

FOOTBALL  Senior Championship Previews

Championship race ready to heat up

The championship aspirations of Éire Óg and Lissycasey are hanging by a thread - they're just two sides who are in crunch action in a full programme of games that take place from Thursday to Sunday. **Joe Ó Muirheartaigh** and **Eoin Brennan** look ahead.

**GROUP 1**

 **Shannon Gaels**
v
 **O'Curry's**

@ Doonbeg, Saturday, 5.30pm

THERE'LL be talk of 1992 in the air before this one - there was always the chance this was going to be so given the Aidan Moloney v Francis McInerney dimension to the game. However, it will definitely be there thanks to John Maughan's cameo involvement with Shannon Gaels.

It's quite a coup for a Gaels team that is already cock-a-hoop having hit the championship ground running with a 1-13 to 0-9 win over St Joseph's Miltown. A similar result is expected here, even though the Gaels' Achilles heel in the past has been to follow up an opening round victory with a second round flop.

You only have to look back to their experience last year - they were impressive in getting over the challenge of Liscannor in their opening tie, but then proceeded to take victory over Ennistymon in their second outing as a given. Such a lax attitude was fatal and they fell to the north Clare magpies in Quilty.

Any such soft underbelly will be pounced on and exposed by O'Curry's, who are smarting from a disappointing opening performance against Wolfe Tones. It's not that they were beaten, but more that the traditional passion play you'd associate with them in championship was missing.

They were a shadow of the team that reached the quarter-final stage two years ago. Their only hope of causing a sensation here is if that burning never-say-die passion is back and if Shannon Gaels don't go to school on their bitter experience from last year. The passion will be back, but the Gaels won't be caught.

Their forwards mightn't be as lethal as Wolfe Tones' tyros that ripped O'Curry's apart the last day, but with John Paul O'Neill and Brian Cunningham leading the way they'll put enough scores on the board to bag two more precious points.

Verdict: Shannon Gaels

 **St Joseph's Miltown**
v
 **Wolfe Tones**

@ Lissycasey, Saturday, 3pm

CRUNCH game in the group. Make or break for St Joseph's - something similar for Wolfe Tones, even if it isn't a last chance saloon as they have the luxury of having two points to their name already.

St Joseph's Miltown have nothing following their dismal showing against Shannon Gaels on their first day out. There were a lot of things wrong that day - the team and numbers given for the programme bearing no resemblance to the team that took the field; good form in the Cu-

sack Cup not counting for a thing; players underperforming everywhere to such an extent that only Graham Kelly emerged with honour intact.

In a way it's a good starting point for Miltown - they can only improve and will be a totally different proposition in this game, simply because their season depends on it. Cathal Lafferty on his return from county hurling involvement will add physical presence in midfield or centre-forward, while up front they have to get a better return from Gary Egan and Dessie Molohan.

But it's the Miltown backs who really hold the key - Peter Hennessy, Kevin Burke and Enda Malone played in the full-back line the last day and if they're in situ again on Saturday they'll be facing a Wolfe Tones full-forward line of Stephen Monaghan, Gary Leahy and Mick O'Connell that scored 2-7 of their winning 2-9 scoreline against O'Curry's. Gordon Kelly could be pulled back from midfield to do a man-marking job on Stephen Monaghan, with Lafferty plugging the gap in the middle.

Wolfe Tones meanwhile, will have Brian O'Connell and Frank Lohan back. O'Connell, if fit would go centre-back, with Brendan Hughes going to the wing, while Lohan could be given a half-forward/midfield berth. Either way they add hugely to the Tones' armoury. However, when looking for a winner it's hard to ignore the Tones' 5-8 to 1-8 hammering at the hands of Kilmurry Ibrickane in the under 21 semi-final. It will be hard to lift it in five days.

Verdict: St Joseph's Miltown

GROUP 2

 **Éire Óg**
v
 **Ennistymon**

@ Corofin, Thursday, 7.30pm

IT'S kind of a case of back to the future for this clash between the 2006 county champions and the north Clare magpies. All because both will have reason to remember Corofin. The wise football heads in Ennistymon will tell you that the best senior championship side sent out by the club was when they reached the quarter-final back in 1993.

That year they twice played a Faughs side made up of 12 Éire Óg players and three from St Joseph's in Corofin. Over those two games Páirc Finne and particularly Crowley's on the main street became spiritual homes of Faughs football.

Fifteen years on it has a real reference for Éire Óg - more than ever they need to tap into the spirit of '93 to save their season. Their position is that perilous following their meltdown against Ballyvaughan. And their problems don't end there. Midfield anchor Peter Cosgrove is out through suspension, while captain David Russell and Michael O'Regan are struggling with injury. In simple terms their backs are to the

wall, so 60 minutes will tell whether they have the fight and desire to play themselves out of trouble.

Standing in their way are the best Ennistymon team since '93. Michael Nestor is out through suspension but they have top class performers - Liam O'Driscoll, Brian Conway, Alan Griffin, Laurence Healy and Joe Dowling spring to mind. They'll really fancy their chances here but with a humiliating exit staring the townies in the face if they lose could spark a backlash that they so badly need out on the field.

The half-back line that was shredded by Ballyvaughan won't be as porous, if Alan Malone is given the number six jersey. David Monaghan is back in contention for a starting place as is Brendan Manning. They could be two of the trump cards to get the townies over the line.

Verdict: Éire Óg

 **Ballyvaughan**
v
 **Corofin**

@ Ennistymon, Saturday, 7pm

BACK to the scene of their greatest triumph for Ballyvaughan. More of the same will have them in dreamland and on the cusp of a first quarter-final appearance in 70 years.

Back in 1938, a north Clare team that went by the name Ballyvaughan went all the way to the final. Finals are far from their minds at this stage, instead Pat Costello and company have adopted a give-it-a-lash attitude where every senior championship match is a voyage of adventure to wherever it takes them.

And, what better way to follow their stirring triumph over Éire Óg than by plunging themselves into a Burren derby with Corofin. These sides know each other well - for instance James Flanagan who has been in Corofin corner for a good few years now won a Junior B championship with Ballyvaughan in '94.

Derby ties tend to bring the best out in both sides - it means that if Ballyvaughan produce their second half form of the last day and Corofin finally rediscover the form of their 2006 Munster club campaign a real cracker is in store. Ballyvaughan have the confidence, but after the real high could come the low.

They mightn't know it, but they won't have it as easy as they did against Éire Óg and Corofin are eyeing this tie as a real opportunity to bounce back into the race. On paper they have the better footballers - Darragh Shannon, Dara Clancy, Brian Lynch offer strength down the middle, while the seam of experience is provided by Colm Clancy, Michael O'Dell and others.


Ballyvaughan have the belief, but Corofin will improve from their Ennistymon display. Provided they can negate the influence of John Martyn in attack and James Hynes in midfield it will be Corofin's day.

Verdict: Corofin





GROUP 3

 **St Senan's Kilkee**
v
 **Kilrush Shamrocks**

@ Doonbeg, Saturday, 7pm

A POSITIVE start to the championship from both sides that sets up this intriguing encounter on Saturday. Kilrush sprinted into a commanding lead against St Joseph's but took their foot off the gas and allowed Doora/Barefield back into the game before eventually hanging on for victory.

Similarly for 45 minutes against favourites Kilmurry Ibrickane, Kilkee were the dominant force but they tired in the final quarter and it was enough to give Kilmurry Ibrickane hope and indeed a valuable point.

The group enters a critical stage this weekend but when it comes to championship, Kilkee are never found wanting and backed by the experience of David Russell, Michael O'Shea, Kevin Larkin and Christy Kirwan, they will hope to continue their good form and at least get back to where they left off in the semi-final last year.



They won't get it easy from Kilrush though who will feel they disappointed in the quarter-final last year after winning all of their group games. Pat Joe McGrath was their hero last time out, scoring 1-3 but down the centre they are equally strong with John Hayes anchoring the defence at centre back, flanked by the impressive Matthew Moloney and Con O'Brien. Donal O'Sullivan is still the main target at midfield and up front, Peadar McMahon, Patrick Clancy, Brendan Crowley and McGrath are all capable of chipping in with some

important scores.

The key battles should be Hayes and his fellow county team mate Michael O'Shea and potentially Donal O'Sullivan and David Russell at centre field. It will be interesting to see if O'Shea is used more as a roving third midfielder or will he just meet Hayes head on to see who comes out on top. Russell's battle against O'Sullivan could be the crucial battle though as dominance around the centre will be central to both side's supply.

Shouldn't be much in it but expect Kilkee to shade it if their previous championship performance is anything to go by.

Verdict: St Senan's Kilkee

 **Kilmurry Ibrickane**
v
 **St Joseph's Doora/Barefield**

@ Lissycasey, Sunday, 1.30pm

AN UNBEATEN streak of 18 straight victories including two trophies had Kilmurry Ibrickane clear favourites for this year's championship before the first round. Perhaps the weight of expectation proved too much against Kilkee as they looked to be heading for their first defeat of the year but unlike last year's similar opening to the championship, this Kilmurry Ibrickane side demonstrated that they possess much more character this year and they will want to build on that fightback against St Joseph's this weekend.

The situation is simple for Doora/Barefield. Win it and the group opens up for them, lose it and they are out of the running for qualification. It's as clear as that and although they are predominantly a young side, they

also have county experience in the form of Keith Whelan, Greg Lyons, Niall White and Kevin Dilleen as well as a host of underage talent.

It is difficult to look beyond a Kilmurry Ibrickane win though as the Cusack and O'Gorman Cup winners have been in unstoppable form so far this year. Five successive Under 21 championships have provided an assembly line of potential stars for the future and their understanding gained in that 19 game unbeaten run has instilled a confidence that St Joseph's will find hard to match. Add in the experience of Enda Coughlan, Paul O'Connor, Vinnie Talty, Peter O'Dwyer, and Johnny Daly and it all points to a Kilmurry Ibrickane win.

St Joseph's should put it up to them early on but Kilmurry Ibrickane should pull away as the game develops.

Verdict: Kilmurry Ibrickane

GROUP 4

 **Doonbeg**
v
 **Cooraclare**

@ Quilty, Sunday, 1.30pm

WHEN the draw for the championship was made a few months back, plenty turned to this fixture and speculated that Cooraclare could prove to be a massive banana skin for a Doonbeg side seriously looking to secure a championship title.

Since then, Cooraclare put in one of the season's finest displays when they brushed aside Shannon Gaels in the Garry Cup Final with a fantastic second half display, orchestrated mainly by a flaying Mark Tubridy. After that, they focused on a first

round championship meeting with Liscannor but failed to repeat the flowing football they displayed in the Division Two final. They scored just five times against Liscannor and in the end, a late point from Brian Consideen nicked a win.

It means that Cooraclare will have to follow through on that potential banana skin theory if they are to keep their summer alive. The loss was a major dent in a year that had been ticking over nicely and if they are to threaten Doonbeg on Saturday, they'll have to own the ball for much of the game. Liscannor kicked 16 wides over the hour. If Doonbeg get similar possession near the posts, they won't be as wasteful, particularly as David Tubridy is back from suspension.

This season, Doonbeg have shown focus and they've added another dimension to their panel with the addition of Paul Hehir. Though this is a derby day, they should and will have a little too much for a Cooraclare side that will fight hard for their survival.

Verdict: Doonbeg

 **Lissycasey**
v
 **Liscannor**

@ Quilty, Friday, 7.30pm

THIS could be the game that ends the defence of Lissycasey's title hopes and that in itself should ensure a tight, physical and intense game. But those are also the situations that Liscannor relish.

Lissycasey this year have found it difficult to move through the gears and have yet to throw the shackles off and play like champions but un-

doubtedly, they should have one big game in the tank. The bottom line is, it needs to be this game.

Against Doonbeg, Lissycasey lacked any real cutting edge and in their opener, Liscannor tacked up an unacceptable number of wides so this one looks likely to be a low scoring, close encounter.

The feeling is that if Liscannor can stay within touching distance coming to the home stretch, they could have the power to see them over the line. Lissycasey stopped playing in the last quarter of their first round and a repeat performance will probably be punished by Liscannor. They'll use their power and strength to try and dominate the game from start to finish, particularly as they have gained some valuable momentum of late.

They should have been the first side to beat Kilmurry Ibrickane this year in the Cusack Cup semi-final and they followed that with the one-point win over Cooraclare in the championship.

Expect a similar result when they line out against Lissycasey at the weekend.

Verdict: Liscannor

Opposite page:
Above: Graham Kelly, the only Miltown player to perform in their first round defeat to Shannon Gaels
Below: Eire Og captain David Russell, who is struggling with injury ahead of their crucial tie against Ennistymon.

This Page:
Left: Liscannor and Lissycasey in action in the 2005 Cusack Cup final.
Right: Cooraclare and Doonbeg renew championship rivalry for the first time since 2005.