

Dungannon face up to life in second rung after defeat

THEY WERE too good to go down. Everybody said it — even the St Mary's College coach Ciaran Fitzgerald bemoaned Dungannon's departure to the second division after his team applied the final, fatal blow at Templeville Road on Saturday.

Dungannon can, of course, point to the debilitating sequence of injuries which so disrupted the early part of their season. There were many games they were unlucky to lose, and a points' differential of minus 32 is ample proof that they were the traditional whipping boys who prop up tables at the end of the season.

Yet this eighth defeat in nine matches encapsulated many of their problems. It was another match that got away but that was almost entirely of their own making. As you'd expect from a team compelled to fight for their First Division status against a team who had merely a sense of professionalism in their own performance to play for, Dungannon forced the tempo throughout and had possession aplenty to win comfortably.

ST MARY'S **13**
DUNGANNON **9**

Gerry Thornley

The day's most revealing statistic was arguably the penalty count of 21-7 in the visitors' favour, which accurately reflected how much Dungannon strove to make things happen. Mary's clearly felt that this tally may not have been unconnected with the curious appointment of an Ulster official.

Mary's were more inclined to wait for things to happen, feeding off Dungannon's handling errors (of which there were many) and then making their tackles count when withstanding the inevitable frantic second-half assault.

And, befitting someone in their plight, Dungannon's rugby was riddled with panic. Playing with a swirling, diagonal wind behind them in the first period, they strove desperately to apply their continuity game, but the number of turnovers whenever they moved the ball out from their

well-drilled pack merely exposed their chronic limitations behind the scrum.

Even then they could have had a fair old buffer for the changes over had their kicked their penalties and made their tackles. Dungannon did neither. The left-footed Ashley Blair and the right-footed Keith McGarry missed five kicks between them, each missing from just outside the 22 metre line from favourable angles. The importance of these misses was underlined in the final quarter, when any of them would have left them within three points of victory as Mary's conceded penalties willy-nilly.

By contrast, Nicky Barry landed three from three. When they capitalised on another turnover after 12 minutes to mount an orthodox reverse move in midfield from a Steve Jameson tap down, Gary Lavin came off his wing to take Vinny Cunningham's pass and score practically untouched.

Thus Dungannon were compelled to play catch-up rugby for the remainder of the match, trail-

ing 10-3 at the break. They made a wonderful fist of it, Blair pulling the strings as the pack kept it amongst themselves in classic rucking style. But the match ended deep into injury time with Willie Dunne over the Mary's line but unable to ground the ball.

St. Mary's were in a different class behind the scrum with Cunningham back in harness and clearly eager for physical contact under the watchful eye of Gerry Murphy. Ciaran Fitzgerald would have him in the World Cup party but admitted: "I'd be biased."

Anderson endeavoured to play down the acute disappointment. "If you're comparing disappointments and tragedies it wouldn't be on the Richter scale."

ST MARY'S: G L Halpin; G Lavin, N Barry, V Cunningham, D Wall; F Campion, P Lynch; R Lynch, M Corcoran, B Keane, S Jameson, M O'Kelly, K Potts, V Costello, K Devlin (capt).
Replacements — T Meagher for Wall and W Bowden for R Lynch (both 78 mins).

DUNGANNON: S McDowell; R Carey, J Boyd, R Stevens, P Sandford, K McGarry, A Blair, B Morrow, H McCaughey, G Leslie, P Johns, K Walker, Johnny Hastings, W Dunne, Jeremy Hastings (capt). **Replacement** — A Redpath for Boyd (45 mins).

Referee: B Stirling (Ulster).