no more than something likely to prove a statistical entry.

The transformation in the play of St Mary's in the second half was truly remarkable. They took on the Constitution pack. Second rows Steve Jameson and Kevin Potts dominated the line out. Their driving and rucking disconcerted the Constitution pack. They might have scored twice, but were held up just short of the objective.

Then in the 64th minute, the best back on the field, Constitution outside half Ralph Keyes dropped a glorious goal from 40 yards. He had made a great break in the first half that might have yielded a try and he played with infinite wisdom into the wind.

Eight minutes after that dropped goal, he came on to the end of a pass from Bradley after a half break. Keyes threw a long pass beyond his centres to Kenny Murphy and he, in turn, found Denis O'Dowd who stepped inside a tackle and scored wide out. Keyes landed a great conversion and it was 13-3. But even that intimidating scoreline did not diminish St Mary's efforts. Peter MacGiolla Riogh got a try three minutes from the end and Hennessy converted. A few more anxious minutes for Constitution to endure. They need some remedial work on the back row, but just over 1,100 paying customers saw a quality match.

Constitution: K Murphy; B Smith, B Walsh, C Murphy, D O'Dowd; R Keyes, M Bradkey capt; P Soden, P Derham, P McCarthy, D Lenihan, D Lynch, T Tuohy, B Howell, V Donnelly.

St Mary's College: S Hennessy; A White, R Hernan, capt, V Cunningham, B Kealy; P MacGiolla Riogh, S O'Beirne; B Keane, D Whitty, G Hassett, K Potts, S Jameson, B Gavin, D Fanning, N McCarthy.

Referee: S Hilditch (Ulster).

Constitution get off to winning start

CONSTITUTION 13

ST MARY'S 9

From David Walsh at Temple Hill

CONSTITUTION: K Murphy, B Smith, B Walsh, C Murphy, D O'Dowd, R Keyes, M Bradley (capt), P Soden, P Derham, P McCarthy, D Lenihan, D Lynch, T Tuohy, B Howell, V Donnelly.

ST MARY'S: S Hennessy, A White, V Cunningham, R Herman (capt), B Kealy, P Mac Giolla Riogh, S O'Beirne, B Keane, D Whitty, J Hassett, K Potts, S Jameson, B Gavin, D Fanning, N McCarthy.

REFEREE: S Hilditch (Ulster)

RIGHT at the end, Mary's stampeded towards the Con line. From ten yards out, they got to within five and, from the third ruck, prop Jerry Hassett lunged towards an equalising try. He was held up, Con's hooker Paul Derham picked and surged out of his team's danger zone.

It was what we used to call "real Cup tie stuff". Now it is stuff of the All Ireland League and the sizeable attendance (estimated at 1,500) loved it. If this is what the new league shall bring, it has not arrived a moment too soon.

Constitution were so much the better side in the first half, the difference between the teams wasn't funning. Frozen by nerves, Mary's were as much spectators as those who watched from beyond the sideline. First time fly-half Peter Mac Giolla Riogh got an attacking ball, he let it spill.

Against the breeze, Con played with a smashing efficiency, driving into the breakdowns and forcing Mary's backwards. And, always, Con remained upright. The new league has clearly concentrated the minds.

Michael Bradley moved sharply, Ralph Keyes controlled the match at fly-half and Mary's had precious little ball. The big wind was an advantage they could never use. More than that, Mary's didn't give the impression of wanting a battle.

They trailed 4-3 at the interval and calculations then suggested they would be lucky to survive with anything less than a 20 points hammering. But Mary's are, by nature, fighters. Faces to the wind, backs to the wall; they were superb in the second half.

Kevin Potts and Steve Jameson, the locks, threw themselves headlong into the confrontation - Jameson controlling the middle of the line out and Potts hurting Con everytime he got the ball in his hands. Close at the second row's shoulder was flanker Noel McCarthy and Mary's were, at the very least, looking like Mary's.

For twenty minutes of the second half, they trailed by just one point and owned the match. Ray Hernan made a marvellously incisive run to set up Mac Giolla Riogh but the fly-half was handtripped with the line open. On another occasion Declan Fanning flipped up a short pass for Potts who was stopped on the line.

Then with Constitution struggling to catch breath, Keyes produced the kind of moment his performance suggested was inevitable. Lenihan went high to take a line out, Keyes was a good 40 yards out when he struck the drop goal. He could have been 50, the ball flew precisely where the No 10 intended.

That was 7-3 and, still facing the big wind, Mary's now had a mountain to climb. Con

struck before they could leave the foothills. No 8 Barry Howell winning a line out, Bradley sucking in the defence, releasing to Keyes and the fly-half's long pass found Kenny Murphy beyond his centres. Murphy transferred to the impressive left wing Denis O'Dowd and that was it.

Murphy converted for 13-3, only eight minutes remained and, on another day, the crowd might have begun to filter away. Not on this day. Mary's, sure enough, began the long climb back. Potts, Fanning and McCarthy set up Mac Giolla Riogh for a try, Steve Hennessy converted and that left us with a quite thrilling conclusion.

Constitution are exasperating. Outstanding in the first half and oh so ordinary when Mary's caught fire in the second. Through the first half Con did look very formidable. Phil Soden and Paul McCarthy are good props and the Con scrum moves in only one direction. But it was the hunger and technique of the forward unit which most impressed in that first period.

The try which put Con in front came on ten minutes when Lenihan caught at a line out and plunged forward for the score. Coming away the second row thanked his line out assistant, McCarthy, and reminded you that in this game nobody does much without help. Murphy, who was again on top of his game, kicked the conversion badly but that didn't seem to matter.

Hennessy kicked a penalty for Mary's 13 minutes before the break but at 4-3 down Mary's looked dead at half-time. Their resurrection ensured that an historic day was marked by a very decent match.