

Hunger should give Clare a sharper edge but real priority should be late July



Nicky English
Hurling Analyst

Counties will rightly see themselves as contenders for Liam but league form suggests otherwise

This is a big weekend because the Munster championship is starting but how important is the actual outcome of tomorrow's Clare-Limerick match in Thurles?

The reality is: will either team manager be distraught at losing by a point, especially as both counties will probably be stronger in a month's time? Hurling in Thurles on the last Sunday in July is a lot more important than doing the same on the second-last Sunday in May and if I were managing a team that would be at the forefront of my mind.

Bear in mind two statistics about the Munster championship. The first is that no team has made it through the three matches on the long side of the draw (having to play a quarter-final against one of the established hurling counties – it's happened a couple of times in years when Kerry were involved) to win an All-Ireland since Cork in 1966.

Second, the record of the provincial winners in the All-Ireland has been really poor and it's now 10 years since Munster champions went on to lift Liam MacCarthy. Both Tipperary

and Clare have won the All-Ireland through the qualifiers in that time and both years they beat the Munster champions along the way.

I'm not sure that these statistics are all coincidences either. To win three big matches in the province drives up expectations and expends energy and that makes any team that comes through the long side of the draw vulnerable.

Intimidating

To win the provincial title, tomorrow's winners will have to play last year's All-Ireland finalists Tipperary and then Munster champions Cork or the league holders Waterford. The qualifier route isn't as intimidating, even if Clare did eventually lose their All-Ireland last year against Wexford.

Clare and Limerick are entitled to think of themselves as All-Ireland contenders. Clare won it two years ago and Limerick very nearly beat Kilkenny in last year's semi-final. But looking at them in the league, you'd have to have reservations.

In the league quarter-final against

Dublin, I was concerned by Limerick's performance – and that was with a stronger team than they have tomorrow. Maybe they were deliberately holding back but a few of them didn't look fully fit and were well off the pace; so that's a huge improvement needed in only eight weeks.

I'm not one for believing that levels of performance are going to jump dramatically between league and championship. Older players like to frighten younger members of the panel by saying championship is going to be way tougher and faster than the league. It's not and two months may not make a huge difference.

Clare's final performance against Kilkenny in the relegation match was at a much higher level but overall they had a bad campaign. They've lacked consistency and have had to weather controversy over panel departures. Was there a feeling as well that they had put too much into last year's league and left themselves drained by championship time?

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quiet by his standards, Conor McGrath is almost certainly injured and a likely huge loss (if he's selected to play that would have to represent a gamble which could potentially lay him off until August) and a lot has fallen back on Shane O'Donnell.

O'Donnell has been carrying the burden impressively and looked dangerous in Kilkenny with as good a defender as Paul Murphy on his tail – but he'd be much more dangerous with McGrath beside him.

Permanently missing

Compared to two years ago, Clare are permanently missing Podge Collins (now with the county footballers) and Colm Galvin (gone to the US for the summer); Brendan Bugler is suspended and McGrath injured.

In the matches I saw, Galvin was scoring as much as the forwards and McGrath was clearly their best forward until Shane O'Donnell started to come back. All four have won All Stars and then there's Cathal McInerney, arguably one of their best forwards in 2014, who's also gone to the footballers. That's a huge

loss of quality.

Davy Fitzgerald will feel that he will have better options in a month's time but there is still pressure on him to deliver in the Munster championship. He is helped by Limerick's own absentee problems. They're short David Breen, Nickie Quaid and Kevin Downes and haven't shown great form this year.

In the past they've been able to put disappointing league runs, as well as inquests and inquiries, behind them – they lost their manager a few weeks before last summer and still beat Tipp – but it's not easy to keep doing that. Also their first matches in the past two years have been in June, giving them more time to prepare.

How they played in last year's All-Ireland semi-final was impressive. They had Kilkenny cooked until Richie Power's goal and it was a huge performance in awful conditions. Limerick of August last year would have beaten Clare but they're not currently at that level.

This time around you'd expect the motivation to put 2014 behind them will help Clare come out on top.

Connacht SFC



Roscommon's band of brothers braced for a long campaign



Eamon Donoghue

A Connacht title is the primary aim for a talented, tightly-knit squad but first they must negotiate a tricky assignment in London

John Evans keeps referring to what a close-knit bunch his young Roscommon panel are. But when you consider that 13 of his players have at least one brother involved in the set-up with them, it's hardly a surprise.

The term band of brothers is often used in a figurative capacity, but this particular group of course don the term for a far more literal reason; this is a young team who have progressed together through the underage ranks experiencing unprecedented success and now as seniors share a unified aim.

That aim is to win a first Connacht title since 2010 this summer. Beyond that; "who knows".

At one point in Roscommon's last competitive game, the Division Two league final triumph over Down in Croke Park, there were seven brothers on the field.

Each of the five families of brothers involved in the panel bring their own dimension to the group, some such as the Smiths having just one year separating them while for others such as the Creggs the senior grade has been their first opportunity to play alongside one another.

While most of the current squad have witnessed little less than multiple underage successes, Cathal Cregg has witnessed the good times and the bad.

A double Sigerson winner with DCU and a Connacht senior medalist in 2010, last summer's International Rules panelist has enjoyed his own successes but he also knows how it felt to be wallowing in Division Four less than five years ago.

"I suppose it's been coming for a couple of years, probably since a bit before 2010," says Cathal who was joined by his

22-year-old younger brother Finbar in the panel last summer.

"Around that time it started getting a lot tighter and there were a lot of young lads coming through, a lot of the 2006 minor team would've come through together. In the last few years that's continued with Finbar and the Smiths and the couple of Dalys and these lads coming through from the different underage teams which has obviously tightened it up even more."

"Once a group of players get on well and are close off the field, there's a good bond in the dressing room and that will obviously show on the field as it has done over the last 18 months."

Underage teams

While much of the current panel can be split into five groups of siblings, they can for the large part also be broken into three successful underage teams. All of the 15 who won the All-Ireland minor final in a replay nine years ago have had a taste of senior county football at some point and those who remain include current captain Niall Carty, Donie Shine and David Keenan.

Most of the rest of the panel played in either the 2012 or 2014 Under-21 All-Ireland final defeats.

Ian Kilbride, like Cregg, is another one of the group's more experienced players. A club All-Ireland winner with St Brigid's in 2013, Kilbride says that team contained three sets of brothers including himself and Senan, a normal number of family ties for a rural club team.

"Five sets of brothers is very unique for a county team," says the older of the Kilbride brothers. "We started to notice it when they were giving out tickets for matches and the brothers were getting

involved in the set-up with them, it's hardly a surprise."

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less tickets because there are so many of us. It is very unusual but there's a homely feel to it."

Unlike most of the panel's siblings who would find noting their similarities far easier than their differences, Ian's all action approach in defence and Senan's languid left footed style in the inside line reflects almost polar opposite traits.

"We're very different, he's the talent, he's definitely the talent whereas I'd be a lot more reliant on hard work" says Ian. "You'd be very surprised if you saw me up looking for a pass off him. If I'm even up that far, something would be very wrong."

"There'd be the odd match in training that I'd mark him but it's never anything that bad, we're both physical players but he's very big now so I wouldn't be reverting back to the bullying tactics of when we were teenagers anyway. He's gone far too big for that."

"We'd be very different though and we'd prepare quite differently, I'd like to talk a good bit leading up to games, trying to bounce stuff off him but I suppose he's quieter, he knows exactly what he needs to do."

Things couldn't be more different in the Smith household where the little and large duo's almost telepathic link up play in the forward line has been key to not only the majority of the county's two Connacht minor titles and four under-21 triumphs in the past five years, but also to DCU's Sigerson victory earlier this year.

While the pair mightn't share the same physical traits – Enda is 6ft 3in and equally capable of holding his own in the middle of the field – both are noted for their clever kick passing and interplay.

"There's only a year between us so we're playing together since under 10, which leaves us in the fortunate position of knowing each other's game inside out," says Donie.

"If he's playing out the field and I'm inside he'd know exactly where to kick the ball when I'm running for it."

"Even with the club, I'd say well over 70 per cent of the scores we get the other would be involved. It comes mainly from kicking ball out in the garden for years, and I suppose it's similar with all the brothers. They all have their own skillsets."

Very similar
"But myself and Enda would be very similar, the differences are he is obviously a bigger frame, but we both like kicking, we like passing and kicking scores, and just the idea of playing open-branded football, but I suppose the way the game has gone it has hindered that a bit."

Donie and Enda are also joined by older brother Cian who is involved with assisting the team's goalkeeper coach. Cian was a member of the 2006 minor panel and had been involved in the senior set-up before illness forced him to prematurely hang up his boots.

The other two families carrying a trio of brothers are the Murtaghs and the Dalys.

Niall, Conor and Ronan Daly are all at their most comfortable operating in a wing back position while Diarmuid and Ciarán Murtagh are

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I know getting relegated isn't a

disaster and that there's plenty of

good hurling in Division One B but I

don't think relegation is part of the

plan for any county and a team with

ambitions should be winning their

home matches at least.

The reason Clare didn't was down

to a lack of cutting edge, not includ-

ing Tony Kelly, which isn't a good

sign going into the championship.

John Conlon has been relatively

both corner forwards.

"There's just two years between the three of us so when we were younger there were big games out the back of the house," says Niall Daly who won a Sigerson title.

"It's easier going to training, getting up for early morning sessions and all these things when there's the three of us. It's a lot easier even shortening the journeys by having a bit of craic in the car."

"So we'd be very competitive, we're all fighting for a similar spot and the team is very tough to make this year so we are all trying to nail down the position and that comes first."

While older brother Niall has often been tasked with holding the defence in the number six jersey, particularly in the absence of the injured David Keenan, all three would be seen as attack-minded wing backs with outstanding endurance levels; a half forward's nightmare.

Mainjob

Conor was another Roscommon man on this year's DCU team while 20-year-old Ronan is a regular at Tadhg Kennelly's AFL combine trials.

"We're aware that our main job is defending," says Niall, "but we do like to attack and get scores, we all enjoy seeing our name on the scoreboard."

"It's certainly a help having the two lads there, when the training is hard you can pull each other along, and it's the same in a game, the same idea trying to give each other a lift. But there's a lot of lads in the panel of a similar age and we pull well together and we know the way each other plays too which does come in handy."

Meanwhile two of the three Murtagh brothers are fighting for similar positions in the forward line, while the eldest of the St Faithleachs trio, Brian, is competing for a place with the Dalys in the half back line.

Brian was first brought into the panel

under previous manager Des Newton hav-

ing impressed en route to securing the under-21 Connacht championship in 2010, while Diarmuid and Ciarán were brought in last year.

"It's easier going to training, getting up for early morning sessions and all these things when there's the three of us. It's a lot easier even shortening the journeys by having a bit of craic in the car."

"We're all relatively new to the panel but one of us would have played with nearly everyone before so there's a strong bond there."

"When I wasn't involved last year and the lads were I was mad to get back, when you see the brothers doing well of course you're delighted but you want that yourself too, so it can be very competitive."

"Ever since we picked up a ball it was our individual ambition to play for Roscommon, and the fact that the three of us are playing now together is obviously great, but that's more for the parents and the family. In years to come I'm sure we'll look back and be delighted but there's not much of a sentimental factor there at the minute."