

Convincing response to Cross examination

The Ciarán MacLochlainn Column

Authority reigned because doubt had been dismissed. Their true worth had been questioned, but anyone watching on Sunday will know now that Crossmolina harboured no doubts about their ability to retain the Connacht club crown. Their seven point win was a massive demonstration of their maturity. The ease with which they danced to victory is not reflected in that margin. Double it and you'll begin to realise its sweeping proportions. Inevitably, questions about the standard of the opposition arise, and whether Corofin were suffering from the affects of fatigue, having been in action five Sundays in a row.

Their amicable goalkeeper Martin MacNamara, who saved his side from greater embarrassment with one of his typically daring saves in the first half, put that ghost to rest. "That was not the reason for our defeat. We were beaten because we met a far better team. Crossmolina played great football, and I hope they go all the way to the All-Ireland title. They have the ability to do it," he said. Encouraging words from a man who has been there, who has tasted All-Ireland club and county success. Yet, Crossmolina will know that a repeat of the profligacy of their first ten minutes of action will not be enough to even secure a place in the All-Ireland final on St Patrick's Day.

In those ten minutes, before Johnny Leonard eventually opened the scoring with a point from play, they had accounted for seven wides. Corofin hadn't even mounted one serious attack in that time. It had been almost one continuous onslaught on the Corofin goal during which MacNamara effected that fine save from the boot of Thomas Loftus. Maybe there was too much urgency in those opening minutes to pile up early scores, leading to carelessness . . . an exigency to avail of these moments of superiority before the sombre affects of Kieran McDonald's departure had begun to take hold. McDonald had been removed from the game by a ferocious tackle a minute after the start, and his withdrawal with rib injuries seemed ominous.

Crossmolina had clearly planned for that eventuality. They replaced the Mayo star with Liam Moffatt, and within minutes the big bustling full-forward had the ball in the Corofin net. McDonald's silken skills will always attract special attention from the opposition. He has become a prime target in every game. Stop him, they believe, and you will beat Crossmolina. There is no special protection for artistic talent and, inevitably, it invites the focus of the ruffian. Crossmolina have learned to adapt to the vicissitudes of games without McDonald, and you wouldn't have missed their star performer on Sunday.

Maybe with his presence they would have had a score tally reflecting their superiority, for they were never too far away to be out of danger in the first half. Outfield, it was one-way traffic, but up to the 20th minute Crossmolina were ahead only by Leonard's point and Moffatt's goal. Corofin's raids in that time had been few and far between. Yet, one opportunity did arise for the visitors to alarm the home team of their vulnerability. For the first time they had put together a decent movement involving Shane Conlisk, Alan O'Donovan and Trevor Burke leading to a gaping hole in the full back line which allowed David Morris a shot at the goal that came back of a butt of an upright after Barry Heffernan had cleverly narrowed his angle. That and another intelligent save by Heffernan when he scrambled the ball away after it looked as if it would dip into the net with the sun shining straight into his eyes were sufficient warnings against Crossmolina's creeping complacency.

Corofin didn't score then, but Alan O'Donovan had their first score, a point from a free in the 21st minute. Clearly they had suffered more from the withdrawal of their experienced corner forward Derek Reilly than Crossmolina had from McDonald's retiral. Reilly got a knock in the same build-up in which McDonald was injured and was forced to leave with a suspected fractured collar bone. They managed just one further point before the break, and for all Crossmolina's dominance, they enjoyed only a four-point lead - 1-3 to 0-2 - at half time. What followed, made up for all that. Suddenly Crossmolina hit gold. A plethora of points - by Paul McGuinness, Peadar Gardiner and Michael Moyles - without reply, had at last begun to mirror their supremacy. Now our doubts had begun to dissipate.

Speedy and intuitive, they overran the opposition, skilfully directed by Michael Moyles at midfield, having perhaps his finest hour in the Crossmolina shirt. His energy, stamina and perceptiveness were

notable and, beside him, James Nallen's performance would have been distinguished but for the heights to which Moyles had risen. When you consider that Crossmolina lost perhaps their best back in Patrick McAndrew seven minutes into the second half - dismissed by the referee for a second bookable offence - and continued to perform with the same fluidity, the same unshakeable conviction, you get an inkling of the control they exerted. Corofin, who won the All-Ireland club championship two years ago, and which was the spur to Galway's success the same year, were a pale shadow of that side. Some of the old brigade were still in action, but Ray Silke, even though he was one of their best defenders, does not command the same leadership ability that was so much part of Corofin's success.

Compared to Crossmolina they were strong, but sluggish and unable to keep pace with the swift and deliberate movements of the home team. Their first point of the second half did not come until fifteen minutes from the end. Even without McAndrew, Crossmolina's defence had become clam tight. Tom Nallen at full-back was back to his finest form. Stephen Rochford, Colm Reilly, Damien Mulligan, Francis Costello, McAndrew and goalkeeper Heffernan were pillars of support and assistance to one another.

Following the withdrawal of McDonald, Enda Lavelle, the front line's work horse, moved aside to make way for Liam Moffatt at full-forward and made splendid use of himself. So did Paul McGuinness and Peadar Gardiner, and Johnny Leonard and Thomas Loftus and Moffatt. And when some were withdrawn to make way for the likes of Noel Convey, and Gabriel Walsh and David O'Donnell, there was no diminution in the team's verve or vigour, no let-up. But by then Corofin were drained of any powers of resurgence, unable to raise enough strength to walk, let alone mount a successful strike. Their two final points came in the dying seconds of the match when Crossmolina had relaxed, their Christmas having come early