

Cats always land on their feet



COMMENT

By Garry Doyle

MARK TWAIN, the celebrated American author, may not have spent much of his life pondering the fickle nature of hurling, yet his observation that reports about his death were greatly exaggerated, seem a perfect fit vis-a-vis Kilkenny. Written off by almost everyone after their defeat to Waterford earlier this month, they responded to the jibes about their lack of pace, lack of youth and lack of fight by doing what they do best: winning.

Yet again Tipperary were the victims of their anger — just as they have been for the bulk of the Brian Cody era, and while last Sunday's trip to Nowlan Park was hyped as the start of a new era, the narrative remained same old, same old. Tipp started well, dominated for a spell, built up a lead... and lost. Lost, just as they have done in almost every game they have played against their rivals since the 2010 All-Ireland — which was supposed to be the year the baton was passed from one era (and one team) to the next but which instead has initiated a spell of misery for the Premier County and joy for the Cats. Fourteen times they have met since that final. Just twice have Tipperary won.

Does that tell us more about them or Kilkenny, though? You could say it is a bit of both. Certainly whenever questions



TOP CATS: Kilkenny's Conor Fogarty and Shane Prendergast battle for possession against Noel McGrath of Tipperary

have been asked, Brian Cody's men have provided the answers. The All-Ireland defeat in 2010 was supposed to be the end, the heavy loss to Dublin in the 2011 league providing further proof of that. How did they respond? By winning four of the next five All-Irelands.

In this context, we should have known. We should have looked at the defeat to Waterford — where Kilkenny were outfought, as well as outplayed — and reserved judgement. We should have noted the absence of Richie Hogan, the 2014 hurler of the

year, and realised it didn't matter. Not to them.

After all, they spent the winter of 2014/15 watching one legend after another retire — from JJ Delaney through to Henry Shefflin — yet replacements were found. So when Hogan was missing on Sunday, combined with Richie Power's retirement, Ger Aylward's injury and Eoin Larkin's sabbatical, we shouldn't have jumped to conclusions. Unless, of course, your conclusion was that their revival was about to begin.

"All the talk after the Waterford

game was that they were hungrier and played with much more aggression — and that is the sort of thing that will drive Brian Cody absolutely mad," Noel Hickey, their former full back, said. "He'd be totally against that because the No 1 thing with Cody, above everything else, is that you have to work at least as hard as the fella you're marking. Cody will be driven demented listening to that talk and he'll have made a big point that things have to improve."

And they did improve. TJ Reid

was inspirational, but then again he has been for the best part of three years. What impressed more about Sunday were the performances of two debutants: James Maher, who scored four points, and Robert Lennon, whose defensive solidity impressed at centre half.

The timing of their arrival couldn't have been better: After all, so much was made of the fact Cody underused his bench last season, the implication being that he didn't trust them. And again, in the defeat to Waterford,

the arrival of just one substitute into the fray — when the starting XV were underperforming so miserably — suggested the quality wasn't there, a theory strengthened by the fact that at Under-21 level, Kilkenny have not won an All-Ireland since 2008.

Still while last year's team — and squad — were regarded as the weakest in Cody's tenure, not only did they win an All-Ireland, they did so without breaking sweat, posting 5-25 against Wexford, 1-25 against Galway in the Leinster final, 1-21 against Waterford in the All-Ireland semi-final and 1-22 in the All-Ireland decider. Look at those numbers and the consistency of the scoring. Hence the predictions of gloom when they returned from Walsh Park with just 0-14 to their name. Yet key factors have to be accounted for regarding that defeat, namely that it was February, the first round of the League and the squad had just returned from a team holiday in Thailand. Instead the post-match analysis focused on the absence of Power, Aylward, Larkin and a subsequent absence of speed and class.

And then came last Sunday. Kevin Kelly scored 2-1 to suggest he belongs at this level. Reid plundered 10 points to suggest the mantle of leadership is something he will relish rather than be burdened by, while Maher — whose grandfather, Pa Dillon, decorated the 1960s — showed hurling has passed down the generations. All of which made Hickey smile. "Kilkenny won another All-Ireland convincingly last year," he said. "They have lost one league game. So it's still way too early to be talking about anybody being on the slide."

Indeed, those reports were greatly exaggerated.

Irish Guards serve up unique GAA experience at Hounslow Barracks

UPON entry to the Cavalry Barracks in Hounslow, London, a Union Jack flutters in the wind while identification, signature and a reason for visit are taken from each external attendee.

After watching hundreds if not thousands of GAA matches from many different sidelines, entering a British Army base to watch a game of Gaelic football was indeed an unusual experience.

Inside the gates, the flag of St Patrick flies above a makeshift GAA pitch, while a row of military vehicles next to the field adds to the peculiar spectacle of St Clarets' visit for Saturday's friendly with Gardai Eireannach, the team from the British Army's Irish Guards regiment.

It may sound like intimidating



PITCHED BATTLE: The Guards and St Clarets players tussle for possession



COMMENT

By Jamie Casey

surroundings for a man from South Armagh, though it was anything but. For once past security there's a real feel of Irish hospitality about the place, with

tea, Guinness and Irish stew on offer for all visitors.

I was stuffed. But unfortunately for the hosts, so was their team.

This was only the second match the Irish Guards have played, and once again they were understrength and comprehensively beaten, with St Clarets showing no mercy in putting eight goals past them.

Harlesden Harps scored 5-10 against them in their opening game in the same venue earlier this month and once again the difference in experience was telling from start to finish.

Nonetheless, the Guards were creating chances of their own on the muddy surface, but wayward shooting caused a sizeable number of wides.

Many of their players grew up playing GAA or rugby at youth level, so the ball handling skills were there to be seen, and that lack of confidence in front of the target could be eradicated with some much-needed shooting practice.

Due to the nature of their work, the Guards will struggle to field a consistent starting XV, but with a

growing pool of over 50 players to choose from, they will have no trouble fielding a team anytime soon, even if some of their players are unfamiliar with each other's names thanks to the sheer size of the barracks in which they're based.

Despite the heavy defeat, those involved appear to be enjoying the early stages of their journey and they're hoping for another practice outing against Tir Chonaill Gaels' Junior side on March 5 ahead of their first competitive season in London GAA.