

THE BEST AT HIS VERY BEST

What a final!! The game had everything. Fantastic attacking play, great defending, yellow cards, a red card, great point scoring, two goals, tactics galore and drama right up until the very last kick of the ball. Dublin chasing their immortalising five in a row and Kerry valiantly defending their rich footballing heritage by attempting to halt Dublin's glory. Both teams gave everything they had and the only winners on Sunday were the spectators especially with the quality of football that was played. The only winners from Sunday's drawn final are the spectators who will be afforded a replay on the 14th September meaning another bumper crowd 82,000 crammed into Croke Park anticipating much of the same. If only it could hold "120,000."

It was a pulsating final that I am sure many people, maybe even Kerry themselves, will feel they left behind them. With three missed goal chances in the first half, including a penalty, they could have been well ahead by the break. On the same note, Dublin in the same period had four possibly five goal chances and scored one, so Kerry paradoxically could also have found themselves chasing a far larger lead than four points at the break. Thus, to say they left it behind them may in some way be disrespectful to Dublin especially as they operated the majority of the match with fourteen men.

The red card was deserved, David Clifford is allowed to shield the ball as he did, but Johnny Cooper is not allowed to hold a player and pull him to the ground as he did. If a harsh yellow, it was a certain black card which would have resulted in the same red card outcome. The red card did not disadvantage Dublin for the remainder of the game, instead it acted more as a leveller balancing the power and abilities of both teams resulting in the fantastic spectacle we witnessed for the remainder of the game.

This was shown nowhere more so than on the scoreboard. Before the sending off Dublin were comfortably building a lead and keeping Kerry at bay. After the red card, especially in the second half, Kerry were more able to exploit their numerical advantage and use the extra space to move the ball into shooting positions and even score a goal themselves bringing them right back into the game. Kerry also got their tactics right and executed them very well on Sunday. They were able to keep most of the Dublin players subdued for the majority of the game. This coupled with their work rate and high intensity play made Dublin look as if they were playing below par.

With Dublin seemingly playing beneath what we have come to expect from and Kerry really taking the game to Dublin, one man for me stood out and stemmed the rising Kerry tide. Stephen Cluxton's performance on Sunday was instrumental in earning Dublin a second chance at capturing the five in a row. His restarts, his situational play, his footwork and his leadership on the field of player were at his very best. He started with going short with his restarts finding his man on each occasion which forced Kerry to squeeze his restarts with a zonal press. Once Kerry pressed Cluxton's restarts he played one straight down the middle to Fenton which Kerry won, which for me was a decoy to Kerry that Fenton would be the target when pressed up.

The next three kickout went long and to the same wing where Brian Howard (2) and Dean Rock caught balls immediately launching attacks which resulted in a return of one goal and two points. Dublin anticipated the Kerry press and used it to their advantage. Although they scored 1-02, this could have easily been three goals as the attacks evolved into possible goal chances bearing fruit on one and points on the other two. This could have put Dublin out of sight before half time.

In the second half Cluxton increased the speed of his restarts in order to beat Kerry's press before it could get set up. This work very well so much so that Kerry eventually would be forced to drop to the Dublin 45m line and start their press from there on occasion. The most telling restart for me was after Kerry had scored their goal. Emotions were heightened and Kerry had the wind in their sails. Cluxton's next two kicks were not good at all, losing one and putting another long over the sideline. After these two bad kicks Cluxton changed things up and using his experience sent the call out to his defence to pull tight together in the centre to allow for breaking runs to the wing to gather the ball. Dublin needed possession and they got it.

Where Cluxton influenced the game, the most was in his situational play. Kerry had five goal chances converting one. In the first half they spurned three of these chances. The first had resulted in Paul Geaney being played through on goal and with the onrushing Cluxton, Geaney was forced to play a measured ball to the corner which was saved by James McCarthy on the line.

Next was the penalty. High ball into the square which saw Cooper foul Clifford. Although it was a foul Cluxton still dealt with the difficult high ball very well and from the resulting penalty pulled off a great save to again deny Geaney his goal. A short time later Stephen O'Brien found an angle for a score shooting for goal but narrowly putting it over the bar. Cluxton had positioned himself very well meaning that O'Brien was extremely limited in the amount of goal he could aim for thus pointing instead of rippling the net.

The fourth goal opportunity that Kerry had seen Paul Murphy bursting through the Dublin defence and goalward bound. His rifled shot had first looked as if he had smashed it against the crossbar until the replay had shown that Cluxton was able to make a vital save and push it on to the bar. Using his excellent foot work to stay in the line of the shot and moving down the line to narrow the angle while also standing up tall, waiting until the shot was taken ensured that he had every chance of making the save. The fifth chance Kerry finally broke through and scored that all elusive goal.

It was a great final from a neutral's viewpoint especially when Kerry had raised their performance to a level where they looked more than equal to Dublin. With the Dublin players looking like they were not fully firing on all cylinders, it was crucial for their talismanic captain to be at his illustrious best to keep Dublin in the hunt.

“A Goalkeeper is there for you whenever you fail, not because you have decided to stop working.”

Cluxton was there for his teammates whenever they failed to stop Kerry breaking through on goal on a number of occasions. He had to be at his best and **The Best Was At His Very Best.**

