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FOOTBALL W County Championship Previews

## Let the battle for Jack Daly begin

The battle for Jack Daly finally begins this Saturday on a weekend that will see six games played. **Joe Ó Muircheartaigh** looks ahead to some intriguing ties that pit many county championship heavyweights together.





**GROUP 1** 



@ Cooraclare, Saturday 4pm

SHANNON Gaels flopped in last Sunday's Garry Cup - there's no other way to explain away their eight-point defeat. Why? Belly for battle? Or, were they pulling a fast one and holding something back for this one? Maybe somewhere in between. Six days on they can go one of two ways. More of the same and another underachieving year could be their lot; circle the wagons this week and hit the field in Cooraclare with loads to prove. In that sense the Garry Cup defeat will be the making or breaking of them. Miltown, meanwhile, have been lying low since their Cusack Cup semi-final defeat to Doonbeg. They were exposed that day - high in effort in many parts of the field, they lacked punch in the forwards where only Dessie Molohan showed something in spurts. How Miltown line-up will have a huge bearing on this one. If they persist with Graham Kelly in the forwards they're wasting a fine talent. He needs to be facing the goal, wing-back being the position from which he can be the engine of the team driving them forward. Midfield will be the key battleground Sean Meade and Michael Barry v Noel Kennedy and Padraig Neylon. Meade and Barry look stronger as a unit, but of the four Noel Kennedy has the most potential for inspiration. Up front it could be a shoot-out between John Paul O'Neill and Dessie Molohan. Expect Gordon Kelly or Enda Malone to take O'Neill, while Eugene Flanagan or Michael Coughlan will be detailed to police Molohan. However, it's the forwards around these talismans who will really hold the key. The Gaels have the better ones and will win. Verdict: Shannon Gaels

**GROUP 2** 



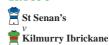
@ Ennistymon, Saturday 6.15pm

A BAPTISM of fire for Ballyvaughan, thrown in at the deep end for their first senior championship game against the Townies who have

been in five finals this decade, winning two of them. It's a mission impossible, but in many ways this is Ballyvaughan's best chance of causing an upset. All because, the Townies are notorious for making slow starts and could take this one for granted. There are other factors too, most notably the fact that in the week of the game, Éire Óg don't know who will be running the line for them. Leo Ryan, who stepped in to train the side at the start of the year when they had no one, is away on holidays, while Mick Frain who joined the setup mid-season was absent from their final challenge game workout at the weekend. This state of flux doesn't augur well for their overall championship challenge. Ballyvuaghan, meanwhile, have nothing to lose. They hadn't won an intermediate championship game until their fairytale run last year that culminated in final triumph over Michael Cusack's. They won't be the pushover Éire Og are expecting. Though operating two divisions lower than Éire Og in the league, in their semi-final they put it up to the 2007 senior semi-finalists Wolfe Tones and only lost by a point. They'll throw everything at the Townies, but still for all Éire Og's problems off the field, made worse on it through an injury to captain David Russell, it's hard to see anything other than the two points coming back to Eppis

Verdict: Éire Og

## GROUP 3

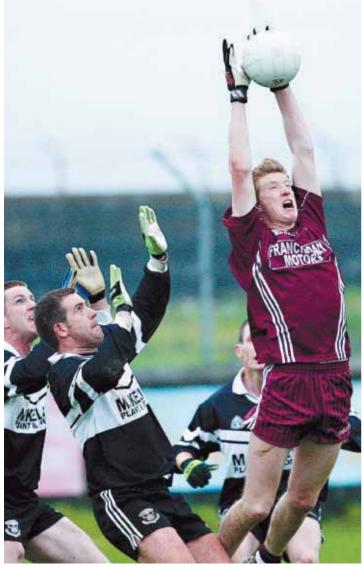


@ Doonbeg, Saturday 2.30pm

KILMURRY Ibrickane can do no wrong at senior level. This will be their 19th game in all senior competitions this year - they're going for their 19th win, but it might not be as easy as some people expect. Of course, on from it has to be Kilmurry, albeit that their Cusack Cup final could have gone either way. Still, the 90-plus minutes of football in Kilmihil will have been worth a couple of weeks training. The biggest problem they have is picking the team. Injuries forced their hand in the Cusack Cup - with Evan Talty, Declan Callinan, Mark Killeen and Johnny Daly ruled out, they had to re-jig their line-up. For instance, Vinny Talty came in and did very well, most importantly of all from the team point of view he added physical presence to the team. It's this physical presence that has been Kilmurry's Achilles heel in recent seasons, but they measured up in his regard against Doonbeg and must do so again here. All because Kilkee will fight on their backs - they're being written off as a team in transition, with Denis Russell, Ger Keane and Ger Crotty unlikely to figure in the game. Add in that they were dreadfully disappointing in the Garry Cup semi-final replay. Still, they'll rise it big time here and will rattle if they select the right team. That means building the team around David Russell, by taking him out of the forwards and placing him at centre-back. Up front with good ball, Michael O'Shea, Micheál Keane, Gearóid Lynch, Noel O'Shea and Barry Harte know how to win county finals, so Kilkee have loads of potential to compete. Last year they beat Kilmurry at the same stage by a point, even though that Michael O'Dwyer looked to have got an equalising point at the death. Kilmurry's season never really recovered and won't want the same to happen here

Verdict: Kilmurry Ibrickane

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Left to right: Éire Óg captain David Russell, who is a doubtful starter for Saturday's championship opener against Ballyvaughan; Shannon Gaels' Padraig Neylon and Miltwon's Michael Neylon will renew championship rivalries on Saturday; Lissycasey's Anthony Kelly gets higher than any of the Doonbeg players during last year's Cusack Cup Final; Kilkee's Thomas Galvin tries to stop Kilmurry Ibrickane's Declan Callinan during the 2005 county football final.



@ Kilmihil, Saturday 6.30pm

A potential banana skin for the Shams. They're strong favourites, overwhelming even thanks to tradition alone, but St Joseph's have a stream of fine footballers who have come through the ranks from minor and under 21 level. They're in the semi-final of the under 21 championship following victory over Ennistymon at the weekend. They have players who would be on most club teams Greg Lyons, Cathal O'Sullivan, Kevin Dilleen to name but three of them. They also have James Hanrahan training them, having transferred back to the club after a decade with Éire Og. He knows what it takes to win county championships on and off the field and will have St Joseph's playing to their optimum in the championship. However, getting out of a group that includes three teams with 38 senior championships between them just isn't on. This is their best chance of taking some points in the 2008 Jack Daly race – the Shams were quarter-finalists last year, which represented progress. They now need to take it to the next level. They have good young players in Con O'Brien, Matthew Moloney and co, while John Hayes and Peadar McMahon bring inter-county experience to their cause. Their combined talents will be too much for St Joseph's who simply won't have the experience to trouble any of their three illustrious opponents in this group.

Verdict: Kilrush Shamrocks

GROUP 4



@ Kilmihil, Saturday 8pm

GAME of weekend one. The champions versus the bluebloods who have been out of the county final picture for seven years. Are they on a mission to restore the old order of things in 2008? Could be so. They lost nothing in defeat in the Cusack Cup final, only the cup and David Tubridy. As regards the latter, therein lies a tale. Lissycasey would probably not agreed to play this weekend had Tubridy not been ruled out

through suspension, preferring instead to hold out until Colin Lynch was freed from county hurling duties to come back to the fold. However, with Tubridy out they seized their chance to play and why not. Tubridy has been huge for Doonbeg in recent years - last year alone he scored 21 points out of Doonbeg's 1-33 in four championship games. Take him out and Lissycasey's chances are vastly improved. This game will go to the wire - Lissycasey being in the very strange position county champions, yet underdogs. It's all on the back of a poor league, but things have changed a lot since then. Martin Daly would be a huge asset on the field, but word is that he's made a huge impression since taking a pivotal role off the field. Meanwhile, David Considine provides experience from the 2007 selection team and Barry Keating is a two-time championship winner with Faughs and Éire Óg. Then there's the team – despite being champions they have loads to prove, while they know they can beat Doonbeg as the tempestuous Cusack Cup final replay showed last year. It tees up a titanic struggle. Paul Hehir will be expected to take up the scoring burden in the absence of Tubridy, while if Frank O'Dea can have as influential a game as in the Cusack Cup decider, it's hard to look beyond the Magpies. Factor in that Lissycasey – minus the extraordinary talents of Martin Daly and Michael Slowey from the forwards last year – don't have as good an attack as Kilmurry Ibrickane, which means the Doonbeg backs should be able to cope with what's thrown at them. Verdict: Doonbeg



@ Miltown Malbay, Saturday 7pm

AN intriguing tie. Cooraclare are cock-a-hoop following their storming second half display in claiming an emotional victory for the Garry family in the Garry Cup, while Liscannor are lurking in the long grass, inactive competitively since going down to Kilmurry Ibrickane in the Cusack Cup semi-final. They'll be primed for this one though, the second game in the Group of Death. Liscannor have been one of the most consistent teams in Clare football this past decade, while always falling short in championship. Joe Con-

sidine and Mark and Gerry Tubridy were at the fulcrum of Cooraclare's Garry Cup success, and more of the same will be required here as they bid to arrest their alarming slump as a force in senior championship football over the past three years. From being only a few points shy of eventual champions Kilmurry Ibrickane in the quarter-final in 2004, they failed to get break free of the groups stages in '05, '06 and '07. Last year the writing was on the wall from game one when they went down to St Breckan's, while worse followed against heavyweights Kilmurry Ibrickane and St Senan's. This year their task is tougher and nothing will come tougher than Liscannor - they kicked away their chance of Cusack Cup glory in the first half of the semi-final and if they can somehow find they're shooting boots they'll be very hard to stop. Their core is very strong - Brian Considine, Ronan Slattery, Darragh Blake and Alan Clohessy give them experience that a primarily youthful Cooraclare don't have. However, in terms of balance, Cooraclare looked the more rounded team. It means it could go either way, but Liscannor's experience might edge them home.

Verdict: Liscannor