


FOOTBALL  Senior Championship Previews

Quarter-final picture to become clear

Doonbeg, Shannon Gaels and Wolfe Tones are already through to the quarter-final stages, with all bar O'Curry's and the St Josephs' from Miltown and Doorra-Barefield in contention for the last five places on offer. **Joe Ó Muircheartaigh** looks ahead to the final round of games.



GROUP 1

 Shannon Gaels
v
 Wolfe Tones

A CHAMPIONSHIP game but really more like a challenge game or a workout for two sides with the luxury of having already qualified for the quarter-finals. It's just the tag of group winners that's at stake as both look ahead with confidence to the knockout stages. It gives both the chance to tinker with their teams, with both sure to use the opportunity to give a run to fringe players and make some positional changes around the field. Wolfe Tones have hurling to worry about on Saturday night in their make of break game against Tulla, so some of their dual stars such as Jamie Roughan, Brian O'Connell, Patsy Keyes and Brendan Hughes might be spared from playing a second championship game in two days. Shannon Gaels, meanwhile, might be tempted to rest John Paul O'Neill who has been carrying a leg injury all year. There won't be much in it, but with all energies going in to trying to save their hurling season on Saturday night, Wolfe Tones mightn't be too bothered with producing their best on Sunday. That's if the game goes ahead – they're not happy about having to play senior championship games on successive days. Why should they be?

Verdict: Shannon Gaels

 St Joseph's Miltown
v
 O'Curry's

A NOTHING game in terms of the 2008 senior championship race, but where the 'B' grade and the 2009 championship is concerned, there is loads to play for. St Joseph's are the Senior B champions, a title they won so impressively last year when Dessie Molohan almost beat Ennistymon on his own. Therein lies a tale. There has been much talk in Miltown and beyond over the past week about the decision to drop Molohan and select Niall Quinn ahead of Conor O'Loughlin in goal for the game against Wolfe Tones. The 'what if' line has been trumpeted since their 2-6 to 0-7 defeat. However, rather than dwell on what might have been, Miltown should be looking ahead to try and avoid the ignominy of being thrust into a relegation semi-final. It must be hard for O'Curry's to look ahead after their 22-point defeat at the hands of Shannon Gaels. They can go one of two ways after that one, lie down and be like a team that just had open heart surgery without an anaesthetic, or stand up and show the spirit that made them a senior club in the first place. The latter will prevail,

but it still won't be enough.



Verdict: St Joseph's Miltown

GROUP 2

 Éire Óg
v
 Corofin

THE most competitive group of them all, in the sense that all four teams are still in contention for a quarter-final place coming into the third round of games in the round robin series. There's no tradition between these two at senior championship level, albeit that way back in the storied summer of '95 when there was sunshine instead of rain, Éire Óg provided 13 players to the Faughs team that beat Corofin in the county semi-final. There are a few survivors from that day – Michael O'Dell and Colm Clancy for Corofin and Peter Cosgrove for the Townies, all of whom are vital to their teams causes. Cosgrove will come back into the Éire Óg side after missing the second round win over Ennistymon due to suspension. That day the Townies showed the necessary urgency to get the result that was vital to giving fresh life to their championship challenge. More urgency will be required here, because even though Corofin have only one point from two games, they have the football to trouble any side. It's win or bust for both – for the Townies the two points will put them through, for Corofin a win would get them at least a play-off for a quarter-final spot. The force seems to be with the Townies though – the second half collapse made for much soul-searching in their camp and brought with it a realisation that their football careers could be passing them by. Victory here will ensure that there's life left in them yet.

Verdict: Éire Óg

 Ennistymon
v
 Ballyvaughan

ANOTHER north Clare derby, another game in which Ballyvaughan will be underdogs. They wouldn't have it any other way as they continue on their journey at upsetting the odds. In the words of manager Pat Costello after their stunning victory over Éire Óg in round one, "people didn't think we were good enough for senior, but we've proved them wrong". Clare football stood up and took notice after that maiden triumph, while the draw against Corofin on their second day out has brought them to the cusp of the quarter-final. Their task isn't straight forward, but a draw is all they need to advance. Ennistymon need a win,

while a draw won't be enough if the Townies beat Corofin. Michael Nestor will be back after suspension to bolster Ennisytmon's midfield or half-forward line. Ennisytmon are favoured, even though they went down by six to Éire Óg. It wasn't a reflection on their overall play and a bit more composure in front of goal and a tighter defence could be get enough to get them home. Ballyvaughan, meanwhile, will bring another large following, and will serve up another passion play. Mightn't be enough though.

Verdict: Ennisytmon

GROUP 3

St Joseph's Doora-Barefield
v
St Senan's Kilkee

FOCUS on the football front in 'The Parish' will all be directed towards their under 21 A final showdown with six-in-a-row seeking Kilmurry Ibrickane the following weekend. This is just a fixture that has to be fulfilled, albeit that defeat will plunge the James Hanrahan side into a relegation dogfight. They're used to such scraps though and always seem to rouse themselves enough to come out on the right side of them. The Blues will pick up the points here and advance to their fourth quarter-final in a row. They showed their pedigree in forging clear of Kilrush when the pressure came on in Doonbeg and shouldn't be extended here. They've one foot in the last eight already – they'll be there with something to spare after this 60 minutes.

Verdict: St Senan's Kilkee

Kilmurry Ibrickane
v
Kilrush Shamrocks

THE tie of round three beyond dispute. The Shams are perfectly poised. They'll never have a better chance of causing what would be a sensation – as big a shock as Ballyvaughan beating Éire Óg in their senior championship debut. All because they're not being given a hope in hell of derailing the Kilmurry Ibrickane train that's on course for a clean sweep of senior titles in 2008. Then again Tyrone were no-hopers against the Dubs; Wexford were the same against Armagh, while at half-time in the Munster final no one gave Cork a chance of beating Kerry. That's why the Shams, riding the wave of unpredictability, are hoping to pounce. They have tradition and they have nothing to lose. Kilmurry Ibrickane are expected to win with something to spare – evidence of their strength in depth in an unbeaten run that has taken in 20 senior games in all competitions this term came when they dropped a handful of under 21 for their last outing against St Joseph's Doora-Barefield. No other club in Clare could or would have taken this zero tolerance approach. However, Kilrush never fear lofty reputations, will tear into them and hope that Kilmurry Ibrickane take them for granted. The combination of both

could transform this match-up into a potential banana skin for the championship favourites. If Kilrush can roll back five years to when they nearly shocked Kilkee in the county final they have a real chance, but Kilmurry's class should still win out.

Verdict: Kilmurry Ibrickane

GROUP 4

Doonbeg
v
Liscannor

DOONBEG are through, but that doesn't mean they'll take the foot off the gas here. Tommy Tubridy teams go out to win every game, while there's another incentive here. In last year's group meeting between the sides it was Liscannor who came out on top. They'll be keen to balance the books here, while Liscannor would happily take the point they need to secure qualification and put county champions Lissycasey out of the race. However, that point will be hard won – Doonbeg have improved greatly since last year. It's hard to imagine them going through this game without registering a point from play – that was their fate in the 2007 championship meeting between the sides. Liscannor, meanwhile, are the hardest team in Clare to beat, but too often fail at the door of poor shooting. They'll have to find their shooting boots here, but Doonbeg look to have more options up front to carry the day.

Verdict: Doonbeg

Lissycasey
v
Cooraclare

COORACLARE were crowned Garry Cup champions the week before their championship opener against Liscannor. However, the championship has been another unmitigated disaster as two defeats leaving them well shy of a quarter-final place for the fourth successive year. However, champions Lissycasey haven't fared much better, even if this game gives them a chance of a late reprieve. Victory here is their bottom line, as is a Doonbeg victory over Liscannor. Those two results would mean a play-off between Liscannor and Lissycasey for runners-up in the group. It's the only thing that Lissycasey have to aim for and in their hour of need the time has come for Colin Lynch to answer his club's call. However, it's not all about qualification. There's relegation to think of too – the losers here will be only two defeats away from intermediate football for 2009. Cooraclare who have to face into a fight for survival.

Verdict: Lissycasey

Opposite page: Peadar McMahon will be key to Kilrush's chances of upsetting Kilmurry Ibrickane, while the return of Colin Lynch would be a boom to Lissycasey's hopes. This page: Peadar Cosgrove returns to action for Éire Óg after suspension, while Pat Costello will be hoping to mastermind Ballyvaughan's march into the quarter-final.



The People's Team Fantasy Football Top Twenty after Round 2

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Team of Round 2

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 Conor Whelan (Doonbeg) 22
 James Hynes (Ballyvaughan) 22
 David Russell (Éire Óg) 18
 Brendan Moloney (Kilmurry Ibrickane) 18
- Eugene O'Neill (Shannon Gaels) 23
 Patsy Keyes (Wolfe Tones) 20
 Brian Conway (Ennisytmon) 19
 John Paul O'Neill (Shannon Gaels) 18
 Michael O'Shea (St Senan's Kilkee) 18
 Alan Clohessy (Liscannor) 17
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