

St Mary's in full bloom as the sun shines

ST MARY'S..... 64
BALLYMENA..... 33

John O'Sullivan

A SCENT of spring and St Mary's College are ready to bloom. Long regarded as the top of the ground specialists, the Leinster club endorsed this supposition with an entertaining and ruthless dissection of title aspirants Ballymena.

Templeville Road, immersed in sleepy sunshine, provided a fitting backdrop to an invigorating celebration of running rugby, often balmied with the quality, composure and panache to which Ireland can only aspire: give Mary's an inch and they'll take 70, 80, 90 yards.

Unfortunately for Ballymena, they allowed the home side far too much latitude, a porous midfield defence particularly culpable in this respect. Stanley McDowell may have been hampered by a flu bug but Gareth Gannon's display will have left the Ulsterman more drained.

The young St Mary's centre has improved significantly, graduating from a promising, if flawed young player, to a polished gem and in the last two games has arguably been his side's outstanding player, a significant achievement when one considers that St Mary's have scored 106 points.

Gannon has always enjoyed a reputation as a noted defender but it is the vision, sleight of hand and strong running that he now contains in his armoury that marks him as a strong candidate for a place in the forthcoming A international against France. There are still a few rough edges but representative experience can hone a burgeoning talent.

His midfield partnership with Ray McIlreavy provided St Mary's with the cutting edge to exploit Ballymena's weaknesses.

TOP SEVEN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	PT
Shannon	9	6	0	1	1225	60	16
Garryowen	9	6	1	1	2317	127	13
Y Munster	9	6	0	1	2165	119	13
St Mary's	10	6	0	0	3203	198	12
Ballymena	10	6	0	0	4271	180	12
Clontarf	10	5	0	0	1593	180	10
Can Con	10	5	0	0	1682	156	10

a particular strongpoint and had "suffered a zillion scrums during the week, but it paid off." With ops inside Mark Cuddihy an effective link in the continuity chain, the home side scored three fine tries through McIlreavy, Gannon and Nowlan.

It was difficult not to feel sympathy for Ballymena. Deprived of key players Keith Gallick and Rab Irwin they never quite managed to construct the requisite platform up front yet still created try scoring chances only to spurn them.

Scrum-half Andy Matchett enjoyed a superb game, grabbing a brace of tries and generally appearing sharp and incisive. Full-back Jan Cunningham was another to perform combatively, but even they were swept away in the bluewash.

Perhaps the final ignominy for the visitors was when Irwin was refused permission to replace Rodney Lormer at half-time by referee Brian Campsall, on consultation with a doctor, because the former was deemed to have a scrum pox.

RUGBY/All-Ireland League



Victor Costello of St Mary's pushes off Ballymena's Rupert West during Saturday's game at Templeville Road. — (Photograph: Paddy Whelan).

often resembled seven's face. Ballymena coach Nellie Smith was generous in defeat paying tribute to the prowess of St Mary's in possession, but correctly pointed out that defensively the winners could be quite lax, a point which Jameson acknowledged.

"We need to be more professional. It's a mental thing, you can't concede the sort of soft tries that we did. The lads know that and it is something to work on."

For Ballymena the work load is even more gargantuan: they can afford no more slip ups if they are to keep slim promotion hopes alive. St Mary's should feel less threatened.

Scoring Sequence: 11 mins: McIlreavy try, 10-0; 21 mins: Gannon try, 17-0; 23 mins: Gannon penalty, 13-0; 36 mins: Nowlan try, 20-0; 41 mins: Gannon try, 27-0; 43 mins: Gannon try, 34-0; 48 mins: Hickie try, 37-0; 51 mins: McIlreavy try, 44-0; 57 mins: Jameson (capt), 51-0; 77 mins: Costello try, 58-0.

BALLYMENA: J Cunningham, J Topping, M Barry, S McDowell, J Gray, A Park, A Matchett, R Lormer, S Hickie (capt), R Lormer, R MacCarthy, R McIlreavy, G Gannon, D Hickie, P Campsall, B Campsall (England).
Referee: B Campsall (England).

Ballymena capitulate to ruthless Mary's display

ST MARY'S 64
BALLYMENA 33
David McKechnie
Templeville Road

THREE consecutive defeats for Ballymena, but yesterday's match, when they conceded an astonishing nine tries in one of the most remarkable games of the season, may stimulate pride in the more damaging. They managed to come up with five of their own, but most came when alleviating the embarrassment was all that was left to play for.

It was a match decided in the first half, a period which saw the visitors spend long spells inside the St Mary's half, only to reap virtually no reward. The fact that they trailed 20-5 at half-time was merely a reflection of St Mary's greater ruthlessness.

Scorelines as clear-cut as this rarely have that decisive moment known as a turning point, but yesterday was an exception. It came after 25 minutes, when at 13-5 down, Ballymena had ample opportunity to recover. For seven minutes they camped inside the St Mary's 22. The home side defended well, but it was mostly Ballymena's own profligacy that kept them from scoring. At one stage, Michael Rainey was a yard from the line in the corner when he misplaced his pass and the move came to nothing. Four minutes later, Andy Park missed a penalty, and by the end of the half St Mary's were virtually out of sight.

Playing into a considerable breeze, St Mary's defended in depth and their backs did the maximum of damage. Eleven minutes in, a sweeping move through the centre gave Ray McIlreavy the opening try. Two minutes later, Brennan made a break inside the 22 and fed Gannon, who slipped in to score.

Lack of effort was never Ballymena's Achilles heel. Indeed eight minutes later they gave themselves a chance with some quick thinking by

Matchett. The scrum-half quickly tapped a penalty on the St Mary's 22, passed it to Andrews, and the number 8 threw himself over the line.

For all the admirable work of their pack, Ballymena never managed to build on that. A further blow arrived a minute before the break when St Mary's set up a ruck inside the visitors' half. Gannon passed right to Gannon and Nowlan accelerated into the ball and went over.

Few were convinced it was all over at that stage, but eight minutes later they were certain. An astonishing spell just after the break saw St Mary's cross the line three times, all of them converted by Gannon. First, Gannon scored virtually from the kick off; then, two minutes later, Costello fed McWeeney who touched down in the corner. Ballymena were in disarray. To prove it, a Matchett pass went hopelessly astray in midfield, Hiddle pounced and suddenly, with half an hour to play, St Mary's had broken the 40-point barrier.

The remainder of the game was an irrelevance, as try after farcical try was notched up with abandon. Ballymena gave themselves a boost with two tries in close succession, the first by Matchett down the left, the second from substitute Andy Duggan. It wasn't enough to stifle St Mary's. Costello-rolled passes with Nowlan down the right and broke through for a score of his own, and soon afterwards McWeeney got his second down the same side. Consolation scores from Matchett and Boyd were incidental, as was Cuddihy's late try for St Mary's.

The Mary's fans were suitably delighted with the offering, but the meek manner in which they conceded scores of their own won't have gone unnoticed. Rarely are potential champions so careless.

As for Ballymena, their season is in real danger of capitulating. Placed second before yesterday, they'll be merely hoping that they can hold it together long enough to reach the play off.



Victor Costello of St Mary's on the charge against Ballymena at Templeville Road yesterday