

Primed to go one step further

15/02/01: On St Patrick's Day last year, the footballers of Crossmolina discovered there were few things worse than falling just short. Na Fianna and the great Crossmaglen team were there in Croke Park and the Mayo players were, like the rest of the country, just spectators. No matter that they had pushed the city side to the brink for a time: their season was done.

"I think we resolved then to make sure we got there this year," said half back Stephen Rochford earlier this week.

"The feeling was that we hadn't done ourselves justice in the semi-final. We performed fairly well in the first half and went in level and had a strong breeze behind us then. There was never a question of relaxing but, I think, human nature being what it is, we were probably a bit cautious in that second half. You don't overcome the likes of Dessie Farrell and Kieran McGeeney by sitting back and maybe we were guilty of that a little bit."

Crossmolina have learned and demonstrated the hunger and durability to return keener than ever. After emerging as Mayo champions for the second consecutive year, they cut a sward through Connacht, confining Galway kingpins Corofin to just five points in a one-sided Connacht final.

"I think that result has to be put in context," says Rochford. "It was a tired Corofin team. They had five games in seven weeks, what with the Galway championship being run off late. Jason Killeen was missing also. But that said, we were pleased with our own manner of playing and undeniably, if we could hit that form on Sunday, then we feel we would have a strong chance."

Crossmolina have seen Bellaghy only on video. The teams competed in a tournament some years ago but were drawn in different groups.

"We know their quality. I think a feature of all Ulster teams is that they don't let themselves be pushed around - they aren't necessarily dirty, just physical and don't give a lot of space. And they have a lot of fine players, they are a team that has a lot of experience at this level."

But Crossmolina, despite an age average of just 25, have been around for quite a while as well. Although James Nallen and Kieran McDonald are perhaps the household names, the team is based around a nucleus of talented young players who grew up together and have long been accustomed to winning.

"We know one another's game and what it takes to close out matches," said 22-year-old Rochford, who captained the Mayo minors in 1996 before going on to play at under-21 and senior levels.

"And at the moment, around 16 of the panel is based in the area and those that are studying or working away return very regularly. Tom Jordan took over as manager in 1998 with Jarlath Cunningham as the trainer and they bring a lot of motivation to the team."

That Crossmolina are pressing again is perhaps indicative of the quiet resurgence of Mayo football. Pat Holmes has steered the county side to an impeccable league run and

some of the Crossmolina players are hopeful of rejoining the county squad when the club season ends.

Rochford, who played two league games for the county last year, said: "Naturally, I would love to be involved with Mayo. But it is extremely hard to break into the defence because we have always been very strong in that area. Anyway, right now it is important to concentrate on my place on the Crossmolina team and really not think beyond that."

As he sees it, it is critical that their season does not conclude at the same point as last year.

"That was our intention when we got together after watching last year's All-Ireland. It would be great for the community and western football in general if we could go one step further and challenge for the big one."