

## 2 FIELD OF DREAMS

Sunday, 15 July 1984. There were just five minutes left.

The swaying, heaving, seething Tipperary crowd could almost taste the triumph. It had been thirteen long years since their last victory over the old enemy to the south. Many of the schoolchildren now screaming themselves hoarse around Semple Stadium couldn't even remember a time when Tipperary were Munster champions, let alone All-Ireland holders. And yet glory now beckoned – and the sweet intoxication of beating Cork.

Around the ground a slow hum of anticipation began to build – a living, breathing homage to Raymond Smith's famous declaration that there was no sporting cathedral in the world like Thurles on a Munster championship Sunday. Fans tore their eyes away from the pitch to desperately check the time. Not long now. Yet in almost every blue-and-gold stomach a tight knot of icy apprehension defied the logic of time. 'There isn't time for Cork to come back – is there?' A few fans were worried by the thought: Tipperary, after all, had themselves beaten Clare in the semi-final four weeks before, thanks to a last-minute Liam Maher goal after a penalty had been won by Nicky English. Ger Loughnane's Clare were two points up and apparently destined for the Munster final, with the clock running down, when Tipp struck.

But Tipp fans took heart from the sight of the Cork crowd, dozens of whom were now giving up the match for lost and streaming towards their cars and the train station in a bid to beat the traffic. It's a long journey home for any losing team, and no-one wants that journey extended unnecessarily. Tomás Mulcahy, a young Cork forward in his second championship season, noted from the pitch what he thought he'd never

see: Cork fans giving up on a lost game.

Out on the sun-soaked Thurles pitch, Tipperary seemed to tense with the inevitable onset of victory. Tipp had played a barnstorming match and hurled with a fury driven by their burning desire to make sure the home county reached the centenary All-Ireland final, which would be played in Semple Stadium in seven weeks' time – a suitable homage to the town that was the birthplace of the GAA. Cork knew what to expect but were still helpless in the face of the Tipp onslaught. The Cork star Jimmy Barry-Murphy later acknowledged that Tipp had hurled to a degree no-one had thought possible. Tipperary showed scant respect for the fact that Cork were seeking their third All-Ireland appearance in a row and had a team that carefully blended youth and experience. Nicky English had scored a goal on the stroke of half time, and suddenly all Tipperary believed. But try as they might, Tipp just couldn't deliver the *coup de grâce* to Cork as the defending champions tenaciously held on.

The Rebels stubbornly stayed with Tipperary until, in the sixtieth minute, Noel O'Dwyer scored a point from a free that Cork had hotly contested. Minutes later Philip Kennedy fired over a seventy, to the roar of the Tipperary crowd – and then O'Dwyer scored another point, his second of the game. The gap was now four points, and the game was into its last five minutes. Tipperary had breathing space, but there was still time. Cork needed two scores – a goal and a point – to earn a replay; two goals would give them an outright win. They had already scored two goals against the Tipp back line, thanks to two Jimmy Barry-Murphy strikes in the first fifteen minutes – but, more importantly, their own backs had conceded three to the Premier County.

Cork fans screamed in agony as Jimmy Barry-Murphy then narrowly missed with a gilt-edged scoring chance after an astute pass from Kevin Hennessy. The thought that crossed every Cork mind was whether that chance might have been the last of the match. But Cork fans took heart from the fact that Pat Hartnett was hurling like a colossus in midfield. Suddenly the ball broke in midfield; Cork won possession, only for the desperately scrambling Tipp midfield to give away a free. Cork's captain,

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John Fenton, ignored the pressure and nonchalantly slotted over the free; John McIntyre, Tipperary's outstanding centre-back, stood helpless as he watched the sliotar sail straight and true between the uprights. The gap was now down to three points or a single goal – and there were still four minutes left. Cork rallied for one final, exhausted onslaught, and the Tipperary crowd gasped in horror as Cork again won possession.

The ball was fed to Pat Hartnett, who broke free of his marker and drove the ball goalwards. Tipp fans held their breath – then were beginning to scream in relief as the Tipp goalie, John Sheedy, pulled off a brilliant reaction save. But the cheer died in twenty thousand throats as the sliotar ricocheted clear, directly into the path of Tony O'Sullivan. The Piersaigh forward made no mistake and drove the ball into the back of the Tipperary net. He had been brought on only as a substitute for the ailing Tim Crowley, and yet his touch was flawless. As the net bulged, O'Sullivan turned and roared defiance to his team-mates.

Suddenly, Semple Stadium was a madhouse. Cork fans roared their renewed faith, and Tipperary fans held their heads in disbelief. Thousands of Tipp fans desperately willed their side to hold on. Thirteen years of championship agony had suddenly come back to haunt Tipperary like a recurring nightmare. 'Not again!' one fan whispered in horror. Cork fans who minutes before had been streaming to the train suddenly, desperately fought their way back up the steps to watch the unfolding miracle, alerted by the tribal roar of their comrades. In midfield Pat Hartnett was hurling his way into Cork legend. Tipperary simply couldn't win the clean possession they so crucially needed, and the Cork pairing of Fenton and Hartnett was supreme. Fenton got the ball – and missed. Seconds later the ball again came to the Midleton star and, incredibly, he fired wide a second time. Cork fans were now in agony: they couldn't lose now, could they?

Tipperary finally got the ball and drove upfield. Some Cork fans put their hands over their faces, unable to watch. The ball broke to Michael Doyle, Tipperary's hard-working forward, and he flicked it across the Cork goal from the left touchline. Nicky English and Donie O'Connell raced to try and meet it while Ger Cunningham in the Cork goal braced himself for a

potential match-deciding shot. But Denis Mulcahy – shifted to full-back by the Cork mentors minutes earlier in a bid to staunch the Tipp flood – coolly intercepted. The Cork fans screamed in relief as Tipp fans watched transfixed, unable to comprehend the drama unfolding before them. Mulcahy cleared, and the ball fell to the racing Tony O’Sullivan. The Cork forward was clear of his marker and, turning towards the Tipp goal, instantly took his shot, his hurley carving a graceful arc in the summer air.

More than fifty thousand people held their breath as the sliotar sped goalwards. Cork fans instinctively knew it was straight and true, but Tipp fans prayed it wouldn’t make the distance. But there was still time for Tipperary to equalise, even if it was a point, the Premier County faithful desperately thought. The ball agonisingly began to fall short, and John Sheedy made a despairing attempt to prevent the score and keep the match even. He flailed in an effort to block the sliotar – and suddenly the ball had broken free, back into play, without a point being scored.

The Tipperary backs seemed to move in slow motion to clear a danger they were suddenly, terrifyingly aware of. And then the smallest man on the field moved with the speed of a rattlesnake. Seánie O’Leary spun and, with a short-handed action, impudently drove the ball into the net before Sheedy could readjust his feet to react and save.

The Youghal forward checked that the ball had indeed flown true before turning and jogging back outfield, his arms raised in gleeful triumph, his face a mask of ecstasy. Later O’Leary would admit that he thought the sliotar would clear the crossbar. ‘I thought it was going over, but when the goalkeeper brought it down and it fell right into my path, I slapped it into the back of the net.’ Within seconds of O’Leary turning to trot back from the Tipp goal he was swamped by delirious colleagues. Pat Hartnett, realising there was still time for a Tipperary puck-out, roared at his team-mates to get back into position, dragging several by the jersey. Around the stadium, fifty thousand fans were now going berserk.

John Sheedy looked shell-shocked as Tipperary tried to regroup for one final, despairing, courageous attempt to save the game and their cherished centenary All-Ireland dreams. But the Cork midfield was ruthless.

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Tipperary scrambled for clean possession, but the ball broke again to a red shirt. It was too much for some Tipperary fans to watch. The sliotar was quickly fed to Fenton, and he made no mistake, clinically driving over his seventh point of the game. From four points down only five minutes before, Cork were now four points ahead. When John Moore of Waterford, refereeing his first Munster championship final, blew his whistle seconds later, the Cork players joined their fans in a frenzy of celebration. The exhaustion of the players was forgotten in the exuberance of the moment. Around Semple's hallowed turf, Tipperary players slumped onto the sod. Several held their head in their hands, almost disbelieving what had just happened. The Cork joy was sweetened by the realisation that Kilkenny – who had beaten them in the previous two All-Ireland finals – had already lost their crown to a Tony Doran-inspired Wexford.

Cork had won the centenary Munster championship by a 4-15 to 3-14 score. But scorelines don't tell much of blood and thunder, skill and courage. The fifty thousand fans flooding out of Semple Stadium knew that they had witnessed what was arguably the greatest Munster final of modern times. Many would come to regard it as one of the greatest games of hurling ever played. Thurles was now awash with cheering, shouting and prancing Cork supporters, hundreds of whom now couldn't care less about trains or buses home. Their joy had been whetted by the near-taste of defeat, and they were no longer in any hurry. It simply didn't get any better than this: beating Tipperary in Thurles in Centenary Year. The devastating All-Ireland defeats of the previous two years were merely a bad memory; this year would be different. Cork would show Tipperary and Kilkenny that the spirit of Christy Ring lived on in the blood-red jerseys.

Tipperary fans were visibly gutted, and dozens were in tears. Despite all the pain and disappointment of the previous thirteen years, this was agony on an infinitely higher level. Most fans, however, were simply shocked. How could they lose a match like this and a chance to appear in an All-Ireland final on Tipperary soil when leading by four points with only five minutes left? Milling around the dressing rooms, former Tipperary players and selectors struggled to conceal the pain of defeat while being as

gracious as possible to the victorious Cork side. Only a few feet separated the two dressing rooms, but emotionally it was a chasm. The shouts and cheers from the Cork dressing room echoed down the hall to the Tipperary room, where the silence spoke volumes.

The legendary Tipperary hurler and current selector Pat Stakelum knew that clashes of the 'Big Three' were always unpredictable. Tipperary, after all, had won their share of matches over the years that they probably should have lost. But that didn't make the pain and disappointment any easier. Proudly, Stakelum turned to the waiting media and said that Tipperary had lost nothing in defeat. With a nod to the hurling legacy shared between Cork, Tipperary and Kilkenny, he said the rivalry was as old as hurling itself – and, if anything, was more intense and sporting now than ever. Then, in a clear message to the despondent players in the dressing room behind him, his voice rose a notch as he assured the assembled reporters: 'We'll be back – you can count on that.'

Minutes later, by the Cork dressing room, Jimmy Barry-Murphy acknowledged what Tipperary were now going through; Cork, after all, had just gone through the agony of losing two successive All-Ireland finals. But Barry-Murphy's smile said it all. Cork were still in the running for the centenary All-Ireland title; Kilkenny and Tipperary were not. 'To be honest, I thought Tipp had it when they were four minutes up with only a few minutes left. But we got the breaks in the end – Tipperary were a much better side than I or anybody else had considered them to be.' As if to emphasise the match's place in history, Barry-Murphy said it was the best Munster final he had ever seen, let alone played in.

Outside the ground a Cork fan stopped and gazed around him at the milling throng emerging from Semple Stadium, almost in disbelief at what had just happened. Jimmy Reilly had travelled home to watch this game from New York. He raised his head and briefly closed his eyes. His friends from the north Cork town of Mallow smirked because they thought he might be praying – or thanking the gods for what had just happened. Then, almost as suddenly, he opened his eyes and stared at his friends. 'Soak it up, boys, soak it up – it doesn't get any better than this.'