

# Tribune Sport



Gort's Jason Grealish prepares to strike as Portumna's Leo Smith closes in during Sunday's Galway hurling final at Kerry Park. PHOTO: ENDAN COONE.

## GRITTY GORT

South Galway men prove their mettle again in explosive finish to county final

DARA BRADLEY

THERE was a collective gasp of 'uh oh, we're in trouble' from the Gort contingent at Kerry Park on Sunday when Portumna drew level with a goal three minutes from full time. The sense of impending doom was palpable.

Gort, who had done most of the hurling up to that point, had surrendered the momentum. Portumna, like true champions, had recovered and looked like they'd power on to retain their crown.

Gort players were momentarily warped by shivers down their spines; a sinking feeling of dread - 'have we let this slip?' - when Kevin 'Chunky' Hayes bagged the Portumna goal. The fear was only fleeting.

At that stage, with the winning post in sight, you'd have put your house on the experienced heads of Portumna to guide them home, grind it out. Instead, it

was Gort who finished strongest. The South Galway men's response was instant. And it was decisive.

Substitute Wayne Walstr's crucial scrappy goal immediately from the next puck-out killed all momentum and impetus Hayes' goal had given Portumna. Gort were back in the driving seat; there was no stopping them now. A second goal minutes later sealed the deal. Albert Mullins hooked full-back Conor O'Hare, whose clearance only went as far as Gerard Quinn. The dead-ball specialist fed it back to the unmarked Mullins who found the net. The scoreboard read 2-13 to 1-10. Game over.

It was a rip-roaring end to a surprisingly entertaining encounter, given the time of year and heavy underfoot conditions. It was fitting that the insurance score stemmed from persistence and hard work, because it was those characteristics that carried Gort over the line.

Dogged work-rate was a fea-

ture throughout. Remember early on, a quick turn of pace from full-forward Richie Cummins, kept the ball from going wide over the end-line. From the next play, captain Greg Lally scored an inspirational point to put Gort 4-3 up midway through

For the second time in four years, they've dethroned the Galway and All-Ireland champions in a county final

the first half. It was easier for Cummins to let it go but Gort are different animals this year, defined by perseverance, teamwork and a strong work ethic.

It was the same for two of their next four scores - Jason Grealish hooked Ollie Canning in

the lead-up to a converted free from Gerard Quinn, and Gerard O'Donoghue hooked Gareth Heagney, which again led to a free that was converted by Quinn.

That left it double scores, 0-8 to 0-4. Both sides scored a point apiece before half-time and though Gort would have been pleased to be leading by four, it should have been more.

It just took too long for Portumna to get into a rhythm; they weren't allowed the space to play.

In defence Gareth Heagney, Peter Smith, Martin Dolphin and Eoin Lynch were tidy and cleared a huge amount of ball. Damien Hayes was lively soon after the break when he took the battle to Gort with a pair of points. Ollie Canning fought the good fight. Portumna's best player on show, Joe Canning, as always, was a constant threat even allowing for a few missed frees and sidelines.

The game's big turning point,

apart from the goals, came right after the restart when Joe Canning's goal-bound free, from over 21-yards out, was saved by 'keeper Gavin Lally, and cleared by Aidan Harte. The save had as big a psychological impact on Gort as a goal would have had on Portumna - it lifted the entire team.

Gort were winning most of the duals and had mastered the aerial warfare with Jason Grealish (first-half) and Paul Killilea all through, particularly prominent in winning puck-outs in the air. In attack, Richie Cummins, although he spurned one or two goal chances, was razor sharp and kept the Portumna defence honest. Gerard O'Donoghue had his moments, and Quinn was reliable from placed-balls, landing seven frees in total. Gort's half-back line was outstanding. Sylvie Og Linnane had a powerful second-half and captain Greg Lally held firm in the centre throughout, as well as tagging on two scores.

Aidan Harte, is what his surname suggests - the heart of the defence, and indeed the team. He did a mighty job of containing Joe Canning, caught and cleared some amount of ball, scored an inspirational point and had a general all round positive influence on proceedings. Harte, the Galway player, just relishes playing in county finals for Gort, and seems to come into his own in them - the Bridge Street man was the official best player on show in the 2011 final, and on Sunday, he was, by a long stretch, man of the match again.

Portumna went down fighting - like true champions. But Gort deserved the win. No doubt about that. For the second time in four years, they've dethroned the Galway and All-Ireland champions in a county final. They've beaten the best club team in the country, and based on this performance, Gort have the wherewithal to go on and become the best in the country in the Spring.

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## GALWAY SENIOR HURLING FINAL

**Late goals from Walsh and Mullins do the trick for driven challengers**

GORT	2-13
PORTUMNA	1-10

STEPHEN GLENNON  
AT KENNY PARK

TWO late goals from Wayne Walsh and Albert Mullins had the people of Gort 'Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree' as the club secured their seventh county senior hurling title with victory over reigning champions Portumna in a festive season cracker at Kenny Park, Athenry on Sunday.

In one of the most explosive finishes to a county senior final in many a year, three goals were netted in the final two minutes of normal time with, decisively, Gerry Spelman's charges registering two of those through substitute Walsh and former Galway minor Mullins.

In truth, it was no more than Gort deserved given Portumna, aside from taken the lead for the one and only time through a Joe Canning free in the third minute, never had their noses in front again for the remainder of the 60 plus minutes of action.

Indeed, even when the All-Ireland club holders rallied in the second half - Kevin Hayes pouncing for a 58th minute goal that would have broken a lesser team - Gort responded within 30 seconds through 48th minute substitute Walsh in a goalmouth scramble that knocked the earth off its axis.

For in hurling terms, that's what it felt like. This was seismic. Portumna - arguably the 'invincibles' of Galway GAA - were rattled to their very core... so much so, that just over a minute later, they conceded a second in a passage of play that summed up what Gort brought to this contest.

That was intensity, hunger and desire. This time, Mullins exemplified all those attributes, working hard to get a hook in on Portumna full-back Conor O'Hare whose spoiled clearance was picked up by Gerry Quinn. He ran with the moment and off-loaded to Mullins who rounded the keeper to seal the win and secure a second county senior title for the club in four years.

There was barely time to draw a breath. Canning did have a close range free late on in injury-time. He blazed his effort wide although in his frustration



# IT'S GORT'S

he disputed this with the umpire, earning him a booking for his troubles. Soon after referee Christy Browne blew the final whistle.

**In the 10 minutes prior to the interval, Gort turned the proverbial screw to outscore the All-Ireland champions by four points to one**

The championship may have been one of the most drawn out in history but its whirlwind conclusion certainly put the definitive full-stop to it. Okay, the hurling wasn't always of the highest quality - the heavy underfoot conditions sucked a great deal of the pace out of it - but there was huge commitment from both sides and the closing minutes alone were worth the admission fee.

Really, Gort, from early on, set the agenda through their work-rate and being aggressive under the puck-out. In this re-

spect, the exertions of Paul Killilea were hugely influential, with the half-forward - almost playing the role of a midfielder - finishing as their top primary ball winner.

Indeed, Gort's play to concede the short puck-out to Portumna in favour of drawing their half-forwards deeper was a brave one but it paid dividends, particularly in closing down the space around Portumna danger men Canning, Damien Hayes and an out-of-sorts Ronan O'Meara.

O'Meara, who had a scintillating campaign right up to the enforced break ensuing from the Turroughmore controversy, was not the only one struggling to get to the pitch of the contest, with the returning Andy Smith from injury also a pale shadow of himself.

In Portumna's 2013 county final victory over Loughrea, Smith hit 1-4 from play in a man of the match performance but on Sunday he seemed unable to bounce back from a problematic knee injury that has hampered him for the best part of their campaign.

In contrast, Gort's Jason Grealish was also returning after an



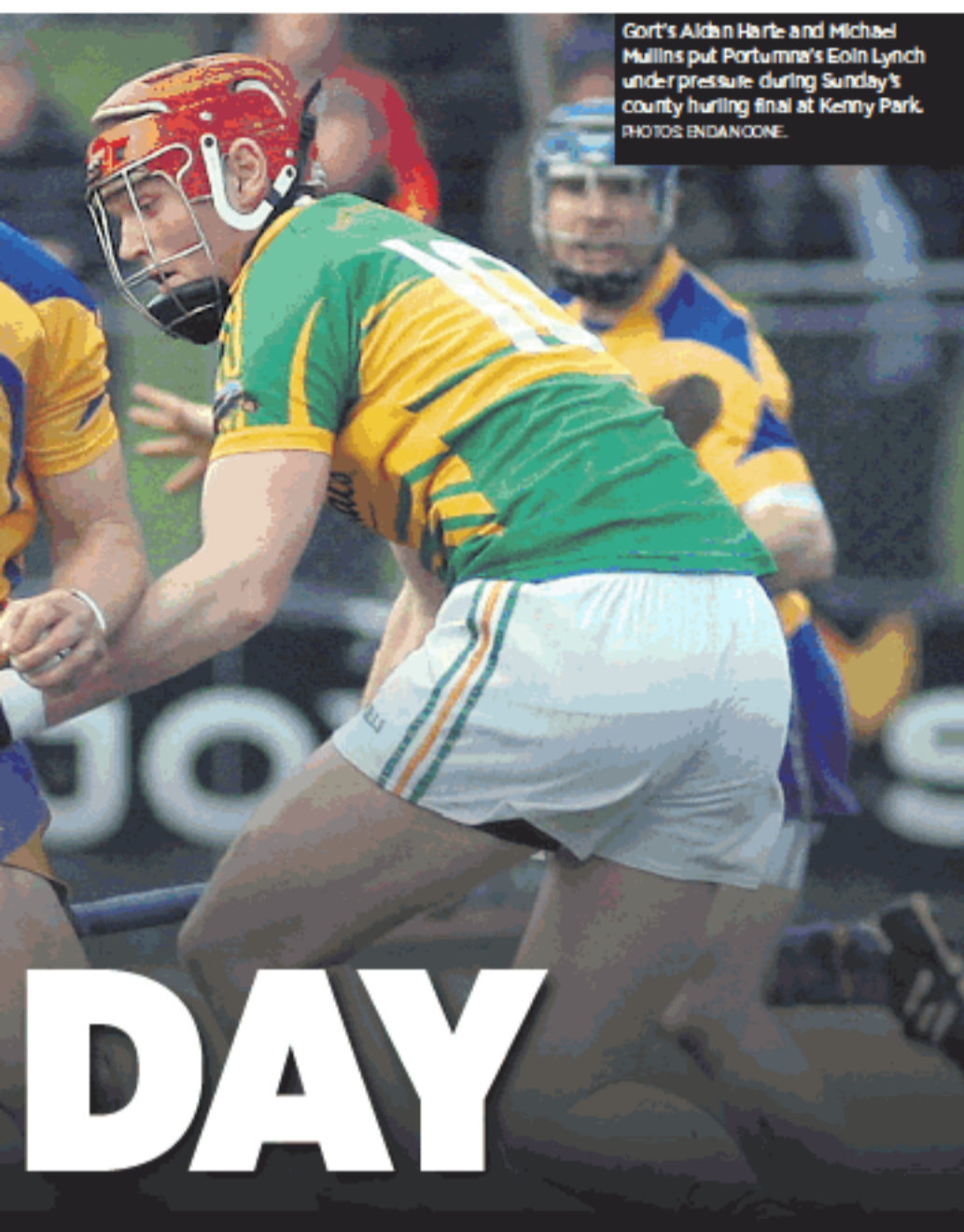
Gort's Richard Cummins aims for goal despite the attentions of Portumna's Gareth Heagney

enforced absence but, despite having very little game time under his belt, he contributed handsomely over the 46 minutes he was on the field. It was a brave call to give Grealish the

nod over the hard-working Niall Forde but he repaid the management's faith with a fine display.

All over the park though, there was a fantastic sense of

purpose about Gort and, consequently, they had put themselves in a strong position when leading 0-9 to 0-5 at half-time. As noted, Portumna had taken the lead with a free in the early



Gort's Aidan Harte and Michael Mullins put Portumna's Eoin Lynch under pressure during Sunday's county hurling final at Kenny Park. PHOTOS: ENDAN COONE.

# DAY



Gort's brothers Michael and Albert Mullins celebrate after their county final victory over Portumna at Kenny Park on Sunday.



Portumna's Damien Hayes tries to break free from Gort's Greg Lally at Kenny Park

get. It could have been better for Gort had a Cummins effort on goal not flew wide of Joe Keane's post but, as it was, they had to be content with their lot at the break. Portumna's only score in this time was a 27th minute Canning free after Michael Cummins was pulled for a throw ball. At any rate, it was still a difficult one to call at the midway mark although it was felt there would be a kick in Portumna. Re-jigging the side - most notably, Canning going to midfield and Damien Hayes and Kevin Hayes re-deployed at centre and full-forward respectively - they rallied.

From the throw-in, they went after Gort as Eoin Lynch was hauled down for a 20-metre free. Canning had a go at it but Gort custodian Gavin Lally stood tall to the strike before Harte gobbled up the loose ball and cleared the lines.

Still, two Damien Hayes points quickly followed to inject new life into their endeavours and, while Quinn kept the scoreboard ticking over for Gort with two frees, points from captain Ollie Canning and two Canning frees had Portumna back to within one, 0-10 to 0-11 by the 48th minute.

By now, Gort were opening up the bench - Conor Helebert, goalscorer Walsh and Niall Forde were all introduced over the ensuing minutes - and the fresh legs certainly added something to their challenge.

Quinn hit two frees, following good work from Harte and Richie Cummins, and with three minutes remaining Gerry Spelman's men were 0-13 to 0-10 to the good. It was just a matter of holding on now.

However, as they have done so many times in the past, when a goal chance presented itself, Portumna had the uncanny ability to take it, as they showed against Loughrea and Craugh-

well in the quarter-final and semi-final respectively.

Once again, you could argue there was an element of good fortune about Kevin Hayes' 58 minute score but, regardless, credit has to go to Ollie Canning for being under the posts when Niall Hayes effort came back off the upright and to Kevin Hayes for being in position to bat his captain's handpass to the net.

With the blood pumping through Portumna's veins following the goal - and the fixture tied up on level terms for the fourth time with just two minutes remaining - the betting in running had to be favouring a Portumna victory or, even a draw and a return, perhaps, to the same venue four days before Christmas.

Gort had other ideas and in the space of 90 seconds or so they had the sliotar in the Portumna net not once but twice. It was a remarkable conclusion to a contest that had struggled for long parts to break away from the shackles of mediocrity, the underfoot conditions and Winer hurling.

Ultimately, what this came down to was that more of Gort's players performed nearer their maximum on the day. Goalkeeper Gavin Lally was solid while the defence - ably led by Harte and captain Greg Lally - ensured Portumna posted up their lowest championship tally of 2014.

Greath and, to a lesser extent, Sean Forde won the midfield battle while up front Killilea - a strong contender for the man of the match award - got through a huge amount of work between the two 45s along with the Mullins brothers, the impressive Albert and Michael.

Inside, the trio of O'Donoghue, Cummins and freetaker Quinn always looked a threat while the substitutes, especially Conor Helebert and Wayne Walsh, also made telling

contributions when introduced.

Portumna did not have that. Yes, they toiled honestly with Gareth Heagney, Eoin Lynch and particularly Martin Dolphin doing their best to keep things tight at the back but going forward they lacked the spark to ignite them.

Damien Hayes - although doing his best to rally the troops in the second period - the Smiths, Leo and Andy, Kevin Hayes, although taking his goal brilliantly, and Ollie Canning never hit the heights they reached earlier in the year.

SHC top scorer Joe Canning, their most prominent player in terms of possessions in attack, had a mixed game, tallying six points (four from frees) but wasting too much from dead ball situations. That his marker, Harte, received the man of the match accolade highlighted what a frustrating afternoon it was for him personally.

At any rate, the tale of the elongated 2014 senior championship has finally ended with Gort Inse Guaire celebrating a very 'Happy Christmas'. After that, they'll turn their attention to Henry Shefflin and Kilkenny's Ballytaole Shamrocks in the All-Ireland series - no doubt eager to ensure 2015 will be a 'Happy New Year' in the South Galway town as well.

**Gort:** Gavin Lally; T. Linnane, M. McMahon, M. Cummins; A. Harte (0-1), Greg Lally (0-2, 0-1 free); S. Óg Linnane; S. Forde; J. Greath; M. Mullins; A. Mullins (1-0), R. Killilea (0-1); G. O'Donoghue, R. Cummins (0-2), G. Quinn (0-7, all frees). Subs: C. Helebert for J. Greath (46 mins); W. Walsh (1-0) for G. O'Donoghue (48 mins); N. Forde for S. Forde (54 mins).

**Portumna:** J. Keane; G. Heagney, C. O'Hara, P. Smith; O. Tracy, M. Dolphin, E. Lynch; L. Smith, D. Hayes (0-2); K. Hayes (1-0), O. Canning (0-1), J. Canning (0-6, 0-4 frees); N. Hayes, R. O'Meara (0-1), A. Smith. Subs: R. Dolphin for O'Meara (55 mins). Referee: C. Brown.

stages but, thereafter, Gort dictated proceedings.

Two points from Richie Cummins nudged them in front before Canning (2) and O'Meara traded points with hugely influ-

ential centre-back Greg Lally - free and play - and Gerry Quinn (free) over a 10-minute spell.

However, in the 10 minutes prior to the interval, Gort turned the proverbial screw to

outscore the All-Ireland champions by four points to one, with man of the match Aidan Harte, Paul Killilea - stealing a short Portumna puck-out - and Quinn (two frees) hitting the tar-