

Senior Runner-Up
Hannah Nic Eindrí
Coláiste Oiriall, Cnoc an Chonnaidh, Co. Monaghan
Teacher – Bríd Ni Bhraoin



Ríastard

The ashen, somber atmosphere was emphasised by the gloomy clouds lurking overhead. People sludged through the marshy, sodden path to reach their destination. The day was upon them. A boy sat in his teams changing room. His leg jiggled up and down, keeping in rhythm with the neighbouring clock. His head flicked around him as frequently as the hands of the clock. The other boys of their troop were scattered around them, their nerves were palpable as they chattered aimlessly with each other. The boy maintained his own company and instead observed his surroundings. He knew that the commander was depending on his abilities today. The extra pressure was guaranteed in these colossal battles. However, due to their opposition, they could not afford to suffer an annihilation. Suddenly the door creaked open. The boys stared in apprehension as their commandant stood before them.

“It’s time”, he told them in his strict, cacophonous voice.

The boys followed him in an orderly fashion, their heads raised in anticipation at the upcoming events and their camáns in hand. A tunnel of light was in the horizon before their destination. As they passed through scintillant passage, they were greeted with a rapturous applause from the audience. The solitary boy scrutinised his opponents, his eyes promising a fierce game. The opposing side gazed at them with equal hostility. The lone boy particularly ogled his rival with antipathy. His rivals name suited him perfectly; Hound. His forearms bulged menacingly and his eyes were intense. He bared his fangs threateningly making some boys shrink back in alarm.

Each troop lined up opposite one another with their sticks poised for action. The usual abuse and slander passed between the two aggregations before a warning whistle from the arbiter. The boys assembled in their ranks to go through their strategies before taking up their positions. The adjudicator was located in the middle of the park with a whistle and sliotar in her hands. She stood patiently and gazed down at her watch before placing the whistle between her teeth. The two teams braced themselves. Upon the shrill blast signalling the start of the match, the armies launched themselves headfirst into battle. It was a frighteningly violent feud. Each team clamoured for victory. It was complete bloodshed. The crowd screamed in horror as Hound thrust his camán into the lone boy's face. The boy was knocked off his feet. His lungs struggled to gain back his breath. His hand stretched gingerly up to feel the blood splattering down his face. He placed his fingers upon his nose and grimly twisted it back into place. He brushed off the impending medical assistant and rose to his feet. The congregation cheered animatedly at his revival. He smirked at Hound with a mocking undertone. Hound responded with a growl and both charged for the ball. They slammed into each other creating a deafening sound throughout the stadium.

The clutter of people groaned in consternation as the boy tumbled to the ground for a second time. People scrambled to their feet to watch whether or not he would arise for the second time. If he didn't get up it would be all over for the Cú Chulainn squad. People screamed at him to get up but to no avail. A medical member approached him with caution and bent down to examine him. People gazed restlessly at the scene before suddenly, the boy lurched to his feet. The crowd shrieked ecstatically. The boy rolled his shoulders and stretched his bruised legs. He gathered up his stick before the referee whistled for play to continue. The lone boy battled with a new determination. His actions were tenacious and dogged. He read the other players and combined a strategy to bring down their barriers. His plan was flourishing until he came head to head with his competitor Hound. Hound sneered at him and threw out his club to gather the sliotar. The boy crashed his own camán at the same time against Hound's stick. They began their mighty battle. It was as if the other players were of no consequence to the match.

Unexpectedly, the boy gathered up the sliotar and struck it with a flash. Hound choked as the sliotar shot at his throat. The isolated boy looked on in disbelief as Hound crashed to the ground with a thump. He did not get up.

The lone boy gathered up the sliotar and with a deep breath, he hurled it over the bar. The crowd arose from their seat as the umpire confirmed the point's authenticity. The stadium erupted with screams of delight at the team's victory. The Cú Chulainn members raced towards the boys and with the help of their supporters, they raised him up into the air and began chanting his name, "SÉTANTA, SÉTANTA, SÉTANTA..."

The sound echoed throughout the stadium and Sétanta felt his heart burst with pride. His face glistened with tears. He had gone through hell and back for this victory and it felt sweet to be able to lift the trophy in front of his fellow teammates and community. He had defeated the Culainn team and its sinister frontman; Hound. He had become a hero, a legend.