

HISTORY IS RE-WRITTEN IN EPIC FINAL

BRENDAN FURLONG

in Wexford Park

OULART-THE BALLAGH 3-12
FERNS ST. AIDAN'S 1-16

THE HARD years of experience accumulated over many campaigns on the road stood the test as reigning champions, Oulart-The Ballagh, completed a record five-in-a-row after an enthralling Pettitt's Senior hurling championship final clash with Ferns St. Aidan's at Wexford Park on Sunday last.

There was no shortage of passion or drama, while the standard of hurling throughout the 60-odd minutes was quite amazing given the heavy downpours and resulting slippery underfoot conditions. Ferns St. Aidan's were bidding to end their famine but they had the worse possible start, finding themselves seven points adrift (2-2 to 0-1) after just four opening minutes.

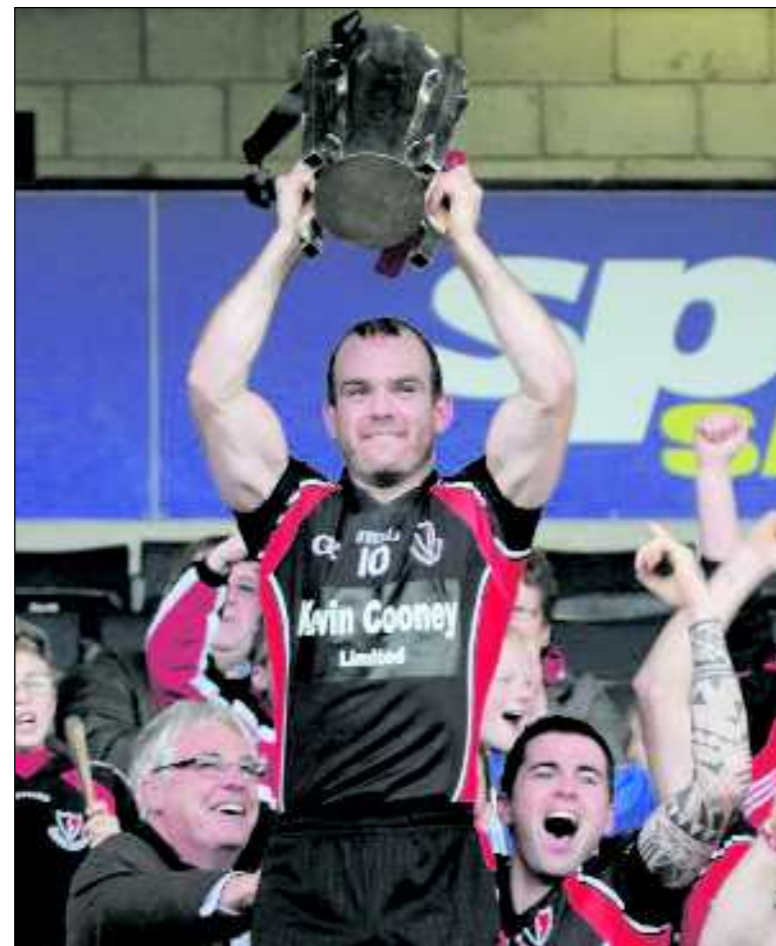
This was a storming opening for Oulart-The Ballagh. Given the manner in which they dismantled the Ferns full-back line with an avalanche of early scores, one feared as if the game would develop into a runaway victory, as the underdogs were hit with such ferocity in their first final appearance since 1969 that it was going to take a recovery of mammoth proportions even to get back into proceedings.

Ferns now had to use any hard-won possession to maximum advantage just to haul themselves back into contention. A team of lesser calibre would have folded under this early surge, but credit to Ferns as they kept their composure and re-grouped, gradually reducing the deficit with some amazing points before remarkably going in with a two-point interval cushion.

The conditions were proving a challenge to both sides but they still managed to show creativity and cohesion, while the stick work and first touch led to excellent passages of hurling, with the scores flowing from a variety of angles. Ferns showed they were not going away as they displayed amazing resilience in the face of adversity, giving the large crowd a final of real quality which went right down to the final whistle.

Thousands of supporters were enthralled with the hurling that was on offer. It was tense, tough and skilful, with some wonderful scores along with individual performances as it ebbed and flowed throughout the 60 minutes.

Not many will begrudge Oulart-The Ballagh this victory, as when it mattered most, they showed an ability to pick off their scores, while Ferns were left ruing



■ Darren Nolan raises the Dr. R.J. Bowe Cup aloft in triumph.

some wides from scoreable positions, and they also dropped a number of point attempts short to the goalkeeper.

It was always going to be a big challenge but they made it an even bigger one with that dreadful opening four minutes, conceding 2-2 in the process. Still, this young side battled back with such ferocity that they showed they are just a stroke of a ball away from winning that elusive title. This was Oulart-The Ballagh cashing in on a winning mentality, something that will only come Ferns' way with more experience at this level of hurling.

But the reigning champions were given an almighty fright by a Ferns side that fought back magnificently as they sought out a first Senior title in their first final appearance in 44 years.

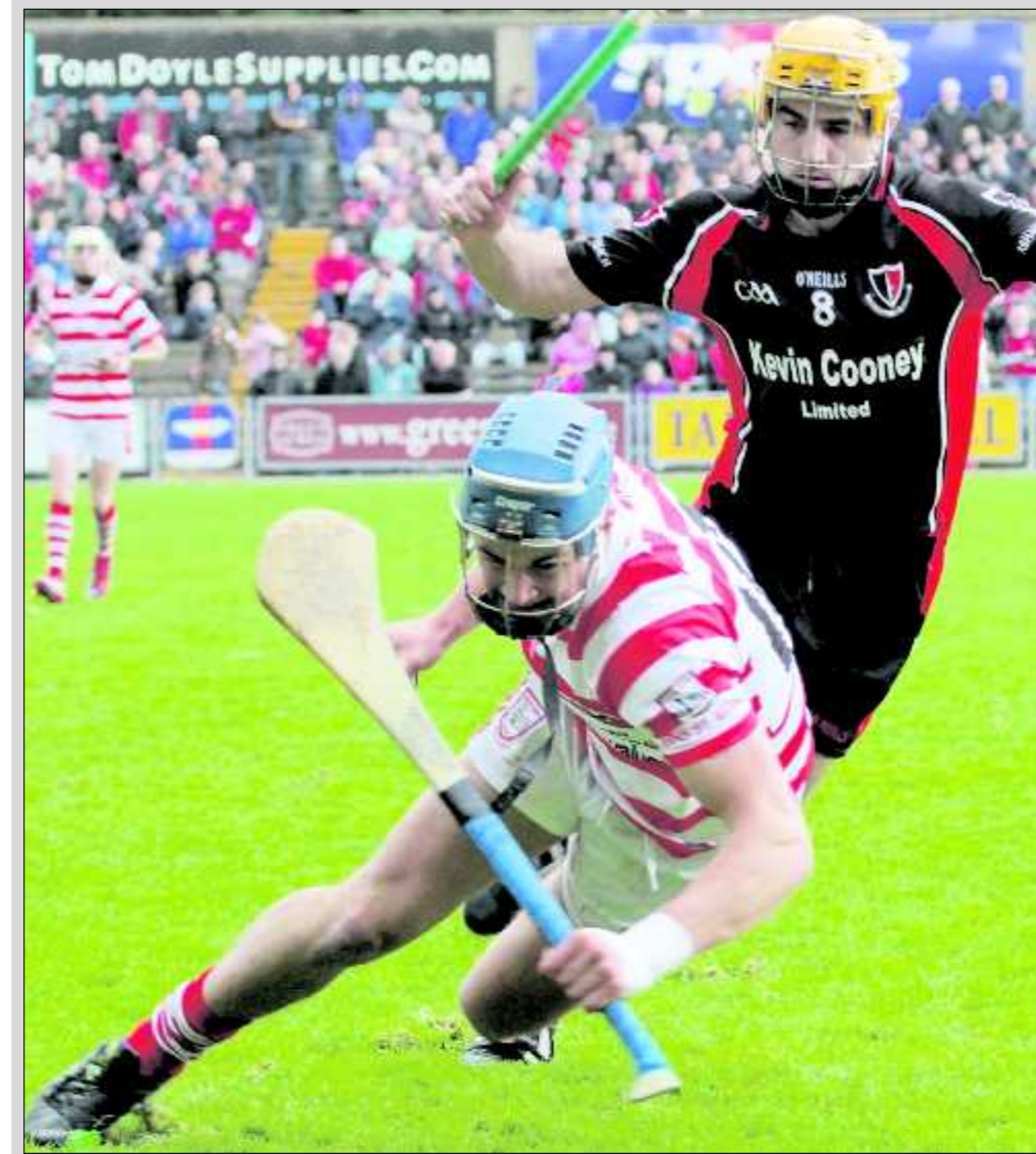
David Redmond, who was popping up in different positions during the course of the 60 minutes, inspired his side, striking over two crucial second-half points on 23 and 25 minutes to give them a one-point lead. Although Ferns battled back to level, the Jacob brothers fired over two points in additional time to

steer their side to an historic victory.

It took Oulart-The Ballagh just 30 seconds to open their account. Having played a long ball deep into the Ferns defence, corner-back Colm Whelan was dispossessed as he attempted to clear, with Nicky Kirwan taking advantage to create space and point.

But worse was to follow 60 seconds later when the defence failed to deal with a high Darren Nolan delivery, leaving Rory Jacob unmarked to pick up the breaking ball and shoot to the net from ten metres. When David Redmond fired over a long-range point a rout looked on, particularly after their response to an Ian Byrne 80-metre point after three minutes with a typical Kirwan opportunist goal one minute later, leaving his side leading by 2-2 to 0-1.

The biggest challenge now facing Ferns was to keep their composure and play their way back into the game. James Tonks began to take a foothold at centre-back, while Niall Maguire and Gavin Bailey also helped to settle the defence. Tommy Dwyer was beginning



■ Ian Byrne of Ferns St. Aidan's takes a tumble as Oulart-The Ballagh's David Redmond closes in (left), while Des Mythen takes on defender Niall Maguire (above).

to impose himself in midfield, while Ian Byrne, Paul Morris and Jonathon Dwyer showed an ability to take on the highly-rated champions' defence.

Ferns responded with four unanswered points through Tommy Dwyer (free), Jonathon Dwyer with two, including one magnificent sideline cut, and a further Tommy Dwyer free, reducing the deficit to three (2-2 to 0-5) after nine minutes. A Nicky Kirwan point helped to lift the siege, but Ferns by this stage had found their feet.

Tommy Dwyer (free), Brendan Jordan with a huge effort from midfield, Ian Byrne with an excellent point from under the stand, and a John Breen strike, had them amazingly level (2-3 to 0-9) after 18 minutes.

Ferns were pushing on as they took the game to the champions. A tremendous piece of defending from Keith Rossiter when he put his body on the line to block a Paul Morris attempt for goal brought the crowd to its feet. Eight minutes before the break Tommy Dwyer pointed a free after Ian Byrne had been fouled, but it was during this period of dominance that the challengers hit two bad wides while two point attempts dropped into the hand of 'keeper Ben O'Connor.

After Des Mythen had brought the sides back level, Ferns put in a storming finish to the half, resulting in two excellent points from Ian Byrne which sent them in leading by 0-12 to 2-4 at the interval.

Garrett Sinnott and Paul Morris exchanged early second-half points, but Ferns showed they were up for a battle in what turned out to be an absorbing finale. The challengers were leading by 0-13 to 2-6 when Kirwan goaled from close range after 41 minutes.

The champions weren't setting the world alight but they were digging in after a Paul Morris point reduced the deficit to the minimum. Jonathon Dwyer and Darren Nolan exchanged points before 'keeper Ben O'Connor dropped a lobbing Paul Morris ball over the line, giving Ferns a 1-15 to 3-8 lead going into the closing ten minutes.

Given the way the game was ebbing and flowing, it was difficult to separate the sides who overcame heavy downpours and a slippery surface to turn in the most absorbing county final seen in the county for many years. All of a sudden the game rose to even greater heights and the reigning champions were now calling on all their experience.

David Redmond took on the responsibility. Having seen a point attempt just curl wide, he stepped up to the mark seven minutes from the end with a delightful point from midfield, while two minutes later, having picked up a loose clearance in midfield, he showed uncanny accuracy to steer the wet sliothar straight between the posts, giving his side a 3-10 to 1-15 lead going into the closing stages.

Redmond was proving the vital cog in his side throughout, and during this

remarkable spell he popped up in a variety of positions to inspire the champions to one final effort. He was proving the real leader after centre-back Darren Stamp was forced to retire with a recurring leg injury that had him doubtful all week.

While Oulart-The Ballagh kicked on with those crucial scores, credit to Ferns who bounced back as a Paul Morris point with 30 seconds remaining had the sides level.

As the crowd were settling for a draw, the Jacob brothers stepped up to the mark with two points in injury time. However, the drama was by no means finished as in the fifth minute of additional time Tommy Dwyer had a 21-metre free saved after Brendan Jordan was fouled trying to drive in on goal.

Given their amazing achievement, Oulart-The Ballagh have won the respect of every hurling follower in the county. For Ferns they must take great credit for making this such an absorbing final.

They are a young side, capable of winning that elusive title within a short space of time. They have got the taste of the big occasion and now they must push on to another level in 2014.

Credit also to referee Sean Whelan who showed consistency in his decision-making in the conditions, contributing largely to such a wonderful final.

WHISTLE BLOWER

There was widespread praise for referee Sean Whelan's sensible handling of this well-contested final in the trying conditions

OULART-THE BALLAGH

SCORERS: Nicky Kirwan (2-3, 0-2 frees), Rory Jacob (1-2), David Redmond (0-3), Michael Jacob, Darren Nolan, Des Mythen, Garrett Sinnott (0-1 each).

1. Ben O'Connor
2. Paul Roche
3. Keith Rossiter
4. Barry Kehoe
5. Laurence Prendergast
6. Darren Stamp
7. Shaun Murphy
8. Eoin Moore
9. Michael Jacob
10. Darren Nolan (capt.)
11. David Redmond
12. Des Mythen
13. Rory Jacob
14. Garrett Sinnott
15. Nicky Kirwan

SUBS: Dennis Morton for Stamp, inj., Conor Goff for Moore, inj., Conor O'Leary for Murphy.

FERNS ST. AIDAN'S

SCORERS: Paul Morris (1-3), Jonathon Dwyer (0-4, 2 line balls), Tommy Dwyer (0-4 frees), Ian Byrne (0-3), Brendan Jordan, John Breen (0-1 each).

1. Mick Walsh
2. Declan Byrne
3. Niall Maguire
4. Colm Whelan
5. Gavin Bailey
6. James Tonks
7. Ciaran Roberts
8. Brendan Jordan
9. Tommy Dwyer
10. Ian Byrne
11. Paul Morris
12. Jonathon Dwyer
13. Patrick Farrell
14. John Breen
15. Christopher O'Connor

SUBS: Colin Leacy for Byrne, Derek Thorpe for Farrell.

REFEREE: Sean Whelan (St. Martin's).



■ The Oulart-The Ballagh squad celebrate after making hurling history with a fifth Senior title on the trot.