

## **GAA: Crossmolina in cruise control**

*By: Michael Commins*

Crossmolina 1-8, Bellaghy 0-7

Sunday was a proud day for the people of the Crossmolina region in the lovely lake county of Fermanagh. On a day almost borrowed from Summer, they crossed a major hurdle when overcoming the strong challenge of Derry and Ulster champions Bellaghy to reach the All-Ireland Club Final for the very first time.

It was a joyous occasions in Brewster Park in this town that has known some very sad days in other times and where the memory of people like Marie and Gordon Wilson can still touch the hearts of many in a very special way.

Last year, the semi-final proved a bridge too far for Crossmolina when, on a very wet and windy afternoon, they met their 'Waterloo' against Na Fianna of Dublin in the semi-final.

It was easy to understand the emotion of those most closely associated with Crossmolina football on Sunday evening.

They had watched other clubs reach the big stage on St. Patrick's Day over the years and the dream was always there that perhaps someday they too might take their place at the top table. For all who sported the club jersey down through the years, there has to be a tingle of pride in the achievements of the current batch of players. The club is at the heart of the GAA and many are the unsung heroes who have played their part in nurturing the game and laying down the tradition from which the new crop has sprung and which is yielding such a generous harvest right now. The supporters travelled in great numbers with Crossmolina favours much to the fore. And it was not just a North Mayo crowd that journeyed to Enniskillen but they were joined by men and women and children from South, East and West Mayo. Such is the attraction of the club championships in recent years that the event has turned very much into a family affair with a carnival atmosphere surrounding the build-up to the big matches. Sunday was a special day too for the managers and selectors who have taken this team along the various underage grades to where they are today. Like Pete St. John so beautifully alluded to in his Dublin song 'The Rare Auld Times, many of these too have been 'raised on songs and stories and heroes of renown'. It's the old heart beating out a new rhythm in an almost timeless tradition rooted in the soil of this country. Quite remarkable by any standards is the fact that three bordering clubs from within a few miles of each other have now reached the All-Ireland Club Final in the last five years. Knockmore were there in 1997 and Ballina lost by a point to Crossmaglen in 1999. (Corofin of Galway won the title in 1998 and the Cup crossed the Shannon for the first time). Now, Crossmolina carry the mantle on St. Patrick's Day and the whole county will be hoping they can become the first club to take the Andy Merrigan Cup to Mayo when they take on Nemo Rangers from Cork.

### **Early control**

Apart from a spell midway through the second half, the Mayo lads never looked like losing this game. The game was far from a classic but never lacked in whole-hearted endeavour. People must still reside that this is club football and no club can ever hope to have the resources available to a county team. Even though Gavin Diamond nudged Bellaghy ahead after four minutes, there were clear signs from an early

stage that Crossmolina were on form. Joe Keane, showing sound composure, fired over the equaliser. With James Nallen and Michael Moyles faring very well at centrefield, there was a decent supply coming through to the forwards. Pressure on Bellaghy full-back, David O'Neill, led to him making a hasty clearance which was gratefully accepted by James Nallen who found himself in open space and who duly picked his spot to land a lovely point. The Crossmolina lads were rampant at this stage and Peadar Gardiner was on target from over 40 yards while Johnny Leonard sliced through the Bellaghy defence in powerful fashion before unleashing a pile-driver that screamed over the bar. Enda Lavelle was popping up all over the place, showing wonderful stamina and displaying a most commendable industrious nature. And when Michael Moyles raised another white flag from a long range free, things were looking very rosy for the men from the West. Bellaghy got a bit of a reprieve when Gavin Diamond, one of their more industrious forwards, and the tenacious Francis Glacken picked off two points. But the crucial 'break' of the match came seven minutes from halftime when the Bellaghy defence fumbled three chances to clear their line and as the ball broke loose from a melee, the foraging half-back Pat McAndrew let fly with a ground shot and Crossmolina flags were waving around Brewster Park. Just before the interval, Gavin Diamond converted a close-in free and this left the Mayo lads 1-5 to 0-4 ahead at halftime.

### **Temperatures rise**

The quality of play deteriorated considerably for a long spell of the second half. Both sides began to make mistakes, passes went astray, clearances were mis-directed and the game became quite scrappy and even dangerous. The physical nature of the match saw temperatures soar in the aftermath of an incident when Johnny Leonard was floored after six minutes of the half. Players from both teams began to 'shape-up' to each other and the game threatened to boil over on a few occasions. Kieran McDonald was sprung from the Crossmolina bench but it was Bellaghy who surged back into the game two points from Gavin Diamond which left just two between them with 13 minutes to play. Crossmolina supporters must have been fearing the worst at this stage because, with the exception of Pat McAndrew's goal, they had not scored for almost 40 minutes. Gerry O'Malley, who took a flight home from the Lebanon for the match (and who left for the Middle East again yesterday), was called into action. And just when it seems that the Derry lads were about to haul in the Connacht champions, it was big Liam Moffatt who landed a gem of a point from out near the corner. It was exactly what the 'troops' had needed and when Kieran McDonnell followed with another two minutes later, the pendulum had a distinct sense of western swing about it. Noel Convey was the last to enter the fray and Crossmolina, with three fresh players on board, coffer-fastened their grip on the match. Kieran McDonnell converted another free to leave them five clear. And while Bellaghy virtually laid siege to the Crossmolina goal area in the closing minutes, the defence showed great resolve under pressure and all Bellaghy could muster was a point from a free by Gavin Diamond. Barry Heffernan dealt admirably with all that came his way. Tom Nallen was very confident at fullback while Stephen Rochford and Colm Reilly worked hard throughout. Pat McAndrew has been one of the team's most consistent performers for some years and he capped off a grand performance with the only goal of the game. Damien Mulligan and Francis Costello also toiled very hard in the halfback line and effected several good clearances.. Moyles and Nallen played a key role in fashioning this victory and produced first rate displays on the day. Up front, Enda Lavelle showed a marvellous return to form and his overall

contribution was highly significant So too was that of Liam Moffatt who showed that he has adapted well to the full forward role. He won plenty of possession and steered over a vital point at a time when the game was delicately balanced. Johnny Leonard, Peadar Gardiner, Joe Keane and Paul McGuinness had some good spells too, especially in the first half while Kieran McDonnell, Gerry O'Malley and Noel Convey will be glad to have played a role on this historic day for Crossmolina. It was a disappointing day for the Derry men. Gavin Diamond with six points (three from frees) and one from Francis Glacken was all they could manage. Indeed, these two players, together with Gareth Doherty, were the pick of the forwards. In defence, Cathal Diamond and Paddy Downey were always to the fore with Ciaran McNally and Peter Diamond also faring well. Fergal Doherty also worked hard but the Mayo men were worthy winners and few in Derry could begrudge them their well earned success on the day. And so the big push is underway for what will be the biggest day ever in the history of the Deel Rovers Club form Crossmolina. Tommy Jordan, Jarlath Cunningham and their 'team' will spare no effort in having the squad in top shape for the showdown with Nemo Rangers. The Mayo lads will have huge support from around the country and there is a belief out there that this is the team to finally bring the Cup to Mayo. A word of advice for what its worth. The Crossmolina club should keep well clear of pre-All-Ireland corporate dinners. Similar fund raisers have been held by clubs a week or two before All-Ireland Finals in the past and have often proved to be most divisive ... as well as taking the focus of the prime objective. The Mayo County Board should willingly make a significant contribution to the club as they prepare for another big day in the history of Mayo football.

**Crossmolina:** B. Heffernan, S. Rochford, T. Nallen, C. Reilly, P. McAndrew (1-0), D. Mulligan, F. Costello, J. Nallen (0-1), M. Moyles (0-1), P. McGuinness, J. Keane (0-1), P. Gardiner, J. Leonard (0-1), L. Moffatt (0-1), E. Lavelle. Subs: K. McDonald (0-2) for J. Leonard, G. O'Malley for P. Gardiner, N. Convey for J. Keane.

**Bellaghy:** C. Donnelly, P. Downey, D. O'Neill, P. Diamond, K. Doherty, C. McNally, C. Diamond, F. Doherty, J. Mulholland, G. Doherty, K. Diamond, J. Cassidy, G. Diamond (0-6), C. Scullion, F. Glacken (0-1). Subs: Paul Diamond for D. O'Neill, E. Cassidy for C. Scullion, D. Quinn for J. Mullholland, J. Donnelly for J. Cassidy. Referee: Aidan Mangan (Kerry).