

Days like this -->

-->All-Ireland Club Football Final Feature/Monday in Crossmolina

THE maroon flags blew defiantly on the road between Lahardane and Crossmolina last Monday afternoon. 'The Deel will be done when the Merrigan is won' proclaimed a banner on the outskirts of the town.

Two anglers pushed their boat out into the rippling water of Lough Conn. The region already anticipated a prize catch on this day. And majestic Nephin commanded attention, as it seemed to stretch forever into the Mayo skyline.

On this particular Monday, Crossmolina recycled its Sunday best and put its good foot forward. An uncorked bottle of champagne sat in a bucket outside The Dolphin Hotel. At first glance, it seemed as if someone was giving fate an elbow in the ribs.

But it wasn't like that at all.

Inside, the staff waited for the bride and groom to arrive. A strikingly beautiful girl panned her camcorder on a deserted street. The last act of the hurling final unfolded on the big screen.

The schedule of the day had gone slightly askew.

At least Patricia Ruddy had an excuse. After all this was her special day. She probably kept Martin Newman waiting at an altar somewhere in North Mayo as well. And rightly so. She was only exercising a traditional right.

Some days are worth the wait. This was surely one.

Mark Doyle had travelled from his Westport home in search of atmosphere. Seldom does a complete stranger become a sound man in such a short time span. Beyond the Marian Shrine, I had already happened upon the genial Michael Commins. Things were looking up.

Not wishing to hijack Patricia's event we ambled across the Deel River to Hiney's Upper Deck on the far bank. This establishment still respectfully affords curtsy to a bygone era. Pictures of Mayo teams who walked the Promised Land adorn the walls.

In addition, there are gentle reminders of changing currencies.

Had you visited here in 1786 you could have availed of luxurious overnight accommodation for one shilling. And for a further four pence, they would look after the horse. Per person sharing one can only presume.

Those who chose to forsake the journey to Croke Park had long occupied the premium seats in Hiney's. Clad in blue dungarees and the maroon jersey of Crossmolina little Amy looked resplendent.

As usual, RTE had their finger completely off the pulse. Seemingly, someone in Montrose believes a 1950's slapstick comedy would attract more viewers down around Crossmolina on this Easter Monday. Let them off — they'll be learning.

It was left to TG4 to beam images of happenings on a Dublin field.

Deciphering an Irish account of proceedings was always going to be difficult. Crank up the delivery with the fluency and speed of Brian Tyers and the problem becomes insurmountable.

However. Martin Loftus is not just a friendly and efficient barman. He knows his clientele and was on the ball as

usual. The TV sound was eschewed in favour of local radio. I imagine Martin's tweaking of the knobs mirrored technological happenings in most Mayo living rooms.

It was the dulcet tones of Mike Finnerty that transported us beyond the language barrier by putting words to pictures. He has been over the course a few times before. There have been other Crossmolinas to carry the news to. And far too often, he has been the unfortunate bearer of bad tidings.

With Billy Fitzpatrick along as match analyst, he was aided and abetted by an astute and observant eye. Nobody reads the game better than Fitzpatrick. There's a strange feeling watching a neighbour on television. Crossmolina folk experienced this first hand on Monday afternoon. Here were the lads who walked those very streets. Many an evening they saw them in the flesh when, as gasurs, they ambled down to kick a ball in St. Tiernan's Park.

Now they were a world away. And they would have gone completely out of sight were it not for Barry Heffernan. His two first half saves rattled Hiney's door. And Kieran McDonald's points were hit from the foot of Nephin.

But there was no sign of premature celebrations. Everyone in Hiney's tavern braced themselves for the sting in the tail. Past experiences are still far too fresh in the memory for that. In Mayo, sweet dreams have a habit of always turning into nightmares.

However, this time the script was different.

Mike Finnerty was suddenly the bearer of good tidings. He surely plucked a few emotional chords when he mentioned a North Mayo Junior victory back in 1926. Punters in Hiney's stared reminiscently into middle distance when he rhymed names of Crossmolina folk who helped shape this outcome. Some have passed on and now look down on Crossmolina from the veranda of Heaven.

A strange eerie silence descended on the town after the final whistle sounded. But it was shortlived.

Fair play to the woman who drives 99 MO 1363. I think it was a grey Honda Civic but cannot be too sure. She didn't hang about because she was on a unique mission. She it was who officially declared it party time in Crossmolina. And all Mayo joined them in the festivities.

This evening there was to be no hard luck stories. No talk of what might have been. No unlucky bounce of the ball or chances sent a begging. Crossmolina footballers finally laid a few old ghosts to rest.

It was a strange feeling. It's been a long time since Mayo football strolled so proudly down the corridors of glory. A new era has beckoned. The call deserves an answer from all concerned. Tom Jordan and his dedicated bunch have blazed new frontiers. It is now time to build on this strong foundation.

Nephin has already set the tone. It suddenly assumed new stature beneath a balmy Mayo evening. The first major catch has landed on the shores of Lough Conn.

And Patricia Ruddy finally arrived and corked the bottle of champagne that lay unattended outside The Dolphin Hotel.

May all our dreams – and hers – come true!

