

□ The Road to the Semi-Final

Qualification for the All-Ireland Junior Cup is pretty straight forward – you simply have to finish in the top four of the premier Junior League competition in each of the four provinces. With the sixteen names in the hat the draw is made and following round one the sixteen is reduced to eight. Similarly with the remaining rounds until just the finalist remain. So at this point in time the competition is down to four and Skibbereen are destined to meet reigning Ulster Junior Champs Clogher Valley on the 14th December next – while the other Ulster team involved Portadown meet Leinster side and last year's finalists Enniscorthy on the same day.

Interestingly enough it was Enniscorthy we met last year in this competition also – albeit the very first round – and it's true to say we weren't exactly firing on all cylinders on that day – Enniscorthy eventually went on to play Clogher Valley in the Semi-Final and beat them away 27 – 19 to reach the final for the first time only to lose out to cup specialists Tullamore in the final – winning their second Ulster Bank All-Ireland Junior Cup in a row. I wonder what the chances of Skibbereen and Enniscorthy getting through to meet each other in the final?

Whatever the final outcome we are twelve months down the road from our initial All-Ireland Junior Cup debut and we are in a much better frame of mind and playing much better rugby – team rugby. So we have every reason to be confident as we entertain our Northern friends in the Showgrounds on Saturday the 14th next. Understandably we will be going in as underdogs to this fixture given the high profile of Clogher Valley not alone in this particular competition but as clear League leaders in their Provincial Kukri 1 League up north. But then again that's how we like it – the mantle of favourite never rested easily on our shoulders, for any competition, and we have always managed to play our best rugby from 'behind' – so we approach this fixture in much the same light.

A quick re-cap of the Ballina match in the first round told us a few things about ourselves – all very positive – especially the strong team effort from start to finish – the consistency of the passing movements and the high work rate defensively and offensively in all areas of the pitch over the eighty minutes – plus the strength from the reserve bench when introduced. What

became obvious during the game was the visitors Ballina were without some of their 'big hitters' and so it would be fair to say that Ballina too were not firing on all cylinders that day. However that simply highlights a team with dependency on a few star performers and when absent things begin to fall apart – we thankfully don't suffer that dependency and can say our strength is across the entire team.

The Tralee game highlighted this point admirably and demonstrated if such were necessary this strength against a tried and tested powerful Kerry side. It was clear Tralee were quite confident of taking the honours having started so well in the competition beating strong Leinster side Wanderers 10 -6 in the opening round. So of course they were disappointed to lose but they underestimated the quality strength in depth of Skibbereen side and when the chips were down the home side came through comfortably 17 - 10

Now as we host Clogher Valley – a first for both sides – we can look at their quality pedigree and their consistently high winning margins against opposition in their Kukri 1 league – but in the midst of the notable victories one notices a few results that tell us they are indeed mortal after all. A recent defeat by Ballyclare in the Millar McCall Wylie Junior Cup must have set them back a little – why – well because the Ballyclare side are from the Junior division below them – granted Ballyclare are leading in the lower division – but a big surprise nonetheless. Their result 10 – 9 against Kanturk in the quarter final of this competition is also worth noting as it was the Ulster side that had to come from behind 5 – 9 in the 78th minute to score an unconverted try as Kanturk were heading for victory. I mention it to highlight the fact that - yes of course we must proceed with caution and respect – but never to lose sight of the fact that we are in the last four on merit. It is also worth remembering that throughout the thirty-two counties of Ireland there is very little between the sides that play the game of rugby at Junior 1 level – and on a good day the difference is probably in the 'head' . It's worth keeping that in mind as we approach this fixture. We too have achieved remarkable wins in the past and I dare say we will again in the future – and with a home venue – I'm pretty sure we're in there with a pretty good chance – and you the players have to believe that.

No team came close to beating the score we registered against Ballina 36 – 18, neither was it reached in the second round.

Saturday 14th December - be there.

And so to the day itself - Saturday 14th December 2013 and the visiting team opted to stay in Clonakilty on the Friday night and come what may had also booked in for the Saturday night. Granted it would have been a seriously long journey back to the North after an evening match so they planned well.

On the day itself Skibbereen hosted the visiting dignitaries to a pre-match reception in the Clubhouse and welcoming words were spoken by Club President John Field and the Clogher Valley President Kenny Graham responded in kind and there followed an exchange of Club crests and ties - and indeed a few bottles of locally produced Drombeg Whiskey also, which went down very well - excuse the pun - with the Clogher Valley recipients.

Some photographs taken at the reception:















For a full match report of this memorable fixture - a first for Skibbereen - please click [HERE](#)