

## **Penultimate Pandemonium**

How cooperation won out at the 2016/17 Volleyball Association Cup Semi-Final/Shield Final weekend

Where was Moses when the lights went out? This is a 'trick' question known to those of you who are fans of the philosophical musings of one Huckleberry Finn on the nature of the biblical story of Moses and the candle. For those not so inclined the trick, such as it is, lies in the fact that he is not in the dark - which occurs after the lights went out nor is he in the light - which happens beforehand. Well this comes to mind because there was an unannounced power cut in the Patrician School Newbridge on one of the most important competition days in the Volleyball calendar. The venue was hosting two Association Cup Semi-finals and a Shield final with teams from Limerick, from Galway and even from deepest darkest Dublin already on the road. What is almost worse is that there is nobody to blame, the Newbridge club who put weeks of preparation and arrangements into the weekend were as stunned as we all were rumours of a match fixing coup were soon discovered to be without foundation.

Disaster! Catastrophe! Cries of OMG (no I don't know what it stands for either) we will be playing on Easter Sunday. This is the worst thing to happen everrrr; What to do? Why panic of course, Or...

Then up steps Ms Katie Nolan the Competitions Commission's newest member and saving grace who within 15 minutes had organised a new venue and was half way through the 1500 phone calls required to arrange and re-arrange travelling teams fixtures which took two weeks to sort out in the first place. She was able to contact Ann Fay & and Crona Byrne who with Marion Moloney and the whole Naas Cobras volleyball club came to the rescue with a venue that really saved the day, no words of thanks on behalf of all of us could do them justice. The task of switching the whole schedule around was achieved with calm authority (and excel) by Clodagh NicCanna; the Referees and Competitions Commissions working as one (on your behalf). So the phone calls were made to dozens of coaches and team reps who were understanding and accommodating (thanks to all) and half the matches decamped to Naas. Not simply the matches originally due to be played in the Patrician School Hall but the first men's semi-final, the second men's semi-final and the men's Shield final; that feat of juggling remains a mystery to the writer and may always remain so.

So our low budget one-act play becomes a multi-location extravaganza match reports below.

### **Act II Scene I**

#### **Holy Family School, Newbridge**

##### **Association Cup Womens Semi-final UCD v TCD**

As the power-cut panic played out in the background the women of UCD and TCD got proceedings going in still functioning Holy Family School in Newbridge. A clash of

Cardinal Newman and Edmund Burke no less; both figures famous for pursuits other than Volleyball and hardly written of fondly in the feminist lore but we must all respect tradition and the mores of different times. Separated by a division and 8 places in the league this was not predicted to be a close match but both teams had qualified under the same conditions and the Premier team, UCD, still needed to get the job done.

Experience though counts for a lot in Volleyball and so it proved here with TCD not really getting going until the 2<sup>nd</sup> set was up and running. The first set was characterised by long service runs from Alex Graves, Miriam Gormally and captain Regina Halpin. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> set TCD put up considerably more resistance against a much altered UCD side using their back court attack to counter UCD's strong block and getting their own block working to good effect. However in truth UCD were in control and pulled away in the final third of the set. In the final set UCD already in control finished the game in some style with their wing attack leading the way. While TCD had some good moments they were too widely dispersed and up against one of the strongest teams in the country in recent years their inexperience at this level was exposed. One for the bookies to rue as the favourites lived up to their pre game expectations and one : nil for the Cardinal.

*The result UCD 3:0 TCD.*

## **Act II Scene II** **St Mary's School, Naas**

### **Association Cup Mens Semi-final Garda v Naas Eagles**

The first Naas match 10 miles away where electricity was plentiful, was a clash of the Garda and Naas Eagles, locked together in the league the crowd was expecting a close match and that is what the first set turned out like.

Locked together at 12:12, 16:16 and again at 19:19 Garda got an edge on Osama Edghim's serve and closed out soon after at 25:21. The second set started off a continuation of the high tempo hitting game of the first, Naas had switched their team around somewhat to try and counteract the strong Garda attack but failed to find their rhythm and having held Garda to 8:8 fell away and Garda ran out winners 25:14. So to the third set and Garda on a roll ran up a 15:9 lead and the coaching team were starting to wonder what they would be wearing to the final. But lo! Naas found the form that eluded them so far and fought back strongly, the block until now excellent became excellent and fortunate. Serves hit the line too and at 23:23 it really looked like we were in for a 5 setter. If Naas could win this set Garda who were (or is that was?) wondering how this was happening would clearly struggle in the 4<sup>th</sup>. It's now or never and Garda push on to 24:23 and an error on serve and we are at 24:24, no another service error it's 25:24 and Garda serve for the match, the serve is in but lacks conviction and the inevitable set to "4" leads to a point for Naas

and another match point saved. Tension is high now and Garda on serve receive set up an attack again and take the point - match point #3. Serving at 26:25 Garda foils the Naas attack and make it home with a valuable lesson learned, Naas on the other hand feel they deserved more than the 3:0 result and in truth they are probably right.

*The result Garda 3:0 Naas Eagles.*

### **Act II Scene III Holy Family School, Newbridge**

#### **Association Cup Mens Semi-final UCD v Tallaght Rockets**

Back to Newbridge and the second semi-final to decide who would face the Garda 5.0 mens team in the final in two weeks' time. Would it be UCD past winners currently experiencing Premier League mid-table respectability or Tallaght Rockets struggling with league form and clearly second favourites if league form was to be a reliable indicator. An added incentive for UCD would be to join their womens team on home court on Cup Finals Day.

After a steady start the teams were level going into the last third of the set but UCD pulled out a couple of fine points with strong attacks through the middle and went on to win the set in 19 minutes to Tallaght Rockets 19 points and the form book proves reliable again. The 2<sup>nd</sup> set was a repeat of the first with teams trading points until after the 2<sup>nd</sup> technical time out. However it was Tallaght Rockets that now got their act together setting up a strong blocking unit to counter the UCD attack and Adam Polkowski pulled 4 serves out of the hat at a crucial point in the game and the Rockets went on to win at a canter. One set each and now it looked like we had a match on our hands but in truth it was Tallaght Rockets who were in the ascendancy. The Rockets strong attack as well as their ability to hold serve proved the difference again in the 3<sup>rd</sup> set with Israel Xavier and Jose Maria Lobo serving consecutively managed 7 service points which put paid to the college men. So into the 4<sup>th</sup> and a chance for Tallaght to close out the match surely their superiority would show out and they could make the final on UCD's home court. However at 20:16 down things didn't look so rosy for Tallaght and UCD looked like they may pull off a comeback. However that ability to hold serve became Tallaght's saviour one last time and when Luis Paolo Perreira switched in to serve receive his 4 points along with a strong defensive display from libero Nathaniel Sausa put paid to UCD's resistance and Tallaght belied their league form to win the 4<sup>th</sup> set 25:22. There would be no home team in the mens final in UCD in 2 weeks time and the bookies appreciate the respite.

*The result Tallaght Rockets 3:1 UCD*

**Act II Scene IV**  
**St Mary's School, Naas**

**Association Cup Womens Semi-final Garda v Galway VC**

The Garda were up again in the Womens semi-final (law and order would have to take a back seat it appears) where Garda Patatas were facing Galway whose trip to the final was extended by 10 miles by the move from Newbridge to Naas. Fatima Balza coach of the mens team now moved on to court to play in the womens match. As she coaches the womens team too there was some confusion but we all laughed like we understood what was going on and the game proceeded apace. Like in the mens match earlier league form was little for the bookies to go on as the teams had a 3:1 win each in the league albeit Galway's being more recent made them marginal favourites.

The match started with a 40 minute marathon set. Both teams attacked again and again and despite long periods where teams maintained their serve mid set, the end was nip and tuck with Galway's block coming out on top in a 27:25 thriller characterised by strong defensive play rather than any weakness in either side's attack. However it soon looked like the Garda had overcome their disappointment and in set 2 they powered into a 7 point lead that bridged the first technical timeout. Galway pulled back and were in touch at the second TTO when their setter Lucie Ruzickova stepped up to serve and 8 serves later it was over for Garda, the combination of strong serving coupled with a triple block/attack option proved too much. The irony being that Ruzickova's second serve was clearly long when taken by the Garda defenders – such innocuous things do games turn on. So into set three and Garda were struggling to get past Galway's block, this time it was captain Olivia Molloy's turn to string 6 serves together late in the set which turned out to be the difference in the end with Galway winning 25:20. Did both teams play wonderfully entertaining volleyball? Certainly. Did the best all-round team win the match? Probably. Did the 3:0 score flatter them? Yes but them's the breaks.

*The result Galway VC 3:0 Garda Patatas*

**Act II Scene V**  
**Holy Family School, Newbridge**

**Association Shield Womens final Naas Cobras v Aer Lingus Hawks**

Back to Newbridge and the top 2 teams in Division 1 of the national league contested the women's Shield final after defeating Premier League opposition in the semi-finals. League results between the two pointed to a close contest, with Aer Lingus winning 3:2 in their last meeting 7 weeks ago so most spectators and teams alike expected this to go the distance.

Contrary to expectations, the 1<sup>st</sup> set was very one sided. Aer Lingus Hawks had a nervous start which put them on the back foot and allowed a mature (in temperament if not in age) Naas Cobras to win the set by some margin. Naas served superbly and the Dublin outfit struggled to get any kind of rhythm or pattern to their play. Onto the next set, which saw Aer Lingus regain their composure and it made for a much tighter affair with the lead exchanging hands a number of times throughout the set. This period of the match was dominated by long rallies where Aer Lingus were able to dispel the strong Naas attack with good defensive play, which also saw some clever hits by Aer Lingus' Emily Slattery. However the timely introduction of experienced ex-Premier player Claire Walsh at 11:11 for a number of points helped bring an element of calm to the Kildare team in defence. Towards the end of the set clever serving, a few fast middle attacks along with strong backcourt hitting well-orchestrated by Naas setter Mary Creaton saw them through to win out 25:23. The pattern of the beginning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> set followed the same as the previous set, with the lead swinging back and forth in the early exchanges when Eimear O'Neill went into to serve at 12:10. Six serves later and Naas had a comfortable lead which they never surrendered and even though further tight rallies ensued, Naas controlled the destiny of the set and ultimately the match, with the Division 1 champions winning out 25:18. A close match in the end despite the 3:0 scoreline and it was a good advertisement for the strength of Division 1 volleyball in the league at the moment.

*The result Naas Cobras 3:0 Aer Lingus Hawks*

## **Act II Scene VI St Mary's School, Naas**

### **Association Shield Mens final Ballymun Patriots v Munster Thunder**

To the final game of the day, and this game actually was a final, the Mens Shield Final. The match played between teams separated by 8 league positions and one full division would surely be an uncontested victory for the Premier League champions, Ballymun Patriots over Division 1's Munster Thunder given that we had earlier witnessed two 3:0 matches by teams evenly matched in the league. If that was your thought process then like your correspondent you would be in for a surprise.

The match started nervously enough with both teams struggling to find their rhythm. The result, an outbreak of sticky fingers as the handling errors mounted uncharacteristically on both sides of the net. The result of the first set was a win and a loss for Ballymun; the win was a 25:22 set victory however the loss was an injury to wing hitter Genadijs Kukjans. Without a substitute Kukjans had to play on, only getting a respite in back court when the libero could cover - in front court though he was on his own. Although not obviously incapacitated the loss of a strong wing attack and block soon became apparent to the Limerick team whose experience belied their league position and they took the second set 25:18 thanks in no small

part to strong consistent middle attacking by Arnis Beide working with experienced and wily setter Ioannis Manolakis. We now had a game on our hands, would Ballymun Patriots find a way to protect Kukjans or would Munster Thunder's discovery in set 2 get them over the line and an unlikely victory? The result in set 3 was a fascinating and closely fought set with Ballymun playing cat and mouse with the Munster Thunder defence but ultimately hitting on the solution, in the person of Marco Priimagi, Kukjans' wing hitting partner who was brought into action in the back court to good effect or at least good enough effect to win out more closely than even the 25:21 scoreline would indicate. The 4<sup>th</sup> set went the same way too and Ballymun won out 3:1; a result that was harsh on Munster Thunder. So a lesson learned, substitutes are important unless you can change your game plan on the fly and have players fit enough to hit front and back court!

*The result Ballymun Patriots 3:1 Munster Thunder*

So the Cup Semis/Shield Final event is over for another year and what have we learned? There is a spirit of cooperation in Kildare and across our volleyball community that we can be proud of – is there any disaster we can't handle? We know that league form is not a reliable gauge of cup form at times and at other times maybe it is. The gap between Division 1 and Premier is not so large and on 22 April at the Association Cup finals the Garda can play in UCD while at the same time protect the city from the myriad dangers that lurk therein. We know that the finals will guarantee entertainment when Galway take on UCD at 12.30pm in the womens and Garda face Tallaght Rockets in the men at 2.30pm (check the VAI website for further details).

Oh and of course we now know where Moses was when the lights went out – he went to Naas - of course.

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Competitions Commission