

Lurgan College secure All-Ireland glory on day of drama

LIMERICK proved a happy hunting ground for Lurgan College once more as they claimed overall victory on a remarkable final day of the ESB Electric Kate Russell All-Ireland Schoolgirls Championships at Crescent College Comprehensive.

It was a surprisingly fraught affair, though, as the Ulster champions ended by winning by the narrowest of margins, a single strike on goal difference separating them from Alexandra College. How it eventually arrived at a single-goal, goal difference conclusion looked a million miles away on Thursday as Lurgan and Alexandra College shook off the shackles and went goal-crazy on day two. The school had won the last time the competition was hosted by Crescent in 2003, and they did so here on goal difference as fatigue and motivation proved a decisive factor in some hammerings exacted late in the day.

Lurgan College opened their campaign on Thursday by beating hosts Crescent College 3-1, with goals scored by Natalie Barr, Bethany Barr and Kim Scott. With tired legs they faced their main opposition in Alexandra College in their second game of the day, with Alex fresh and lively in what was their opening game.

A spell of ten minutes where three Lurgan players sustained injuries requiring medical attention, disrupted Lurgan's concentration and flow and they went down 2-0 at the break to a fast and well organized Alex side. The College girls came out refocused after half time to drive relentlessly at Alex in a furiously paced thirty minutes, and Gemma McBride managed to convert a single goal response, leaving the final score at a disappointing 2-1 to Alex.

Alex, now looking like tournament favourites faced Loreto Kilkenny in their second game of the day, and played like a completely different team after their bruising encounter with Lurgan. In an incredible twist of fate, Loreto defeated Alex 4-3, much to the delight of the Ulster champions and their parents.

With all five sides winning and losing on day one, it was open season on Friday with Lurgan taking the early initiative with a 3-0 dismissal of Coláiste Iognáid; Kim Scott, Bethany Barr and Hannah Grieve netting the three crucial goals.

Alexandra College's 5-0 dismissal of a tired Coláiste Iognáid seemed to tilt the balance in their favour. But when the Lurgan College side romped to a 3-0 half-time lead against Loreto Kilkenny in their second game, Alex were forced to listen on as the goals rattled in, knowing each one was another they would have to score themselves in the tournament's ultimate match.

Lurgan eventually put seven past Loreto Kilkenny in a thrilling game which had the Lurgan supporters screaming for more. Chloe McCann and Hannah Grieve profited from Natalie Barr's silver-service, winning umpteen corners and free chances which they duly potted to leave Alex needing to beat Crescent by six clear goals in the final game. The College corner routine which had failed to produce goals on day one clicked into gear when really needed and produced text book variations that made scoring look easy.

The Belfast Telegraph Cup holders had to sweat it out however, as they watched the last game of the day between Alexandra College and hosts Crescent Comprehensive.

The Milltown school set about the task in determined fashion, gobbling a rebound inside 90 seconds. A second was disallowed moments later before Alex drove home another corner for 2-0. But the momentum was brought to a shuddering halt when Crescent swept a rising reverse from the top of the D into the Alex net, a hammer blow which left it 2-1 at the break.

A third followed shortly after half time and Alex scored a stroke for 4-1 with the final ten looming. The Alex forwards, who showed remarkable energy despite the rigours of the tournament, finished off two more moves for 6-1 with the umpire's signal for two minutes already shown.

Alex won a corner which allowed time to run down to zero and twice, piledrivers were saved in front of the Crescent goalkeeper only for Alex to keep the ball alive and win another shot.

Lurgan were given a mighty scare as it seemed the hooter would never sound. Indeed the vociferous Lurgan support were thankful to a Crescent CC corner defence routine which kept out three penalty corners on the final hooter which could have taken the title from their grasp.

Eventually however, Crescent cleared their lines and Lurgan cheered loudest and longest as they found Limerick a happy hunting ground, repeating the achievements of 2003.

The Ulster champions took the title, influential captain Natalie Barr suitably raising the trophy, finally taking the glory after selflessly creating chances for her team mates to finish off, and playing through what was confirmed as a broken finger, sustained in the second match of the tournament.

This was a complete squad effort however and every single Lurgan College player, representing their school and province, raised their performance to an incredible level in the pursuit of 'Katie', which now has a home in College Walk until next year.

This now means that the team of 2011 has made a clean sweep of all of the 1st XI silverware available this season. From an early season Schools Tournament win, to winning the Senior Schools Cup and then the Mid-Ulster league and Cup titles, the final icing on the cake was lifting the All -Ireland title.

Thanks to the following local businesses for their valuable sponsorship and support in facilitating the squad trip to limerick:- Total hockey ,Banbridge; Kukri Sports; Abraham Motors, Lough Road; Knox filling station, Lough Road and Classic Water.