

1998

Team Manager: Declan Bonner

Dr. Mc Kenna Cup.

1 8th March Donegal 1-09 Tyrone 1-11

Winners: Down

Ulster Senior Football Championship

2 28th May Casement Park Donegal 1-11 Antrim 0-11

3 25th June Clones Donegal 0-15 Cavan 0-13

4 20th July **Ulster Final** Clones Donegal 0-08 Derry 1-07

30th Aug. All Ireland Semi-final: Kildare 1-13 Kerry 1-09

27th Aug. All Ireland Semi-final: Galway 0-16 Derry 1-08

17th Sept. **All Ireland final:** Galway 1-14 **Kildare 1-10**

National Football League. -1997/1998 Allianz NFL Division 1A – Section B

5 19th Oct 1997 Pearse Park Longford 2-07 Donegal 1-12

6 2nd Nov 1997 MacCumhaill Park Donegal 2-14 Derry 1-09

7 23rd Nov 1997 Davitt's Park, Lurgan Armagh 3-01 Donegal 0-12

8 1st Dec 1997 Fr. Tierney Park Donegal 1-08 Meath 1-08

9 15th Feb 1998 McCumhaill Park Donegal 2-11 Westmeath 2-08

10 1st March 1998 Casement Park Antrim 0-07 Donegal 1-15

11 15th March 1998 Ruislip Donegal 2-15 London 1-06

12 5th April 1998 Croke Park Donegal 2-14 Cork 1-09

13 12th April **Semi-Final** Croke Park Donegal 1-14 Offaly 3-10

Final Offaly **0-09** **Derry 0-07**

DR. McKENNA CUP

Few tears as Donegal make

their exit

TYRONE 1-11
 DONEGAL 1-9

Michael Daly reports from Healy Park, Omagh

Donegal were scarcely troubled when they went down by two points to Tyrone in this Dr. McKenna Cup game played under experimental rules at Healy park on Sunday.

Leaving the ground I got the distinct impression that Donegal players and officials alike were glad to be out of this particular experiment which ensured that although there was barely a dirty look, never mind a dirty tackle that 15 players were hooked and one sent off.

The bookings, with the exception of one, all accrued as a result of the experimental rules and the general consensus was that they were simply silly and destroyed a game that, under normal rules, would have been very entertaining. With the exception of the straight lift off the ground there was little favour found with the rules from those this reporter spoke to.

There was some fine football played by both sides, Donegal's Brendan Devenney clocking up 1-4 in a first half where he could do no wrong while Tyrone's little known corner forward, Fergal Coyle, snatched his opportunity and, apart from scoring a match turning goal, was generally a real nuisance for the Donegal defence.

Despite defeat one sensed Donegal were far from concerned with exiting from this competition. Playing under the experimental rules has ensured the Dr. McKenna Cup competition will be nothing but a confusion filled curiosity shop - quite frankly Donegal will have enough games before the Ulster Championship without having to worry about participating this hybrid nonsense.

Perhaps one element of concern to be harvested from this mish-mash was Donegal's total failure to make any use whatsoever of the numerical advantage they enjoyed for the final 17 minutes when Tyrone's Ciaran Loughran was sent off for his second bookable offence.

Loughran, one of nine Tyrone players to be booked, suffers no real punishment for his dismissal as sendings off for the personal foul breach will not put him out for Tyrone's crunch NFL clash with Monaghan this Sunday.

BEMUSED

If the small attendance was initially amused by the sight of two referees, Gerry Lynch and Pat McEneaney stepping out to take control, they were very quickly bemused by the number of early stoppages and bookings.

After 14 minutes three players had been booked, the tone had been set and football turned to farce. If a player gained possession he had little to stop him from heading goalward as the merest hint of a tug or a pull would result in an automatic booking.

Brendan Devenney was quick to catch on and he ran directly at the Tyrone defence who had little choice but to 'foul' him.

After 20 minutes three Devenney points and one from John Duffy had Donegal on level terms, 0-4 each with a Tyrone side who had started impressively but faded rapidly.

With neither Brian Murray nor John Haran winning the ball cleanly at midfield, there was a real scramble for possession in that sector which became ridiculously crowded - Donegal playing just two players, Tony Boyle and Devenney in attack, John Duffy (wearing No. 13) popping up at cornerback and midfield in a game where marking was very poor.

The game's two best players, Devenney and Coyle, traded scores to leave the sides level, 0-5 each with one minute left in the half.

GOAL

Tyrone were caught out by an unusually direct approach by the otherwise short-passing Donegal. John Duffy hit a glorious 40 metre pass which Brendan Devenney made the most of.

Holding his feet well, he turned his man and strode quickly forward to drive the ball low under the fast approaching Finbar McConnell.

A shade fortunate to lead 1-5 to 0-5 at the break, Tyrone points from Cush and Cavlan frees narrowed the deficit six minutes into the second half. Donegal re-opened their three point lead, Boyle scoring one and creating another before being replaced by Brian Roper.

With 17 minutes to play, Donegal appeared to be in control when Devenney pointed from a free moments after Carrickmore's Ciaran Loughran was sent off.

However, the introduction of Mattie McGleenan and a towering last quarter from full forward Eoin Gormley saw Tyrone score 1-4 without reply inside a mere six minutes.

Stephen Lawn and Gormley fired over long range points but Donegal went close to a second goal, Brian Roper finding himself in a similar position to the one in Casement Park a week earlier where he scored a goal despite the presence of four defenders. This time he failed to get as much power behind the shot and McConnell smothered the ball to deny a goal.

A Barry Eccles point left Tyrone trailing by one with ten minutes remaining when they pounced for a vital goal. Stephen Lawn placed Fergal Coyle for a well driven shot

but Donegal's Tony Blake did superbly to push the ball onto the bar. However, Coyle followed up and found the net with the rebound.

Lifted by that score, Tyrone battled for every ball, Donegal showing no hint of a numerical advantage, seemed to lose interest and when Cathal Brennan opted for a point with a goal chance a real possibility, one sensed this game had slipped from Donegal.

The final six minutes were scoreless, three players booked in the final three minutes for minor offences bringing the final tally of bookings to 15 - a full team!

On the plus side for Donegal was the performance of goalkeeper Tony Blake. For months now Donegal have been looking for a deputy to Paul Callaghan and Tony looks like the man for the job, his kickouts were long, his shots stopping and clearances very sound.

TYRONE: Finbar McConnell; Sean Teague, Fergal Logan, Fay Devlin; Pascal Canavan, Seamus McCallan, Terry McKenna; Paul McLaughlin, Vinnie Owens; Barry Eccles (0-1), Gerard Cavlan (0-2, both frees), Diaran Loughran; Fergal Coyle (1-2), Eoin Gormley (0-4), Stephen Lawn (0-1). Subs: Adrian Cush (0-1, free) for Owens 10 mins. (injured); Brian Meenan for Logan; Sean McLaughlin for McCallan (both h/t); Paul O'Neill for Teague (39 mins.); Mattie McGleenan for McLaughlin (45 mins.).

DONEGAL: Tony Blake; Jonathan Scanlon, Shane Carr, John Joe Doherty; Noel McGinley, Dessie McNamara, Martin Bonner; John Haran (0-1), Brian Murray; Barry McGowan, Adrian Sweeney, Cathal Brennan (0-1); John Duffy (0-1, free), Tony Boyle (0-1), Brendan Devenney (1-5, two frees). Subs: Brian Roper for Boyle (40 mins.); Noel Hegarty for Bonner (45 mins.); Damien Diver for Doherty (50 mins.); Mark Crossan for Brennan (54 mins.).

Referees: Gerry Lynch (Fermanagh) and Pat McEneaney (Monaghan).

Bank of Ireland Football Championship



ULSTER SENIOR FOOTBALL CHAMPIONSHIP

Michael Daly reports from Casement Park

Photos by Conor McGonagle

Donegal 1-11
Antrim 0-11

Donegal made an uncertain start to the 1998 Bank of Ireland Ulster Senior Football Championship at Casement Park where unfancied Antrim posed a host of searching questions in a game which was often as dull as the Belfast sky.

Although one can never be certain of these things, it seems reasonable to suggest that a side with more finishing power than Antrim, would have defeated Donegal. 6,000 spectators were left wondering would Antrim finally end their championship famine (they haven't won since 1982) but Donegal did no more than enough to thwart Antrim's urge for better days.

Ambling along, Donegal appeared only to take the initiative when it was absolutely necessary. That they could do so is to their credit, but it's a dangerous game; last Sunday there was a real fear midway through the second half that Donegal would be overhauled by the sheer momentum of Antrim's appetite for success.

Imperfect as Donegal's display was, the response in particular from Noel Hegarty and Tony Boyle in the latter and most vital stages of the game was heartening. Sensing real danger they dovetailed to produce the match winning football that finally ended Antrim's hunt for glory.

From a position where they had been six points clear by the 43rd minute, Donegal were reeled in by a determined Antrim clawback, four scores, all from frees of varying distance, prompting a swell of vocal support from the outnumbered Antrim supporters.

Defending an increasingly vulnerable two point lead, 1-7 to 0-8, Noel Hegarty, now at centre-back, made a stirring run which he capped with a vital point, Donegal's first score in 16 minutes.

EXPERIENCE

The experience of Barry McGowan yielded a vital free moments later and when Tony Boyle stepped up to convert that opportunity, some of the steam seemed to run out Antrim's challenge. Facing a 16th season

without a championship victory, the shadow of that haunting record was chasing Antrim into heady endeavour. Passionate but it lacked focus, there was honest endeavour, corner forwards at pace, but there was no real penetration.

For Donegal it was just as well. A cooler side with clinical forwards would have exploited Donegal's shocking series of fade outs.

Donegal remained ruffled to the finish. The improvisation which dictated Tony Boyle would spend the latter stages of the game out in the half forward line an indication of how Antrim's spirited performance had so unsettled Declan Bonner's best laid plans.

With scores needed to end Antrim's stubborn resistance there can be little surprise that Boyle would be somewhere in the production line for two important points. That he would score both seems, in retrospect, to have been preordained.

The Dungloe man worked a short free to Brendan Devenney and took the return to point. Two minutes later Boyle and Hegarty ghosted through the middle, neat passes at speed flatfooting the Antrim defence,

Boyle taking the point to force Donegal into an unlikely five point lead, 1-11 to 0-9, with four minutes remaining.

Antrim's talented free taker John McManus scored twice in the final minutes, once from play, but the sight of Noel Hegarty clearing a testing high ball in added time finally confined Antrim's best efforts to zero - yet again.

SWITCHES

Donegal played Barry McGowan a midfield, Tony Boyle and Brendan Devenney were left in isolation up front. Elsewhere was a congested maze of defenders and forwards but of concern was Donegal's inability to win any great deal of controlled midfield ball. The breaking ball was shared but Antrim's James Murphy and Ciaran O'Neill were the imposing players.

After four minutes Donegal hatched the goal which effectively won this match. Tony Boyle got in behind his marker and fed a fisted pass to Brendan Devenney. He went past three defenders to drop kick to the net from close range.

John Gildea and Adrian Sweeney added quick points as Antrim appeared very vulnerable at the back. However, a simple witch from Antrim which saw former minor captain Anto Finnegan blaced as a sweeper in front of Boyle and Devenney did much to contain the Donegal threat.

Indeed the ploy was so effective as to be worrying for future games. By half-time it seemed Donegal would have little option but to revert to a more traditional attacking formation - with Manus Boyle likely to come in beside his namesake and Devenney.

Adding to a confused first half was the Antrim ploy of playing Frankie Wilson as far from goal as possible. Raymond Sweeney followed him, Martin Coll had an important role in covering the space left and did so very well at times.

Antrim came into the

wing.

Encouraged, Antrim should have added further scores in their best spell of the game. They didn't and Noel Hegarty's first point of the afternoon had a quality to it which suggested there was another gear if it was required.

Unconvincing against what has unfairly been described as modest opposition, this may well be Donegal's least inspiring display of the championship. When one considers there were five senior championship debutantes involved then there is hope that those players and others will find their true form later this summer.

However, if opponents follow Antrim's lead in stifling the supply route to such as Tony Boyle, I would be very concerned. There has always been criticism, most of it ill-judged, of Donegal's short passing game, but if the 'long ball to Tony ploy' is essentially Donegal's only gambit, there will be defenders elsewhere in Ulster who will have as much if not more success than Antrim in disrupting Donegal's main scoring avenue.

There needs to be variation and at times perhaps a return to a more orthodox attacking formation - not all the time. But, having been carefully studied by opponents throughout the NFL, it's clear Donegal are becoming easy to predict again. From day one under Declan Bonner's management there were some new faces, new ideas. There was the sense of the unexpected. Last Sunday I felt Donegal were something of an open book, Antrim had done their homework and made life very difficult for Donegal.

Overall Donegal's best performers were Adrian Sweeney, Noel Hegarty, John Gildea and Mark Crossan. Martin Coll had a good first half. Barry McGowan may waste very little ball but at midfield I felt he held onto it too long while neither he nor Jim McGuinness have the necessary bulk to win a conveyor belt of possession. As a partnership I doubt if it will work long term. McGowan is better breaking from the half back line. Indeed it's probable he would never have started at midfield but for the injury to James Ruane.

ANTRIM: Donard Shannon; Martin Mulholland, Emmet McCorry, Anto Finnegan; Gearoid Adams, Paul McErlean, Darren Swail; James Murphy, Ciaran O'Neill; Joe Quinn, Mickey Boyle 0-1, John McManus 0-6, 4 frees, 45; Kevin Brady 0-1, Frankie Wilson 0-2, free, Kevin Madden 0-1. Subs: Peter McCann for Brady (63 mins); Sheeny McQuillan for McCorry (67 mins).

DONEGAL: Paul Callaghan; Noel McGinley, Raymond Sweeney, Mark Crossan; Shane Carr, Martin Coll, Damien Diver; Barry McGowan, Jim McGuinness 0-1; John Gildea 0-1, Adrian Sweeney 0-3, one free, Brian Roper; Noel Hegarty 0-1, Tony Boyle 0-5, two frees, Brendan Devenney 1-0. Subs: Brian Murray for Coll (46 mins); Manus Boyle for Roper (47 mins); Shane Bradley for Gildea (69 mins).

Referee: Brian Crowe (Cavan).

game well mid-way through the first half, Kevin Madden ending a series of points with a fine effort to leave his side trailing 1-4 to 0-4 at half-time.

SECOND HALF

Playing against a significant breeze, Donegal did some early scoring but there were two unsettling moments where keeper Paul Callaghan was almost beaten by a high ball fisted goalward, Noel Hegarty making a vital save.

Adrian Sweeney, Donegal's hardest working player throughout, continued to carry the ball well and he scored a wonderful curling point to give Donegal that six point cushion in the 42nd minute.

But that score marked an impasse - Donegal stalled almost, Antrim's Mickey Boyle pointing after a Donegal move broke down. Kevin Brady seemed to have all day to cut inside and kick an Antrim point while McManus lofted over an excellent free from the

Bank of Ireland Ulster Senior Football Championship Semi-final

Punchy performance knocks Cavan out

14 man Donegal refuse to lose!

Michael Daly reports from Clones

Photos by Conor McGonagle

Donegal0-15
Cavan0-13

There was something very stirring about the manner and the method of this magnificent Donegal victory before some 26,811 mainly Cavan supporters at Clones last Sunday.

was an inspiring confidence and a new hunger which Cavan simply could not match.

That hunger saw Donegal make light of a numerical disadvantage which saw them play 60 minutes with 14 players, Martin Coll sent off in the 9th minute for a head high elbow on a Cavan player.

An immediate switch saw John Gildea placed at midfield and Noel Hegarty returned to his best position, centre half back. Gildea was to emerge as the Democrat's man of the match followed closely by a clutch of players including Barry McGowan, Damien Diver, Hegarty and Tony Boyle. McGowan played superbly at corner back where his understanding of the ebb and flow of football, allied to his speed and confidence saw him totally subdue one of the stars of Cavan's victory over Fermanagh, Mickey Graham.

At right half back - but covering an enormous amount of ground - Diver had an excellent game, his high fitness level making him the perfect option for covering and counterattacking.

Coll's dismissal and the subsequent Donegal display evoked memories of Donegal's 1992 Ulster final victory against Derry.

Trailing by three points to no score after 12 minutes and down to 14 men, Donegal's position looked precarious, their best scoring attempt a rather hopeful long range effort from John Duffy. But the loss of Coll fired Donegal into another dimension.

By the 56th minute Donegal had opened a five points 0-13 to 0-8 lead and looked to be moving towards certain victory. However, Ronan Carolan (scorer of 1-7 when the sides met last year) threatened to haul the defending champions back into contention, scoring three points in a row inside 90 seconds. As in '97, Carolan proved the main threat from the Cavan attack but he got poor support from his inside forwards who, by in large, were well contained by Mark Crossan, John Joe

Not since the heady days of 1992 have I seen Donegal supporters flood onto a pitch with such exuberance after a semi-final victory. There was something sweet yet manly about Donegal's approach. There was aggression, there was flair, but most of all there

Doherty and McGowan. With eight minutes still to play Cavan had cut Donegal's lead from five points to one.

Tony Boyle, as so often in this game was the case, won a free and converted the score to put Donegal 0-14 to 0-12 ahead with six minutes left to play.

Cavan pressed with time running out and so nearly found the net. A hopeful high ball was fisted half clear by Tony Blake and Cavan's Larry Reilly fisted the breaking ball goalwards but Mark Crossan saved a certain goal when he held Reilly's effort on an otherwise unguarded goal line.

From there he quickly moved the ball forward where sub., Brian Roper gained possession on the Cavan 65 metre line. Roper held off Bernard Morris as he raced down the wing, in front of the main (Gerry Arthurs) stand. He hit a vital point to signal the end of Cavan's comeback hopes. From Crossan's goal line clearance to Roper's pointed finish, Donegal had turned from near disaster to triumph, all inside 20 seconds.

FIRST HALF

Supremely fit and always comfortable on the ball, Donegal moved at pace from defence to attack and it became increasingly clear that Tony Boyle had the measure of his marker. Inside a five minute spell three Donegal points in-a-row had them back on level terms at 0-4 each, Noel McGinley breaking from half-back to hit the levelling score.


It was an indication of Donegal's pace from defence to attack and their growing confidence. Tony Boyle posted a lead but Ronan Carolan replied from a free to level matters for a second time. Three quick fire points from Manus Boyle, Tony Boyle and Brendan Devenney gave Donegal a 0-8 to 0-5 half-time lead.

It was a first half littered with off and on the ball fouls. On several occasions skirmishes broke out, some of them quite serious, some of them not. But, by the end of the half Donegal had stamped their authority on the game and might have been further ahead had they been more accurate in front of goal, Brendan Devenney going close to hitting the net with one effort.

16 seconds into the new half Donegal's Damien Diver slipped from defence to score a fine point but Cavan replied with two scores, Mickey Graham favoured by the bounce moving well to point and Ronan Carolan scored on 37 minutes to leave just two points between the teams.

After three minutes of the second half Cavan introduced Fergus Reilly for Patrick Shiels in an attempt to win greater possession around midfield where the Naomh Chonaill partnership of Gildea and McGuinness was proving superior to anything offered by Cavan.

Bank of Ireland Football Championship



Scoring once in a five minute spell where they also clocked up three wides, Donegal still held the upper hand, Tony Boyle scoring from a rather easily won free.

In the game's most intense spell, Cavan's Raphael Rogers, now the extra man, ended a magnificent 50 metre solo run with a super point but Manus Boyle matched it with a fine effort from 40 metres. Tony Boyle added a wonderful score, beating his marker Terry Farrelly to the initial ball and then getting away from him neatly with a hop and a skip before screwing the ball from right to left but very much between the posts.

A measure of Donegal's dominance was their failure to score from a further two chances, McGuinness and Gildea both wide. Donegal were wasteful with a total of nine second half wides but when Manus Boyle scored again, another fine point from the wing, one sensed Donegal, despite playing with only 14 men, couldn't lose a five point lead.

CAVAN COMEBACK

However, they very nearly did, Cavan scoring three points inside 90 seconds, all of them from Ronan Carolan. Raymond Cunningham added a fourth point without reply and Donegal looked very nervous as players hit the deck suffering from cramp, among them Damien Diver and Adrian Sweeney.

Tony Boyle conjured up a vital score, winning a free as James McHugh made his championship return and moments later after Cavan went so close to hitting the net it was another sub, Brian Roper who swept upfield to score a superb - match winning - point.

Donegal played a magnificent ball retention game all through this match but their ability to hold the ball in the final minutes was vital, Fintan Cahill restricted to his only score of the game in the final minute, referee McBrien playing only 17 seconds of additional time.

Donegal had marvellous displays from so many players but man-of-the-match for this writer must go to John Gildea for his contribution when pushed into midfield where he gave Donegal a control and command they have so rarely enjoyed in this sector in recent years.

DONEGAL: Tony Blake; Mark Crossan, John Joe Doherty, Barry McGowan; Damien Diver 0-1, Martin Coll, Noel McGinley 0-1; Noel Hegarty, Jim McGuinness; John Duffy 0-2, frees, Adrian Sweeney, John Gildea 0-1; Brendan Devenney 0-1, Tony Boyle 0-5, 3 frees, Manus Boyle 0-3. Subs: Brian Roper 0-1 for Duffy (56 mins); James McHugh for Sweeney (63 mins).

CAVAN: Paul O'Dowd; Gerry Sheridan, Ciaran Brady, Terry Farrelly; Anthony Forde, Bernard Morris, Patrick Sheils; Dermot McCabe 0-1, Raphael Rogers 0-1; Ronan Carolan 0-7, 3 frees, 1 45, Larry Reilly 0-1, free, Raymond Cunningham 0-1; Jason Reilly, Fintan Cahill 0-1, Mickey Graham 0-1. Subs: Fergus O'Reilly for Sheils (38 mins); Mark Leddy for J. Reilly (50 mins).

Referee: Martin McBrien (Fermanagh).

Bank of Ireland Ulster SF Final

BROLLY REIGNS IN CLONES

DERRY 1-7
DONEGAL 0-8

A KISS to the crowd from Derry's injury time hero, Joe Brolly brought a dramatic and in Donegal's case, a sickening end to an Ulster Final which they could so easily have won.

Despite playing well below themselves, Donegal did create enough chances to see off Derry - especially in the second half. But just when it seemed that these sides would have to meet again, Donegal hearts were broken by a goal out of nothing, 45 seconds into injury time.

Diarmaid Doherty reports from Clones

Photos; Conor McGonagle

Derry had controlled the game for the final quarter but their forward line, like Donegal's, never really enjoyed good service, possession or space.

The introduction of Dermot Heaney 15 minutes into the second half did have a telling impact on the game but perhaps not as much as that of 64th minute substitute, Geoffrey McGonagle.

The burly Dungiven frontman was the man who, hustled his way to a long punt up field ahead of Noel McGinley, turned and set up Brolly for the winning goal.

Brolly, in yards of space, moved onto his left foot and as Tony Blake challenged, the Derry man kept his head and blasted the ball past John Joe Doherty on the line.

Afterwards, Derry manager, Brian Mullins reflected on a victory that brought Derry their first Ulster title since 1993.

"It certainly wasn't a day for nice football, given the conditions and the fitness of the opposition. But we made certain changes - sometimes changes can be disastrous and other days they can go well.

Today, we would have to take a bit of credit that the changes we made worked out to our advantage".

Questionable refereeing

The conditions might not have been as bad as those of '93, but the quality of the game was once again very disappointing. Big match nerves, a wet and slippery surface and some questionable refereeing combined to serve up a poor final.

The match official, Jim Curran of Tyrone earned the wrath of both sets of supporters. His insistence on stopping the game to penalise players for "pulling n' draggin" meant the game never got a chance to flow.

More importantly, Curran chose to rule out a seemingly legitimate Donegal goal midway through the second half.

Manus Boyle's '45 dropped under the crossbar and was grabbed by Anthony Tohill only for John Duffy to advance and punch the ball from Tohill's hands to the net.

Whether Curran felt Duffy had pushed the Derry man, or the incident was a square ball, we weren't sure but looking at the action later on television, it was clear that Curran had got it wrong.

Earlier in the game, Derry players had reason to question a decision when Adrian Sweeney's lofted point was allowed, despite the Derry players' insistence that the shot was wide.

Started Nervously

Donegal, back in their first final in five years, had started nervously. Anthony Tohill and Enda Muldoon commanded the middle and their half forwards won plenty of breaking ball in those early stages.

Derry deserved their 0-3 to 0-1 lead and coming up to the 20th minute, continued to have the better of things. And as Donegal sought a spark to liven up their game, Derry and in particular, their defence, continued to frustrate.

Eventually Declan Bonner's hand was forced. Mark Crossan, doubtful for the game, was clearly hampered by his hamstring injury and the manager took the chance to

bring on James Ruane in an effort to address the problems at centre-field.

Noel Hegarty dropped into half back with his club-mate Noel McGinley moving in on Joe Cassidy in place of Crossan.

The changes certainly had a good effect. Donegal drew level with points from Sweeney and the lively Brendan Devenney and finished the half on top.

Good chance

Donegal began the second half well. Ruane squandered a good chance of a point as did Sweeney. In between Tony Boyle got his first point of the game - fisting over the bar after another brilliant Devenney run set up the opening.

So instead of being three points in front, Donegal led by only 0-4 to 0-3.

Bank of Ireland Ulster SF Final

As the game began to open up, the teams exchanged scores and were level at five points apiece eight minutes into the second half. Two points from Tony Boyle put Donegal 0-7 to 0-5 in front and suddenly Donegal were in control.

Once again though Derry came back. Dermot Heaney replaced Eamonn Burns and Joe Cassidy scored a long range point to leave just a point in it.

Minutes later, Duffy's "goal" was ruled out and as Derry began to turn the screw again, they drew level with a fine point by Gary Magill.

Bonner sent on Brian McLaughlin for a tired Manus Boyle towards the end. The Dunfanaghy man almost had a telling impact when he got his fist to a driven free by Tony Boyle, only for the ball to hit the side netting.

The game looked destined for a replay. Time was running out and both teams seemed content to come back for another day. That was of course before Geoffrey McGonigle's intervention and Brolly's winning goal.

It was probably Donegal's worst performance in Declan Bonner's first season in charge. Too many players failed to deliver on the big occasion although Derry were not good either.

Brendan Devenney deservedly picked up the man of the match award with a display that saw him see off his marker, Gary Coleman and then cause David O'Neill awful problems.

There were also good performances from Barry McGowan, McGinley and Martin Coll in defence. Sadly, however, the space given to Brolly right at the death, was to prove fatal.

DONEGAL; Tony Blake; Barry McGowan, John Joe Doherty, Mark Crossan; Damien Diver, Martin Coll, Noel McGinley; Jim McGuinness, Noel Hegarty (0-1); John Duffy (0-1, free), Adrian Sweeney (0-1), John Gildea; Manus Boyle, Tony Boyle (0-3, 1

free), Brendan Devenney (0-2). **SUBS;** James Ruane for Crossan (24 mins), James McHugh for Sweeney (40 mins), Brian McLaughlin for M. Boyle (63 mins).

DERRY; Eoin McCloskey; Kieran McKeever, Sean Martin Lockhart, Gary Coleman; David O'Neill, Henry Downey, Paul McFlynn; Anthony Tohill, Enda Muldoon; Gary Magill (0-2), Dermot Dougan (0-1), Eamonn Burns (0-1, free); Joe Brolly (1-2, 1 free), Seamus Downey, Joe Cassidy (0-1); **SUBS;** Dermot Heaney for Burns (50 mins); Enda Gormley for S. Downey (59 mins); Geoffrey McGonigle for Cassidy (64 mins).

REFEREE; Jim Curran (Tyrone).



Team captains John Joe Doherty and Kieran McKeever pictured during the pre match handshake alongside match officials. (22/7/111)

Section B, National Football League

Donegal win

Donegal 1-12
 Longford 2-7

Report Michael Daly

Photos Conor McGonagle

Donegal survived a second-half backlash from lowly Longford to emerge victors from Pearse Park in Longford. Donegal started superbly, stuttered badly in the early stages of the second-half but re-emerged in the final quarter, picking off points from frees against a somewhat naive, if eager Longford side.

Watched by one of the largest number of Donegal spectators to travel to a senior league game anywhere in the country in recent times, Donegal seemed to emphasise this was a new beginning when they emerged from their dressing room in a new look strip.

While the route to this two point victory proved rockier than expected there was an after-match sense of relief from spectators and manager alike when news of other results came flooding in. Simply winning this game and getting two points on the board was the objective and that has been achieved with a team that wasn't totally new but certainly had a novel ring to it. As one observer suggested, Donegal learned more from what proved a close finish than had they strolled to victory, as appeared likely in the first half.

Longford, initially looking every inch a Division 4 side, went into the half-time break trailing by seven points, but they re-emerged to stun Donegal with two goals inside nine minutes which brought them to level scores, 2-4 to Donegal's 1-7.

Donegal started with four debutantes, by the finish two of these had been replaced while the other two had done enough, albeit sporadically, to claim first team places when Derry provide the opposition in Ballybofey on November 2nd.

Brendan Devenney, the discovery of the club championship, had a very impressive first half while Shane Bradley, for place ball kicking alone, seemed an inspired choice. Jonathon Scanlon struggled somewhat with the pace of the game while Cathal Brennan also had trouble finding any sort of fluency.

Over the hour Brian Roper, John Duffy, Martin Coll and Jim McGuinness played well, McGuinness giving midfield a mobility it hasn't had for many years. Brian Murray, when

introduced did make a difference while Tony Boyle, at times, played like the Boyle of old, beating his man to the tempting chest high ball before turning to set up a scoring chance.

With five of their six forwards scoring in the first half, Declan Bonner would have had good reason to have felt satisfied at half-time, those forwards contributing 1-7 to Longford's 0-3.

What had looked a certain victory threatened to turn into a nightmare as former Monaghan manager Michael McCormack instructed his side to use the most basic ploy in the world to cause problems. Turning the possession stakes in their favour at midfield, Longford opted to send virtually every ball long and high into the Donegal 'square'.

It was far from pretty but it caused problems, John Joe Doherty's lack of height and weight becoming a serious disadvantage as the noticeably overweight but very strong and tall Niall Sheridan began to win or break the ball.

After just six minutes Sheridan got between John Joe Doherty and Jim McGuinness and ended up being jack-knifed into the air, winning a penalty for his troubles.

Enda Barden drove the penalty low and left. Paul Callaghan blocked his shot but it came straight back to Barden who slotted the rebound past the helpless keeper.

Barden immediately combined with Pauric Farrell who pointed to leave Longford three points behind. With Donegal's midfield totally out of contention, Brian Murray came in for Brennan. However, Longford prospered again from the high ball tactic, another 'hit and hope' effort fumbled by Noel McGinley. Pauric Farrell pounced to crash the ball to the net and level the sides.

Longford's lack of finesse up front saw them eventually run out of ideas up front. Donegal sorted out their problems under the high ball and while Sheridan and Barden remained a threat, the final 18 minutes saw Damien Diver and Noel McGinley playing with great guile as they helped to cover off the breaking ball.

Enda Barden scored a Longford point in the 42nd minute to level the teams, John Duffy having pointed a Donegal free moments before.

Although they found their Longford opponents a handful - big men hitting hard against a relatively young experimental outfit - Donegal's more experienced players showed their worth when it mattered most.

Brian Roper had a major bearing on the outcome, he and Jim McGuinness winning vital frees converted by John Duffy and Tony Boyle in

the 45th minute to edge Donegal 1-10 to 2-5 ahead.

With ten minutes left Donegal hit their fourth pointed free of the second half, Duffy fouled and Tony Boyle converting.

SQUARE BALL

A brilliant piece of forward running by Noel Hegarty saw Donegal score a goal, Brendan Devenney passing to mark McShane who palmed the ball to the net. However, the score was deemed a square ball although from this reporter's vantage point it appeared McShane had made every attempt to stay outside the small parallelogram.

From this reprieve Longford continued their high ball strategy and the Sheridan/Farrell partnership conjured a score to reduce Donegal's lead to a very tentative two points, 1-11 to 2-6.

Twice inside the final two minutes Enda Barden should have scored points, but his first effort from a 35 metre free was a costly wide while from play he also kicked wide.

In injury time Tony Boyle pointed from a 35 metre free which forced Longford's Enda Barden to go for a goal from a 20 metre free in the 63rd minute. Barden got under the ball and had to settle for a point.

Longford, with a little more finishing power up front could at least have taken a share of the points from this game, Donegal will hardly have the same breathing space when they face Derry in two weeks time.

However, having taken both points with a display which mixed the good and the ordinary, Donegal will have learned from this experience, particularly their younger players who have got their first real taste of competitive NFL action.

Longford: Gavin Tonra; Sean Mimmagh, Gary Brady, John Kenny; Ciaran Keogh, Gerry Delaney, Cathal Conefrey; David Hannify, Aidan Keogh; Enda Barden 1-4, pen., three frees, Colin Hannify, Pauric Farrell 1-2; Pauric Davis 0-1, Niall Sheridan, Michael Mulleady. Subs: P. J. O'Neill for Conefrey; Frank McNamee for Delaney; Gary Murtagh for Mulleady.

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Noel McGinley, John Joe Doherty, Damien Diver; Martin Coll, Noel Hegarty, Jonathon Scanlon; Cathal Brennan, Jim McGuinness; Brian Roper 0-1, Shane Bradley 0-3, two frees, 1 '45, Mark McShane; John Duffy 1-3, 3 frees, Tony Boyle 0-4, all frees, Brendan Devenney 0-1. Subs: Brian Murray for Brennan; Adrian Sweeney for McShane; Mark Crossan for Scanlon.

Referee: Martin McBrien (Fermanagh).

Donegal 2-14
 Derry 1-9

6

Michael Daly reports from MacCumhail Park

Photos by Thomas Gallagher

Donegal's new look senior side dispatched visitors Derry with some ease at Ballybofey on Sunday, two second-half goals from Jim McGuinness effectively killing off Derry hopes of victory.

A typically hard-hitting derby match, the sides showed changes from the original team selections, all of which ensured both teams fielded some new players.

If the line-outs appeared somewhat experimental, the game saw new faces resume old hostilities. There were eight bookings, six from Derry and briefly, in the second half, the game appeared to be slipping out of control.

While Derry should have been awarded a late penalty they can have few gripes with the overall result, they were outplayed and out-hustled by a much, much keener Donegal.

However, for a spell Anthony Tohill threatened to provide one of his vintage performances, but the threat evaporated as Donegal players did the simple things well and did them with an enthusiasm which, for some, until recently was noticeably absent.

To suggest the Donegal players 'got stuck in' is putting it mildly. They simply hounded and harried Derry at every opportunity when defending while the entire forward unit played particularly well.

Of the six starting forwards only one, Adrian Sweeney, came in for mild after-match criticism, criticism which ignored the useful role he played in 'torturing' Henry Downey. More often than not in these meetings Downey has found far too much freedom to set up Derry attacks.

Last Sunday he must have found Sweeney a handful. Young and aggressive, Sweeney was perhaps not as creative as such as John Duffy, but you couldn't play John Duffy centre half forward, he lacks the bulk and power of the Dungloe man. In judging Sweeney's contribution one might also take Henry Downey's very quiet contribution into consideration before coming to a conclusion.

Time and again Sweeney got an arm, a leg, a knee and maybe an occasional elbow in where it mattered, and it mattered as Derry were left unsettled at the back and uncertain up front.

With the forwards feeding off plentiful supply it was to their credit that scores came quickly, particularly in the first half. Tony Boyle, who has been improving game by game since the challenge with Mayo, proved a handful for the re-jigged Derry defence.

David O'Neill was to have started at full-back but was ill, prompting a switch which saw Johnny McBride placed in the no. 3 berth. Since an unconvincing showing against Laois' Hugh Emerson, McBride's suitability for full-back has been open to debate. He's a fine player, but Tony Boyle, back close to his best, proved too difficult to handle and by half-time Donegal had chalked up ten points, a healthy proportion of them from frees won and scored by Boyle.

After half-time Gary Coleman took over the marking duties on Boyle who added two to his first half tally of four points. In that second-half John Duffy played some memorable passes, one in particular, in the 54th minute a quite exquisite delivery which yielded a Brian Roper point.

Brendan Devenney again showed he is well able for football at this level. Strong and quick he scored twice but contributed in general terms in the sense that he always looked capable of beating his man and getting or making a score. His simple presence provides a threat and more than Derry are taking note of this club championship 'find' from St. Eunan's.

At midfield a shuttle before throw-in saw Martin Coll switching to centre back and Noel Hegarty joining Jim McGuinness in the pivotal axis. Hegarty has rediscovered his appetite for football and worked very hard throughout. McGuinness was magnificent. He is superbly fit winter or summer and it's standing to him now in particular. Covering an enormous amount of ground he slipped unnoticed

from midfield to pick up two great positions, unmarked on the edge of the 'small square' to score two goals. He was worthy recipient of the man-of-the match award.

In defence John Joe Doherty held the side together well. Noel McGinley was much sharper on this occasion to the breaking ball while 19-year-old debutante Eamon Reddan had a very competent debut with the half-back line playing solidly.

Watched by circa 3,000 spectators the overcast dull sky was an inappropriate backdrop for a very colourful game. Fine scores and occasional off the ball fisticuffs inter-mingled to 'entertain' all palates, there was high fielding from Tohill and generally accurate finishing from both sides who, between them kicked only eleven wides.

For Donegal it was a welcome end to Derry's recent winning sequence, they did it essentially with two vital scoring bursts.

After five minutes the sides were level at 0-2 each. Donegal then struck five unreplyed to points, Tony Boyle and Shane Bradley (two each) and one from John Duffy.

Derry, drifting out of contention were rescued by a 29th minute Ronan Rock's goal. The Loup forward benefited from a precise long range Tohill free. he turned deftly on a slippery surface to wrong-foot John Joe Doherty and with Callaghan to beat he drove the ball into the corner of the net.

Derry were most fortunate to trail by just three points, 0-10 to 1-4 at half-time but their interest in the game dissipated in the third

quarter. Held scoreless for 19 minutes while Donegal scored two goals, both finished by McGuinness, they can have few complaints, their first score of the second half coming from a Donegal error, Shane Bradley giving away possession before Michael Gribben pounced for a point.

Referee Pat McEneaney's failure to award a cast iron penalty for a foul on Benny Murray in the 60th minute may have left Derry visitors disgruntled with the referee, but had it been awarded and converted it would have reduced the margin to four points, but the outcome was never seriously in doubt.

Winning in the end by six points, Donegal were full value for their victory, Derry suffering in the absence of their Dungiven players, Joe Brolly in particular.

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Noel McGinley, John Joe Doherty Cpt., Eamon Reddan; Mark Crossan, Martin Coll, Damien Diver; Noel Hegarty, Jim McGuinness 2-0; Shane Bradley 0-2, Adrian Sweeney, Brian Roper 0-2; John Duffy 0-2, Tony Boyle 0-6, five frees, Brendan Devenney 0-2. Subs: Brian McLaughlin (55 mins) for Sweeney; Brian Murray (58 mins) for Bradley.

Derry: David Hasson; Paul Diamond, Johnny McBride, Gary Coleman; Karl Diamond, Henry Downey, Adrian Heaney; Anthony Tohill, Gary Doyle; Gary McGill 0-3, Dermot Dougan 0-1, Benny Murray 0-1; Michael Gribben 0-1, Ronan Rocks 1-0. Joe Cassidy 0-1. Sub: Gavin Diamond (42 mins) for Rocks.

Referee: Pat McEneaney
(Monaghan).

Armagh 3-1
Donegal 0-12

Donegal came through their toughest test to date on Sunday last in dreadful conditions at Davitt Park, Lurgan, when they had to endure a very intimidating atmosphere in the second half as Armagh reacted to a leg-breaking injury to full-back, Colm Hanratty.

The incident occurred five minutes into the second half when Shane Bradley collided with Hanratty in what seemed an accidental collision. Mayhem broke out as the Armagh players and supporters reacted with venom. During the six minute stoppage to attend to and remove the player on a stretcher, Longford referee, John Bannon dismissed Bradley, while Armagh keeper, Brendan Tierney escaped punishment despite running from his goal to mete out punishment to Bradley and Brendan Devenney.

**Peter Campbell reports from Davitt Park, Lurgan
Photos by Conor McGonagle**

The Donegal players formed a huddle to regain their composure. Armagh captain, Jarlath Burns (who spent his summer teaching in the Donegal Gaeltacht) joined them at one stage and he was promising the Donegal team a watery grave. For the duration of the stoppage the atmosphere was as bitter and threatening as I have ever witnessed.

The remaining twenty five minutes of play saw many young Donegal players come of age. Led from the front by Tony Boyle, corner-backs Noel McGinley and Eamon Reddan mopped up everything; Mark Crossan was outstanding while Brian Murray joined Noel Hegarty and Jim McGuinness around the middle of the field to piece together twenty five minutes of teamwork which, at the end of the day, deservedly won Donegal the two points.

The dreadful conditions at Lurgan with a downpour an hour before the throw-in and a heavy shower at the start of the second half left this second-rate venue far from ideal for any kind of match. Those conditions, more than anything, caused much of the problems on Sunday and the authorities should take a hard look at venues which are incapable of holding such a competitive game.

Credit must go to Longford referee, John Bannon, who despite the intimidatory atmosphere kept control of the game in the second half

when, at times, it looked an impossible task. The official never flinched from giving the correct decisions and with a weaker referee, it is doubtful if Donegal would have got the result they deserved.

Apart from the unsavoury spell in the second half, the game was competitive but quite well contested. Armagh, despite scoring 9-35 in their first two league matches, were disappointing and their inability to score a point from play and record just two wides over the hour shows just how poor the opposition must have been in those opening two games.

Donegal, on the other hand, continued their good form shown against Derry where teamwork and spirit were again out of the top drawer and by the end of the game even the Armagh players and supporters were accepting the fact that they were the better team. Midway through the first half, former Armagh star, Jimmy Smyth, now with the BBC's, opined: "Donegal don't deserve to lose this game." It was an honest assessment, even at that stage.

Why they won it is down to that new-found team spirit and some wonderful individual performances, especially from Tony Boyle. The Dungloe man epitomised the Donegal spirit, winning copious possession, winning frees and, most importantly, finding the target. It was fitting that it was Boyle who should win (and point) the free which put Donegal ahead in the 62nd minute. Indeed, he needed over a minute to recover from the tackle which won him the free, but he showed the way by firing powerfully over the black spot from 35m.

Brian McLaughlin with his first (and only) touch doubled the lead some five minutes later to seal the points.

The first half saw Donegal on top for long spells, but Armagh looked very dangerous when going at the Donegal defence. They did just that from the throw in with John Campbell forcing Paul Callaghan to tip around the post for a '45' inside 30 seconds, and from the kick, Cathal O'Rourke had what amazingly proved Armagh's only point of the game. Donegal obviously learned something from watching Armagh in a challenge game the previous week, as the long ball to Tony Boyle became a vital part of their armoury, pinpointing an obvious weakness in the Armagh full-back line.

Donegal got back in contention with points from Tony Boyle and Brendan Devenney before Armagh's first goal midway through the half. Diarmaid Marsden lined himself up for a point, but his shot dropped short and caught Paul Callaghan out of position to drop into the far corner and put Armagh 1-1 to 0-2 ahead.

From then to half-time, Armagh failed to score again and Donegal hit back with points from Tony Boyle (two frees), Noel Hegarty, John Duffy (free) and a wonderful point from Adrian Sweeney just before half-time.

Half-time: Armagh 1-1, Donegal 0-7.

Five minutes into the second half, Brendan Devenney found himself free in front of the Armagh goal but keeper, Brendan Tierney,

smothered his shot. Then came the clash of Bradley and Hanratty. After order was restored, Armagh hit their second goal to draw level. Martin McQuillan forced his way through the Donegal defence, taking plenty of steps in the process, and found full-forward Barry Duffy with a fisted pass. Duffy turned and fired goalwards and despite the best efforts of Paul Callaghan and John Joe Doherty, the ball ended up in the net.

That was the cue for the second outbreak of fisticuffs after which Martin Coll and Cathal O'Rourke were ordered off by the referee. A point by John Duffy from a free, put Donegal back in front in the 49th minute, but the Armagh response was a third goal, again from Marsden, as he sailed through the Donegal defence.

Donegal brought in Brian Murray and after some delay, Adrian Sweeney was the one to make way. Points from Tony Boyle and Jim McGuinness brought the sides level again, before Boyle (free) and McLaughlin secured victory.

Victory must have been sweet in the Donegal dressingroom afterwards. They had their three point advantage removed immediately after the flare-up and they again dug deep after the third Armagh goal to show that team spirit and ability will always win through if you can keep your shape and focus.

Armagh: Brendan Tierney; Enda McNulty, Colm Hanratty, Mark McNeill; Martin McQuillan, Justin McNulty, Andrew McCann; Kieran McGeeney, Jarlath Burns; John Campbell, Cathal O'Rourke (0-1, '45), Paul McGrane; Diarmaid Marsden (2-0), Barry Duffy (1-0), Gerard Houlihan. Subs., Ger Reid for Colm Hanratty, Martin Toye for Gerard Houlihan, Alan O'Neill for J. Campbell.

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Noel McGinley, John Joe Doherty, Eamon Reddan; Mark Crossan, Noel Hegarty (0-1), Damien Diver; Martin Coll, Jim McGuinness (0-1); John Duffy (0-2, frees), Adrian Sweeney (0-1), Brian Roper; Shane Bradley, Tony Boyle (0-5, four frees), Brendan Devenney (0-1). Subs., Brian Murray for A. Sweeney, Brian McLaughlin (0-1) for B. Devenney.

Referee: J. Bannon (Longford).

MATCH FACTS: Donegal won 28 frees, 18 in the first half, while they had 11 wides, seven in the first half. Armagh won 19 frees, seven in the first half and they had just one wide in each half.

Donegal 1-8
Meath 1-8

Commitment and courage were very much the key elements of another brave if flawed display by a re-emerging Donegal against a Meath team who are not on a dissimilar learning curve.

Although creating the more clear-cut goal chances that could so easily have won the game, Meath had to rely on fresh faced Ray McGee, a 21 year old who a day earlier kicked 1-10 in a club game, to score the levelling point 90 seconds from the finish.

Michael Daly reports from Fr. Tierney Park Photos by Thomas Gallagher

While the 60 entertaining and eventful minutes of play seemed to rush by, it was a game which finished a shade prematurely -- but let's not quibble with losing 25 seconds.

Perhaps Galway official Michael Curley's decision to blow full time with the sides level for the fifth time, was indeed apt. Neither side, by that stage, deserved to lose in a game tripping with excitement.

Billed before hand as the match of the round in Section B, Ballyshannon hosted a game of high quality, a match where good scores and tough tackling were interspersed with some mediocre work, least pleasing from a Donegal aspect was the return to short football and slow deliveries.

However, there was good old fashioned hard hitting, honest endeavour at all times and if mistakes were made, there was occasional perfection also -- the quick passing movements, although not always resulting in scores, were breathtaking.

By the finish both sides had maintained their unbeaten records and some hints as to what players are likely to fill football shirts in both counties next summer had been gleaned.

A certain starter for Donegal will be Jim McGuinness, who for the second time in four outings was selected man of the match. A midfield dynamo, his work rate was again phenomenal.

Donegal did struggle however, to curb the dominance of the Meath midfield but Noel Hegarty, a late if astute switch into that sector, played a significant part in regaining lost ground for Donegal and from there Donegal pushed ahead, only to be hauled back time and again by a resolute Meath.

While Donegal were leading by one point with 90 seconds left, they could have lost this game had Meath taken goal chances which fell to Ollie Murphy and Evan Kelly after 35 and 39 minutes.

Late in the game Meath exerted considerable pressure but the diminutive Brian Roper tracked back from the half forward line to save a goalbound effort on his own goal line. Heroic work certainly on a day where the high fitness levels of both sides proved a telling factor.

After ten minutes Donegal led 0-3 to 0-1, a brace of scores from Tony Boyle, one a free and a point, a free also, from John Duffy, while Ollie Murphy opened Meath's scoring tally in the 9th minute.

Losing 0-4 to 0-3 after 20 minutes, Meath's plan of leaving Ollie Murphy isolated in attack against just one defender, was beginning to reap rewards. With gaps opening up in front of him, Meath's Stephen Dillon opted for a point. His effort cannoned off the upright and Evan Kelly got a favourable deflection before lashing the ball to the net.

Immediately followed by the best score of the game, a Graham Geraghty point after the centre back burst through from 60 metres, Meath looked briefly awesome.

Two minutes from half-time Donegal replied with their first goal ever from play against Meath in eight league outings. Brian Roper's pass to Adrian Sweeney split the Meath defence open. He found Brendan Devenney who tried to blast the ball through a crowded 'square' but his effort took a deflection, only as far as John Duffy who cushioned the ball off his instep to a gaping net.

Half-time saw the sides level at 1-4 each and the second half maintained this theme, no more than one point separating the sides at any stage.

After just 14 seconds Donegal were in the lead again, Brendan Devenney hitting the ball over the bar after Tony Boyle had carried it forward, only to lose control as he prepared to shoot.

Meath came close after five minutes, Graham Geraghty's point effort again hitting an upright but from the rebound which fell to Ollie Murphy it was keeper Paul Callaghan who made a fine save before 19 year old Eamon Reddin finally got the ball away.

Two points from McGee and Giles put Meath ahead again by the 38th minute when Murphy drew two defenders before lobbing the ball to the unmarked Evan Kelly. He thundered his shot left of the right upright, a dreadful miss from close range.

A necessary switch in midfield saw Brian Murray hauled ashore with James Ruane brought in. However, it took a later shuffle involving Noel Hegarty to really get this sector functioning properly.

In what was now a pulsating second half Brendan Devenney levelled the sides after good work by Sweeney and Boyle. Boyle kicked a free from his hands to put Donegal 1-7 to 1-6 ahead and but for a timely Colm Coyle interception James Ruane might have found the net.

Eleven minutes from the finish Jody Devine broke clear to score a point on the run, four minutes later Tony Boyle knocked over a lead point after McGuinness showed great bravery in winning the ball in the first place with a diving lunge which showed scant concern for his own safety. It was that type of courage which made him a deserving recipient of the man of the match accolade, although there were a number of votes for Brian Roper too.

Still leading as the game closed, Donegal gave one of Meath's better players, Ray McGee too much room and he made certain of his point to tie the sides level.

On balance neither side could be unhappy with a draw, both could make claims that victory could have been theirs, but I suspect of the two, Donegal boss, Declan Bonner was slightly less pleased, some old bad habits resurfacing.

Donegal's lack of penetration in attack was in some measure due to the robust Meath tackling. Suffering from a lack of good ball forward, Brendan Devenney was confident when he got on the ball and perhaps because getting the ball was all too rare, he was inclined to try to do too much.

Adrian Sweeney's first half play was superb and all told he had a fine game, again breaking a lot of ball from Meath and generally bustling and hustling all through. Brian Roper, Tony Boyle and John Duffy did a great deal of hard work, Duffy scored 1-1, but with so many players grafting and not enough scoring consistently, one would hope forwards like Duffy would improve their scoring ratio.

For new boy Shane Carr the game seemed to by-pass him, a difficult debut, he hopefully will keep at it and get another chance to 'bed in'.

In defence Noel McGinley had a difficult task with Ollie Murphy but contained him well by the finish. The half back line was less than watertight and while good in general play some of Damien Diver's foot passing was particularly poor. Eamon Reddin had a competent hour, making a number of very confident interceptions while John Joe Doherty held things together with some well timed tackles.

Keeper Paul Callaghan made one great save but in terms of kickouts I was puzzled at his lack of variation, drilling everything down the middle to where Meath were winning most of the clean ball and the majority of the breaks.

All in all Donegal have done well in the NFL and seven out of a possible eight points from what was considered the more difficult part of the league season is a fine return for a panel rich in spirit.

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Eamon Reddin, John Joe Doherty, Noel McGinley; Mark Crossan, Noel Hegarty, Damien Diver; Brian Murray, Jim McGuinness; Shane Carr, Adrian Sweeney, Brian Roper; John Duffy 1-1, free, Tony Boyle 0-5, four frees, Brendan Devenney 0-2. Subs: Brian McLaughlin (h/t) for S. Carr; James Ruane (39) for Murray; Jonathon Scanlon (51) for McLaughlin.

Meath: Cormac O'Sullivan Donal Curtis, Enda McManus, Henry Traynor; Colm Coyle, Graham Geraghty 0-1, Paddy Reynolds; Nigel Nestor, P. J. Gillic; Ray McGee 0-2, Trevor Giles 0-1; Jody Devine 0-2, Evan Kelly 1-0, Stephen Dillon, Oliver Murphy 0-2. Subs: Brendan Reilly (49) for Gillic; Richie Kealy (59) for Kelly

Referee: Michael Curley (Galway).

Late scare but Donegal still unbeaten

REPORT: MICHAEL DALY

PHOTOS: CONOR MCGONAGLE

Donegal 2 - 11
Westmeath 2-8

The unbeaten run in the League remains intact, but supporters, mentors and players were made to sweat unnecessary at MacCumhaill Park, Ballybofey, on Sunday last as Donegal almost snatched defeat from the jaws of victory.

The Tirconaille men were on their way to an easy League win against what looked a poor Westmeath team when, 2-10 to 0-4 ahead, manager, Declan Bonner withdrew two of his more experienced players, Jim McGuinness and Tony Boyle.

What happened next was a transformation in the opposition as Westmeath awoke to find huge gaps at midfield and in the Donegal defence and within ten minutes they had reduced a twelve point lead to just three points.

For 45 minutes Donegal had been in all but total control - they scored two early first half goals and by the 40th minute might well have had a couple more, so poor was the Westmeath defending. More than once they were rescued by some fine goalkeeping from Dermot Ryan.

Donegal, despite playing into a stiff breeze and without the services of their Naomh Columba players John Joe Doherty, Noel Hegarty and Noel McGinley, were in superb shape in the opening quarter.

Playing James Ruane much deeper than his allotted centre half forward position the home side were able to find Tony Boyle, Brian Roper and Brendan Devenney with relative ease.

John Duffy, picking up most of his possession around midfield, gave good service to his fellow forwards and the early indications suggested Westmeath were going to suffer a very heavy defeat.

After just 40 seconds John Duffy scored from an angled free from the hands. Over the hour Duffy was to convert a further four frees - one of them a 45. He Boyle and Roper who finished with 1-2 each, were Donegal's top scorers while Jim McGuinness was possibly denied his third Parian China plate in five outings when he was taken off after 36 minutes with Boyle - more to get a rest and to give other players an opportunity to make an impression.

At midfield McGuinness won copious possession and his distribution was always prudent while John Haran, on his debut, did little wrong, although he had difficulty holding some of the ball he initially won in the air.

Points followed from Boyle (two) before the first of two well worked Donegal goals all but shattered Westmeath's brittle resolve.

Boyle took a quick 8th minute free to Brendan Devenney. His kick rebounded off the upright and the well placed Roper turned his man before shooting low on his favoured left foot to the net.

Moments later Boyle displayed some of the soccer touches regularly used when he's playing for Keadue as he outfoxed his marker but the final pass was poor and Westmeath cleared a possible goal chance.

Into the tenth minute Roper fired over a point, turning and shooting in the same movement.

Three minutes later Roper was unceremoniously body-checked by half back Damien Gavin who was lucky to receive only a booking for what was a very late tackle. The 'attention' dolled out to the Ballyshannon man reflected perhaps the problems he was causing as his marker, Gavin was finally moved off him. Westmeath captain John Murray asked to cover the Donegal No. 12.

Kicking only their first wide of the game after 15 minutes helps to underline the dearth of attacking offered by the wind-assisted visitors.

Roper added his second point on 17 minutes, a drop kick 40 metre pass from McGuinness sending him on his way.

ALMOST FUNNY

With 19 minutes played Donegal should have had their second goal, it evolved from a brilliant run, soccer style by John Haran, and it was almost funny to watch as Donegal players queued up as they tried to put the ball in the net, Haran, Duffy, Devenney and Adrian Sweeney all denied as Westmeath finally cleared from an untidy scramble.

However, what seemed an inevitable second goal duly arrived four minutes later, Devenney passing to Roper, 'keeper Ryan saving superbly but the ball fell kindly for Boyle to side foot to the net.

Leading 2-5 to no score, Donegal could do no wrong.

Three points in-a-row from the visitors gave them some comfort and the Donegal went in 2-7 to 0-3 ahead at half time.

SECOND HALF

Donegal were quickly into their stride, Duffy from a free and Adrian Sweeney from 45 metres scoring points. Westmeath seemed to compound their problems with some poor free kicking, Ger Heavin well wide from a relatively easy free.

The pattern of Donegal attacks continued unabated and inside four minutes Donegal could have had two further goals, a deflected pass from Tony Boyle well won against the odds by Roper but his hastily hit shot went narrowly wide in the 37th minute. Another attack promised much but ended with a square ball and the second of two goal chances fell to Boyle but his drive was well saved for a 45 by the excellent Ryan and from it John Duffy converted.

That score put Donegal 2- 10 to 0-4 ahead -- 12 points in front with 18 minutes to play.

However, they failed to score for the following 16 minutes and as Boyle and McGuinness made their way from the field they barely had time to put on track suit tops before Westmeath had found the net.

The visitors scored goals through Damien Gavin and and midfielder Paul Conway as Donegal made those substitutions, bringing in Brian Murray and Alan McFadden.

Gavin, playing superbly now as an attacker (his first half display while marking Roper had been woeful) hit a marvellous point but Westmeath lost their rhythm in the final minutes, Damien Diver, good throughout, playing brilliantly from his own full back line to carry the ball forward. He made several runs, one ending in a booking for David Martin and a free which John Duffy converted from his hands to ease Donegal four points clear again with two minutes remaining.

Ger Heavin hit a point for Westmeath but Donegal held out for another two points that leaves them on top of Section B with nine points, Armagh after their great win over Meath just one point behind on 8.

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Eamon Reddin. Raymond Sweeney, Damien Diver; Mark Crossan, Martin Coll, Martin Bonner; John Haran, Jim McGuinness; Adrian Sweeney (0-1), James Ruane, Brian Roper (1-2); John Duffy (0-5 4 frees .1 45), Tony Boyle (1-2, 1 free), Brendan Devenney (0-1).

Subs., Brian Murray for McGuinness; Alan McFadden for T. Boyle; Barry McGowan for Ruane.

Westmeath: Dermot Ryan; Dermot Brady, David Murphy, Damien Healy; John Murray, Aidan Collins (0-1), Damien Gavin (1-1); John Cooney, Paul Conway (1-0); David Hughes, Thomas Cleary (0-2, both frees), Ger Heavin (0-3, 2 frees); Mark Staunton, Kenny Lyons, Michael Reilly (0-1).

Subs., Shane Colleary for Hughes; David Martin for Staunton; Eddie Casey for Reilly.

Referee: Eddie Neary (Sligo).

Bonner concerned with display in final 15 minutes

Following Donegal's narrow escape in a game they seemed to have all but wrapped up by half time, there were more than a few questions put to manager Declan Bonner as to why he had withdrawn Jim McGuinness and Tony Boyle.

Bonner explained that he felt both players had a lot of football lately and he wanted to rest them:

"They have played a fair bit of football over the past few weeks with the Railway Cup and we decided to give them a rest. With 15 minutes to go we were 12 points up and all of a sudden Westmeath came back. However, in the end we did come away with a three point victory."

Asked in particular about the substitution of Jim McGuinness whose influence around midfield was particularly missed he stated:

"We were 12 points up, I was replacing him with Brian Murray -- it wasn't as if he was coming on for the first time -- questions will be asked and at the end of the day we got away with it, lessons will be learned."

The Rosses man made no secret of the fact that he wasn't pleased with Donegal's final 15 minutes:

"It was very pleasing for 45 minutes that we played as good as we did since I took over, but in the last 15 minutes we were very disappointing and I will have to see what happened there."

He said he felt Westmeath looked capable of scoring more than the two goals Gavin and Conway actually did get:

"I was worried for the last ten minutes once they started running at us. They looked like creating goals and they got two goals. It was probably a lesson to learn for us all, the game is never over."

Donegal used three debutantes, John Haran, Raymond Sweeney and Martin Bonner in a side

which saw further late changes when the Naomh Columba, Glencolmille players withdrew from the team due to the death of their team colleague and former county minor, J. P. Cunningham.

"We had three lads starting inter-county football for the first time and maybe it was that lack of experience that could have cost us in the final 15 minutes. At the end of the day the new lads came through very well. We were without the Glen men due to the tragic circumstances in Glencolmille. The boys decided not to play and we were totally behind them.

"We have prepared for every match the same. We had a trying few days whilst preparing for this game. We sought a postponement and didn't get it. It was difficult coming into the game in

the circumstances. We will be going to Antrim looking for two points and hopefully we will get them.

Bonner said he was pleased with the display of his forwards all but one of whom got a score:

"The forward line were very good and all of them did very well but maybe in the last 15 minutes the defence were caught a little. Midfield also went out of it for 15 minutes but we are happy to get two points."

The Donegal Co. Board sought a postponement of Sunday's game because of the death of J. P. Cunningham, but the G.A.C. in Croke Park ruled that the game should go ahead.



Adrian Sweeney feels the full weight of Westmeath's Aidan Collins during Sunday's game in MacCumhaill Park.

Donegal nearly let it slip away

HOW Donegal frittered away a 12-point lead will occupy the thoughts of their manager, Declan Bonner, today as he ponders a remarkable final flurry from visitors Westmeath in Section B.

Donegal were held scoreless for 16 minutes while Westmeath, down and out for so much of this game, clattered in 2-3 and might have had more but for some woeful finishing.

Westmeath scored goals through Damien Gavin and midfielder Paul Conway as Donegal made a number of unforced substitutions. Jim McGuinness, dominating at midfield, and Tony Boyle, already with 1-2 to his credit, were hauled ashore.

But their departure coincided with Westmeath's flowering and Bonner admitted after the game he was "a worried man".

In the first half there was little

DONEGAL 2-11
WESTMEATH 2-8

need for concern as Donegal poured through a weak Westmeath defence. Brian Roper and Boyle scored goals while John Duffy, from frees, and the lively newcomer, Brendan Devenney, created problems.

DONEGAL: P Callaghan; E Reddin, R Sweeney, D Diver; M Crossan, M Coll, M Bonner; J Haran, J McGuinness; **A Sweeney (0-1)**, J Ruane, **B Roper (1-2)**; **J Duffy (0-5, 4 frees, one 45)**, **T Boyle (1-2, one free)**, **B Devenney (0-1)**. Subs: B Murray for McGuinness and A McFadden for Boyle (36 mins), B McGowan for Ruane (61 mins).

WESTMEATH: D Ryan; D Brady, D Murphy, D Healy; J Murray, **A Collins (0-1)**, **D Gavin (1-1)**; J Cooney, **P Conway (1-0)**; D Hughes, **T Cleary (0-2, both frees)**, **G Heavin (0-3, two frees)**; M Staunton, K Lyons, **M Reilly (0-1)**. Subs: S Colleary for Hughes (20 mins), D Martin for Staunton (46 mins), E Casey for Reilly (54 mins). Referee: **E Neary** (Sligo).

RESULTS ROUND-UP

National Football League Section A

Laois	1-9	Louth	1-7
Mayo	1-9	Leitrim	0-9
Carlow	3-6	Kilkenny	1-9
Galway	1-19	Fermanagh	1-8

	P	W	D	L	Scored	Con	Ave	Pts
Mayo	5	4	1	0	5-59 (74)	1-40 (43)	1.721	9
Laois	5	4	1	0	6-51 (57)	1-46 (49)	1.163	9
Galway	5	3	2	0	3-67 (76)	4-41 (53)	1.434	8
Leitrim	5	3	0	2	7-58 (79)	4-41 (53)	1.491	6
Louth	5	3	0	2	8-60 (94)	9-41 (68)	1.235	6
Carlow	5	1	0	4	5-41 (56)	6-58 (76)	0.737	2
Fermanagh	5	0	0	5	6-41 (59)	6-62 (80)	0.738	0
Kilkenny	5	0	0	5	4-27 (39)	13-75 (114)	0.342	0

Section B

Donegal	2-11	Westmeath	2-8
Antrim	3-9	London	0-11
Derry	0-13	Longford	0-10
Armagh	1-8	Meath	1-7

	P	W	D	L	Scored	Con	Ave	Pts
Donegal	5	4	1	0	6-57 (75)	9-33 (60)	1.250	9
Armagh	5	4	0	1	14-55 (97)	5-35 (50)	1.940	8
Meath	5	3	1	1	10-66 (96)	3-43 (52)	1.846	7
Derry	5	3	1	1	3-61 (70)	4-47 (59)	1.186	7
Longford	5	3	0	2	8-51 (75)	7-47 (68)	1.103	6
Antrim	5	1	0	4	10-37 (67)	8-75 (99)	0.677	2
Westmeath	5	0	1	4	5-46 (61)	7-56 (76)	0.803	1
London	5	0	0	5	3-33 (42)	16-70 (118)	0.356	0

Section C

Tyrone	1-9	Kerry	1-6
Monaghan	2-12	Dublin	0-12
Cavan	4-11	Wexford	1-11
Sligo	0-12	Offaly	1-9

	P	W	D	L	Scored	Con	Ave	Pts
Offaly	5	4	1	0	4-51 (63)	4-40 (52)	1.212	9
Tyrone	5	4	0	1	4-64 (76)	2-44 (50)	1.520	8
Monaghan	5	3	1	1	8-52 (76)	4-51 (63)	1.206	7
Sligo	5	2	2	1	3-53 (62)	3-55 (64)	0.969	6
Dublin	5	2	0	3	4-55 (67)	5-42 (57)	1.175	4
Kerry	5	2	0	3	5-36 (51)	1-42 (45)	1.133	4
Cavan	5	1	0	4	5-44 (36)	6-60 (78)	0.462	2
Wexford	5	0	0	5	2-33 (39)	10-56 (86)	0.453	0

Section D

Wicklow	2-16	Waterford	2-6
Kildare	1-15	Clare	0-13
Tipperary	1-11	Limerick	0-7
Cork	0-13	Roscommon	1-6

	P	W	D	L	Scored	Con	Ave	Pts
Cork	7	6	0	1	6-89 (107)	6-54 (72)	1.486	12
Kildare	7	5	0	2	6-94 (102)	4-66 (78)	1.308	10
Down	6	4	0	2	3-67 (76)	5-40 (55)	1.382	8
Clare	6	3	1	2	3-71 (80)	4-58 (72)	1.111	7
Roscommon	6	2	2	2	7-60 (81)	2-54 (60)	1.350	6
Tipperary	6	3	0	3	9-53 (80)	8-57 (81)	0.988	6
Wicklow	6	2	1	3	5-58 (73)	5-54 (69)	1.058	5
Limerick	6	1	0	5	2-41 (47)	6-91 (109)	0.431	2
Waterford	6	0	0	6	5-29 (44)	4-72 (84)	0.524	0

ALL-IRELAND CLUB SH: semi-finals — Sarsfields (Galway) 3-14, Dunloy (Antrim) 4-11, Clarecastle (Clare) 3-9, Birr (Offaly) 1-15.

WALSH CUP SH: semi-finals — Kilkenny 3-8, Offaly 1-10, Wexford 2-12, Laois 1-12.

OIREACHTAS SHIELD: Mayo 1-12 (Dom Greally -8; D Tierney 1-2; Declan Greally, A Hession 0-1 each) **Fermanagh 3-4** (D Graham 2-0; B Flanagan 1-0; J McGoldrick 0-2; O McShea, D McShea 0-1 each).

SOUTH EAST LEAGUE: Final — Waterford 1-11, Cork 1-9.

Donegal likely to meet Down or Kildare in the quarter-finals

Having qualified for the quarter-finals of the National League by defeating Antrim on Sunday last, it looks likely that either Down or Kildare will provide the opposition in that game, writes Peter Campbell

Providing that Donegal win in London, as winners of Section B, they are due to meet the runners-up in Section D. That section has Cork and Kildare level at the top on 12 points, but Kildare have completed their programme and it would seem that Cork should win their remaining match away to Wicklow, they would be winners. Down are also in the equation, two points behind Kildare, and a win for the Mourne men in their

final game away to Roscommon would guarantee them the Division One status and the quarter-final spot as they have a superior scoring average to Kildare.

The final series of matches will be very interesting with only Donegal and Offaly already qualified, but Galway, Cork, Mayo, Down, Tyrone and Derry look in a strong position to make it also.

The Section B and Section D tables are as follows:

SECTION B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Donegal	6	5	1	0	7-72	9-40	11
Armagh	6	5	0	1	16-70	5-47	10
Derry	6	4	1	1	4-68	4-54	9
Meath	6	3	1	2	10-73	4-50	7

Longford	6	3	0	3	8-63	9-62	6
Westmeath	6	1	1	4	8-65	8-62	3
Antrim	6	1	0	5	10-44	9-90	2
London	6	0	0	6	4-39	19-89	0

SECTION D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cork	7	6	0	1	6-89	6-54	12
Kildare	8	6	0	2	7-94	4-77	12
Down	7	5	0	2	3-87	6-46	10
Clare	7	4	1	2	4-91	5-63	9
Wicklow	7	3	1	3	8-65	5-65	7
Roscommon	7	2	2	3	7-71	3-64	6
Tipperary	7	3	0	4	9-64	11-64	6
Limerick	7	1	0	6	3-47	6-110	2
Waterford	7	0	0	7	6-40	7-104	0

CHURCH & GENERAL NFL, ROUND 6

Donegal back in Division One

Michael Daly reports from Casement Park

Photos by Thomas Gallagher

DONEGAL 1-15
ANTRIM 0-7

Donegal have achieved their main aim for the League by ensuring Division One status next year after defeating Antrim in Casement Park on Sunday last.

The result, which puts Donegal one point ahead of Armagh and two ahead of Derry, ensures Donegal's position in the quarter-finals also, as Derry and Armagh meet in the final series of games and both now cannot overtake Donegal.

It was not all plain sailing, however, as Donegal struggled badly at midfield throughout the first half, but still had five points to spare at the break, leading by 0-9 to 0-5.

In the second half, it was a different Donegal which appeared and a remarkable goal from Brian Roper in the 39th effectively killed the game as a contest.

The Roper goal and some picky refereeing from Dubliner Joe Woods were the key talking points as a surprisingly small attendance - no more than 1,200 - left the Belfast venue. Woods' handling of the game became terribly irritating for both sides. He awarded 55 frees but more annoying was his fussy insistence on where frees were taken from.

Donegal players seemed constantly at a loss with his decisions and quite frankly they were not on their own.

What at no stage was a wonderful game was spoiled by petty squabbles over where a free should and should not be taken from; sometimes there is nothing as uncommon as common sense.

Although soundly beaten, Antrim did show early promise and were more than a little unlucky to trail 0-9 to 0-4 at half-time - having played against a very strong breeze.

Opting to crowd their own half of the field with John Duffy and Noel Hegarty playing very deeply, Donegal seemed to be inviting trouble as Antrim put on considerable pressure.

With midfielders James Murphy and Ciaran O'Neill getting the measure of Jim McGuinness and John Haran, there was obvious concern for Donegal. James Ruane's inclusion after 20 minutes was to prompt a gradual improvement in that sector but question marks remain over Donegal's overall midfield strength. McGuinness is a wonderful

30 metre point.

BAD MISS

Four minutes into the second half Brendan Devenney created a great goal chance but lost his footing as he shot and what seemed a certain goal became a bad miss. Donegal replied to an Antrim point with Adrian Sweeney first timing the ball for a point after the first effort from Jim McGuinness hit the bar.

30 seconds later Brian Roper appeared to be fouled for a penalty before he somehow managed to shoot goalwards for a remarkable goal.

Little seemed to work for an increasingly disjointed antrim - even the breeze which they had worked so hard against in the first half seemed to die and Donegal finished with some very stylish football.

Barry McGowan picked out Brendan Devenney with a fine long ball and he in turn supplied Tony Boyle for a point.

Antrim's best chance of hauling themselves back into contention came on 47 minutes, Mickey Boyle, with only the 'keeper to beat, saw his stinging drive stopped and then held by Paul Callaghan.

Edging ten points ahead from a John Duffy free with as many minutes to play, Donegal's final scores were from a left footed Boyle effort from play and yet another well hit Duffy free.

After a nervous start Donegal worked around their midfield problems to produce a very polished scoring display, all but one of their forwards scoring.

Antrim, with their impressive under 21 Kevin Madden were short of scoring power - a roving player but still needs an old fashioned 'hammer man' - a Brian McGilligan type player - as his partner.

Antrim played full forward Enda McAtamney in a roving role and with John Joe Doherty forced to follow him, Donegal looked vulnerable, Mickey Boyle making several darting runs, Donegal living dangerously after 20 minutes when Antrim twice went close to scoring goals - the first from a McAtamney effort which was deflected by Damien Diver but Paul Callaghan was alert to it and saved. Seconds later a long ball from midfield found Boyle who would have scored a goal but for marvellous last gasp defending from the

impressive Damien Diver whose presence forced Boyle to fire over the bar from close range.

Boyle's point, after 21 minutes, brought his side to within two points of Donegal, 0-6 to 0-4.

However, Donegal took full advantage of an injury to Anto Finnegan which forced Antrim to play with 14 men for the final five minutes of the half.

Tony Boyle supplied McGuinness for a point having scored one himself moments earlier and the visitors led by five points when another early ball from Boyle found John Duffy who turned his man before shooting a but their defence and midfield had some fine players, most notably Anto Finnegan and Ciaran O'Neill.

Antrim: Donard Shannon; Martin Mulholland, Emmet McCorry, Locky McCurdy; Gearoid Adams, Paddy Graffin, Anto Finnegan 0-1, free; James Murphy, Ciaran O'Neill 0-1; Colm McCabe 0-1, John Kelly, Darren Swail; Mickey Boyle 0-1, Enda McAtamney 0-3, one free, Donal McManus. Subs: Paddy Doran for McManus (h/t); Andy McGowan for McCurdy (46 mins); Ciaran Brown for Doran (54 mins).

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Mark Crossan, John Joe Doherty, Damien Diver; Noel McGinley, Martin Coll, Martin Bonner; John Haran, Jim McGuinness 0-1; Adrian Sweeney 0-2, Noel Hegarty, Brian Roper 1-1; John Duffy 0-5, 4 frees, Tony Boyle 0-5, 2 frees, Brendan Devenney 0-1. Subs: James Ruane for Haran (20 mins.); Barry McGowan for Coll, injd. (h/t); Shane Bradley for Devenney (54 mins.).

Referee: Joe Woods (Dublin).

National Football League Section B

Donegal ease past London for showdown with Cork

London 1-6
Donegal 2-15

By Diarmaid Doherty

Declan Bonner and his Donegal squad now face the prospect of a NFL quarter final game against Cork after they handsomely defeated London in Ruislip last Sunday - this despite a poor first half that saw them only a point ahead at the interval.

Without their U-21 contingent and the injured Jim McGuinness and Noel Hegarty, Donegal were a much changed outfit from the team that defeated Antrim a fortnight earlier.

Indeed, such was the lack of available squad players that the last three names on the substitutes list read: Declan Bonner and team mentors Matt Gallagher and Charlie Mulgrew.

Bonner declined the chance to introduce either himself Gallagher or Mulgrew although the display from his side in the first half gave him ample excuse.

Donegal led by only seven points to 1-3 at half time - hitting ten wides and failing to click into the form that the 3,500 supporters were expecting.

They should have scored their first goal of the game midway through the opening half when Brendan Devenney chose to head the ball home from the edge of the square rather than fist it.

The goal was ruled out for a square ball infringement although by all accounts, Bonner was none too happy with Devenney at half time.

KNUCKLED DOWN

Like the rest of the side, however, the St. Eunan's man finally knuckled down to the task in the second half. He was part of a forward line that eventually got the better of a hard working London defence - Shane Carr being the only forward that failed to get on the scoresheet.

The former Tir Chonaill Gaels man made a sparkling return to the London venue with a fine display - scoring 1-5 of his side's total. Elsewhere, Devenney and Tony Boyle scored four points each while Brian Roper also looked very sharp.

James Ruane replaced McGuinness at midfield and despite the early first half scare, the Donegal defence, in which John Joe Doherty made his 100th appearance, were rarely troubled.

The London goal came with only ten minutes of the contest played. A high ball into the danger area by Tommy Maguire caused confusion in front of Paul Callaghan and former Kerry player, Mick Galvin fisted the ball to the top corner of the net.

Two excellent frees from Ballybofey man, Damien Gillespie, kept London well in touch in that opening period - Gillespie, a late inclusion in the London side - scored four points in the end and had a fine game at corner forward.

FOUR EARLY POINTS

Four early points without reply in the second half left Donegal 0-11 to 1-3 ahead before Duffy fired home their first goal.

Ruane caught a high ball out around midfield and after interchanging with Boyle, Duffy raced through to shoot past London keeper, John Collins.

Four minutes later, Donegal's second goal arrived when Adrian Sweeney shot home after excellent approach play by Noel McGinley.

Johnny Scanlon, Brian Murray and Dessie McNamara came on as late substitutes as Bonner's side, while far from convincing, finished top of their section programme with six wins from seven games.

London: John Collins; Stephen Kane, Dermot Gordon, Mark Waldron; Conor Wilson, Barry McDonagh, Brendan Bolger; Shane Trench, Aidan Creamer (0-1); Mick Galvin (1-1), Paul Coggins, Andy Carr; Damien Gillespie (0-4, 3 frees), Tommy Maguire, Frank Hussey;

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Mark Crossan, John Joe Doherty, Damien Diver; Noel McGinley (0-1), Martin Coll, Martin Bonner; James Ruane, John Haran; Shane Carr, Adrian Sweeney (1-1), Brian Roper (0-1); John Duffy (1-5, 2 frees), Tony Boyle (0-4, 1 free), Brendan Devenney (0-4, 1 free). SUBS; Johnny Scanlon for Bonner (48 mins); Brian Murray for Boyle (48 mins), Dessie McNamara for Coll (51 mins).

Referee: G. Kinneavy, Galway.

Bonner's youngsters take Cork apart

THE REFRESHINGLY positive approach by the Donegal players to the League represents a clear response to their manager Declan Bonner's particularly high regard for the competition.

The attitude of what is largely a fledgling side keen to learn came sharply into focus to the discomfort of a disorganised, if depleted Cork at Croke Park yesterday.

That Donegal are playing championship football at this time of year is more by design than accident. Bonner believes that the League, for those lucky enough to be in contention at this stage, is the only thing that matters. "We are not even thinking about the championship," he insists.

The rewards of the Bonner doctrine are an unbeaten record and a place in the semi-finals. Bonner has what he says are "a good bunch of lads who work hard and who are playing with limitless confidence" and the value of this was plain to see. Cork crumbled under the pressure. From the moment corner back Barry McGowan cheekily pushed forward to collect a pass unchallenged to the right of the Cork 20-metre line to kick the opening point after only 25 seconds, the crowd were conscious of Donegal's intent and their inventive approach.

McGowan's score was a prelude to a catalogue of searching questions asked of the Cork defence subsequently. The response from the men in red only served to disillusion their supporters and management.

Brian Corcoran, of all people, was found wanting at full back on the very day that called for a special performance in a defence that had been depleted through injury and suspension. Corner back Anthony Lynch was moved out to pick up the dangerously-roaming Noel Hegarty, but sustained severe ligament damage in a shoulder after 25 minutes and had to be replaced.

Hegarty won out anyway. Eoin Sexton was replaced at half-time and

DONEGAL 2-14
CORK 1-9

Pat Roche

wing back Ciarán O'Sullivan pushed forward, which weakened the Cork rearguard even further.

It seemed that as soon as Cork tried to plug the holes in their sinking ship fresh options opened up for the persistent Donegal attack.

Donegal's two first-half goals by opportunist Brendan Devenney saw Cork's defensive confidence turned off at the mains.

With Cork still trying to get off the mark for an opening score Devenney struck after five minutes, taking advantage of Hegarty's through ball to bury a great shot past Mick Maguire.

That left Donegal ahead by five points (1-2 to no score). To Cork's credit they retaliated gamely and held the creative Donegal front-runners at bay while recovering to get back on level terms by the 13th minute (1-2 to 0-5).

Donegal regrouped and had a point to spare (1-5 to 0-7) when Devenney struck again two minutes from half-time. This time the Cork defence seemed to politely get out of his way as he careered along the end-line before getting into position in front of the startled Maguire to crash to the net.

By this stage a lot of good ball was getting through to the Donegal attackers. Moments later Tony Boyle, supplied with the sort of ball he likes best, again coddled Corcoran and had a chance of goal number three, but his shot flew over the crossbar.

Jim McGuinness kicked only his sides second wide just on the half hour. Soon afterwards his midfield partner, James Ruane drove over yet another Donegal point to give the Ulster men a 2-7 to 0-7 interval lead.

The omens worsened for Cork at the outset of the second half when

Adrian Sweeney booted Donegal further ahead inside a minute.

Cork's scoring rate became more sluggish. Ciarán O'Sullivan reduced arrears after five minutes of the second half and their next point, from Alan O'Regan, did not arrive until the 10th minute.

Donegal almost arrogantly opened up the Cork defence with the best move of the match, a double one-two involving John Duffy, Hegarty and Jim McGuinness for Hegarty to land the point.

Even though this classical 41st-minute score dumped Cork into an eight-point deficit they were given a renewed glimmer of hope by a dubious penalty award when O'Regan's attempt at a shot from close in was smothered by Donegal goalkeeper Paul Callaghan.

Referee Brian White broke up a scuffle between players on the edge of the semi-circular exclusion zone, but Joe Kavanagh then buried the spot kick with his left foot.

Donegal goalkeeper Callaghan had earned his keep before and after the penalty, but a brilliantly-defiant run by Cork midfielder Michael Monaghan deserved a better reward.

Bonner was pleased with his team's performance, especially since many of them had been playing on the Croke Park pitch for the first time.

"For me it's the second phase of my three-part plan, we got to here unbeaten, secured Croke Park experience for the younger players and winning the League is now the big priority.

DONEGAL: P Callaghan; **B McGowan** (0-1), JJ Doherty, D Diver; N McGinley, M Coll, N Hegarty (0-1); **J McGuinness** (0-2), **J Ruane** (0-1); S Carr, **A Sweeney** (0-1), B Roper; **J Duffy** (0-1), **T Boyle** (0-5), **B Devenney** (2-2). **Sub:** B Murray for Duffy, 52 min.

CORK: M Maguire; E Sexton, B Corcoran, A Lynch; **C O'Sullivan** (0-3 frees), S Óg O hAilpín, D Wiseman; **N Murphy** (0-1), M Monaghan; **B Walsh** (0-1), **J Kavanagh** (1-2, goal from pen, one point a free), C Crowley; **A O'Regan** (0-1), **P Hegarty** (0-1), A Dorgan. **Subs:** M O'Donovan for Lynch, 25 min; B Collins for Sexton, half-time; S O'Brien for Crowley, 48 min.

Referee: **B White** (Wexford).

The Donegal Democrat 9 April 1998.

DONEGAL 2-14
CORK 1-9

Although new to Croke Park, 22-year-old St. Eunan's lad Brendan Devenney looked totally at home on Sunday where his contribution of two goals and two points helped Donegal to a very comfortable eight point victory over a dreadful Cork outfit.

Michael Daly reports from Croke Park Photos by Conor McGonagle

This victory puts Donegal through to their fifth NFL semi-final of the 1990s and a meeting on Sunday next at Croke Park with Offaly – a game to rekindle memories of their meeting at championship semi-final stage in the '70s when Tony McTague and Joe Winston traded free taking skills.

Leading 2-7 to 0-7 at half-time, Donegal were always in the lead as Cork struggled throughout. While Donegal won easily this was a far from flawless display and before getting carried away it must be measured against the paucity of the Cork attack and some terrible defending by the Leesiders' defence, their full-back line in particular which was remarkably static.

One must wonder what homework Larry Tompkins did on Donegal star Devenney. Anthony Lynch, the left corner back was despatched to mark Noel Hegarty, who started at corner forward in a switch with Shane Carr – Devenney was poorly marked and for both of his goals he took on and beat flat-footed defenders – something he has been doing at club level here in Donegal – before scoring smashing goals. His second goal, close to half-time was like something out of Roy of the Rovers.

Devenney and the experienced Tony Boyle accounted for 2-7 of Donegal's total, Boyle scoring four superb points from play and Donegal's only score from a free – that from 46 metres in response to a penalty controversially awarded some seven minutes earlier.

That penalty arrived with 17 minutes to play, Paul Callaghan – in my view – making a superb save, but referee Brian White ruled that the Burt man had fouled Alan O'Regan by using a foot block. In different circumstances it could have been a match-turning moment but fortunately Donegal were in a commanding position, leading by eight points before Joe Kavanagh calmly fired a fine drive to the corner of Callaghan's net to reduce the arrears to five points.

Cork's failure to built on that fortuitous goal says much about their limitations in attack. Despite the introduction of Stephen O'Brien and Brian Collins, the Leesiders remained ponderous in attack – their best attacker was half-back, Ciaran O'Sullivan, a player Corkonians have argued should never have been played as a forward. From this display it's fairly obvious that attacking options are not all that plentiful in Cork.

MIDFIELD

For Donegal the deployment of Noel Hegarty and Shane Carr as ball winners in and around midfield, proved a worthwhile exercise, particularly in the second half. With Martin Coll very impressive at centre-half back, McGuinness and Ruane, while rarely catching a clean ball, seemed able to direct it more often than not to a waiting colleague.

However, Donegal were struggling to put passes together in the first half, with the experienced players Noel Hegarty and Barry McGowan spoiling otherwise fine play with some diabolical foot passing – Hegarty firing two over the sideline in succession as he and his colleagues tried to settle.

McGowan, however, made a very quick impact, tearing away from corner-back after 24 seconds to accept a James Ruane pass which he coolly slotted between the Canal End posts. That score did two things, settle McGowan and totally confuse Aidan Dorgan, the Cork corner-forward who would have assumed it would be he and not McGowan who would be doing the scoring.

As it turned out the normally busy Dorgan saw the first 59 minutes pass him by as McGowan played a tidy game, orchestrating some of Donegal's best moves from defence. Elsewhere John Joe Doherty and Pat Hegarty had a tremendous first half battle, Doherty eventually forcing Hegarty to roam outfield in search of possession.

Donegal led 1-2 to no score after four minutes, the slightly greasy surface proving no obstacle to fleet-footed Devenney who pointed on three minutes and exploded onto a long ball from Hegarty before beating his man and clipping the ball first time past the advancing Michael Maguire for a real predator's goal.

Worryingly, Donegal seemed to sit back on their lead, Cork settling well and dominating the next 20 minutes. Points from Kavanagh (two), Nicholas Murphy and Ciaran O'Sullivan (two frees) hauled Cork level but Donegal hit the front again, Tony Boyle finishing a series of short passes with a very direct finish from 30 metres.

Cork continued to press but vital defensive tackles from Damien Diver and a particularly memorable steal by Barry McGowan as Cork appeared to have players free to his left and right, denied Cork a certain goal. On 25 minutes Cork might well have goaled, Joe Kavanagh releasing Pat Hegarty but he fired over Callaghan's bar with only the Burt man to beat.

Having started well, slipped into slumber for the main part of the half, Donegal finished the half superbly, Boyle punishing a poor Cork clearance with a point and McGowan picking out Devenney with a clever side-line ball.

Devenney, close to the end-line, stunned the Cork defence by taking on and beating two players before cutting across keeper Maguire's goal before sliding the ball under him for a fine goal – a goal out of nothing that has been Devenney's trademark at club level in Donegal.

Fine defending at the expense of his second injury saw John Joe Doherty stop a Cork counter attack and James Ruane finished the half on a high note, finishing a slick more with a 30 metre point.

With most of the 15,000 attendance now in the ground, Donegal turned to play into the Railway End, again there was little breeze although the pitch did appear to be cutting up quite a bit to confirm a yielding sod.

However, the conditions and the wide open spaces suited Donegal, in particular Tony Boyle who by now had clearly got the better of Brian Corcoran. Adrian Sweeney, Boyle and Devenney points edged Donegal eight points clear by the 38th minute.

Some superb play by Noel Hegarty confirmed his hunger for the game has returned, the Glen man starting a move, placing a ball to Jim McGuinness and taking two very heavy tackles before coming onto the return to score one of Donegal's better points.

Cork showed real flair to create a goal scoring chance, a flowing move – a rarity in this game – ended with a controversial penalty decision, Donegal boss Declan Bonner enraged by the decision as he protested on the field with referee White.

For the penalty Kavanagh closed the gap to five points but that score, 16 minutes from the final whistle, was to be Cork's last.

Donegal simply shut up shop, happy and more than able to retain possession with slick passing and movement, three points coming too, the best from a free by Boyle, John Duffy and Jim McGuinness adding scores to secure a semi-final spot and continue Donegal's recent fine record against the Munster side.

Donegal were certainly fitter and much keener to impress, however, there were problems with foot passing and while Tony Boyle scored one fine free, he and John Duffy were otherwise struggling from frees, Duffy missing some very scoreable chances.

Provided the players remain sensible about this display – they must remember this was a much weakened Cork side – there are reasonable grounds for optimism and the possibility of yet another Donegal v Derry NFL final is a very real one!

Donegal: Paul Callaghan; Barry McGowan (0-1), John Joe Doherty, Damien Diver; Noel McGinley, Martin Coll, Noel Hegarty (0-1); Jim McGuinness (0-2), James Ruane (0-1); Shane Carr, Adrian Sweeney (0-1), Brian Roper; John Duffy (0-1), Tony Boyle (0-5, one free), Brendan Devenney (2-2), Sub., Brian Murray for Duffy (53 mins.)

Cork: Michael Maguire; Eoin Sexton, Brian Corcoran, Anthony Lynch; Ciaran O'Sullivan (0-3, all frees), Sean Og O hAilipin, Donagh Wiseman; Nicholas Murphy (0-1), Michael Monaghan; Brendan Walsh (0-1), Joe Kavanagh (1-2, pen, one free), Colin Crowley; Alan O'Regan (0-1), Pat Hegarty (0-1), Aidan Dorgan. Subs., Michael O'Donovan for Lynch (inj. 21), Brian Collins for Sexton (half-time), Stephen O'Brien for Crowley (42 mins.)

Referee: Brian White (Wexford).

CHURCH & GENERAL NFL SEMI FINAL

OFFALY 3-10
DONEGAL 1-14

MICHAEL DALY REPORTS FROM CROKE PARK

PHOTOS BY THOMAS GALLAGHER

A game of remarkable quality fluctuated to and from Donegal's favour, Leinster champions Offaly finally emerging two point victors from an epic struggle thanks largely to two vital if audacious second-half goals.

Played at a remarkable pace throughout, this semi-final will be remembered as one of the best games played at Croke Park, but for Donegal, suffering their first competitive defeat under Declan Bonner's guidance, that's little consolation.

Donegal have been praised in many quarters for their contribution to a wonderful spectacle but as time elapses since last Sunday, there is a feeling that, bad luck apart, this really was a game Donegal should have won.

Donegal created an abundance of goal chances - this writer recalls six goal chances - only one goal came from those six while Offaly created five clearcut goal scoring opportunities and scored from three of them.

Declan Bonner, the Donegal manager, spoke of "too many basic mistakes" by his side while in contrast Offaly, so often outplayed by Donegal, showed a killer instinct, Roy Malone, James Stewart and Ciaran McManus scoring their goals.

Donegal, deploying two players in isolation up front - Tony Boyle and Brendan Devenney - were caught out by Offaly's quick long ball counter attacks, Malone outpacing John Joe Doherty for the first goal after Donegal had appeared to have taken charge of the game.

There was much to enthuse about this Donegal performance, their grit, spirit, fitness level and sheer commitment to the final whistle. There were times when they lost possession, and when they did Offaly were quick to punish, their third goal coming from

possession squandered by Donegal.

Fast and fluent throughout, both teams exuded confidence and played with a level of fitness and tenacity one might anticipate much later in the football year. Unblemished by as much as a single booking, both teams deserve great credit for offering such a high level of entertainment to some 17,419 spectators.

A simply superb hour from Tony Boyle wasn't enough. His goal after nine minutes was a sparkling effort as he rounded his man to race goalwards before driving to the net.

Donegal, who started smartly to lead 1-2 to 0-1 after nine minutes thanks to that wonderful goal, found themselves three points adrift at half-time but they hit the front again 14 minutes from the finish and threatened the Offaly goal with such regularity that victory appeared well within their grasp.

However, Offaly, with those three goals, gave further evidence if it was really needed that they are an exceptional side, a side worthy of last year's Leinster championship crown.

REMARKABLE

A combination of top class saves from net minder Pdraig Kelly and one remarkable hand block by David Foley to deny an all but certain Brendan Devenney goal, gave Offaly the impetus to win this game, their midfielder Ciaran McManus crowning a wonderful display with a goal which would grace any stage.

Offaly having recovered their lead through a well finished James Stewart 46th minute goal, found their way through for another three pointer, McManus galloping through the Donegal defence before unleashing a top corner finish from 20 metres.

A stunning strike, no keeper could be faulted for allowing such a well placed, venomous strike go past him

and despite facing a six point deficit, Donegal to their credit responded with memorable attacking efforts.

Tony Boyle, whose outstanding contribution is underlined by that personal 1-8 tally, lifted his side with a point, his personal tussle with Offaly All-Star Cathal Daly one of the golden links of a pearl encrusted hour.

Twice inside two minutes Donegal were denied goals, Boyle ending a remarkable passage of play with a drive which skipped agonisingly wide. John Gildea, in from the start for the injured John Duffy, churned up an opportunity and Brendan Devenney chalked up an important point to slice Offaly's lead to two points, 3-9 to 1-13.

SHATTER

Offaly's defence, shored up from midway through the first half by some important switches, looked decidedly brittle again and it seemed halfback Noel McGinley was certain to shatter their embattled walls when he came on to a through ball with four minutes to play.

McGinley's shot was struck well but somehow Offaly keeper Kelly coiled his body upwards to save one-handed. One of the defining moments, but only one in a game littered with memories and might-have-been.

Brendan Devenney might yet be wondering how he failed to add to his goal haul. With his side one point in arrears by the 40th minute he gathered a Tony Boyle pass and made space to shoot. Driving the ball firmly he joined 17,419 others in astonishment as David Foley's outstretched hand saved from six metres.

Three minutes later the impressive St. Eunan's predator was

in again, this time his every step was almost a carbon copy of his second goal a week earlier against Cork. Beating his man he strode across the goal to shoot low but Kelly made a stop with his knee, Brian Roper following up to point through a crowd of players.

At that moment manager Bonner sensed it was not to be: "We had a chance with Devenney and the keeper blocked it and I said to myself it's probably not going to be our day. They went down the field and got a goal and it was as good as a six pointer."

FIRST ATTACK

Starting with their now familiar two-man full forward line of Boyle and Devenney, Donegal attacked against the bitterly cold wind into the Railway End. Their first attack yielded a John Gildea point, even then there might have been a goal on but it was a promising return for the Naomh Chonaille player who has waited six months since his U.S. suspension to taste competitive action.

With Barry Malone replaced by Daly to mark Boyle, there was an improvement in Offaly's defence for the latter part of the first half. By the 14th minute they were on level terms, the pace of Roy Malone and Vinny Claffey posing problems for the Donegal defence.

Malone slid in for a fortunate goal, John Joe Doherty desperately unlucky not to get the ball to safety as it sat up perfectly for Claffey to hit first time under the legs of an advancing Callaghan.

Using the long ball with regularity, Offaly prospered, Mark Daly hitting a fine point from under the shadow of the Hogan stand. Offaly replied to a fine Gildea score to lead 1-7 to 1-4 at half-time.

After the break a Tony Boyle free narrowed the deficit but only a brave stop from Callaghan kept Malone from his second goal. With Barry McGowan showing well against McManus who was now at wing forward, Donegal hauled themselves level with Boyle (free) and McGowan points.

Offaly sub Phil O'Reilly, an impressive performer from his introduction, edged his side clear again and Callaghan had to be quick to steal in before Colm Quinn to win possession. Denied by Foley, Devenney showed composure to point on 42 minutes to level the sides yet again.

Finbar Cullen missed a glorious point taking chance, firing badly wide as Donegal upped the tempo yet again, Roper pushing Donegal ahead after Kelly first denied Devenney.

MASSIVE EFFORT

Donegal's massive effort was spiked moments later when Stewart slipped through to find the net, his shot well placed high and left of Callaghan.

As the game continued to enthrall it was Donegal who battled level yet again, Boyle scoring from a free and following that with a wonderful point, winning the ball in front of his man before turning to score from 35 meters.

Locked at 1-11 to 2-8, level for the third time in the second half, Offaly delivered the killer blow, McManus' outlandish strike from distance and an equally vital follow up point from Claffey putting his side four points clear.

With Manus Boyle and Brian Murray now in the fray for Donegal there was further drama as Tony Boyle pointed, then fired narrowly wide for a goal and Devenney hit a beautiful score to see Offaly's lead cut to two.

But the much needed a second Donegal goal failed to materialise, McGinley denied and despite shaving the lead to one point when Boyle converted a 40 metre free, it was Offaly's Vinny Claffey, now playing 70 metres from his original corner forward berth who brought this roller coaster ride to a finish with a point that had its origins in a spilled pass at the other end of the field.

Full time, 52 seconds into added time, came too soon not only for neutrals enthralled by this wonderful advertisement for gaelic football but Donegal fans also who held hopes that a second goal, which so often promised, might finally arrive.

OFFALY: Pdraig Kelly; Cathal Daly, Barry Malone, David Foley; John Kenny, Finbar Cullen, James Brady; Ciaran McManus 1-3, two frees, James Grennan; Colm Quinn 0-1, James Stewart 1-0, Ronan Mooney; Vinny Claffey 0-4, Roy Malone 1-0, Mark Daly 0-1. Subs: Phil O'Reilly 0-1 for B. Malone (h/t); B. Mooney for Daly (58 mins.).

DONEGAL: Paul Callaghan; Barry McGowan 0-1, John Joe Doherty, Damien Diver; Noel McGinley, Martin Coll, Shane Carr; Jim McGuinness, James Ruane; John Gildea 0-2, Adrian Sweeney, Brian Roper 0-1; Noel Hegarty, Tony Boyle 1-8, six frees, Brendan Devenney 0-2. Subs: Manus Boyle for Sweeney (52 mins); Brian Murray for Ruane (53 mins).

Referee: Mick Curley (Galway).



Despite a general consensus that Donegal's semi-final against Offaly was one of the finest games seen in Croke Park in some time, Donegal are licking their wounds and wondering at 'what might have been' this week.

With their forwards creating an astonishing number of gilt edged goal scoring opportunities, the sense of disappointment at a two point defeat is all the more palpable, none feeling it more so than the team and their mentors who I met in the players' lounge at Croke Park on Sunday.

Michael Daly brings reaction from the Donegal camp

Noel Hegarty, looking forward to his wedding a day later, was quick to extract the very positive aspects from the game. "I thought our level of effort was great. We showed tremendous spirit and some of our players would have learned a great deal from this experience. There were chances to win the game, but they didn't break for us, it's a fine line at times and we're the wrong side of it but I think the attitude is great and we're all looking forward to the championship."

Jim McGuinness, looking resplendent in a whiter than white shirt had his legs sprawled across a chair, oblivious to the action in the Derry/Monaghan game. Most of the players huddled around circular tables, few ventured out on to the viewing stand to watch the game.

McGuinness did an interview with RTE's Brian Carty, in it he echoed the sentiments expressed by Hegarty

Earlier, outside the Donegal dressing room under the Hogan Stand, Declan Bonner was his obliging self. Coming from the Offaly dressing room where he complimented Tommy Lyons' side on their victory, Bonner told me he took little solace from the fact his side had played but lost in a fine game:

"It was great for the spectators but, at the end of the day, we would rather have played badly and won in a dour match than play well in a brilliant game and come out losing."

Offering his view on how Donegal lost this action-packed encounter by two points, 3-10 to 1-14, he suggested the concession of goals and chances missed were the key to any analysis:

"We conceded goals at crucial stages in the match. The chances that we didn't take, two basic mistakes by us and at the other end they took their opportunities."

Tony Boyle, having scored 1-8, mirrored Bonner's thoughts when he spoke of Offaly's canny knack of making the most of what came their way:

"We had five goal chances that didn't hit the net; anything they seemed to kick hit the back of the net." He reflected on Donegal's unhappy run at the highest level of the NFL: "Nobody likes losing semi-finals. We've lost three finals in the '90s and felt this could be our year, but it wasn't to be."

GREAT EFFORT

Declan Bonner meanwhile was satisfied with the effort made by his side. "We probably played as well as we did all season, we showed great commitment, played with great heart, just basic errors let us down at the end of the day. I said at the start that the team which makes the least mistakes will win and we probably made too many mistakes. You can't fault the lads, they are a great bunch to work with."

For Bonner and Donegal the next week will be spent recovering mentally and physically from defeat. He and the panel are taking a week off to "recharge the batteries" and championship preparations will resume in earnest thereafter.