

Leinster SFC Final

Dublin pick their way past plucky Westmeath

Two quick goals early in second half squeeze the life out of the contest

Dubs' final tally the lowest they have scored in Leinster under Jim Gavin



Malachy Clerkin at Croke Park

| | |
|-----------|------|
| Dublin | 2-13 |
| Westmeath | 0-6 |

When it comes to Leinster finals these days, we dutifully pan for grains of interest having long since given up on finding nuggets.

Dublin cruised to fifth title in a row and a 10th in 11 years but we knew that would be the case before we arrived at Croke Park so the mere fact of it needn't detain us for long. They are supreme in the province. This is not news.

But at the same time, don't imagine there was entirely nothing to see here. If the rest of this year and the next few to come are to be about how Dublin deal with teams who set out to frustrate them, we got a decent insight into what that will look like.

Westmeath aren't in the same zip code as Dublin but we can say this much for them – they didn't lay back and meekly accept their fate.

Far from it. Coaches with sparklier reputations than Tom Cribbin have all but thrown their hands in the air when it comes to playing Dublin and yet here were lowly Westmeath – with only a fortnight to prepare, remember – coming up with a decent enough defensive screen to keep the perennial provincial champions to 2-13.



Lowest total

That is the lowest total Dublin have put up in Leinster under Jim Gavin. They've only scored less than it twice during their reign – against Mayo in the 2013 All-Ireland final when 2-12 was enough to see them home and against Donegal last year when 0-17 very much was not. All serious teams must have taken copious notes.

Obviously, Westmeath never came within an ocean of actually winning. They only managed six points of their own, two in the whole of the second half.

Working out how to set up a functioning blanket is possible in two weeks but scheming a way to transition that into workable scoreline of your own takes far longer. It took Jim McGuinness the guts of two years, after all.

Cribbin doesn't think he'll always play this way but it's to his credit that he brought a team up here to try and beat Dublin rather than giving them a canvas on which to paint.

"Our game would be an attacking-style game plan but we weren't going to take Dublin on like that this year," said Cribbin

Dublin's Bernard Brogan celebrates scoring his side's first goal against Westmeath during the Leinster senior football final at Croke Park yesterday. PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

afterwards. "Our goal always was to get to the Leinster final, to try and beat Meath – that was our big goal, winning three championship matches along the way. Do that and we would deal with the Leinster final when it comes.

"I felt at half-time we were in with a chance. We knew we were going to need goals and that's the way we set up the second half. We made a couple of changes to try and keep two big men up front so that we might get a goal or two. But unfortunately we conceded two goals at the start of the second half."

Most composed

For all that Westmeath made it difficult, this was not Dublin's most composed afternoon.

They led 0-8 to 0-4 at half-time having kicked seven wides and been sloppy at times

in possession. Diarmuid Connolly, Bernard Brogan and Cianán Kilkenny mostly held their end up but the rest of the forwards struggled for rhythm and accuracy.

This is what lends the remaining months of the championship its fascination.

It can't be much fun having to continually switch play over and back to try and find a way through massed defences but Dublin will almost certainly have to do it at least once and maybe twice more before they can walk up the steps of the Hogan again.

Teams who are further down the road at it than Westmeath will have to be dealt with. That's just life.

Saw daylight

They were helped here by a Westmeath side who never got close enough to goal to make Dublin pay. Cribbin's side had been doing manfully in the first half to break up Dublin possession without ever being able to get enough men forward on the counterattack when they had it.

As soon as Westmeath players saw daylight in the opposing

By the numbers

| Dublin | Westmeath |
|-------------------|-----------|
| SCORES | 0-6 |
| 2-13 (09) | |
| FROM PLAY | 0-4 |
| 2-11 | |
| FROM PLACED BALLS | 0-2 |
| 0-2 | |
| WIDES | 6 |
| 14 | |
| 45s | 0 |
| 1 | |
| FREES CONCEDED | 13 |
| 12 | |
| YELLOW CARDS | 1 |
| 4 | |
| BLACK CARDS | 0 |
| 0 | |
| RED CARDS | 0 |
| 0 | |
| ATTENDANCE | 47,840 |

"Our game would be an attacking-style game plan but we weren't going to take Dublin on like that this year"

half, they let fly. Stephen Cluxton can rarely have had a day when so many attempts at points dropped into his chest – nine in the end by our calculations.

Dublin killed the game off with a sharp 2-2 inside the opening minutes of the second half, turning a four-point margin into 12. Paul Flynn, who was otherwise oddly ineffective, battled his way to the endline before squaring for Brogan who palmed home.

Dublin had been squeezing up on the Westmeath kick-out since half-time and when Darren Quinn tried to take a quick one after the Brogan goal, Jack McCaffrey skated in to steal it and fire home a goal of his own.

A sumptuous Connolly point meant that 0-8 to 0-4 had become 2-10 to 0-5 in devastatingly short order.

Heel injury

At a stroke, Westmeath's game-plan was goosed. John Heslin, it transpired, had been carrying a heel injury since the Meath game and he was peripheral before being taken off. Kieran Martin had a go a few times in

possession near the endline but was mostly crowded out. And when Westmeath gave up the ball, the likes of Connolly and Kilkenny punished them with three points apiece.

Onwards for Dublin then, with a quarter-final against either Fermanagh or the losers of the next Saturday's Munster final replay next on the menu.

Still firm and just favourites for the All-Ireland but not invincible.

Not by any stretch.

DUBLIN: 15 Cluxton; 2 J Cooper; 3 R O'Carroll; 4 P McMahon (0-1); 5 J McCarthy (0-1); 6 C O'Sullivan; 7 J McCaffrey (1-0); 8 B Fenton; 9 M D Macaulay (0-1); 10 P Flynn; 11 C Kilkenny (0-3); 12 D Connolly (0-3); 13 D Rock (0-2, both frees); 14 M Fitzsimons for Brogan (1-1); Subs: 23 M Fitzsimons for Cooper (half-time); 17 P Andrews for McMahon (48 mins); 18 D Bastick for Macaulay (51 mins); 20 A Brogan (0-1) for Rock (55 mins); 26 J Small for McMahon (62 mins); 19 T Brady for Connolly (65 mins).

WESTMEATH: 1 D Quinn; 2 K Daly; 3 K Maguire; 7 J Dolan; 24 David Lynch (0-1); 11 P Sharry; 17 F Boyle; 8 D Corron; 5 P Holloway; 10 G Egan; 12 R Connellan; 4 J Gilligan; 15 S Dempsey; 14 J Heslin (0-3, 0-2 frees); 6 K Martin (0-2); Subs: 20 C Gavin for Dempsey (half-time); 23 P Greville for Lynch (half-time); 25 C McCormack for Connellan (52 mins); 21 D Glennon for Holloway (53 mins); 18 J Egan for Heslin (62 mins); 22 J Gonouf for McCormack (64 mins); Referee: Joe McQuillan (Cavan).

Post-match reaction

'Like other football trends it will swing the other way'

Jim Gavin refuses to believe provincial dominance by Dubs is now a given

GAVIN CUMMISSKEY at Croke Park

Nine out of 10 Leinster titles is no trend. It's not part of the so-called cyclical nature of football in the province. There's permanency to it.

Jim Gavin talks about swings and roundabouts but here lies further evidence of Dublin being light years ahead of their neighbouring counties. Of course, Gavin's mantra will never change. Every game on its merits.

"This thing goes in cycles," he said. "I experienced a downward cycle myself as a player. Like other football trends it will swing the other way soon."

But a trend is change in a general direction. In the history of the Leinster Championship, dating back to 1891, Dublin have never been so dominant. "That is true," Gavin conceded. "But it is not always going to be that way, that's all I am saying."

Mooted overhaul

Despite the 2-13 to 0-6 annihilation, Westmeath manager Tom Cribbin is not willing to embrace the mooted overhaul in championship structures.

"I don't want second tier competitions set up for us," said Cribbin. "This is what you live for. All my players were really thrilled with getting up here and playing in Croke Park. The rest of us have to get up to Dublin. They set the standards. There is no point making excuses."

Can you see a Leinster county becoming a genuine rival to Dublin in the next ten years?

"Without a doubt. Kildare are after winning a couple of (minor) Leinsters in the last few years. That's where you have to start. I know they are doing huge work at underage and we are already doing that in Westmeath with our infrastructures, to make sure our young teams are on the right path. There is no quick fix to get up to that level. It takes

time." A valid point was made about how to stop Dublin.

Westmeath and their 0-6 total here is comparable to Donegal in the 2011 All-Ireland semi-final. The Donegal side that overemphasised the nullification of Dublin's attack a year before they perfected their own masterplan.

To stop any great attacking side requires a fluid defensive, counterattacking approach. Only that causes doubt in the ranks of superior opponents. Doubt leads to panic and that's the greatest leveller.

Westmeath have only spent a fortnight mimicking the ever evolving modern blanket defence systems.

"Yeah, without a doubt," said Cribbin when asked if his team's defensive performance in the first half proved the All-Ireland is by no means a foregone conclusion.

"Look, all the teams playing in Division One haven't gone

“Look, all the teams playing in Division One haven't gone together for no specific reason. You have no choice against Dublin”

putting this system together for no specific reason. You have no choice against Dublin. They have so much collective pace and power. Even their young players, they are very composed on the ball. Very, very quick, it's not just fitness or size, they have an awful lot of natural pace.

"We weren't counter attacking at the pace I would have liked because of the intensity of our tackling."

That was where Westmeath faltered. Six shots fell short of Stephen Cluxton's crossbar in the opening 35 minutes.

"We knew if we got the game plan right on the day and didn't concede goals, keep them to 12 or 13 points and got a goal or two we might rob it."

Stealing it from Dublin. That's the current trend.

Leinster MFC Final

Early scores set up easy victory for Kildare

| | |
|----------|------|
| Kildare | 2-15 |
| Longford | 1-9 |

Jimmy Hyland was the stand-out performer with eight points as Kildare secured their second Leinster minor football title success in three seasons. There was rarely any doubt about the outcome at Croke Park as Kildare led by five at half-time and set the seal on victory with a 1-3 blast early in the second-half.

Their reward is an All-Ireland quarter-final clash with the Ulster runners-up next month while Longford will face the Northern champions at the same stage.

Kildare flew into a 1-4 to 0-0 lead after just 13 minutes, the goal brilliantly taken by Conor Hartley, and they braved a mini Longford revival to lead 1-6 to 0-4 at half-time.

Their second goal in the 34th minute went a long way towards putting the game beyond Longford. Rory Feely arrowed in a kick pass and found Cianan Kelly in space to blast home from 10 yards. Kildare scored 1-3 without reply in seven minutes after the restart to effectively kill off the game with a 2-9 to 0-4 lead.

There was some consolation late on for Longford who conjured a 57th minute goal through captain Conor Berry.

KILDARE: D Campbell; D Lawlor; M Joyce; S Healy; S Doran; S Ryan; R Slattery; D Courtney; R Feely; M Kelly; C Hartley (1-1); B McLoughlin (0-2); C Kelly (1-2, 0-2); E O'Donoghue (0-1); J Hyland (0-8, 0-1); Subs: S Lawlor for Doran (25, black card); K O'Callaghan for M Kelly (54); G Burke for Slattery (51); E O'Neill for McLoughlin (53); A Murphy (0-1, 0-1, 0-1) for C Kelly (53); **LONGFORD:** M Hughes; C Lee; R Sheahan; R Moffatt; K Sorohan; M Cahill; C Brady; C Berry (1-2); E Farrell; P Lynn (0-1); D Doherty (0-1); P Hanley; R Hawkins (0-1); C McCabe; J Matthews (0-2, 0-1); Subs: L Barry (0-1) for Lee (17); R Harkins for Brady (33); J Sheehan for Hawkins (40); R Brady for Doherty (43); C Finnan (0-1) for McCabe (51); N Devlin for Sorohan (56); Referee: R Smyth (Offaly).

September Road

Eamon Donoghue



The I-15 wonder defying Mayo's reputation

Mayo would've won a raft of All-Ireland titles in recent decades if only they had a top class forward – or so we've been told. They don't make scoring forwards down in Mayo though, goes the tale. They're cursed. Well the county's ladies footballers certainly aren't short of a marquee player at the top end of the field and, if ever there was a need to highlight her undoubted class, Cora Staunton's tally of 1-15 against Galway on Sunday showed why she's surely the greatest women's footballer of all time.

Staunton has nine All Stars to her name, and four All-Ireland titles, but during her decade and a half's service to Mayo she'd have done well to surpass

Sunday's contribution. Yet not even she could deny Galway a fourth consecutive Connacht title, after a heartbreaking defeat for Mayo (Galway 0-21 Mayo 1-17).

Staunton scored all but two points of her team's total, including 1-5 from play. While one of her frees in the second half was kicked from well behind the 45 meter line, the type of score not many players in the men's game could pull off. In fact she got every one of her team's first-half scores. Impressive stuff by the 33-year-old and at a time when the exploits of Katie Taylor and Serena Williams are finally getting near their deserved coverage, let us marvel too in the brilliance of a true legend of our own national games.



Twitter twaddle



Anthony Moyles @moylesia Carr Communications earning their dough in the prep for interviews with Jim Gavin this week #countyjerseys #frankdiscussion #dontgooffpoint

Ciarán Lenehan @CiaranLen @Woolbert Some oojus side-stepping there. Have they had a frank discussion is what I wanna know?

Anne-Marie @thecailinrua HOW did Roscommon lose that? John Evan will be easily wound up this week!!! #GAA

Fiona O'Rourke @Fiona1503 Cora Staunton will be getting a call up for the mens Mayo Team soon! #GaillimhAbú #LGFA

Getting all caught up in the 26-man game when calm heads are needed

Such are the aerobic demands of the modern game, it's certainly a tough ask for the 15 who start an intercounty game to be expected to finish it. But where's the line between the need for fresh legs and sacrificing your team's shape, or key leaders, at a crucial stage of the game?

Central to Dublin's success under Jim Gavin in particular has been their strength in depth, something Kerry manager Eamonn Fitzmaurice has been willing to sacrifice the last two league campaigns in search of. Not every county has the pick, or talent that's available in those counties though. Even the likes of Donegal in 2012, they used only 19 players regularly throughout that campaign.

On Sunday Roscommon surrendered an at-one-stage eight-point lead against Fermanagh, among a litany of substitutions. They made six second-half switch-

es, taking off a number of their main score-getters on the day, and some of their go-to men all season.

How many changes in one period does it take to unsettle a team, and can every county afford to take of their key players? Similarly the timing, frequency and choice of personnel for substitutions during Meath's defeat to Westmeath certainly raised eyebrows.

They'd two black cards to contend with, but they introduced seven players in the last quarter with the game getting away from them.

Every conceded score seemed to be greeted with a rushed substitution, at a time when calm heads were needed. The same applied for Roscommon on Sunday and Laois had the same idea against Antrim. Are the second tier counties getting a bit carried away with the "26-man game"?

