

## **Lámh Dhearg 0-09 v Magherafelt O'Donovan Rossa 0-08**

A POINT two minutes into injury time from Karl Maxwell ensured Lámh Dhearg became the first Antrim winners of the Ulster Minor Club tournament at St Paul's since the host club lifted the title back in 1986.

Maxwell was introduced as a second half substitute but ensured he was the hero as he sensibly fired over when put through by Gerard Slane to edge the Hannahstown men ahead during a frenetic finish in which six minutes of added time were played. The game itself was played on an almost frozen pitch but went ahead and with bright sunshine and little wind on this cool January Saturday, conditions were perfect for a final that was played in front of a large and vociferous crowd.

While Lámh Dhearg may have been able to dominate and almost do as they pleased against previous opponents in this competition, there was to be no repeat as they faced a tenacious Magherafelt side that had title aspirations of their own. Indeed, the Derry men were strong in the tackle and forced countless turnovers when their opponents had possession.

They had the ability to attack on the break at pace and will rue some guilt-edged opportunities for simple points that were sent wide. While they hit three less wides than the West Belfast club (five to Lámh Dhearg's eight), half of their misses were from very achievable positions and in the end this was to prove decisive.

Playing towards the Shaws Road goal in the opening period, Lámh Dhearg drew first blood when Mark McGarry curled over a beauty when he advanced up the right wing. While both sides had been in fine goal scoring form during their respective marches to this final, there was to be no repeat on this occasion.

Chances were at a premium but Magherafelt had the best opportunity on six minutes when Fergal Duffin off-loaded to the onrushing Stephen McGuckian who blasted for goal only for his shot to be brilliantly tipped around the post by Gerard McKeown.

The Oak Leaf lads did level on nine minutes through a Conor Kearns point and this nip and tuck nature was to be the theme of the game as 15 minutes later the sides found themselves locked at 0-3 thanks to two frees from Lámh Dhearg's Ryan Murray with Magherafelt's scores coming from Kearns and Duffin.

The West Belfast lads enjoyed the upper hand for the remainder of the half and a breathtaking score from Murray and a shot from Matthew Lappin, that was tipped over by Magherafelt goalkeeper Conor McLarnon, gave them a two-point lead. An injury time free from Chris Spears proved the last kick of the half as Lámh Dhearg went in at the break 0-5 to 0-4 ahead.

If the first half was tense, the second proved heart in the mouth stuff as both sides seemed poised to kick on and win at various stages. Lámh Dhearg were first to look

like winners when they hit the first two scores through Murray and Matthew McKiernan to go three ahead on 38 minutes, but this was to be their last score until injury time.

From this point, Magherafelt stepped up a gear and began to dominate around their midfield and half back line. Two quick scores from Chris Spiers and Conor Kearns on 42 and 44 minutes left the minimum between the teams yet again, but while they had all the momentum they couldn't translate this on the scoreboard.

The south Derry boys eventually levelled through a Spiers free with five minutes to play and just when it seemed they would go on and find a winner, it was Lámh Dhearg who dug deep and began to find their attacking rhythm once again. Stephen Tully first had a chance to edge his team in front from a long range free on 60 minutes but his shot sailed wide, and just as everyone was preparing for extra time, up popped Maxwell to drive over.

The Hannahstown men were able to hang on for the remaining minutes and the final whistle was greeted with scenes of sheer delirium as Lámh Dhearg were confirmed champions.

Lámh Dhearg: G McKeown, C Monaghan, A Caulfield, C McIlvenny, M McGarry (0-1), D Stranney, M Hynes (0-1), D Lynch, S Tully, J Lindsay, G Slane, M Jordan, R Murray (0-4, 3 frees), M McKiernan (0-1), M Lappin (0-1). Subs K Maxwell (0-1) for M Jordan (38 minutes), K Quinn for M Lappin (47 minutes).

Magherafelt: C McLarnon, P O'Kane, P Quinn, P Kielt, N Higgins, M Kerr, F Duffin (0-1), B Atchinson, P McErlain, F Quinn, S McGuckian, C Kearns (0-4, 2 frees), E McLaughlin, S Heavoran, C Spiers (0-3, 3 frees). Subs: P McCusker for S Heavoran (half-time), C Rafferty for P Kielt (53 minutes), R Ferris for B Atchinson (58 minutes).

Referee: Jimmy White (Donegal)

## Reaction

By David Mohan

Lámh Dhearg's minors ensured Antrim's stock in the football world continued to rise as they defeated Magherafelt 0-9 to 0-8 in the final of the Ulster Tournament at St Paul's on Saturday.

Karl Maxwell was the hero of the hour as he fired over an injury time winner after a hard-fought and absorbing contest to send everyone associated with the Hannahstown club into ecstasy.

"I'm almost speechless which is exceptionally difficult for me," said an emotional team mentor Terry McCrudden following the heart-stopping victory.

"I knew the match was going to be tough. By God Magherafelt put it up to us there today. They are a superb team – well drilled, well coached, well everything.

"Frankie (Fitzsimons) and I knew it was going to be a tough game and so it proved but we had belief the whole way through.

“We believed in our lads that they were going to do it and by God they did it.”  
McCrudden went on to praise the spirit and character of his team, which has developed into something special over the years.

“It was a superb performance all over the pitch. I really take my hat off to the Magherafelt boys. They scored a lot of goals in the competition and we scored a lot of goals, but the dominating factor today was that nobody was going to score a goal,” added Terry.

“They actually played like us in that their work-rate is fantastic. Frankie and I knew from day one that we had a special team with these lads and thank God we got there.

“This is an absolutely special day for us in our club – I just can’t wait to get up the hill (to Lámh Dhearg’s clubrooms).

“We were actually poor from frees the whole way through the competition but Ryan Murray stepped up and knocked a few really important ones over, but it was just so tight that it could have went any way. To be honest we just got a few breaks there near the end and took our chance.”

While it was a superb team performance from Lámh Dhearg, the display was epitomised by team captain Declan Stranney who led by example and collected the man-of-the-match award.

The UUI student said the victory was of huge significance for everyone at the club and while he was pleasantly surprised to be awarded the final’s star player, the main concern was to win the game.

“This is unbelievable, I’m absolutely elated. The club has been waiting for this for 18 years or more so everyone is just over the moon,” said the centre back.

“That was a surprise as I didn’t think I would have got man-of-the-match because a lot of people played well there. (Declan) Lynch, (Stephen) Tully, (Michael) Hynesy, all the boys played well so I’m surprised but I really don’t care about that - I’m just glad that we won.

“We said at half-time that we had to try and get back because we were getting hit on the counter-attack in the first half. So we set out to sit back and not to let them run at us and it worked out because we got the result in the end so we are happy enough.”