

FOOTBALL > ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFIER ROUND 2

# Clare are 'far from brilliant'

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THE was hoopla and there was hollering, while everyone of a saffron and blue hue also had the broadest of smiles in celebration of the relief of it all, that Clare had finally got over the line to victory.

Clare captain Gary Brennan was one of the hordes in this camp, but at the same time he wasn't slow or shy about running his teacher's rule over the performance that brought the team this far.

"An awful lot of it was self-inflicted," he mused when questioned on

the toughness of the game. "We just kept giving the ball away. I haven't seen the stats but I would be afraid to look at them. I don't know when we gave away the ball as much before.

"It was far from a brilliant performance but I have been saying it — and wasn't saying it just for the sake of it — that anytime you come to Tullamore it's a battle. They are a really, really proud county and you could see there the way they were playing for their lives and the way they really threw everything at it and thankfully we had enough in the end to get over the line," he added.

For Brennan et al, what could have

been an easy victory if the stats had been more favourable, became a struggle to the death, even after half-time when the wrongs of the first half were righted as they went again.

"The core message [at half-time] was that we had to mind the ball better," said Brennan. "When we were turning it over in the forwards that's what was giving them the opportunities. We knew that if we did that we could get on top.

"They were hurting us when we gave the ball away. A huge amount of it was self-inflicted in the first half — we improved a bit in the second half for a spell but then seemed to go

to sleep again.

"We started losing possession again and it was costly. This allowed them back into the game and they were capitalising on it, were using a lot of pace coming at us and we just didn't seem able to slow the runners," he added.

But, despite these deficiencies, the big thing and the reason for all the celebrations, was that the match was won.

"We saw guys coming in and making a big impact," enthused Brennan. "That's what you need in a game like today. You just don't know who will come in and get their chance —

Gearóid O'Brien kicked two points, Gavin Cooney came in. They all had an impact. Kevin Harnett has had such a long road with that shoulder. To see him get on the field firstly was fantastic, to have him pop up and get a score at the end was extra-special," he added.

**Below:**  
The Clare panel prior to throw-in in the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship Qualifier Round 2 meeting at O'Connor Park in Tullamore, Offaly, on Sunday.  
Harry Murphy/Sportsfile



## Banner boys lift spirits after Kerry disappointment

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FOR Clare it couldn't end here, because back-to-back championship defeats, with the manner of the defeat to Kerry being followed by defeat to a Division 4 team would be a completely underwhelming finish to a year that up until their trip to Killarney and been so good.

It couldn't happen and didn't because when it mattered most Clare were able to dig it out and finally swat the brave Offaly challenge.

"To get a win here was massive to get our confidence back and hopefully it will drive us on to greater things," said Eoin Cleary, who was a star performer with 0-6 over the course of the contest.

"We had a very good league and then we beat Limerick comprehensively. I suppose the Kerry game knocked a lot out of us. Even the training the two weeks after it wasn't great. It was down to the players really.

"It was our experience really. Our experience of playing in Division 2 and playing in

the quarter-final in 2016 stood to us in the end. There is a lot of experience on that pitch.

"You saw a few short kickouts and lads were cool enough on the ball and we worked the ball up into scoring positions and guys took their chances, when maybe they didn't in the first half," he added.

Cleary contributed handsomely in that regard — after thundering into the game in the first half, he grabbed some crucial points in the second.

"It was a very close game and we knew

it would be like that," he said. "It ebbed and flowed and I think the crowd brought Offaly and they had a great home support but thankfully we were able to get scores at the right time and kick on and win.

"A home game would be great — you saw the way it brought Offaly on. It was worth two or three points to them and if we had that behind us in Ennis it would be great."

Away it is, however, but Clare's away record in the Qualifiers has always been better than their home one.

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## MATCH BREAKDOWN

**MAN OF THE MATCH**  
**JAMIE MALONE**  
**(CLARE)**

HIS was a towering performance, with Eoin Cleary just behind him in the pecking order. Malone hit 1-4, when it could have 3-4. The goal he got ignited Clare's challenges, the two that timber denied him could have won the game with 35 minutes to spare, but the fact Clare still won was the big thing. The only thing.

**WON & LOST**

CLARE got over the line because ultimately they had the legs on Offaly at the end. They had the little bit of extra star-quality thanks to Malone and Cleary, but the subs were crucial in the end. The scorers in O'Brien, Cooney and Harnett, but also the likes of Ó hAinfeín who created a couple of points as Clare finished it out well.

**WHERE TO NOW?**

ROUND 3 of the Qualifiers, which means being two more wins away from the Super Eights. One game at a time, of course, with first up being Armagh this coming Saturday.

**TEAMS**
**Clare**

Eamon Tubridy (Doonbeg) (6), Eoghan Collins (Ballyhaunis) (7), Cillian Brennan (Clondegad) (7), Gordon Kelly (St. Joseph's/Doora-Barefield) (7), Cian O'Dea (Kilfenora) (7) (0-1), Aaron Fitzgerald (Éire Óg) (7), Pearse Lillis (Cooaclare) (8) (0-1), Gary Brennan (Clondegad) (7), Cathal O'Connor (Coolmeen) (7), Keelan Sexton (Kilmurry-Ibrickane) (7), Kieran Malone (St. Joseph's/Doora-Barefield) (0-2) (7), Jamie Malone (Corofin) (9) (1-4), Eoin Cleary (St. Joseph's/Doora-Barefield) (8) (0-6, 2f), David Tubridy (Doonbeg) (7) (0-1), Eirín Courtney (Éire Óg) (7). **Subs** Gavin Cooney (Éire Óg) (7) (0-1) for Courtney (HT), Robert Eyres (Kildysart) (6) for E. Tubridy (43), Gearóid O'Brien (7) (Kilrush Shamrocks) (0-2) for D. Tubridy (57), Cónal Ó hAinfeín (Éire Óg) (6) for K. Malone, Jonah Culligan (Ballyvaughan) (6) for Sexton (67), Kevin Harnett (Meelick) (6) (0-1) for Collins (71)

**Offaly**


Alan Mulhall (Walsh Island) (1-0), Brian Darby (Rhode), Seán Pender (Edenderry), James Lalor (Raheen), Declan Hogan (Tullamore), Paul McConroy (Tullamore), Niall Darby (Rhode), Michael Brazil (Tullamore), Conor McNamee (Rhode), Cian Donoghue (St. Brigid's), Shane Nally (Ferbane), Ruairí McNamee (Rhode) (1-2), Bernard Allen (Tubber) (0-5f), Anton Sullivan (Rhode) (0-3), Johnny Moloney (Tullamore) (0-4). **Subs** Jordan Hayes (Edenderry) for Donoghue (HT), Peter Cunningham (Bracknagh) for Nally (41), Eoin Rigney (Rhode) for Hogan (50), Colm Doyle (Clara) for Pender (51), Jamie Evans (Gracefield) for R. McNamee (57), Joseph O'Connor (St. Rynagh's) for Moloney (75)

**Referee** Paddy Neilan (Roscommon)

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Clare's Ciarán Malone races away from Offaly's Michael Brazil during the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship Qualifier Round 2 meeting at O'Connor Park in Tullamore, Offaly, on Sunday.  
Harry Murphy/Sportsfile

# Clare keep the Faith

 Clare 1-19 Offaly 2-14 

At O'Connor Park, Tullamore

THEN there was Clare.

Seven teams had booked their place in the third round of the Qualifiers before a ball was kicked in this one, with Clare rounding things off when finally seeing off the brave challenge of underdogs Offaly in the sweltering mid-summer sun.

The football may not have been as hot as the weather, but in throwing up a contest that produced 36 scores the excitement was certainly at fever pitch up until the time Kevin Harnett finally sealed it with a 75th minute point that eased Clare home to a two-point victory.

It was what Clare's performance on the day deserved, but how they made it difficult for themselves in a contest that should have been over by half-time.

Instead of being the guts of ten points up at that juncture Clare found themselves level — the disparity between what was and what should have been being all down to not tak-



by  
Joe Ó Muircheartaigh

ing gilt-edged goals chances when they came, a profligacy magnified by the concession of a soft goal from a penalty just before half-time.

After a dreadful opening 20 minutes by Clare when all they had to show for their efforts were early points from Cian O'Dea and Kieran Malone as they slipped 1-3 to 0-2 behind, it was the brilliant Jamie Malone that almost singlehandedly dragged his side back into the game.

His 22nd minute goal cancelled out the fourth minute green flag for the

Faithful from Ruairí McNamee as Clare finally took flight in this contest and tore the home side's defence to shreds in the closing 15 minutes of the half.

Miltown clubmates Eoin Cleary (2) and Kieran Malone, as well as Jamie Malone hit points as they moved 1-6 to 1-4 clear, but it should have been so much more, with the crossbar and the post denying Jamie Malone goals before disaster struck just before half-time when after a Clare attack broke down badly a sweeping Offaly move was only ended when Pearse Lillis was adjudged to have pushed Shane Nally over in the square.

Up stepped keeper Alan Mulhall to rifle to the net and suddenly, from a position where Clare could have been 3-8 to 1-5 clear, the sides were level at 1-8 to 2-5.

It gave Offaly a cause worth fighting for in the second half, even though they were playing against the wind and shipped early scores to Lil-

lis and Cleary as Clare moved 1-10 to 2-5 clear.

As the half wore on so did Offaly's confidence grow with captain Anton Sullivan leading their charge with 0-3 from play, while McNamee, Moloney and freetaker Bernard Allen also chipped in with points.

Crucially, however, Clare also kept the scoreboard ticking with points by David Tubridy, Cleary, Gavin Cooney and the inspiring Jamie Malone (2) helping them go three clear, 1-14 to 2-8 entering the last 20 minutes.

That Clare couldn't push on was down to Offaly's raw spirit, with points by Allen (2), Sullivan (2), Moloney and McNamee which drew responses from Cleary (2) and substitute Gearóid O'Brien (2) ensuring there was only a point between the sides entering injury time.

That was when Kevin Harnett became the hero with an insurance point that saved the favourites blushes.



## FOOTBALL ▶ ALL-IRELAND CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFIER ROUND 2

## Clare survive heat and then Offaly

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COLM Collins wasn't at the Munster final, but like most other people was looking on as Kerry laid waste the Cork challenge in Páirc Uí Chaoimh in much the same way they had done to his team in Killarney three weeks previously.

It was something that gave the Clare manager cause for thought, something he revealed after surviving this scare against an Offaly side in a game that was billed a Division 2 v Division 3, but there were 11 places between them in the league standings.

"Having seen Kerry maybe I was a bit hard on my own fellas," said Collins. "Kerry could have won by any amount — coming here I felt the conditions were hard for both teams, searing heat and energy sapping stuff, but they gave everything.

"There's no question that the most important

thing [after the Kerry performance] was to win the match. People were coming up during the week and were going on about this and that.

"We always felt this was going to be a massive contest. Offaly were at home, had a change of management and had a good win against Antrim to get back in the saddle.

"We would have tremendous respect for Offaly — to our eyes in Clare, Offaly are still one of the big football county, they have a tremendous history and they are a formidable. Any time you are in Tullamore against Offaly you will earn your points when you get them.

"We knew it was going to be hard and we're delighted to come out the right side of it. We were lucky to shade it in the end but it could have gone either way," he added.

That said, Collins also pointed to the goals that the posts denied Jamie Malone. "Jamie is an excellent talent and was on fire," he said. "He got

some excellent scores and unlucky not to get a few more.

"At the point where those shots went off the woodwork we probably would have put the game to bed at that stage, but Offaly came back again and got the penalty and Alan Mulhall put it away really well.

"Coming back in the second half we were in the battle. Both teams gave their very all and pushed it to the limit. Offaly never gave up and the last score only time I breathed a sigh of relief when Kevin Harnett kicked the last point. It's nice to be in the bowl," he added.

A bowl that when emptied saw Clare paired with Armagh in the Athletic Grounds this coming Saturday. "Let's see where this takes us," said Collins.

"That's the important thing. We're going to have a go at it. You never know. We had a bit of a run in 2016 and today might spark something like that," he said.

## Harnett returns to action

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WE all knew that Kevin Harnett was a great man around the edge of the square. Getting a hand in, it might even be a finger in the dyke when things are really are really tight; getting a boot in, clearing his lines and finding those around him.

But up until Sunday at around 3.15pm we thought all that industry, endeavour, calmness in situations that can be very hot and doing the right thing was confined to his own square.

After all, he's a fully paid-up member of the Full-back-line Union, not the square at the other end of the field that Clare are attacking into.

But so it was on Sunday when this All-Ireland Qualifier played out under the blazing afternoon sun of 26 degrees that Harnett went on the move, on the run, and finally eased Clare's fraying nerves with the final point of the game.

"It was my first ever point in championship," the elated Meelick man revealed afterwards, "even though Gary Brennan says I did score in a game against Carlow before, but for Carlow and not Clare, but I maintain that that never happened, I'm not claiming it," he laughed.

That insurance point, which was a payback for the journey Harnett has made over the past nine months, wasn't the only thing he was elated about, however.

The win was the big thing, but equally important was the fact that he was back out on the field playing again and not the frustrated spectator he's been all season.

"It was great to get out there," he revealed. "I had an operation on the shoulder last October/November and it was slow getting back — I thought I wouldn't see grass this year, but I have, even though I will have to have another procedure on the shoulder at the end of the season.

"When I came on it was just to try and be able to do something for the team at the end," he continued. "We had to bounce back after the Kerry game and I knew we would. For the point the space just opened out before me and I took the chance.

"Being in the draw on Monday is everything for us and hopefully now we can kick on and be in the draw for a few more Mondays yet," he added.



Clare's Cian O'Dea tries to dispossess his marker during the All-Ireland Senior Football Championship Qualifier Round 2 meeting at O'Connor Park in Tullamore, Offaly, on Sunday.

Harry Murphy/Sportsfile