



Hallowed turf: Croke Park, Dublin, calm before the storm of the final rounds of the All-Ireland Senior Championships. Hill 16 (the terraces) are to the right. The glow from heat lamps above the grass in front of the goal can be seen clearly.

GAME ON for All-Ireland



Jill Worrall

Pat, the bouncer in one of Dublin's smallest bars, leaned over the balcony in the Confession Box pub.

"I've found the Kerry flag," he called down, triumphantly; I saw a brief flutter of green and gold.

A man of generous proportions, Pat stomped down the wooden stairs, through the tiny bar and out on to Marlborough St to hoist the flag.

It joined the deep blue colours of County Cavan already hanging in the limp, uncharacteristically humid, air of a Dublin summer's day.

This was the quarterfinals weekend of the Gaelic Athletic Association's (GAA) All-Ireland Senior Championship; think the Gaelic football equivalent of the final knockout rounds of the Super Rugby, but with more passion than even a dyed-in-the-wool Crusaders' fan can muster, a lot more Guinness and about 50,000 more spectators.

Kerry, who have dominated the championship for years (although they are not the current titleholders), were playing underdogs Cavan; and Donegal, the surprise victors last year, would meet Mayo.

I was in the stands to watch the Dubs (Dublin) trounce Cork and to catch the tail end of County Tyrone and Monaghan.

So, I knew what I was in for – an afternoon in the fourth-largest stadium in Europe watching a sport, that is much, much more than just a game. Gaelic football is about regional pride, the age-old tussle between city and countryside, the north against the south, the wilder west pitted against the east; it's pinning your colours to your county's mast.

But Gaelic football (and its counterpart, hurling) is interwoven with national identity. The Gaelic language lives on here, Kerry is Ciarrai and Donegal is Dun Na nGall for example. This is a physical expression of the feeling of apartness that you find on this most western edge of Europe – essentially this is about being unequivocally, cut-me-and-I-bleed-green, Irish.

I'd seen Gaelic football on television so I understood a little of the complexities of a game that seems to meld aspects of rugby, league, football and even a hint of basketball together in a fast, free-flowing game that is quintessentially Irish.

Croke Park can hold more than 82,000 spectators; while covered stands wrap around three sides of the pitch, the fourth has been kept as terraces, known as Hill 16. These are the domain of the most impassioned supporters for whom sitting in the stands would be akin to reclining in an armchair on the sidelines.

Hill 16 is mostly the domain of the Irish man and a robust approach to the English language. So it wasn't really a surprise that while my Kerryman escort headed for the terraces, I was ever so politely sent to the relatively refined air of the Hogan Stand.

However, my first sight of the velvety hallowed turf of Croke Park was not from ground level but from 44 metres above it. For the last year or so Croke Park has offered those with a reasonable head for heights the Skyline Tour – 90 minutes spent tethered to a safety wire while walk-

ing around the roof, something that appeals to more than sports aficionados. From the roof there is a 360-degree view of Dublin – the Guinness Brewery, the Jamieson distillery and lesser landmarks (cathedrals, Trinity College, the port).

I felt remarkably relaxed, until we reached a section of walkway cantilevered almost directly above the pitch.

Below us, the grass had been groomed to emerald perfection, but clearly the groundsmen were still trying to coax that extra burst of luxuriance from the turf.

Despite the fact that Ireland had been experiencing something of a heatwave (some locals reckoned it was the first time in seven years they'd been to the beach to actually swim or sunbathe) the groundsmen were taking no chances – heat lamps were suspended over the grass in front of the southern end goalposts.

The grass was still looking in remarkably fine condition the following afternoon when I took my seat near the goal posts. In the company of a bunch of avid Kerry supporters we'd walked to the stadium, calling in en route at several pubs as is the tradition on match day.

At the last hotel, patrons had spilled out on to the pavement, clutching plastic beakers of beer, but intriguingly, proper glasses of Guinness (being regarded as a kind of alcoholic version of holy water, Guinness is accorded special treatment).

Across the road, vendors were selling the last of their flags, hats and scarves.

The massive concrete wall of Croke Park loomed above us. Minivans and buses bedecked with team colours lined the

phrase All Ireland would be a reality.

The teams emerged from the tunnel, Cavan to the biggest cheer. This county on the border with Northern Ireland has won the Sam Maguire Cup, known simply as Sam, just five times, the last in 1952, and hadn't beaten Kerry in the championships since 1947.

Their supporters wore the badge of underdog with honour. What else to do when faced with Kerry who have taken Sam home more times than anyone else (36), with their closest rivals Dublin having won it 23 times.

So this was a big day out for Cavan, both the team and their fans. The Kingdom of Kerry (Kerry's the only Irish county to carry that title) take things more in their stride.

They've made at least the quarterfinals every year since 2001 so their fans tend to



Bearing down: A high-flying Kerryman putting pressure on the Cavan defence during the quarterfinal clash. Photo: INPHO

GAA, players score single points by kicking over the post, but three points for a goal into the net beneath. The result is a double scoring system that requires constant mental arithmetic to work out who's winning.

If it wasn't enough to have a blend of rugby and football, things get even more complex. The ball is round (and slightly smaller than in soccer) and can be carried, kicked, bounced, hand passed and "soloed" (where it is dropped, toe-kicked and then caught in the hands).

There is no tackling (but shoulder barging is permitted) and no offside. With no scrums, lineouts or mauls, the game moves fast and furious.

Around me, fans from both sides screamed encouragement, and more than the occasional "Feck, the feck was THAT?" at their players, along with a lilting stream of Kerry-accented invective at the ref for missing a Cavan transgression.

Everyone seemed to be on first-name terms with the whole team and with those including Donnchadh, Colm, Kieran, Declan, Brendan and Ronan the players could really only have been Irish.

If you'd had the misfortune to want to play GAA and been inexplicably christened George or Henry, I suspect a name change could almost be compulsory.

Cavan's vocal fans, initially buoyed by their side's hiss-and-a-roar beginning, were soon to be deflated as Kerry scored nine points in a row and at halftime were leading 0-11 to Cavan's 0-2 (no-one had scored any three-point goals in the net, hence the zero scores for goals).

In the second half, Kerry seemed to mentally go home early and the Cavan fans around me took heart. The young woman next to me yelled instructions to Killian and Fargal et al. I asked her if she knew them personally. "No, not at all but they're ours," she replied.

On the other side, a Kerry woman shared her hot chips with me and beamed the substituting of the No 12 Donnchadh Walsh halfway through the second half. "Again!" she said disgustedly. These women knew their stuff.

Despite Cavan's second-half comeback Kerry emerged victors 0-15 0-9. Perversely, Cavan's fans seemed remarkably upbeat. But after all they'd not been disgraced.

Kerry's fans, although prepared of course, to celebrate the win with a drink or five, knew the big test was still to come – the old foe, Dublin, awaited in the semifinal. Celebrations were restrained, Kerry-men in particular are not prone to overt displays of emotion.

Later that evening, after a slow walk back through the streets of Dublin and some dispassionate analysis over the game at various watering holes en route, we arrived back at the Confession Box.

The overwhelmingly pro-Dublin patrons and staff were magnanimous in their congratulations to my friend from Kerry.

"The semi could be yours," said a Dub, charmingly insincerely. "Oh, I think it might be Dublin's year," replied my friend, equally disingenuously "we're not what we were."

The musicians in the corner launched into a rousing rendition of Dublin's own *Dirty Old Town*. As the last chords faded away the Kerryman in green and gold raised his glass "Up the Kingdom!"

Kerry were due to meet Dublin in the semifinal early this morning, NZ time, in front of a capacity crowd of 82,300. Jill's Skyline Tour was courtesy of Tourism Ireland; for the rest she was an informal guest of the supporters of the Kingdom of Kerry team.



Hope springs: Cavan flags waving wildly after the underdogs briefly hit the lead against the Kingdom of Kerry.

streets. Getting to the quarterfinals can be the pinnacle for some counties, so making the pilgrimage to Croke Park is a must.

Unlike at English football matches, there is no segregation of supporters in Gaelic football. The seating that rises up from the pitch was a swirling sea of green, gold and blue.

A little confusingly for beginners like me, Cork's strip was also gold and green ("They stole ours," muttered my Kerry friend when I inquired as to how two neighbouring counties had ended up with such similar colours).

We stood for the national anthem, in Gaelic of course: Amhran na bhFiann, (Soldiers are we, whose lives are pledged to Ireland). I've never heard this sung other than with heart-felt emotion and more than an underlying hint that one day the

wait until their side reach the semis before they shell out for a bus or train to Dublin from the southwest coast.

The first recorded game of Gaelic football was in 1802 and its governing body was established in 1887. Today the most popular spectator sport in Ireland is still entirely an game. Each players plays for no more than expenses and the honour and glory of representing their county or province.

Cavan struck the first blow, a first point on the board after a kick over the crossbar of the goal posts. The Cavan fans waved their flags deliriously. The supporters of the Kingdom around me sat calm in the knowledge that their men would be unlikely to let them down.

But the kick over the crossbar is where the resemblance to rugby departs. In



In his stride: A Kerry (Ciarrai in Gaelic) supporter resplendent in his county's green and gold and appearing characteristically noncommittal about his team's performance.

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