

Sliotar

Reid's all about it

The new Kilkenny
Captain on his hopes
and fears for 2010

**Clare Memories:
Jimmy Smyth on
the Grandeur of
Hurling**

**Murt Flynn
on Starting
Afresh**

**Pat Treacy on
Camogie's New
Contour**



Eye on the ball: We all wonder who'll go all the way in this year's championship

Picture: Pat Murphy / SPORTSFILE



Introduction

Welcome to Sliotar, an online magazine devoted to hurling, the most beautiful game.

The economic context says it is a bad time to be launching a publication on any subject. The sporting context says something rather different. For hurling people, 2010 can only intrigue. Everyone agrees that Kilkenny's current side, wherever it will rank in the pantheon, is a genuinely special one. The compulsion of watching an advance on five Senior titles in a row speaks for itself. History will be made, whether uniqueness is seized or not. Does anyone over 30 think they will see another advance? Does anyone at all?

There is likewise the freshness of last September's All-Ireland Final, one immediately celebrated as a benchmark contest. Hurling seemed to discover, under this strain, a new splice of physicality and skill. Quality scores kept outdoing each other for class. Saves too.

The splendour of Tipperary's effort to remove Kilkenny, so long set for success, whets anticipation. Another wonderful team may be hatching, forcing out its wings. If there is a view that only Tipp and Galway can defeat the champions, it is a verdict at which Cork naturally chafe.

Clare, Dublin, Offaly, Waterford and Wexford retain upsetting potential and more. Given day, factors in play. Item:

Galway's trip to Ennis in 2007. Nor would there be huge surprise in Waterford reaching another decider. Regrettably, as of February, Limerick are de facto non-runners.

More broadly, the standard of play in 2009 at Minor and U21 drew many compliments. This facet must prompt optimism about the coming decade. Remarkably promising young hurlers are chancing the horizon. One, name of Joe Canning, burst over at first attempt. Keep an eye on him, even if he is slow and one sided.

New decade, so many new possibilities. We hope you enjoy reading Sliotar. Sport begins and ends in enjoyment, the small child dragging a hurl to elderly spectators with a blanket over their knees.



Patrick O'Sullivan

PM O'Sullivan
February 10, 2010

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Enter Sandman

Pictures (including cover): Gail Ryan

PM O'Sullivan talks with Ballyhale's TJ Reid about his hurling heritage and the year ahead

THE juvenile section of Ballyhale Shamrocks has a nice problem all to itself.

Mentors occasionally have to issue a wry command: 'Stop trying to do TJ on it...' The future laughs and tears ahead. Those in charge turn back, laugh, shaking middle-aged heads in mild exasperation. What will lads do but copy a neighbour? Like the sandman who hatches dreams by tilting sleep, TJ Reid makes wizard strokes look so easy that an U14 can yearn for fade to bring a ball back in, for a drop shot riveted 60 yards.

His skill levels are so high that the compliment of imitation is inevitable. Already, in a career hardly out of its opening phase, he has amassed a bulging portfolio of picture scores. Perhaps the most famous is the sideline lanced over against Toomevara in February 2007, the extraordinary All-Ireland semi-final in which his club recovered a 12-point deficit and which his cut pared to a single point. "I remember it exactly," TJ says. "I knew we were still in trouble, I knew we needed a lift. It was the first sideline I ever scored at any level. The first one... I suppose it was in my head to do it because I'd seen Joe Canning at it."

The nonchalance is natural and unaffected. TJ Reid does his own thing, knows his own mind. Rarely without

a hurl in his hand, tipping and tipping against a wall, hurl caught short, right side, left side, he often walks the lines of Páirc na Seamróg at an ordinary match, tapping a sliotar, hurl to hand, hurl to hand. Youngsters sense a kindred spirit, the same small bell of joy at controlling a ball. "This is hurling country, Pat," he laughs. "What else would you want to be doing round here? Hurling is king."





The Reid stamp of excellence: TJ isn't alone in his hurling talent, with his family excelling at the sport in both past and present

The Mentors occasionally have to issue a wry command: 'Stop trying to do TJ on it...' The future laughs and tears ahead. Those in charge turn back, laugh, shaking middle-aged heads in mild exasperation. What will lads do but copy a neighbour? Like the sandman who hatches dreams by tilting sleep, TJ Reid makes wizard strokes look so easy that an U14 can yearn for fade to bring a ball back in, for a drop shot riveted 60 yards.

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a ball. "This is hurling country, Pat," he laughs. "What else would you want to be doing round here? Hurling is king."

The man himself is easygoing and polite, patiently repositioning for the photographer in his homeplace of Kiltorcan. He sands a hurl in the workshed. He stands tall outside. "No problem, no bother..." The Reids have been farming here for so many years, an older brother the [fifth] generation to hold the reins. "I don't think I was ever set to be a farmer but it suits Paddy," he smiles. "It could skin you here in winter but the summer makes up for it."

The farm looks out over a quilt of five counties from a nudge of high ground above the functional village of Ballyhale. If Kiltorcan has long been a heritage site for fossils, the history that counts here is a far nearer draw, millennia squeezed to intimate decades. This parish is a place of long memories and exacting assessments. A mile down the road, just over into Castlebanny, is Fennelly's, right by the entrance to Mountain View Golf Course. A little further lies Walsh's of Kilcreedy, to where Jimmy Walsh, a Carrickshock clubman, brought the Liam MacCarthy Cup in 1932 and '39.

He is glad to be a native son, for all the flint. TJ was a watcher before he was a hurler because he so wanted to be a hurler. His age was a piece of luck. It made him eight years younger than a rising master, a trusted name gone before him into the forest, someone who had learned that the sound of one hand clapping echoes in Brian Cody's accents. "I've often said my biggest influence is Henry Shefflin," TJ states, with an intriguing hint of defiance. "I've no problem saying that to anyone. When I was young I used to go to matches and study what Henry did. He's the best around, and you always watch the best. Henry is doing it right a long time now."

TJ Reid was part of the golden vintage that won a Féile na nGael A title for Ballyhale Shamrocks in 1998. If Cha Fitzpatrick was the star, he had a superb supporting cast. A ten-year-old sub, TJ was considered good enough to appear in one game, a secure lead already established. He even helped himself to a few points, which he recounts with the grin of a natural forward, the grin of someone who always knows exactly what he scored. "It was nice

"I don't want to get hung up on the captaincy," he states. "I'm not going to."

to get on the tournament scoresheet," he admits. "I still remember Wexford for Féile weekend. Myself and a neighbour, Dónal Dempsey, stayed with the same family. It was great, all the fuss about hurling. For a crowd of young fellas, all together, it was brilliant. And amazing to win. You never forget the feeling."

He was always likely to have such days. His father Seán, the club's current Chairman, won an All-Ireland U21 medal in 1974 and was a mainstay with the Shamrocks between 1978 and 1991, when nine Senior titles were harvested. His uncle Richie won a Celtic Cross through 1979's victory over Galway. The same man, who later hurled with Faughs and Dublin, captained the side that won a Club All-Ireland against St Finbarr's in 1981.

Braided blood. Today's brothers are similarly accomplished. Paddy is a gifted club forward, Eoin on the Kilkenny panel since 2006, Richie rising the ranks with St Kieran's College and development squads. "I like hurling with them," TJ says with conviction. "Richie should come on too in a bit."

Is he curious about hurling's past? "Yeah, curious enough," comes the reply. "I've seen some of the old games on TG4. Seen Uncle Richie in 1979. He was fairly good alright. But I don't tell him that! They have some of the County finals on tape at home, and I saw 1991 against Muckalee a while ago. There was a lot more ground hurling then, moving on the ball immediately, going for a return, criss-crossing. It's changed and it hasn't changed. It's all about touch."

His young path followed the standard curve. National school down the road, where Joe Dun-





Ready for battle: While TJ may be the county captain this year, he himself isn't letting the honour go to his head, noting he'll just concentrate on his panel place

Picture: John McIlwaine

phy, the principal, tended a couple of generations through the ranks, urging, urging them all, the same surnames starting to stud the records like jewels set in metal. Then St Kieran's, where he won a Colleges medal as a sub but lost the 2005 final against St Flannan's when victory was strongly expected. His November birthday did not help at this stage, effectively lopping a year off an underage career. "St Flannan's was fierce disappointing," he muses, "but I suppose you have to learn from those days. The Minor went bad too, and we were beaten by Dublin without any chance to get back in."

U21 was a productive swerve. He was promoted to the intercounty panel in this grade after that Minor defeat, italicizing him as an unusual talent. The classic CV for a prospective Senior is to hurl three seasons at U21. TJ Reid achieved four, winning in 2006 and '08. Fetching ability, finesse and points from out the field is quite a package. This grade likewise saw good times for Ballyhale Shamrocks, four A titles on the spin 2003-06. "Obviously I'm a fan of U21," he says. "I wouldn't be someone for getting rid of it, definitely. It's a great way up the ladder."

His measure has been evident in the last two All-Ireland finals. TJ Reid galloped all over Croke

Park, throwing over four beautes, when introduced against Waterford in 2008. That day was aesthetics. His point against Tipperary last September, taken under severe pressure, when missing would have meant grave deflation, showed he can offer business when the day is hard business.

Many observers express surprise the man is still not nailed to the first XV. The same observers often speak of this Kilkenny as the finest outfit of them all. Mark the gap. The best of times for those on the team, the worst in a way for benchers seeking promotion.

Meanwhile TJ Reid always seems to be hurling within himself. There is the dressage trot back into position after a score, the ability to make vital ground without strain. Although very well made in leg and shoulder, he is the stamp of a stylist, all twist and wrist, striking a ball sweetly anywhere between ankle and shoulder. His skill is so easy found that it seems hardly noticed he is a lefthander, a style far rarer in the Kilkenny tradition than in the Tipperary one – a natural lefthander, of course, a hurler who first goes to forehand.

There is singularity here, in that TJ is right-handed and rightfooted. Yet the pure ciotóg style is instinct. Prompted, he recalls its source: "The

father and the grandfather taught me to hurl. Once they were happy, I just went with what came naturally." He could be the code's answer to Ronnie O'Sullivan's amphidextrousness with a cue? "Maybe so," he laughs. "I'd be messing around in training, using both hands. I can take frees and penalties right hand on top as well. I can score them too! But you won't see me trying it in Croke Park..."

He thinks about such matters. I put it to him that he seems happier on the left side of the field, which is a bit unusual for a lefthander, in that we think most easily of a Pat Fox cutting in from top of the right, blazing a forehand stroke. He sees the sense: "I suppose I am happier over on the left wing. I'm happier, going for a ball in the air, to have my catching hand near the sideline. The back can't really get at the ball there. And once I have the ball I usually manage to hit it. Getting possession is the big problem."

The all too obvious question concerns his new role. TJ Reid follows Michael Fennelly as the Senior Champions' nominee. Is the fact that Fennelly did not start last season unhelpful pressure? "I don't want to get hung up on the captaincy," he states. "I'm not going to. The main thing is to be on the panel. Then you might get on the team. Might... I'm just concentrating on getting a place. It's not going to be easy, making the team, because there's an unbelievable panel at the moment. But there's no point being in there if you don't want to start. This year will be my fourth one and I'd want to start making it at this stage."

The role was not taken on, in any case, without serious thought. "I'm lucky that I have three clubmates to ring who have been captain recently," he relates. "I rang Henry and Cha – couldn't get through to Mick [Fennelly] – and asked them what would be involved. They told me what to expect and advised me to give it a go. I also had a chat with a few of the other lads, Jackie [Tyrell] and Tommy [Walsh], and they gave me similar advice. So I said I'd go on. It's a big honour and the lads did remind me it might be the only time I get the chance. Who knows what'll happen with the club down the line?"

He would like to play in defence at some stage, fancying his chances. Puckish, he offers a thought on the relative demands of hurling positions: "I'm



always telling the lads inside that playing in the backs is easy out: all they have to do is drive the ball down the field!" There is a likeable roguishness to TJ at times, which the demands of a necessary blandness cannot stifle: "Anyway, I'll have to forget about the backs for the minute. I'm hardly going to take Tommy Walsh out of his position...!"

There are implications in TJ Reid's fortunes broader than his own success. He is something of a free spirit – almost too much of a hurler, some say. There were early murmurings that workrate would have to improve, that a soccer analogy pertained: the hewing and drawing of a Deschamps would have to underpin virtuoso flourishes reminiscent of a Cantona. Could well be. Aidan Fogarty and Eoin Larkin have formed a unit on the left side of the Kilkenny attack, one where Fogarty's relentless graft allows Larkin to play deep as required, screening their half-backs. Can TJ hurl in this groove?

"I know myself I have to improve," he freely concedes. "I can do a good bit but not enough yet." He stresses help is forever available: "Brian Cody and Martin Fogarty are very good to take you aside and give advice about working hard, about putting a lad off simply by the noise of you coming behind him. I'm also trying to get a lot better at striking on my weak side when I'm soloing. I need to click with a few things better."

He is an intriguing figure. All round Ireland they wonder about a county so strong that it can use TJ Reid as a sub. There is a revealing sentence in *Cody: The Autobiography* (2009), where the current manager offered undisguised irritation: "I've heard it said, and seen it written quite a few times over the years, that Kilkenny are robotic." The sentiment, advanced about an outfit who routinely take 20 quality scores, is nonsensical. Even so, Brian Cody and other influentials are clearly grigged by it.

It is a sore point, needlessly or not. The wider context is that Kilkenny supporters have traditionally loved style above all else. On this axis spun the contretemps in 2003 about Charlie Carter. Tempering this infatuation with the imperatives of spirit is Brian Cody's finest achievement. Still, if Reid does not proceed to a substantial career this decade, it will mean the code has radically altered its demands on wing-forwards. If Eoin Larkin is the very furthest from a robotic presence, he certainly knows how to mark space

as well as a wing-back.

For now, some sort of spring in the air, the Fitzgibbon Cup blows back to mind. TJ won in 2008 after an immediately famous final against LIT. Although happy building up his hurl-making business – "I like being my own boss" – he does hanker after the sort of freedom that third level hurling tinted. "I was thinking about it last week," he remarks. "This time of year. You'd be working up to Fitzgibbon, winding it up. The second year in WIT was brilliant. Living in Waterford, living out of home for the first time, and winning it was unbelievable. I could have gone back but I said I'd try something different."

Kiltorcan is not without immovable shadow. The four Reid brothers lost their mother, Mary, in March 2008. TJ is simply glad she got to see so much unfold, club and county alike. "She went all over the place with us, and she saw a lot of wins," he says with quiet pleasure. "She used to be so delighted afterwards."

He pauses and then continues, frisked by the thought: "It sounds funny but we buried her on 'Patrick's Day in 2008 and Portumna were playing Birr in the All-Ireland Final. I saw it, and I thought it'd be great to get back to Croke Park with the Shamrocks. It's what she would have wanted. She really enjoyed Croke Park." Admirably natural where love is concerned, he is in no doubt about the light of heaven: "She'll be up there, looking down. I know she is. I know if it works out this year, she'll have done it for me."

First Newtownshandrum in Semple Stadium this weekend, as he well knows. Like all the panel, TJ has been impressed by James McGarry as manager, a position held jointly with Michael Fennelly Sr. He enthuses: "Encouragement comes easy to James. He was the same in the dressingroom with the county team, when he didn't have to be doing it, urging lads on. James was always going to be a super manager. We're just lucky in Ballyhale that he came to us first. He has it all freshened up from last year, when we'd gone a bit stale."

Training has moved well but there are no illusions about the challenge: "I think we'll have to sit down and study their games. Newtown' play the same way as Cork. It has been very good for them. Great success with it. You can't give them any space or you'll get cut to ribbons. That's it."

The year awaits, a prospect on rising ground. Now it is he who is watched, studied, admired.

Facts and figures



Date of Birth: November 16, 1987
Club: Ballyhale Shamrocks
County: Kilkenny
Position: Half-forward
Secondary School: St Kieran's College, Kilkenny
Occupation: Hurlmaker
Car: Audi A4
Dream Date: Megan Fox
Food: Steak (well done!)
Hero: Rocky Balboa
Music: Michael Jackson, Westlife
Relaxation: Watching DVDs
TV: Two and a Half Men

HONOURS

3 All-Ireland SHC (2007-09)
 3 Leinster SHC (2007-09)
 2 All-Ireland U21 HC (2006, 2008)
 3 Leinster U21 HC (2005-06, 2008)
 1 All-Ireland Club SHC (2007)
 3 Leinster Club SHC (2006, 2008-09)
 2 Leinster Club Hurler of the Year (2008-09)
 4 Kilkenny SHC (2006-09)
 4 Kilkenny U21 A HC (2003-06)
 1 Fitzgibbon Cup (WIT: 2008)
 1 All-Ireland Colleges SHC (2004)
 2 Leinster Colleges SHC (2004-05)
 1 Féile na nGael A (1998)



Cork, Bottle and Shamrocks

PM O'Sullivan gets opinions on Sunday's semi-final between Ballyhale Shamrocks and Newtownshandrum from Jimmy Barry Murphy and Brendan Fennelly

A lazy subeditor's dream, this one.

The Kilkenny men's name in tandem with the Senior Final's date each year is a nice nudge. Any amount of quips on the drowning of shamrock can be summoned, even for a semi-final. Add corks, add shand(y) and soon comes bottle. Puns spilleth over. All very satisfactory. Never mind the analysis: feel the wordplay.

Restraint, restraint. The seriousness of it all can make you giddy. Both club's form is more sketch than etch, with a strong case available for either outcome. Both clubs, too, are trying to recover momentum after losing same in the aftermath of winning a title in the middle of the last decade: Newtownshandrum in 2004, Ballyhale Shamrocks in 2007. Portumna have been the nemesis in both instances, dismantling the former in 2006's decider and the latter in last February's de facto final.

Where are the pressure points? For all sorts of reasons, Brendan Fennelly is well placed to evaluate this game. He played with Ballyhale Shamrocks in four All-Ireland finals. A loss to Blackrock in 1979 was followed by victory against St Finbarr's (1981), Gort (1984) and Ballybrown (1990). That last year likewise saw him manage the Kilkenny U21s to success. He coached Waterford's De La Salle to the final last season and is currently in charge of Carrickshock United, having steered



PM O'Sullivan

Dunnamaggin to Senior glory in 1997.

Brendan relished seeing a fourth title added in 2007, via triumph over Loughrea, and naturally hopes his native place can progress further. "I think the Shamrocks should do it," he says, "but I'd have genuine concerns at the same time." He feels Newtownshandrum's trainer will be an important factor: "Cian O'Neill delivers a different type of training, very hot on support play and high intensity, and the style of hurling this training puts on the field can be very difficult to deal with unless you're totally ready for it. You have to keep your backs dead solid for the first ten minutes. Newtownshandrum feed on any smell of panic."

Same time, he does see chinks in the Cork Champions: "I thought they looked very good against Ballygunner in the Munster Final – exceptionally good at times. But they also looked poor enough when Ballygunner got in at them. The question they have to answer is how they are when all the nice passing breaks down. Have they a comeback? Can they hurl another way?"

Brendan finds Ballyhale hard to read. "They deserved four in a row in Kilkenny," he states. "But they haven't played that well overall, despite getting some lovely scores. A moderate James Stephens side were never put away and Oulart-The Ballagh nearly had them gone." He elaborates: "Something is not quite right yet about the team's balance. They are only hurling in patches and some of the forwards are probably not pushing themselves enough. They need to get out of any comfort zone. I'm worried that this opposition's lesser known players, like their corner-backs, who look tidy, are better quality than the Shamrocks realize."

The overall dynamic might not help Kilkenny's cause. "Cork teams rarely go in as underdogs," Brendan reflects, "and they will love feeling written off. The kick in the arse they got against Ballygunner couldn't have come at a better time after they'd played so well in the County Final and against Thurles." There are also factors, he believes, beyond the team's control: "The idea I get is that the Ballyhale supporters are looking ahead a

bit. They are mad to get another crack at Portumna and that expectation can get to the panel, through no fault of their own."

Brendan would stick with his initial tip but offers one last caveat: "If they don't allow Newtown a great start, the Shamrocks should have enough class over the whole hour. But I wouldn't like to see them having to go to the bone to win. The Shamrocks will need a lot in the tank if they meet Portumna in Croke Park."

Jimmy Barry Murphy is equally well placed to comment on this clash. Cork's dual superstar needs no introduction, save perhaps a reminder about how he was an All-Ireland winner with St Finbarr's in 1975 and '78, missing out on a third title after a marvellous contest with Ballyhale Shamrocks in 1981. The football equivalent was brought home in 1980 and '81. Jimmy laughs ruefully when he recalls the hurling in 1981. "I was booked early in that game by Noel O'Donoghue, after I'd pulled accidentally across someone," he says. "It rattled me and I never settled down afterwards. But there was no doubt that the better team won."

How will Sunday in Semple >>

**Looking ahead:
Have players such
as Ballyhale's 'Cha'
Fitzpatrick got enough in
the tank to keep going**

Picture: Gail Ryan



Ready to strike: With the O'Connor brothers out to do damage, the Ballyhale defence will need to be at it's best
Picture: Gail Ryan



Stadium go? He has something of a fancy for his own county's representatives because he saw them recently in a competitive match. "Yes, Newtown' were very impressive when I watched them against Sarsfields in the league final last Sunday week," he relates. "They were terrific, throwing the ball around beautifully. There was a fierce cut and move to their play. They looked in really good shape."

Jimmy is pragmatic about the North Cork outfit's style. "I know it's not everyone's cup of tea," he allows, "but nobody can deny that it has served them very well. At their best, their skill and their pace and their recycling of the ball is something else to watch. The emphasis is on skill and that's how you would always like to see a Cork team approaching things." He feels their known stars still take an awful lot of watching: "The big question for Ballyhale is how they deal with Ben and Jerry

"Yes, Newtown' were very impressive when I watched them against Sarsfields in the league final last Sunday week."

[O'Connor]. They can punch serious holes in a defence in a second. Throw in Cathal Naughton beside them and that's a big threat. I'm watching Cork hurling since the 1960s and Ben is as good as anyone I've ever seen. Anyone, now. He is a really superb hurler."

The Rebels' All-Ireland manager in 1999 reckons the

Shamrocks' half-back line will be the telling sector. "Tactically, what Newtown' do is based on Cathal and Jerry supporting play in the forwards, coming in to take a pass on the move, looking to cut through and commit men. If they can receive those breaks from their own men up front, Ballyhale will be in trouble. By the same token, if the Ballyhale half-backs can spoil those passes, they will give themselves a great chance. That's generally where the Newtown' goals come from." Jimmy will stick with his gut feeling, despite concern over a recent development: "The big disappointment for Newtownshandrum is that John Paul King is now out with injury. But they still have the ability to do it if they hurl for the full hour."

Two different verdicts. The subeditors will be hoping that Ballyhale Shamrocks survive to challenge their ability to link drownings, ports and storms.



Doing the Fitzgibbon



Michael Geoghegan

THE group stages of the 95th running of the Fitzgibbon Cup reach their climax next Tuesday. LIT and UCC are already guaranteed quarter-final places, following last Wednesday's results. The other groups will go down to the wire on the final day.

The competition has gone from strength to strength since being opened up to all third level institutes in the early 1990s. Before that it was the preserve of the universities, with only four colleges competing in the competition for the first 50 or so years. Since the Institutes of Technology and the now University of Limerick and Dublin City University entered the competition, the distribution of title wins has been more varied. Again this year there are a number of colleges who have realistic titles ambitions.

This week's action saw St Pat's Drumcondra-Mater Dei give a fright to a fancied UL outfit. For the former side, Kilkenny's Mark Bergin is in fine form, hitting 0-7 in his first outing. Bergin continued where he left off, hitting a further 0-10 (8f) in Dublin this Wednesday against Jordanstown. The Ulster side are in their first Fitzgibbon since 1991 and have an excellent hurler in Neil McManus, who struck 2-5 (4f) for the visitors.

Joe Canning has been in scintillating form for LIT in both games to date. Nothing seems too difficult for him. A tally of 3-10 against UCC on the first day out was registered. Second time of asking, he hit 0-11 against WIT. The Portumna youngster has a hectic couple of weeks ahead, with an All-Ireland Club semi-final on Sunday and another game with LIT (against GMIT) up next Tuesday. Assuming both LIT and Portumna advance, Canning, who turns 22 in November, will be involved in both competitions over the coming month.

LIT stormed out of the traps and led 0-13 to 0-5 at the break. Even a Ray McLoughney goal for WIT on the resumption



was not enough to hoist the visitors back into the contest. LIT reversed last year's result on a final score of 0-18 to 1-11.

Three first half goals from Stephen Moylan, Shane Burke and Rob White helped UCC to a 3-9 to 0-6 halftime lead in Ardrahan. The Cork side continued to dominate in the second half, running out 3-19 to 1-10 winners.

Elsewhere CIT and DIT had a 1-14 apiece draw in Glasnevin in a game that CIT led by nine points at the interval. CIT only posted two points on the resumption and had to rely on a last minute free from Pa Horgan to ensure a share of the spoils.

NUIG also had to rely on a last minute free. This one came from Finian Coone, ensuring a draw in their game with UCD in Belfield. The hosts led by 0-9 to 0-7 at the break and had the better of second half exchanges, during which NUIG netted twice via Caimin Morey and Coone. The latter finished with a tally of 1-9, with John Lee getting the other NUIG scores. Final score: 0-17 to 2-11.

Last year's winners, UCC, have a number of that team. Nevertheless beaten finalists, UL, are seen as joint tournament favourites along with their Shannonside rival, Limerick Institute





**Holding tight:
UUJ in action
against
St. Patrick's
Training
College in the
Ulster Bank
Fitzgibbon
Cup**

of Technology. UCC and WIT meet in a critical game next Tuesday. The prize for the winners will be a home game – more than likely against St Patrick's Training College, Drumcondra. UL were not in action this week since they are the third team in their group.

NUIG have a spread of former Galway underage stars, including Declan Connolly, Finian Coone, Kevin Keehan and Éanna Noone. They also have intercounty centre-back John Lee, along with goalscorer Caimin Morey, Domhaill O'Donovan and Dónal Touhy of last year's Clare U21 team. David Barrett and Kevin Heagney, in tandem with Tipperary's Séamus Hennessy, grant the Westerners a balanced look. However, there is a feeling they will come up short when the stakes increase.

UCD have a distinct sprinkling of talent. Offaly's David Kenny is an excellent full-back, while there is a strong Kilkenny contingent in Seán Cummins, David Langton, Maurice Nolan,

Eoin O'Shea, Neal Prendergast and Liam Ryan. Into the bargain, UCD have available an all-Dublin full-forward line: David 'Dotsy' O'Callaghan, Ross O'Carroll and Liam Rushe. Midfielder Joey Boland is another figure with significant intercounty experience.

End of the day, it will boil down to the effect the heavy schedule of games will have on Joe Canning. If the Portumna prodigy is fully primed, LIT have the firepower to outgun all opponents. Aided by the likes of Tipp star Séamus Callanan, Bernard Gaffney from Clare, Willie Hyland from Laois and Limerick's Seán Tobin, Canning has the required support to give the Moylish-based outfit a third title.

The main challengers will be a Ger Cunningham-coached UL, who play the Cork/Newtownshandrum running style. While this approach is difficult to defend against when UL are moving well, it can also be their downfall, as it did in last

year's decider. The game requires abundant teamwork and is very taxing on the bodies, especially on early spring's heavy pitches. Still, a side that includes many well known names, a side that has been together for a number of years and has trained solidly since November, has a decent chance. Hurlers such as John Devane, Ryan O'Dwyer and Paddy Stapleton from Tipperary, Limerick's Séamus Hickey, Kilkenny's Conor Fogarty, Kieran Joyce and Matthew Ruth, and the Offaly duo of Brian Carroll and Shane Dooley give the Thomond side a sense of equilibrium. Equally, they have an astute manager in Ger Cunningham.

Fitzgibbon weekend takes place in Galway over March 5-6, with the semi-finals for Saturday at Dangan. Also on this weekend is the Ryan Cup for Division 2 teams and the Fergal Maher Shield. The final of the Fitzgibbon Cup will take place in Pearse Stadium on the Sunday.



2010.

THE YEAR OF
MANDATORY
HELMETS AND
TREND-SETTING,
ANONYMOUS
HURLERS!



YOU MAY THINK YOU'RE A GLADIATOR
IN THAT NAFF HELMET BUT YOU
CAN'T HURL LIKE ONE HERE SONNY BOY!
OFF YOU GO MAXIMUS OR WHOEVER YOU ARE!



Tom Daak
2010



Is there a leader in the pack?



Dennis Walsh

PEOPLE give out about standards but they don't really care. This Kilkenny team has taken hurling to new altitudes of brilliance but all we hear is grumbling about one-sided matches and lopsided championships. It is the difference between appreciation and gratitude. Kauto Star won the King George by 36 lengths on St Stephen's Day and is the best steeplechaser since Arkle but there is a part of us that would have liked a race rather than an exhibition.

There is an element of that response about this Kilkenny team too. Clearly, last year's championship was much more of a contest than the King George. Tipperary stayed with Kilkenny until the last fence, Galway and Waterford were in a challenging position at the second last, Dublin did their best to get them off the bridle. But, in the overall picture, other teams were beaten with a circuit to go.

That's the worry. After the first three in the betting for this year's championship, where is the team that could

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We are entitled to our pessimism but that's not necessarily a barrier to hope. The All-Ireland champions of 1995, 1996 and 1999 did nothing in the first round to suggest they would lift the Liam MacCarthy Cup in September. The obvious follow on from that observation, however, is that we haven't had surprising All-Ireland champions since then. Not even close.

Tipperary and Galway will lead the charge on Kilkenny's castle. This group of Cork players would dearly love to get as far as the castle moat again to launch one more assault but their reach is a more

speculation than expectation. While nine players from last year's panel either retired or were culled before Christmas, Timmy McCarthy is the only significant name among that number. Others, such as Neil Ronan and Kieran Murphy (Erin's Own), had become peripheral in any case. The core group remains the same.

Cork have been grooming a development squad over the winter months with the intention of integrating six of those players into the National League panel. As a group, they fluffed their lines badly against UCC in their Waterford Crystal meeting, failing to score in the second half and compounding the impression that nobody among them stands out as a serious option for this summer. For years people have been wondering why Cork were not overhauled. The answer has always been blindingly obvious: the material for change, after more than a decade of massive underachievement by the county's Minors and U21s, simply did not exist.

Is there another serious campaign in this Cork team? Yes. Why? For the first time since 2006 they have had a clutter-free winter of proper training and domestic harmony. Every report from the camp



Chasing stars: It's hard to even imagine the Dubs making it to Croke Park this September
Picture: John McIlwaine



confirms the good impression that Denis Walsh made last year. Training has been challenging, modern and stimulating – precisely the elements missing from the previous regime. The players feel refreshed, mentally and physically. There may not be much left in this Cork team but there is one more surge.

Can the same be said of Waterford? Davy Fitzgerald lost his selectors at the end of last summer and had enormous difficulty replacing them. It would be fair to say that positive first impressions of him were not

Plenty to worry about: Davy Fitzgerald's Waterford side don't have great prospects for the year ahead

Picture: Brendan Moran / SPORTSFILE



enhanced within the group during his second season. Their admirable performance against Kilkenny in the All-Ireland semi-final was ego-driven efforts, like all of the best performances in elite sport. 11 months earlier, Kilkenny had taken their name and Waterford were hell-bent on reclaiming what remained of their reputation.

That kind of glorious performance has a one off quality.

They have been through another punishing January of incredibly demanding 1990s-like pre-season work. If the performance of their Minors and U21s in 2009 would suggest they have something to work with for the purpose of reshaping their team, this overhaul is a medium term project. Previewing this year's championship involves a short term forecast. Since August of 2007 Waterford have been in various stages of decline – occasionally arrested but never reversed – and it is hard to see them bursting out of the pack this year.

Even less so Limerick, who would not be good enough even if they had not become this winter's dysfunctional family. Whatever happens in the coming weeks this season is already a write off.

For Limerick to clear a site and build again Justin McCarthy must walk away. In his mind this course would amount to an admission that he had been part of the problem. Such admissions have always been contrary to his self-image.

The situation is complicated by a lack of public trust in the players. In each of the three Cork strikes the players did not start out with an advantage in public opinion but long before the end they had acquired it, and in each case it was a factor in the outcome. There won't be marches on the streets of Limerick in support of these players – no matter how badly they fare in the first couple of rounds of the League.

Thankfully, the crisis in Clare did not reach that point. Mike McNamara was slow to leave the stage and his delay was wounding to prospects in 2010 but not fatal. In Ger O'Loughlin the Clare County Board have made a wise appointment. In his playing career



Right answer: Ger O'Loughlin seems a wise option for Clare Picture: Diarmuid Greene / SPORTSFILE

and in his business life O'Loughlin had a well attested reputation for shrewdness. His success with Adare in Limerick confirmed he had successfully transported those qualities into coaching.

He is the perfect man for Clare right now. Obviously, they have good young players who will need time and the protection of a manager strong enough to be patient. O'Loughlin won't be affected by the mob outside the wire, one way or another.

It is easy to see Clare having the kind of year Dublin had in 2009. Dublin now need to set a higher bar and clear it. You can crab the form of the Leinster Final when Kilkenny did not get out of third gear and you can point at the All-Ireland quarter-final as a wasted opportunity. There was an element of greenness about Dublin last summer that would not have served them well in an All-Ireland semi-final against Tipperary. Maybe that Thurles defeat will be more valuable in the long run.

In the coming months Dublin and Clare will be jostling for prominence in the chasing pack but imagining them in Croke Park this September requires the kind of vision that we never had.

DENIS WALSH writes for *The Sunday Times*. The author of the award-winning *Hurling: The Revolution Years* (2005), he also co-wrote Ronan O'Gara's *Ronan O'Gara: My Autobiography* (2007).



Off the charts

AND YOU CAN'T DO IT WITH JUST SKILL.
– BRIAN CODY

HAPPINESS WRITES WHITE.
– HENRY DE MONTHERLANT

PHILIP Larkin, esteemed English poet rather than doughty Kilkenny defender, was a connoisseur of gloom. He believed misery a muse – *the* muse, in a way – and so was fond of quoting that statement about happiness by a French writer. This be the irony: all going well, there is nothing to say. End of story.

A variant on this recognition might trouble sportswriters. Such success as was overseen by Brian Cody this last decade more or less bleaches punditry's sheets. What do you say? Wherefore criticism, however constructive, records tumbling like ninepins? The most titles in a decade, with all five Munster hurling counties beaten at least once in a decider. The longest unbeaten championship run. A grand slam of the four main trophies. A display for the ages in the 2008 All-Ireland Final. The greatest combination of all time, according to informed views. Splendid isolation at the top of the Senior roster for the first time in the



PM O'Sullivan

Kilkenny are in a curious position. Who could be remotely harsh if they were beaten in the Leinster semi-final – Dublin surely the opposition – and ushered out first time of asking in the qualifiers? What harm, in the phrase? The current crowd have won so much and it has to end in some form on some day and has to end sooner rather than later, since not even a concrete block painted black and amber could think that Kilkenny will remain

county's history.

The list poses its own question. Are this team not heading off the chart, away into a whiteness, away beyond comment? What is there to tender but blank applause?

unbeaten for another four seasons.

Philip Larkin, doughty Kilkenny defender rather than esteemed English poet, once threw down his hurl in a temper. It was far from the only time but it is the instance that is remembered. The occasion was the 2003 League Final, just after Eoin Kelly had drifted over to the left side of attack and pointed with transfixing finesse. Larkin's body language was a daub of blackest ink. *Enough*. The lasso of humiliation whistling over his head, he proceeded to overmaster Kelly in time and Noreside proceeded to win by a last gasp point. Truly Brian Cody had made the Nore stubborn.

Anybody who wants to stay involved with a hurling team, player or mentor, knows better than to offer hostages to fortune. Say you want to keep winning and say it is going to be terrible difficult to beat that new Norwegian team in the Leinster quarter-final. Standard business. Keep it tight. Grimace as you smile. Journalists are only there to sell newspapers.

Indifference is hard terrain to map. The media have found it impossible to take the measure of Kilkenny. That said, it must be clear by now that the italicization of desire in their camp is not standard rhetoric, camera talk. It is clear that Brian Cody has worked some kind of alchemy where collective focus is concerned. Tommy Walsh's response after being awarded Hurler of the Year for 2009 said it all in this regard. Pretty much Walsh's first comment was that his place for 2010 still had to be secured.

If you want an image for this transformation, go back to 2003. Go back to Larkin dissolving his frustration in the solvent of resolve. A lack of spirit – or a lapse in spirit, some success achieved – is the most insidious enemy of all. Without spirit, there is always an excuse for losing. Brian Cody was entirely correct in his immediate summary after beating Tipperary: "And you can't do it with just skill. You can't do it with just a decent panel. If you don't have this thing that binds the whole thing together, absolutely intact, it'll fall apart when push comes to shove. And push came to shove so many times there today." For a long spell, I



Keeping focus: What Cody has instilled a great spirit in his team

Picture: John McIlwaine

very much overrated skill.

There is no guarantee that the gravitational pull of sport will take its toll at the standard velocity where these champions are concerned. Cody just seems to have changed the rules. Consider the jadedness evident in Kilkenny's play in 1994, as they sought three in a row. Ollie Walsh was an excellent manager but even he had the apple come down on his head.

While other managers would have won plenty titles with the present panel, nobody but Cody could have overseen that triumph against



“The ethos is the aesthetic. Beauty articulate flows from duty immaculate, which is an astonishing renovation of the Kilkenny tradition.”

Tipperary. The ethos is the aesthetic. Beauty articulate flows from duty immaculate, which is an astonishing renovation of the Kilkenny tradition. Hence Cody’s sprint afterwards to congratulate Martin Comerford, a man like a briar to be left off the starting XV but a man who nonetheless spoke unforgettably in the dressingroom beforehand about getting the job done for everyone.

So here is moot and root and cheroot about previewing Kilkenny before a ball is struck in anger this year. Physics, standard hurling physics, no longer seems to apply. It might well apply this summer – and earlier than you think, in that a Galway likely honed by Offaly and Wexford will be a far different proposition than a Tullamore-found Galway the far side of another hockeying for Laois – but there can be no appeal in the spirit of a plumber’s whistle. No longer is anything guaranteed to go wrong simply through length of use.

One argument claims in any event there will be less pressure this season on the champions. Ger Loughnane has been this perspective’s most prominent

advocate, arguing last January in the *Irish Daily Star*: “I expect a fifth title on the trot to come easier for them[...] Tipperary played out of their skins in [the All-Ireland Final] and Kilkenny were below-par – yet it was Brian Cody’s men who came out on top.”

This perspective spins off the intensity of the Kilkenny-Tipperary rivalry, which is unparalleled in its bitterness, much as Clare tried in the 1990s. The availability or unavailability of a smart comment is as much motivation as most intercounty hurlers need. Key matches allow or disallow. Had Tipperary beaten Kilkenny last September, there would have been plenty heard in Urlingford and beyond about the three in a row won against bad teams, the great three in a row when Tipp were so misfortunate as to have an eejity manager. Their medals would be going nowhere but Noreside’s current hurlers would die before inflicting guff on their supporters.

Now such alecry is a dead cluck, Urlingford or anywhere else. The four in a row is as safe in the oral tradition as in the record books. If Tipperary beat Kilkenny this season, it will be gravity’s pull. Brian Cody has his conundrums but he has constructed an extraordinary shot to nothing, in snooker parlance, so far as hurling in 2010 is concerned. Sure, he needs to look again at the half-forward line’s ability to win possession after near meltdown on this front last September. Can Richie Power be spared from full-forward? Can a role be found for TJ Reid that would last a campaign? Corner-back is another arrow, as is whether Jackie Tyrell will ever get to sweep into his kingdom at half-back. All to do.

But Cody has space to breathe, which is the making of any chart.



**Walking the line:
The relentless
march of the cats
continues**

Picture: John McIlwaine

