

Surrounded



Gort's Paul Killilea comes under pressure from Clarinbridge defenders Michael Donoghue and David Forde during the Galway senior hurling final at Pearse Stadium on Sunday. PHOTOS: JOE O'SHAUGHNESSY.

# Gritty Gort end long title wait

All-Ireland Club hurling champions are floored as late pointed frees from Coen and Harte carry the day

**Gort** 0-17  
**Clarinbridge** 1-12

**STEPHEN GLENNON**  
**AT PEARSE STADIUM**

TWO injury-time frees from captain Andy Coen and man of the match Aidan Harte ended a 28-year barren spell for Gort's senior hurlers, who despite having conceded the lead late on, found that extra gear to eventually see off defending champions Clarinbridge in a thoroughly enjoyable county senior hurling final at Pearse Stadium on Sunday.

In the end, it was a victory well-deserved. While an impressive Gort outfit had hurled with great intensity and passion throughout, it was their disciplined execution of their game-plan that, at last, secured the club this sixth senior county title in front of a crowd of almost 9,000.

Over the past year, All-Ireland champions Clarinbridge – and what great ambassadors they have been – have built their game-plan around an impenetrable half-back line partnership of Jamie Cannon, David Forde and Michael Donoghue, the insatiable work ethic of Barry Daly, and the speed and precision of the 'Bride attack.

On Sunday, though, the Mattie Murphy led management team and players had their homework done. Targeting the champions' key areas, they brought the necessary intensity – and, more importantly, the discipline – to stifle and smother their opponents.

The Gort defence was simply outstanding and, unlike many contests, it's difficult to laud one defender over another. Granted, Michael Cummins does deserve particular credit for the job he did in tying up the 'Bride's Eoin Forde, but in saying that the contributions of Coen, Mark McMahon, Greg Lally, Brian Regan and the pacy Jason Grealish were equally as pivotal to the out-

come of this game.

In centre-field, Sylvie Óg Linnane and Sean Forde, especially in the first half, worked tirelessly to close down the space in the middle third, while up front the industry of the Gort attack – particularly in closing down the Clarinbridge half-back unit – was no more typified than by the toil and graft of Paul Killilea on the wing and full-forward Ollie Fahy inside.

Their combined exertions totally disrupted and negated the quality of ball delivered by the Clarinbridge backs into their danger-men while also allowing Harte – who pulled David Forde all over the field – and corner forward Gerard O'Donoghue to pick off some neat points from play. And this, ultimately, was the key.

Gort, in recent years anyway, have proven to be a real goal machine and, by and large, the majority of their championship victories have been achieved thanks to their ability to find the net. You have to go back to the knockout stages of the 2008 campaign to find their last championship win – that over Carnmore – without the South Galway outfit tallying a goal. Indeed, in their last 30 championship games in the last five years, they have scored goals in 26 of them.

Consequently, Clarinbridge could be forgiven for believing that if they did not concede a major, then they would achieve back-to-back title wins, so it's a credit to all concerned in Gort that they, to some extent, were able to reinvent themselves for the 2011 decider.

Not that Gort didn't create those opportunities. Having started in whirlwind fashion, with midfielder Sean Forde registering the opening score after 50 seconds, wing forward Gerry Quinn had an effort blocked down on the second minute.

A goal at that stage would really have rocked Clarinbridge back on their heels, but as it was Gort stuck to the



Gort defender Michael Cummins tries to halt the progress of Clarinbridge's Eanna Murphy at Pearse Stadium.

game-plan and by the 12th minute had raced into a 0-6 to 0-1 lead. Mark Kerins cancelled out the Forde effort with a free on four minutes, but then Harte – who hit two gems from play after dropping deep for possession – and placed ball specialist Quinn (three frees) tallied five unanswered efforts for the victors.

Clarinbridge wing-forward Shane Burke did cut the deficit, following a neat pass from Kerins, at the close of the opening quarter, however, within minutes, Gort had further extended their advantage after scores from Quinn (free) and Fahy, the latter following great work in defence by McMahon. They now led 0-8 to 0-2.

The champions were in real trouble now and they sensed it. However, true to their spirit and commitment, they mounted a late surge in the closing minutes of the first half to outscore the challengers four points to one. All four of those efforts came from the unerring dead ball accuracy of Mark Kerins, while Harte tallied Gort's effort following good work from Killilea.

While the 'Bride had cut the deficit to three, 0-9 to 0-6, at the half-time break, Clarinbridge had to start winning more of the individual battles around the park in the second period if they were to retain the Tom Callanan Cup.

Initially, they were unable to do that as Quinn tallied two

more frees and O'Donoghue sent over an opportunistic effort from play in the opening five minutes of the half. For their part, Clarinbridge were still relying on Kerins, who converted a 33rd minute free, to keep them in touch and it was notable that the champions, by this time, had only posted one point from play through Burke.

However, Johnny Lee's men soon began to find some rhythm and in the ensuing 10 minutes they registered 1-4 to tie up an absorbing contest by the 46th minute. Burke, with his and Clarinbridge's second score from play, Mark Kerins (free) and Alan Kerins (2) all found the target during this very productive spell, before

half-time substitute Billy Lane netted the only goal of the contest on 46 minutes.

An Eoin Forde effort looked to be creeping over when Gort custodian Peter Cummins took the ball down. Unfortunately for the goalkeeper, the ball subsequently spilled away from him into the path of the on-rushing Lane and the All-Ireland winning Galway minor made no mistake in dispatching the slotter to the net.

That goal turned the contest on its head, but then the real talking points began to kick in. Kerins uncharacteristically missed his first free of the day, which would have handed his side the lead, before corner forward Forde picked up his second yellow for a tackle that

was in no way malicious – but reckless nonetheless – and he was shown the red card on 50 minutes.

Nerves were jangling all over the park, though, with Richie Cummins – taking over the free-taking duties from the substituted Quinn – and Paul Coen, a goal opportunity, spurning good scoring chances for both sides. It was now frantic stuff.

Clarinbridge did eventually take the lead for the first – and only time – in the decider with four minutes remaining when wing-forward Stephen Forde fired over what could have been the match-winning score. However, Harte, now on the frees, equalised after Fahy won a crucial free on 59 minutes and while Kerins had an opportunity to level matters again on the stroke of full-time – his effort drifting wide – Gort finally nailed down the win with those late points from captain Coen and top player Harte in injury-time. It was a fitting climax to a decider – and a championship – not without drama.

For Clarinbridge, they were best served by Conor Forde, Paul Callanan, Shane Burke and brothers Mark and Alan Kerins on the day. While they will probably bemoan the fact that this was their fifth week in a row in competitive action, the sending off of Forde, and, perhaps, a number of other factors if they so wish to go looking for them, when the darkness lifts, they can be proud that they represented their club and county with distinction over the past 12 months in particular.

What the future holds after that, who knows? This could possibly spell the end for some of their older players, but at least the conveyor belt of talent has begun to churn out potential replacements in the likes of Billy Lane, Barry Keane, Shane Mannion and Cian Morrissey, to mention but a few. It may just take time.

As with all finals, though, it will be the heroes from the

winning side who will be remembered. Indeed, when the dust settles on this one – probably around Christmas – the day of November 6, 2011 should make for some interesting debates in the various households around Gort.

You can just imagine the great Gael that is Josie Harte – the teak-tough corner back who captained the previous Gort team to victory in '83 – kidding his son and man of the match Aidan that he would never have shot those four points from play in his day... and to come back to him when he has that second county medal in his back pocket! There was no prouder man – or father – than Josie on Sunday.

The same banter could also take place in the homes of current hurlers Brian Regan, Sylvie Óg Linnane, the Cummins brothers, Peter, Michael and Richie, and Greg Lally, among others on the extended panel, all of whom finally stood out of the shadow of their successful fathers – those legends of '81 and '83 – on Sunday. Such is the symmetry between the past and the present.

The broadest smile, though, will be reserved for one Mattie Murphy. Having been part of his adopted club's successes in the early '80s – the latter of which he was also chairman – the six-time All-Ireland winning minor manager's CV keeps growing and growing.

And he ain't finished yet with the All-Ireland club series now within his sights.

Gort: P. Cummins; A. Coen (0-1, free), M. McMahon, M. Cummins; G. Lally, B. Regan, J. Grealish; S. O'Glinnane, S. Forde (0-1); G. Quinn (0-6, all frees), A. Harte (0-6, 0-2 frees), P. Killilea; R. Cummins, O. Fahy (0-1), G. O'Donoghue (0-2). Subs: K. Killilea for Quinn (44 mins.); K. Finnegan for P. Cummins, inj. (55 mins.); A. Mullins for S. Forde (56 mins.).

Clarinbridge: L. Donoghue; C. Forde, B. Burke, P. Callanan; J. Cannon, D. Forde, M. Donoghue; B. Daly, E. Murphy; S. Burke (0-2), M. Kerins (0-7, 0-6 frees, 0-1 '65), S. Forde (0-1); E. Forde, A. Kerins (0-2), P. Coen. Subs: B. Lane (1-0) for E. Murphy (H/T).

Referee: Alan Kelly (Rahoon/Newcastle).