

The Jacks are back

Contributed by Paul Rouse
Thursday, 01 June 2006

As Dublin take on Longford in the Leinster football quarter-final, Paul Rouse considers whether the Dubs can win their first All-Ireland championship since 1995

This is the best week of the year to meet Dubs fans. They've cast their eyes around the rest of the teams in the championship and are distinctly unimpressed. Their current mood might best be described as bullish. All they can remember from the league campaign is the bits where their team was brilliant. The familiar refrain is echoing: this is going to be Dublin's year. The Jacks are back – and driving themselves into a right tizzy of excitement.

The year starts next Sunday when Dublin run out in the quarter-final of the Leinster championship against Longford. The only problem is that the match is down in Longford, so the lads will have to leave Gaffney's or Meagher's or Mulligan's a little more than the traditional three minutes before the throw-in. An inconvenience, but one suffered to be able to say that that you travelled to see the Dubs in hostile territory. Of course, there'll be the obligatory whinge on Liveline about the traffic and the fact that half the travelling spectators only arrived for the last ten minutes ("It was shocking, Joe, there were sheep on the road in Edgeworthstown. And they were wearing the Longford colours").

Hostile territory or not, next Sunday will be a straightforward win for Dublin. They may win easily, allowing their mediocre players to look good and their good players to look majestic. Better that they win just doing enough, however. And that is probably what will happen. Pearse Park is tighter than Croke Park, Longford will be game and committed and will probably stay competitive for 45 or 50 minutes. But that will be it. Dublin will be too big and too strong and just too good, and Longford will wither and die when the spaces open up.

Then it will be Laois in the Leinster semi-final, provided Laois get over what will be a tense local battle against Carlow in the other quarter-final. Dublin will be favourites to beat Laois, even if most pundits consider Mick O'Dwyer's team the only one likely to stop the Dubs in Leinster.

The reality is that winning a Leinster title for Dublin this year would be no major thing. Winning Leinster was a big deal last year – it gave momentum and breathing space to a new manager with a recast team. This year is all about winning the All-Ireland – everything is geared to that and winning just a Leinster title would be mere consolation.

This year's championship has the smell of change about it. For the last few years, you couldn't realistically look beyond Armagh, Tyrone and Kerry for ultimate honours. Not anymore. Tyrone are struggling with injury and retirements – they'll surely recover from the Derry debacle but the missing men will cost them in the height of summer. Kerry are so reliant on The Gooch for scores that they will be in big trouble if injury or an off-day strikes. Armagh are somewhat caught between the old and the new, still impressive, no longer intimidating.

The big three remain favourites to claim the All-Ireland, but there are weaknesses to be exploited by a serious team with the ambition to deliver on the big stage. Dublin certainly have the ambition, but do they have the players to win Sam?

Their goalkeeper is certainly good enough. Stephen Cluxton is as good as more or less anything in the country, give or take a penchant for risky kick-outs. There are question marks about the defence, though. On the positive side the reborn David Henry and newcomer Niall O'Shea have shown enough in recent months to suggest that they are serious corner-backs, capable of doing a good job in championship football. Their arrival releases the stylish Paul Griffin to play on the wing. Paul Griffin is a class act, his quiet, intelligent excellence will be vital to Dublin this year.

A further positive handed on from last year is the value of Barry Cahill. Cahill was the find of the year at centre-back for Dublin. The great negative is that Dublin don't have a full back with the declining Paddy Christie struggling to recover from injury. Cahill played most of the league at full back where, again, he has shown genuine quality, but that leaves a major hole at centre-back.

The obvious candidate to fill in is Bryan Cullen. Cullen is the best footballer in Dublin and potentially the best centre-back in the country. At present he is sited in the half-forward line and doing a fine job. You can see the logic behind what the

Dublin selectors are doing in keeping him there, but no team can win an All-Ireland without the centre of the defence being secure. Cullen should be shifted back. He would thrive – and so would Dublin.

As it is, it looks instead as if Paddy Christie or Coman Goggins will be at centre-back, with Paul Casey on the wing. Goggins has been knocking around for a long time now without ever convincing. He is a decent player, but hardly a top quality centre back. Casey is fit and fast, but he gives away too many frees and his delivery of the ball is poor.

The question marks which hang over the defence, also hang over midfield. The loss of Darren Magee to a serious knee injury is a really serious blow to Dublin's All-Ireland aspirations. Magee is no All-Star but he was growing into the perfect midfield partner for Ciaran Whelan. On top of the ending of Darren Homan's career to a serious back injury last year it leaves Dublin threadbare around the middle. Shane Ryan and Denis Bastick are the options – Bastick is too raw and ill-disciplined, and Ryan is too small. He is fit and determined but his basic footballing skills are not sufficiently good to compensate for his lack of size.

And then there are the forwards. Four players are definite to start there. Bryan Cullen, Tomás Quinn, Alan Brogan and Conal Keaney. Throughout the season they will be joined by two from Jason Sherlock, Mark Vaughan, Bernard Brogan, Ray Cosgrove, David O'Callaghan, Kevin Bonner and, possibly, Collie Moran who might be pushed up from the half-back line on return from injury.

Whatever permutation comes from that lot looks potent, though hardly intimidating. Two of Dublin's forwards need to go to a level that has so far been beyond them. Alan Brogan and Conal Keaney look the most likely. Keaney has the size to match his ability and will keep on improving. How far he can go is vital to Dublin's prospects. Brogan has pace and guts and gets in more threatening positions than any other forward in Leinster. His conversion rate is poor, however, especially when compared with the very front rank of forwards. That has to change.

The scale of Dublin's achievements will be determined by the ability of their forward line to kick scores when under real pressure, when the game is there for the taking. They have potential there and that is more than most counties trying to make the great leap forward. If they can gather momentum, that potential may mature into substance.

Last year they were appalling in the replay against Tyrone – their performance that day was galling. It wasn't so much playing badly, more that it was as if they had settled for their Leinster title and for having made a good showing in the drawn game with Tyrone. They looked like a team that had decided they had missed their chance. No team can win a championship without real mental resolve and Dublin lacked it against Tyrone when it really mattered last year.

This year brings a new chance. You look at Dublin and think that they can win an All-Ireland, but also that they need an awful lot to go right for them. It is possible, though unlikely.p