

Gaelic Games Third-level



For college and county: players anticipate cramming major fixtures



Seán Moran
GAA Correspondent

Earlier start to national leagues leave players little room for manoeuvre

The draws made for the 2018 third-level competitions in Croke Park yesterday are reminders of the challenging year ahead for GAA fixtures. Whereas the abolition of the under-21 football championship has created some space for the colleges – enabling the Freshers competition to take place later – the earlier running of the national leagues means

there is little room for manoeuvre in the main competitions, the Sigerson and Fitzgibbon Cups.

"In fairness to the CCC [Croke Park's fixture committee]," according to Gerry Tully, chair of the GAA's higher-level committee, "the Fitzgibbon was to be a fortnight earlier and we put in a request to have it put back and they acceded to that. We asked purely on an exams basis because the one thing we can't compromise on is exams. That's Comhairle Ard-Oideachais's position on it and the first day we can go is January 21st."

For inter-county players, the pressure of playing for college and county can be daunting.

"It's fairly intense that time of year when you're playing Fitzgibbon and league," says Waterford's Colin Dunford, who also plays for IT Carlow. "You have a game midweek and then again at the weekend. There's good communication between the Carlow and Waterford managers so we're not overtrained and we're primed for the

Sigerson & Fitzgibbon Cup draws

2018 SIGERSON CUP

Preliminary round – Athlone IT v Garda College; TCD v Dundalk IT (Jan 23rd/24th).
First round – (A) NUI Galway v IT Sligo; (B) DIT v Carlow; (C) Maynooth v UCD; (Jan 23rd/24th); (D) Athlone IT/Garda College v (E) UCC; Queens v ITT; (F) St Mary's v ULJ; (G) UL v CIT; (H) Trinity/Dundalk IT v DCU (Jan 30th/31st).
Quarter-finals – (I) AvB, (J) CvD, (K) EvF, (L) GvH (Feb 6th/7th).
Semi-finals – I v J, K v L (Feb 13th).
Final – TCD grounds, Santry Ave, Feb 17th.

2018 FITZGIBBON CUP

Group 1: Cork IT, UCC, UCD. **Group 2:** UL, DIT, WIT. **Group 3:** LIT, DCU, Garda. **Group 4:** Maryl, Carlow IT, NUI Galway, Trinity.
First round – Jan 21st. **Second round** – Jan 23rd/24th. **Third round** – Jan 31st/Feb 1st.
Quarter-finals – (A) 1st Group 1 v 2nd Group 2; (B) 1st Group 2 v 2nd Group 1; (C) 1st Group 3 v 2nd Group 4; (D) 1st Group 4 v 2nd Group 3 – (Feb 7th/8th).
Semi-finals – A v C, B v D (Feb 13th).
Final – Mallow, Feb 24th.

games, which is good."

He expects to be involved with both teams as the spring unfolds but knows that panel depth is going to have to be developed in the light of the new round-robin championship structure.

"It's going to come down to squads, especially with us, because we have so many players involved in both [county and college]. Hopefully, I'll get a few runs this year and get a good run going."

"We're out four weeks in a row in the championship so if

we're getting injuries there you're going to have to use your squad. The Fitzgibbon and the league at the same time will come down to using the squad and who are available.

"Maybe it's not [ideal] but you have at your disposal these 33, 34 players and there's a good chunk of lads not in college. It's hard on lads involved in both [Fitzgibbon and inter-county] but you just have to get on with it at the end of the day."

Wexford goalkeeper Mark Fanning is involved with Water-

ford IT. He says county manager Davy Fitzgerald, who also has Fitzgibbon commitments with Limerick IT, is accommodating.

"We're actually lucky because our manager with the college [Páirc Fanning] is actually Davy's selector with Wexford. Hopefully it'll work well from my point of view. PJ Ryan is involved as well; he's the goal-keeping coach with Wexford and is involved with the college, too. Obviously there's talk of playing Fitzgibbon Cup games on Sunday and such, which is far from ideal."

Coincidence

"Is this going to bring up the college versus county row? For some lads – like, I won't have that problem – but I imagine certain lads will. You don't want to be making things hard for lads."

Another issue that may create problems is the coincidence of the Sigerson final with the All-Ireland club championships on February 17th. This already happened earlier in 2017

Fitzgibbon Cup teams representatives, from left, David Reidy of LIT, Patrick Curran of DCU Dochas Eirann, Nicky Cleere of Garda College, Cian Salmon of NUIG, Michael Breen of UCC, Lorcan Lyons of UL, Mark Fanning of IT Carlow, and Colin Dunford of WIT Carlow.

PHOTOGRAPH: SEB DALY/SPORTSFILE

when Dublin hurling champions Cuala had a clash between their All-Ireland semi-final and the Fitzgibbon finals weekend, which cost UCD a number of players.

That was an unintended clash, as Derry and Ulster champions Slaughtneil were granted an additional week between football and hurling semi-finals in recognition of their status as dual provincial champions.

"It's an unfortunate clash with the All-Ireland," said Tully, "but it has happened before and of course Slaughtneil are back as dual champions again so we'll also have to see how that works out."

All-Ireland SFC

Comer says Galway are still searching for consistency

Full-forward claims county showed Kerry too much respect this year

SEÁN MORAN

Galway forward Damien Comer believes that his team showed too much respect to Kerry in last season's All-Ireland quarter-final and is confident that a season in Division One will help them to develop the consistency necessary to make a sustained championship challenge.

Galway for the second year running defeated Mayo in the Connacht championship only for their season to fizzle out while their defeated opponents went on to reach the All-Ireland final.

Comer was in Croke Park for the launch of the 2018 Sigerson Cup draw, which pitted his NUI Galway side against IT Sligo in the first round. He was asked had the lack of top-level league football held back Galway in recent years.

"Possibly, but I think we showed Kerry a bit too much respect. We should have went at it a bit more. We got caught out a bit with an early goal, which set us back and then we had three or four goal chances. If we had sunk one or two of them, it could have been a different story as well. It seems to be when we get goals we are a different team."

"If we can get consistency into our game, we will be a good side. We have turned over Mayo now the last two years and what we did against Donegal – any other team in the country would be happy with that. If we can do it one week there is



Damien Comer: "It's time for us to put consistent performances together, that's what we're aiming for." PHOTOGRAPH: JAMES CROMBIE/INPHO

nothing to say you can't do it the next week. It is just about getting that out of us every time we put on a jersey and play, that's the main focus going forward."

Squander
That lack of consistency particularly bedevilled the team in last summer's championship. Having started so impressively by defeating Mayo in the Connacht semi-final, they proceeded to squander home advantage in the final and lose their provincial crown to Roscommon.

In the very next match they were impressively convincing winners against Donegal but then disappointed when taking on Kerry in Croke Park. "It's hard to watch," he said of his team's and Mayo's diver-

gent seasons.

"You are wondering what you are doing wrong. If you can take them in the first round you are wondering how come you can't do it towards the end of the season. It's something we've got to work on this year. It's time for us to put consistent performances together that's what we're aiming for."

The year though was positive for Galway in other respects. They gained promotion back to Division One for the first time in seven years and also in last April's Division Two final against Kildare laid to rest the hoodoo of not having won a match in Croke Park since the 2001 All-Ireland final.

Comer is impressed by that factor, describing it as "hype" and pointing out that

many of the Galway players had hardly played there.

"It would be different if you were playing there once a month and you are losing every single game. We get there once or twice a year and some lads, it was their first year playing in Croke Park; other lads it was only their second time."

Stepping stone

He remains positive about the prospect of playing Division One next season.

"We are a relatively young team – there are a few experienced heads but a lot of the fellows wouldn't be used to playing Division One football. So hopefully it is that stepping stone that we need to bring us forward to championship and it will give us the confidence."

All-Ireland SHC

Mahony concerned over Waterford's home fixtures

EAMON DONOGHUE
in Singapore

Waterford's Paucic Mahony admits it will be tough if the county are forced to play four away fixtures in next summer's Munster championship.

The current capacity of Walsh Park is only 11,500, with redevelopment work on the Waterford city venue set to begin next year and unlikely to be completed before the start of the 2018 Munster campaign.

The Déise's home ground has not hosted a major provincial game since 1996 mainly because of its capacity shortcomings, but after the structural changes to the 2018 hurling championship, Waterford have been fixed to host two games in next summer's provincial round-robin. They are against Cork and Tipperary.

"We don't know what's going to happen with Walsh Park, your guess is as good as mine," explained Mahony, talking at the PwC sponsored All Star tour in Singapore.

Unsure

While the prospect of home fixtures is an exciting one, Mahony remains very unsure as to whether plans to increase the capacity to 16,000 will be carried out in time to host those two fixtures.

If the work is not completed it could result in their home games being played outside of the county or even the province, with Kilkenny's Nowlan Park mooted as a possible venue.

"Playing four games away would be tough," said O'Mahony, whose Waterford team have lost two of the last three Munster finals and not won the title since 2010.

"Playing in your own patch is definitely an advantage.

We'll see what happens. For ourselves to get championship matches in our home patch is nice. The atmosphere in Walsh Park will be pretty amazing I'm sure. It will be a special place to be."

Next year's provincial championship will see each team play at least four matches, which means more games and before that an earlier preseason for an earlier league.

"It's hard to know how it'll go and we won't know until the end of 2018."

"There's going to be a lot of games but it's hard to know because we haven't seen it in operation yet. At the end of the day you want to be playing



Paucic Mahony: "Playing four games away would be tough"

games and that's what we'll be doing."

"Derek [McGrath] is letting us recharge the batteries now. It's a good complaint when the year has gone on for so long – it would have been nice to look back with the club [title] and All-Ireland [title]. Two losses in finals is tough to take but that's life, you just have to get on with it and try to do better next time."

"But you have to be that bit more conscious of what you do over the next six weeks or so in the off season because we are back at the end of January playing Wexford in the league. And the championship is a couple of weeks earlier too."

"So you have to mind yourself, and every player is doing that nowadays. There's no real time to take the foot off the gas anymore."

Hockey Men

Hard questions need answering over funding

JOHNNY WATTERSON

As an exercise in missing the boat most hockey clubs around the country should take a very close look at the recent Sports Capital Programme.

It's the annual handout when state money is allocated to local sports. Clubs can see what a huge opportunity they have missed.

In a team sport like hockey, where there are waiting lists to get into some clubs and where synthetic pitches are expensive to build, it is a way of accessing funding simply by filling in an application form.

Almost 2,000 grants were handed out by the state last week amounting to €55,831,000. Only Glenanne and four other applications appear to have been successful, three of them from Dublin and one in Galway.

Synthetic pitch

Guinness Ladies Hockey Club received €1,411, Old Alex Ladies Hockey club drew €6,130 and Weston Hockey Club was given €2,621, which amounts to a little over €10 k in total.

Glenanne, take a bow, were given the highest amount of €150,000 to go towards a new synthetic surface, while Galway City Council applied for funding for a hockey pitch in Miller's Lane and received €73,000. The total for the sport was €211,662.

You don't need to be a genius to understand what a tiny fraction of €60 million that amount of money represents.

In comparison the sport of

boxing hit a jackpot and was awarded €951,000 across 66 clubs or an average of around €14.5 k per application.

Carlow Lawn Tennis Club received €42,000, Sixmilebridge GAA Club in Clare €76,000, Tullow Kayak Club €40,000 and the list goes on.

Hockey needs to ask some hard questions. Why did such a small number succeed in the application and why was there such a small number of applications.

The rejected applications in-

€211,662

The total allocated to hockey from the €55.8m handed out as part of this year's Sports Capital Programme

cluded Three Rock Rovers HC and Navan HC as well as Villiers, Rathdown, Wesley and St Columbas schools.

Hockey with its numbers deserves a much bigger slice of the pie. But it is up to the sport to go and make it a co-ordinated annual episode. Last week has shown that Ireland's most successful Olympic sport, boxing, knows how to work the system.

Hockey should not be too proud to go and ask them, or Glenanne, how they did it because at the end of the day, it is the players who end up paying.

FIXTURES

Saturday – EY Irish Hockey League: Monkstown v Glenanne, MFA 2.15; Lisnagarvey v Annadale, Comer Road, 4.0; Bantrivree v Cookstown, Havelock Park, 5.0.

Hockey Women

McFerran awarded US collegiate honour

MARY HANNIGAN

Irish hockey players have enjoyed considerable success on the college front in the United States in recent years. Emma Russell and Roisin Upton among those who made a name for themselves during their spells with Syracuse and the University of Connecticut, respectively, both picked for the "All-American" teams of the year.

And this week goalkeeper Ayeisha McFerran earned that honour for the second year running. The 21-year-old from Larne, who played with Randalstown and Pegasus before taking up a hockey scholarship at the University of Louisville in 2015, has been in exceptional form this season, earning her the highest honour in US college sport.

McFerran, who, despite her youth, already has 65 senior caps to her name, missed August's European Championships with a foot injury and in her absence since then Grace O'Flanagan, Clodagh Cassin, Emma Buckley and Liz Murphy have all been given a chance to stake their claim to the number one jersey.

She should be back, though, for what will be a busy build-up to next summer's World Cup in London, with three games against Britain at Bisham Abbey in March just added to the schedule.

The bulk of the British squad is likely to make up the England panel for the World Cup, giving Ireland an early taste of what they'll face come June – they are in a pool with England, as well as the United States and India.

Meanwhile on the club front, UCD will look to retain



Ayeisha McFerran: goalkeeper is selected on the All-American team of year

top spot in the Hockey League when they take on Ards at Belfast tomorrow. Second-placed Cork Harlequins are away to Loreto, while Pegasus, in third, host Belfast Harlequins at Queens.

Bottom two Pembroke Wanderers and Monkstown both have a chance to improve their standings over the weekend, the sides at home to Railway Union and Trinity, respectively, tomorrow, before meeting at Serpentine Avenue on Sunday.

FIXTURES

EY Hockey League – Saturday: Loreto v Cork Harlequins, Beaufort 1.15; UCD v Ards, Belfast, 2.50; Pegasus v Belfast Harlequins, Queens, 4.0; Pembroke Wanderers v Railway Union, Serpentine Avenue, 4.0; Monkstown v Trinity, Rathdown, 4.10. **Sunday:** Pembroke Wanderers v Monkstown, Serpentine Avenue, 2.45.

Basketball

Eight to become four in men's National Cup

It's the quarter-final stages of the Hula Hoops men's Pat Duffy National Cup this weekend, with eight teams battling it out to secure a spot in January's semi-finals.

The battle is all the more interesting as a new winner is set to be crowned this year after reigning champions Griffith College Swords Thunder were knocked out in the opening round by underdogs DCU Saints. DCU now go on to contest a quarter-final contest with table-toppers UCD Marian this weekend, and will have a tough task in hand as UCD came out the better of their recent league clash.

Meanwhile, Black Amber Templeogue will host Eanna tomorrow evening in what is set to be another very close quarter-final battle. Eanna had already upset last year's league champions this season with a big win at Coláiste Éanna.

Elsewhere, last year's cup finalists Pyrobel Killester will

make the trip to Moycullen in Co Galway for a Sunday afternoon game. Moycullen came out on top the last time these two sides met in Dublin.

The final quarter-final between UCC Demons and Garvey's Tralee Warriors will take place December 13th, at Parochial Hall in Cork.

Interesting affair

Meanwhile, it's regular Super League action in the women's league. NUIG Mystics will welcome DCU Mercy in what is set to be an interesting affair as the two sides will also meet each other in the Hula Hoops Women's National Cup semi-finals in January following wins over Portlaoise Panthers and Courtyard Liffey Celtics respectively last weekend.

Maxol WIT Wildcats will travel to Upper Glanmire to face Ambassador UCC Glanmire, while Pyrobel Killester host Singleton SuperValu Brunel.