

Ulster SFC Final

Patience and a clever game plan suffice for Monaghan

O'Rourke's side outsmart Donegal to reclaim the Anglo-Celt Cup
Donegal left just a point adrift after a typically intense Ulster showdown



Keith Duggan
in Clones

Monaghan 0-11
Donegal 0-10

Sweet vindication.

Summer arrived in mid-Ulster out of the blue and just as in the heatwave of two years ago, Monaghan beat Donegal on Ulster final day. This was their second Anglo Celt in three years against Donegal and this time there was nothing of the shock about it.

For two years, Malachy O'Rourke and his team have silently absorbed the perception that their 2013 victory had been everything to do with Donegal fatigue and injury.

Disproving that was central to their motivation here and from the fifth minute, after admiring three fine points by the reigning champions, they set about dictating the terms of the day. Nothing could convince them that this was not to be theirs.

Monaghan came with a sharp, specific game plan and stuck to it rigidly. They attacked Donegal along the wings, using strike runners Dessie Mone and Karl O'Connell and looked to draw fouls or to recycle the ball. Patience was their chief virtue.

Guerrilla raids
In general, they treated attacks as sort of guerrilla raids, parachuting into the Donegal 50 only when they were certain that there was something on.

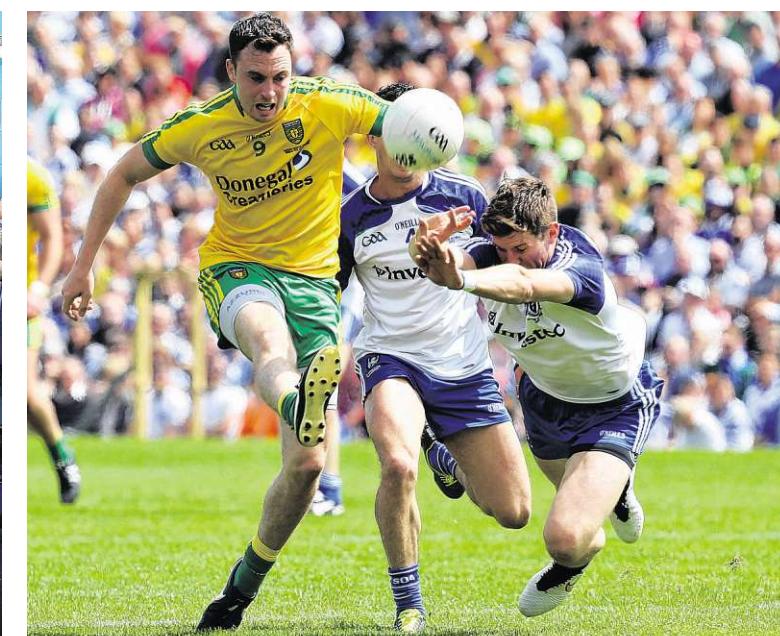
But each of the Monaghan scores seemed worth more than the point on the score board. They seemed to carry a message – and for the Donegal players, an echo of 2013.

For the Donegal drift defence, there was something ominous in the way that O'Connell, the speed merchant, blew past Michael Murphy and confidently fired his first Ulster final point. Owen Duffy took a smart ball from Vinny Corey and released his shot before the Donegal defenders could smother him in the 27th minute.

In fact, that was the crucial difference. Monaghan accepted the terms of engagement here; any delay on the ball would be fatal.

Dessie Mone hammered two early shots hopelessly wide but he trotted away like a man who had endless chips to play at the casino. He reflected Monaghan's mindset: lively and opportunistic and in the phase of play which set Monaghan up, he was on hand to drill one straight down the centre and the Farney men led by 0-7 to 0-4.

A rare and truly terrible pass



■ Monaghan's Dermot Malone and Paddy McGrath vie for possession; Donegal's Martin McElhinney gets his kick away; Conor McManus and the Monaghan team celebrate.
PHOTOGRAPHS: INPHO

by Michael Murphy straight to Fintan Reilly facilitated Monaghan's last point of the half, with McManus the gallows man once more. Donegal retreated in a state of disorientation.

Monaghan managed to hold on despite just registering 0-3 in that second half. But even those scores were lit with the smartness and economy of their approach.

They soaked up three Donegal wides at the beginning of play and then set Owen Lennon free along the tramlines and the Lattan man clipped a tidy point.

They then cancelled out two Donegal frees simply by finding Ciaran McManus. Once he had the ball in his hands, there was little Neil McGee could do to stop two exquisite kicks.

Mass defence
It worked much more effectively than the intricate link game which Monaghan's mass defence just steamrolled over in the first half. Patrick McBrearty kicked Donegal back into contention. A Murphy free in the 66th minute – he did not shoot from play, let alone score – left Donegal behind by just one.

By the numbers

Monaghan	Donegal
0-11	0-10
FROM PLAY	0-8
FROM PLACED BALLS	0-4
WIDES	0-3
45s	0-6
0	0
FREES CONCEDED	12
YELLOW CARDS	2
BLACK CARDS	0
RED CARDS	0
ATTENDANCE	31,997

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But troublingly for Monaghan, they would not score after the 48th minute. And at the same time, Donegal had figured a way through. The ten wides registered here don't tell the full truth: half of those were pot shots.

They didn't come close to threatening Rory Beggs' goal but as it turned out, they didn't need to. Instead, they discovered almost too late how simple it was to trouble Monaghan: they merely handed the ball to the McHugh brothers and Martin O'Reilly; sharp, smart strike runners who found the gaps and forced frees.

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They had the time and might have manufactured a draw but this final, their fifth in succession, asked bigger questions.

Karl Lacey's bright opening ended with a knee injury which leaves his availability for Donegal's qualifier tie against Galway up in the air.

Michael Murphy cut a troubled figure as the second half wore on and how best to use their captain is a theme that carries through from last year's All-Ireland final. There is little use in Murphy being the most influential figure in the game if Donegal can't make use of that.

Collectively, they looked out on their feet in the punishing heat as they sought to plot a path through blue and white shirts for the levelling score.

McBrearty's effort was courageous and almost rescued the day. But this defeat leaves them vulnerable now as they try to come to terms with losing their title and prepare for a rejuvenated Galway. If their path to back to the All-Ireland final looked difficult before the champion-

ship, it looks almost impossible now. But the world has opened up for Monaghan.

They will face Galway (should they beat Donegal) or the winners of Tyrone and Sligo in the All-Ireland quarter final.

Nobody in Monaghan would

be that surprised if they see the familiar figure of Mickey Harte, studious under his peaked cap, when they gather in Croke Park. You can leave Ulster but escaping it entirely is a different matter.

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