

Runner-Up Junior Category
Órlaith Ní Dhubhsláine
Gaelcholaiste Chill Dara, Naas, Co Kildare.

The Sport Of It All

It was sweltering hot and humid. I could feel the heaviness of the moisture in the air weighing down on me and seeping through my jersey. A bead of sweat found its way down my neck and trickled down my spine. The air was filled with the sweet, earthy, summery scent of the Wexford grass freshly cut to perfection. Cut especially for this day, the final of the All-Ireland Féile na nGael 2017. The sun blazed down from the cloudless azure sky. The morning mist that hung above the land like a soft duvet burnt away by the blazing sun. The breeze rolled over us in waves having no effect as it was the same stifling, humid air that surrounded us. We made our way to the dressing rooms, staying in the shade trying to avoid the incandescent, hot, yellow ball that shone down on us.

What felt like days was spent inside that dressing room in Ferns, everyone avoiding the same thing, afraid of the consequences that it would have, speaking of anything else. We didn't want the nerves to kick in, but the butterflies were already haunting us creating a nervous energy that couldn't be dampened. Away from the busy, toxic atmosphere outside we were imprisoned in that dressing room, kept occupied with ice baths for our feet. As cooling and refreshing as they were, cooling our nerves was something that couldn't be done.

We had worked all year for this. We had survived many nights out in the rain, hail and snow, everything the sky had thrown at us. We had pushed ahead, the want for this day enough to motivate us. Enough to drag us away from the warmth at home out onto the hard, unforgiving, floodlit ground at the back of Naas GAA, down on the canal pitch. Extra training sessions, fitness coaches, skills coaches, everything built up to this day.

Sun cream was applied in desperate attempts to save our skin from the inferno in the sky. It was put everywhere, not above our eyes though unless we were trying to sabotage our own game as it would drip into our eyes with the sweat that rolled down our faces that caused enough problems on its own. Vaseline in our eyebrows stopped the sweat from dripping into our eyes and blinding us during the game.

Blood was pumping, and hearts were racing as we started a light jog to warm up our muscles, desperate to block out the noise and the crowds around us. We warmed up, getting the adrenaline going, nervous exhilaration settling over the team like a mist. Not a word was spoken as we concentrated on the task ahead; we brought the team into a huddle and the coaches gave a few words, but there was nothing to be said except; '*Do we want this?*'. There was no doubt about the answer to that, the tension and passion extremely palpable in the '*YEEEESSSS*' that followed. '*1, 2, 3, NAAS*'. This was it; the most important match we had played yet.

The feeling as that whistle blew was like no other, we were subjects of the game now. We fought to be first to every ball, to win every ball, to be better than the other side, and to do the job we set out to do. The blocks of wood shaped and smoothed, in our hands felt comfortable, as they connected with the sliotar sending it soaring past the unfortunate goalie into the back of the net or between the two poles sticking up from either end. The scores racked up for Naas and Salthill, no let-up in the effort and concentration put into every ball! Relief coursed through our veins when the Salthill girls sent the sliotar curving off to the side, the umpires hand waving it wide. Ecstatic roars when our ball hit the bottom of the net, racking up another three points



for us, while the supporters went wild giving us the extra drive to push for the win for the last three minutes. That's all that was left between us and the victory, all we had to do was win.

The club crest on the jerseys worn with pride. The people who travelled far and wide to make sure that the sideline was not silent. Our families who supported us through it all and travelled with us. The wonderful and dedicated people who trained us hard and who were as thrilled with our wins as we were and as agonized by our losses. The incredibly talented girls who ran hard together, rose high into the air to pluck ball from the sky, fought for every ball, supported each other and played alongside each other, the team that would be friends for life. We did it for every one of them, we left everything out on that pitch, the blood, the tears, the sweat, the frustration. Everything except the silverware.

Two sharp blasts and one long blast of the whistle signalled full time as the jubilant feeling flooded through us like water breaking through a dam. Everyone rushed onto the pitch rejoicing and crying in delight. Never to be forgotten though was the sight of the devastated Salthill girls, we understood what they felt as we have been in their position many a time before. It could be us, it could be them – the beauty, the tragedy, the ecstasy, just a bounce, just a puck of the sliothar, the tears, the smiles, the handshakes, the sport of it all, the heart of who we are.