

Limerick win a massive AIL boost for St Mary's

TONY WARD

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Fourteen points was the difference in the end (20-6) but one would have sufficed for the Dublin side. For Mary's, this game was all about winning and ending a hoodoo that has dogged them since the formation of the All-Ireland League. Until Saturday St Mary's had never beaten Garryowen in the AIL in Limerick.

For many rugby supporters in the capital, the introduction of the league almost a decade ago provided something of a culture shock. Their difficulty in fully comprehending the meaning of the word intensity in the white heat of battle has been tangible ever since.

CHORE

To this day there are some who still fail to grasp the mental pressure involved in meeting and beating the best that Limerick and Munster can offer.

When I played for Garryowen throughout the 1970s and early '80s cup games were a chore. There was no All-Ireland competition at the time and the only pleasure in these matches was in winning. Battle lines were drawn once you took the field and for 80 minutes it was all about protecting the honour of the section of Limerick community you represented.

It was probably the nearest rugby can get to the parish ethic at the heart of Gaelic games in this country. These games were miniature wars. I secretly dreaded them but they provided me with the fondest and longest lasting memories of my career.

By contrast, when I switched clubs in the early '80s from Garryowen to St Mary's and from Limerick to Dublin, Leinster cup games were a breeze. The word pressure didn't exist. Yes, they were important but they were nothing like the Munster equivalent.

Suddenly from playing in matches won by the odd penalty in three, or on a really good day the odd penalty in five, I was playing in Leinster's high profile equivalent but the rugby was akin to Barbarians or Wolfhounds games at their free-spirited best. The unreal atmosphere in an almost empty Lansdowne Road hardly helped either. That intensity and the ability to perform under pressure represents the biggest single asset that all Munster teams carried into the All-Ireland competition from the start.

INTENSITY

There is no need to spell out the difference it has made since. Only when those outside of the southern province accept that such a state of mind exists can the challenge be realistically met on a consistent basis. Only then will an AIB League title follow.

On Saturday in Limerick, Mary's took a huge step in that direction. The significance of this latest victory for Dublin's most consistent club since the competition's inception shouldn't be down-played. This was the day when every St Mary's player was required to stand up and be counted.

The scrum was firm and, unlike other occasions at the same venue, never ever retreated. In addition to parity at the scrum, a much more aggressive line-out insured a miserable afternoon for Garryowen's marksman Keith Wood.

Wood's wayward delivery, allied to Mary's competitiveness throughout, swung the primary phase game in the visitors' direction. Upon such bread and butter basics is the Brent Pope philosophy built.

Mary's did the simple things well. They took the few first half chances which came their way and, in total contrast to the second half performance at the same venue nine months previously, defended their line in the second period for all they were worth.

They know themselves that they did not play particularly well but they were infinitely the better of two average sides on the day. Garryowen, for their part, were awful but we will come to that later.

For the second week running, and again in a defensive capacity, Denis Hickie was outstanding. Similar to his display for Leinster at Welford Road, his lines of running in defence were intelligent and his tackling decisive.

AVERAGE SIDES

The watching Donal Lenihan must have been impressed. Equally so with the irrepressible Trevor Brennan. Take his almost suicidal throw-in to himself close to his own line late on out of the equation and this was a performance with his trademark no-nonsense courage stamped all over it.

He's the Leinster player they love to hate in Limerick quite simply because he has earned their grudging respect over the past few seasons. He and Victor Costello were awesome on Saturday.

I have made the case for Costello often enough in recent weeks so I have no desire to labour his position again now other than to say he would be in the middle of my back row at Twickenham with Anthony Foley packing down alongside him.

It is patently unfair that he is not and a subject to which I will return in the coming days. Brennan and Costello between them broke the Garryowen challenge. No one would have appreciated that fact more than Garryowen coach John Hall whose own game was based upon the type of impact both Mary's backrow men in defence and attack exercised on Saturday.

It was simplicity all round in the dark blue corner. The pack won the first phase battle. The backrow won the race to the breakdown. The halves outplayed their more esteemed immediate opposites. The centres smothered the middle. And the back three covered ground, thereby largely nullifying the Garryowen kicking game. Peter McKenna, despite one or two errors early on, looking full of possibilities.

HUGE BLOW

But what of Garryowen? Quite frankly they were awful. The loss of David Wallace early in the second half was a huge blow from which they never recovered. Their scrum was adequate, their line out a shambles. Their attempts to run the ball meaningless.

Both representative halves Tom Tierney and Jeremy Staunton having individual games best forgotten. For Staunton in particular, and for the second season running against the same opposition, it represented the proverbial nightmare.

He is an infinitely better player than he appeared on this occasion but his indecision had a visible knock-on effect on the rest of the team.

Killian Keane, very much the hero back in April, looked ring rusty after his recent lay-off. Only Dominic Crotty and Melvin McNamara in spasms produced anything worthwhile behind the scrum. For the light blues the message is clear: a return to basics (particularly the line-out and their associated driving and punching game close in) is essential and points must be taken when deep in opposition territory, especially with time on the clock.

But to harp on about Garryowen's many glaring inadequacies would do a disservice to the substance of this big Mary's breakthrough.

COLLECTIVE DESIRE

The game plan, devised by Pope and Nicky Barry, was simple and appropriate. Not particularly pretty but highly effective due to the collective desire of all 16 to see it through.

There remains one hell of a long and winding road ahead in search of the AIB League holy grail, but Saturday's win and the manner of it represents a giant step in the right direction.

As they took "Deero" (the Shay Deering Memorial Trophy) home with them on Saturday night, no one knew it better than the players themselves.

Dooradoyle bogey laid to rest

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Gerry Thornley

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St Mary's have played with far more elan on previous sorties to Dooradoyle, but after seven defeats at the venue this was one of those games where a win of any hue would have sufficed. Ultimately the two try to nil outcome told the story accurately. The result mattered more than the manner it was achieved.

In finally laying their Dooradoyle bogey to rest, St Mary's not only maintained their perch atop the AIB League alongside Young Munster, but gave themselves a massive dose of self-belief that they can finally win the league.

"That ends the jinx for another few years anyway," shrugged Brent Pope. The St Mary's coach wasn't exactly shouting from the rooftops as some sort of club messiah either.

"In the end defence won the game for us," Pope admitted.

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"Although at one stage Garryowen were one pass away from scoring, they never really looked like getting over our line. A win is a win, and it was important for the guys psychologically."

Their three big men up front, Trevor Brennan, Victor Costello and Malcolm O'Kelly all delivered big games in this, their first St Mary's game in harness. O'Kelly augmented his usual work-rate by tormenting the Keith Wood throw, where Garryowen's smallish backrow limited the Irish hooker's options and occasionally obliged him to unload a few impudent quick throws before the lines had settled.

Brennan was a persistent thorn in the Garryowen side - and usually around their rib cages, and had a red-rag-to-a-bull effect on the home players.

He possibly led the defensive work-rate, although there were willing allies from the industrious Peter Smyth and Peter Coyle up front to Dennis Hickie out wide, while Costello complimented several trademark rumbles off the base of the scrum with a high tackle count of his own.

In the first-half Garryowen's defence was almost as offensive as St Mary's would be later. David Wallace often led the way until his day was rudely curtailed by a couple of big hits by Brennan which left him with a dead leg and potentially sidelined for at least a week.

Even when on top early on, for all their recycling, the visitors generally went sideways or inched backwards with slow ball. Yet they got the breaks to strike twice. Philip Lynch bounced off Kevin O'Riordan from Costello's blindside pick-up after Garryowen's lineout had crumbled. Then when Fergal Campion blocked Jeremy Staunton's chip from deep with his

hands, Gareth Gannon gathered to steal away and scored, effectively converting Campion's knock-on into a forward pass. But referee Ronnie McDowell was unsighted, and neither of his touch judges saw the infringement either.

Garryowen, save for a brief rally inside the last quarter, when Staunton tried to have a real cut, hardly raised a gallop, and in only his second competitive game at outhalf this season, the youngster was decidedly rusty.

"It wasn't pretty," Pope conceded. "I just think we were very tense and the guys just wanted to win. The guys can look back now and say we broke the bloody jinx. How we won doesn't matter. I sense they're feeling a little anti-climactic because they wanted to go on and win in style," added Pope.

If the St Mary's players felt a little anti-climactic, then that made everyone. This was a disappointing match given the talent on display; a modern day example of crash-bangwallop rugby.

For some bizarre reasons known only to the Garryowen think-tank on the pitch, the home side effectively ensured St Mary's of victory by rejecting kickable three-pointers after 63 and 70 minutes with fanciful notions of going for tries off close-in line-outs with plenty of time left on the clock.

Given the history of this fixture and last season's semi-final - when Killian Keane's four penalties and conversion helped overturn a 17-0 deficit - this was even more extraordinary.

Keane could have provided St Mary's with unsettling memories of that day, and inspirational ones for his team-mates and supporters.

But instead of sewing seeds of doubt in their visitors' heads by getting to within a score (and in the process put themselves in line for at least a bonus point) they let St Mary's off the hook.

It quite simply beggared belief. "We'll have to improve our internal communications," smiled John Hall ruefully afterwards, preferring to leave it at that.

Yet a relieved Pope couldn't but help admitting that once Keane had sliced his penalty to touch backwards from under the posts with 10 minutes to go, "that was it, I knew we had the game then really."

With that, St Mary's heaved a collective sigh of relief and comfortably made off with the bounty.

Scoring sequence: 6 mins: Lynch try, McHugh con 0-7; 11 mins: Keane pen 3-7; 33 mins: Gannon try, McHugh con 3-14; 36 mins: McHugh pen 3-17; 53 mins: Keane pen 6-17; 82 mins: McHugh pen 620.

GARRYOWEN: D Crotty; M McNamara, K Keane, K Hartigan, K O'Riordan; J Staunton, T Tierney; N Hartigan, K Wood, C Botha, S Leahy, D Peters, P Hogan, P Neville, D Wallace. Replacements: C Varley for Wallace (45 mins), R Laffan for Botha (72 mins), R Leahy for D Peters (76 mins).

ST MARY'S COLLEGE: P McKenna; D Hickie, M McHugh, G Gannon, J McWeeney; F Campion, P Lynch; P Coyle, P Smyth, D Clare, I Bloomere, M O'Kelly, T Brennan (capt), V Costello, R Doyle. Replacements: J Kilbride for Lynch (53 mins), R McIlreavy for McWeeney (81 mins).

Referee: R McDowell (Munster).



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