

CONNACHT CLUB INTERMEDIATE FOOTBALL SEMI-FINAL

Resolute Claregalway defy daunting 24-hour schedule

Cummins' second-half goal helps turn the tide

CLAREGALWAY	1-12
ST JOHN'S (SLIGO)	1-10

JOHN MCINTYRE
AT MARKIEVICZ PARK

EVEN up to last Friday morning, the Claregalway intermediate footballers weren't sure if they would be in championship action at all last weekend. In the end, they had to contest two big games in the space of 24 hours only to cope with that demanding schedule in magnificent style.

The first weekend of November proved a momentous one for the Claregalway club as not alone did they claim the county intermediate title, they are now just 60 minutes away from provincial glory as well after surviving a real nerve-jangler at Markievicz Park on Sunday.

Having overcome a gritty second-half fightback by Williamstown in Salthill the previous day, Claregalway had to park the celebrations and, instead, focus on treating tired limbs in advance of this earnestly contested Connacht club semi-final.

After unhelpful uncertainty over whether or not Oileán Árann would prolong their objections to the islanders' semi-final conquerors Williamstown, the green light was given for the Galway final to go ahead at the eleventh hour. Claregalway flew out of the blocks, leading by 1-9 to 0-2 at the interval, and though Williamstown nearly reeled them in, Paul Kilgannon's charges managed to tough it out.

That hard-fought win meant Claregalway only had hours to recover, both mentally and physically, for Sunday's clash with the Sligo champions and you could see the fatigue in their ranks in a game they only took the lead for the first time in the 53rd minute.

It was the polar opposite of how the county final evolved, but Claregalway weren't found wanting even if they were struggling to retrieve a three-point interval deficit until county player Danny Cummins rose high to superbly fist a Sean Moran free to the net midway through the second-half.

Suddenly, Claregalway had drawn level and though a spirited St John's outfit never threw

in the towel, the Galway champions possessed that little edge in class which led to match-winning points from the nifty Mark Rohan and the tireless Moran.

Facing the elements in the opening-half, Claregalway were rocked just four minutes into this semi-final when Abbeyknockmoy native and former Galway Utd player Alan Keane flicked the ball into the path of Brian McGowan and he finished expertly past Brian Donoghue.

The impressive David Rooney tacked on a pointed free for the Sligo men who badly missed the influence of the suspended James Murphy - a son of former long serving county player, Barnes Murphy - who was dismissed in their semi-final trouncing of Leitrim's Aughnasheelin.

Cummins eventually got Claregalway off the mark in the eighth minute when his effort crept over the crossbar and they were back on level terms by the 17th minute thanks to two efforts from the outstanding Barry Goldrick and another white flag from Cummins.



GOLDRICK, WHO COVERED ACRES OF GROUND, HEADED THE CLAREGALWAY INDIVIDUAL ROLL OF HONOUR

Claregalway now had some momentum, but they only managed one further score - a Goldrick free - in the first half as St John's regained the initiative. Tommy Kelly's point after a strong run was augmented by further scores from Robbie Fahy, Rooney (free) and Keane (free), while they also had a goal chance only for Oisín Fox's effort to be thwarted by vigilant corner back Brian Loughlin.

Trailing 1-5 to 0-5 at the break and with the strength of the wind diminishing, there was no guarantee that Claregalway would manage to turn the game around, especially given their exertions the previous day, and for the entire third quarter, the new Galway champions could make no inroads on the deficit.

Despite a lot of toil and pos-



Claregalway's Darren Hennessy on the attack against Gary Kelly of Williamstown during Saturday's County Intermediate football final at Pearse Stadium. PHOTO: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY.

session, Claregalway spurned a number of chances, notably by Cummins, and though Rohan (two) and Goldrick did find the target, they were still 1-8 to 0-8 behind heading into the final quarter.

St John's were doing damage on the break - county player Charlie Harrison was becoming increasingly influential, while David Rooney picked off a couple of fine points to help keep them in pole position in front of a modest crowd.

Things were starting to get a little desperate for Claregalway until Cummins rose to the clouds to finish that badly-needed goal and they had sufficient resilience and quality to carve out the match-winning scores despite substitute Conor Kelly picking up a second yellow card late in the game.

However, when the teams were level at 1-10 each, Claregalway had a lucky escape when St John's substitute Daniel Smith inexplicably passed the ball to opposition reserve Joe Kearney when they had a real goal chance in the 58th minute.

In the context alone of having to unfairly line out twice in the space of 24 hours, Claregalway deserved that break and how their band of supporters celebrated after Liam Devenney's final whistle blew. They had seen their team overcome a daunting challenge with a mix

of pure defiance, heart and no little skill.

Goldrick, who covered acres of ground, headed the Claregalway individual roll of honour, but they also had massive shifts from Moran, who finished in a blaze of glory, Rohan and Cummins - both of whom continually showed for the ball.

Forced to field without the injured Padraig Kearney, the winners also owe a debt of gratitude to Brian Loughlin, Barry Callanan and Conor Campbell in a defence which had its troubles, while midfielders Darren Hennessy and Eoghan Cummins were in and out of the game.

Ultimately, this was a red-letter weekend for the Claregalway footballers - one that will be recalled in fireside chats for years to come when the staying power of a group of men somehow defied a schedule which again made a nonsense of player welfare.

Claregalway: B Donoghue; B Loughlin, B Callanan, M Goldrick; C Campbell, P Divilly, S Monaghan; D Hennessy, E Cummins; B Goldrick (0-4, 0-1 free), S Moran (0-3, 0-1 free), B Callanan; M Rohan (0-3), M Kelly, D Cummins (1-2). Subs: C Kelly for M Kelly (42), S Cunniffe for Monaghan (45), J Kearney for M Goldrick (49), C Glynn for E Cummins (50) and P Fahy for Divilly (60).

St John's: N O'Donnell; A Clerkin, E Roche, N Walsh; C Harrison, D Rooney (0-4, 0-2 frees), O Cox; P

McNamara, R Fahy (0-1); T Kelly (0-2, C Greene, S Stenson; B McGowan (1-0), A Keane (0-3, 0-2 frees), F Grennan. Subs: D Burke for

Stenson (half-time), K Sweeney for Grennan (39) and D Smith for Walsh (52). Referee L Devenney (Mayo).

SPORTS STAR OF THE WEEK SEAN MORAN

THE Claregalway footballers had their endurance and reserves of stamina tested to the limit in a hectic weekend schedule which saw them successfully negotiate two big matches in the space of 24 hours. First up, they held off a strong Williamstown comeback to claim the county title at Pearse Stadium on Saturday before overcoming St John's of Sligo in the provincial semi-final the following day.

Claregalway had many big individual contributions over the two days, but pride of place goes to attacker Sean Moran



whose dynamic running and vital scores helped the Galway club overcome a tough schedule. Moran's outstanding efforts earns him the Tribune Sports Star of the Week award ahead of team-mate Barry Goldrick, Connacht's Tiernan O'Halloran and jockey Liam Gilligan.