

HURLING > UNDER 21 FINAL PREVIEWS

A feast of under 21 action

This coming Easter Weekend will see three county finals down for decision at Under 21 level, writes Eoin Brennan, who looks ahead to all the action.

Under 21A Championship Final

Inagh-Kilnamona v Kilmaley @ Cusack Park, Saturday 5pm

SURPRISINGLY, considering their underage prominence and profile in recent years, this is the first Under 21A final meeting between these neighbouring rivals. However, having been clear favourites from the outset, Inagh-Kilnamona and Kilmaley finally face-off for what should be an intriguing showdown.

Of course, they last clashed in last November's Minor A decider that Inagh-Kilnamona eventually edged by 1-14 to 1-10 for their first title in nine years. Backed by the largest contingent on the 2017 Clare minor panel of captain Cian McInerney, Keith White, Aidan McCarthy, Eoin Fitzgerald and Eamonn Foudy,

a Kealan Guyler goal had put Inagh-Kilnamona into an eight point advantage entering the final quarter. However, typifying their character, Kilmaley rallied with Tom O'Rourke almost single-handedly dragging his side back into the contest as a 1-3 rally slashed the arrears before Cathal Darcy earned a last penalty that would have regained parity.

Goalkeeper Eamonn Foudy came to the rescue to prevent his opposite number Ronan Callinan from earning a full reprieve as Inagh-Kilnamona relievedly held on for victory.

That game alone epitomised the unpredictability of this derby that sees the 2015 champions Kilmaley - who overcame Inagh-Kilnamona by 1-15 to 1-11 on their way to bridging a 40 year gap that year - pitted against their successors.

Indeed, this is Inagh-Kilnamona's

third consecutive final appearance, having shared the honours evenly with Feakle/Killanena over the past two deciders. That experience alone could be crucial in such a inch-tight battle for control as seven of the 2015 panel that saw action in that winning final are still underage for this weekend's version.

Central to that experienced core is county senior Jason McCarthy who has conducted matters from centre-back while his younger brother Aidan forms the fulcrum of the attack.

However, injury has prevented another Clare senior panelist Keith White from playing any part in this year's championship, something that is unlikely to change which would be a significant blow. They do welcome back Austin Kerin though, another experienced regular who returned

to action in Saturday's Division 2 League clash with Sixmilebridge.

Kilmaley, who have contested five of the last six Minor A deciders, are not short of big game practice themselves though. And they're certainly not lacking in leadership either for that matter as Sean Kennedy, Sean O'Loughlin, Joe Carmody, Tommy Barry, Aidan Griffey, Tom O'Rourke, Cathal Darcy and Paudie McNamara have ensured that they hurdled the difficult challenges of Clarecastle, Wolfe Tones and Bodyke/O'Callaghan's Mills.

Both sides haven't even reached their potential yet which augurs well for this Easter decider. But while Inagh-Kilnamona will go in as slight favourites, thanks to their prior experience at this level, Kilmaley will be determined to redress their recent final record, that outside of last year's county expected intermediate decider win, has seen them suffer defeat in the Munster version along with the last two Minor A deciders.

Verdict: Inagh-Kilnamona

Under 21B Championship Final

Crusheen/Tubber v Broadford @ Cusack Park, Friday 5.15pm

The competitiveness of this year's Under 21B race has made for a quality run-in, evidenced by Sunday's semi-final double that saw Crusheen/Tubber eventually see off Cratloe after extra-time while a quickfire brace of James Vaughan goals just before the break proved the difference for Broadford to avoid a dogfight with Clonlara.

Crusheen/Tubber have never claimed Under 21 honours since their alliance began but did contest the 2014 decider, only for Feakle/Killanena's strong second half display to turn a half-time stalemate into a six point win in Tulla.

The amalgamation were also agonisingly edged out by Cratloe the following year at the penultimate stage before finally getting back on track this year thanks in the main to the scoring prowess of Cillein Mullins, the experience of Ronan Monahan and John Fawle along with last year's

Clare minor trio of Ross Hayes, Bredan Horner and Eanna McMahon.

Broadford, as Minor A equivalent winners with partners Smith O'Brien's in 2015, also have a strong pedigree at this level in Darren Chaplin, Diarmuid O'Brien, Sean Phelan and Cian Cremins while young gun Paddy Donnellan is an inspirational crowd favourite.

That hard-earned Minor A final win over Wolfe Tones does give Broadford the edge in what should be a seesaw battle. However, Crusheen/Tubber's powers of resilience, as evidenced last time out, could see them finally crown their neighbouring alliance with some much-needed silverware.

Verdict: Crusheen/Tubber

Under 21C Championship Final (Friday)

Bodyke v Inagh-Kilnamona (2) @ Cusack Park, Friday 3.45pm

Two clubs that harboured Under 21 A and C double hopes up to last weekend but with Bodyke/O'Callaghan's Mills falling to Kilmaley in Sunday's A Semi-Final, it means that their full concentration can now be placed in winning back the Under 21C crown, last held in 2015.

That feat can now only be achieved by Inagh-Kilnamona but the key difference is that while any players from their first team cannot play for the second string, Bodyke's side have had the experience of also playing in the top tier this year, something that has undoubtedly helped in experience and match practise but has also gone against them somewhat in terms of fatigue and injuries.

Still, while Inagh-Kilnamona saw off the Banner and then fellow second team Clarecastle after extra-time last time out, they will have to raise their game significantly if they are to topple Bodyke who will be red hot favourites to bring the honours back to the east.

Verdict: Bodyke

Left: Kilmaley's Cathal Darcy and Inagh-Kilnamona's Cian McInerney in action.



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