

Rugby voice will cheer for Galway

By PADDY DOWNEY

A distinguished sportsman of international renown will watch the All-Ireland hurling final from a seat in the Hogan stand at Croke Park tomorrow — and cheer for Galway.

Sometime, possibly many times, during the game he will remember the day, 20 years ago, when he played there himself, wearing Galway's maroon in the All-Ireland minor final.

Although his sporting path has long since taken a different direction, Ciaran Fitzgerald, Ireland's Triple Crown captain (twice over), Lions captain and now the Irish national coach, is still a keen follower of hurling and one of Galway's most steadfast supporters.

He rarely misses an All-Ireland final and when Galway are involved 20 packs of the most awesome All-Blacks wouldn't keep him out of Croke Park. But he is not a blinkered supporter. When I talked with him a couple of days ago his heart was not ruling his head when he said:

"I think Galway are the better team, good enough to win. But they'll be in trouble if their backs give the Cork forwards the freedom they enjoyed against Tipperary in the Munster final. The Cork forwards will score if they are allowed to run loose. The match will be won and lost in there. I don't think the Galway defence will fail. The full backs now have the chance to prove that there is no question-mark hanging over that line."

He spoke of the danger of over-confidence in a team. "Galway are favourites and that's an uneasy tag to carry, especially if a team are any way arrogant, although I am not attributing arrogance to Galway. You have to be an exceptional side to win from the front."

The line between confidence and complacency, or arrogance, was thin, Fitzgerald said. "Apart from ability, the best ingredients for success are hunger and freshness. On the day, everything starts 50-50, in any game."

"Galway are exceptionally lucky to have a man like Cyril Farrell in charge. He has seen both sides, defeat and victory, and I'm sure he will have his players in the right frame of mind".

Born in Ballina, Co Mayo, but reared in Loughrea, Co Galway, from the age of four, Ciaran Fitzgerald was immersed in hurling during his childhood and youth and played in all of the under-age competitions with the local club. On one occasion when the Galway Co GAA Board sent a group of boys to the Gaeltacht to learn Irish and practise hurling at the same time he was coached by Donie Nealon of Tipperary.

He played for Garbally College in the All-Ireland colleges' championship — they met St

Peter's, Wexford, in the semi-final of 1968 — and was a member of the Galway county minor team in 1969 and 1970. Although he would have liked to play in a half back position, he was placed at full forward because he scored two goals in one game against Dublin.

He was full forward on the Galway team that lost to Cork in the All-Ireland minor final of 1970, and among his teammates were players who were later to become famous names with the county senior side — Iggy Clarke, P. J. Molloy, Joe McDonagh and Andy Fenton.

Fitzgerald might well have joined them on that plane if curiosity had not led him into rugby one day during his final year as a student at Garbally. The priest in charge of the college team put him in as hooker, "because I resembled the boy, then departed, who had played in that position previously". Thus are some illustrious sporting careers begun. He was also required to throw the javelin at sports meetings, because the other boy had thrown it, too. But that was a non-starter.

"I found rugby very complicated at first but I was fascinated by the game". His interest in rugby deepened when, as an Army cadet, he studied at UCG — and then his sporting paths irrevocably divided. He was now set on a new career but continued to play hurling for several years, with the Loughrea club and in Army competitions. In 1977 he made his final choice. "But after that, on holidays, I always carried a couple of hurleys and a sliothar in the car".

When he captained the Irish rugby team that toured Japan in 1985 he was bombarded with questions about hurling for 25 minutes at their arrival press conference.

They had a dozen hurleys and three dozen balls flown out and Fitzgerald, Donal Lenihan, Brian Spillane and Michael Bradley demonstrated the game to growing numbers of fascinated Japanese onlookers after their training sessions.

"During the tour the media seemed to cover hurling as much as rugby," he said. "Hurling is on a par with any field game in the world. It is a unique game that we should show with pride to people all over the globe."

"No other country has anything like it. It symbolises Ireland, the Irish temperament and character. It is a tremendous asset and should be used to promote an image of Ireland abroad".

Rugby has been Ciaran Fitzgerald's special passion for nearly 20 years but the love of hurling implanted in his boyhood holds a permanent place in his heart. The maroon jersey that he once wore will bring many memories of that boyhood back to him tomorrow.

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