

SENIOR SCHOOL'S CUP CHAMPIONS

LURGAN COLLEGE BRING FAMOUS TROPHY BACK TO COLLEGE WALK.

Strong favourites Lurgan College fulfilled their dream on Wednesday when they defeated Wallace High School in an agonisingly close encounter to lift the Belfast Telegraph Senior Schools Cup and be crowned Ulster Schools champions.

This was an eagerly anticipated game and despite the tag of 'favourites' the College team knew not to underestimate the ability of a Wallace side whose confidence had improved with every round. In front of a huge crowd, the atmosphere was electric. Both schools had closed for the afternoon, so pupils descended on the perimeter fence of Lisnagarvey Hockey pitch, chanting support for their team. Wallace High, one of Ulster's largest grammar school's, has approximately three times the number of pupils that the College have, but the College support were well organised with their horns and special order vuvuzelas, and were determined to generate more noise than their opposition support.

Local primary schools, Lurgan Junior High School and Lurgan Ladies players and management, also turned out in force to urge their young heroes on – many of them getting a glimpse of a possible future dream for themselves. As the players processed to the middle of the pitch for the line-up and mandatory photos, the nervous tension heightened for both sides and the starting whistle couldn't come quick enough.

The first half was dominated by Lurgan College as they sent wave after wave of attack into the Wallace '25'. This pressure was rewarded with a series of penalty corners from which Kim Scott went close with a deflected effort just wide of the right post. The Wallace goalkeeper was in sparkling form and she denied shot after shot with fine saves which inspired confidence in her defenders. As the first half progressed Wallace started to come into the game and drive forwards, but their efforts were cut short with strong defending from Louise Murray, Hannah Grieve and Gemma McBride. Catherine Bell in nets for the College had a relatively quiet game with such competent defenders in front of her.

At half time deadlock remained and spurred on to convert the chances that they were generating, the College players again drove relentlessly at the Wallace circle. Again they found themselves with opportunities from penalty corners, but Wallace defended extremely well to clear their lines from any variations thrown at them.

The College forward line stepped up their high press on the Wallace hit outs and cracks began to emerge in their opponent's defence as Bethany Barr and Jill Edgar intercepted attempted clearances. Ellen Mullen worked hard when she came on, however it seemed that the Wallace keeper could do no wrong and always stretched for a final touch to safety. Captain Natalie Barr went closest from open play when she drove across the circle and had the goalkeeper stranded, only to shave her reverse stick shot wide of the upright. Chloe McCann repeatedly bamboozled Wallace defenders with her mazy runs into the circle, but strong tackling displays denied her the goal she desperately sought. As the minutes ticked away it was obvious Wallace were content to defend and run the clock down in the hope of pushing for penalty strokes. As Lurgan continued to drive

forwards, Wallace intercepted a loose pass in the final few minutes of the second half to break away and win a penalty corner themselves. The College support held their breath in the hope that Wallace would not score, but the experienced College defence held firm to thwart the momentary danger. Jordan Davidson and Serena Barr were outstanding in marshalling the defensive lines during some last minute Wallace pressure, throwing the ball forwards in a final attempt to break the deadlock. The final whistle beat them to it however, so twenty minutes of extra time followed.

The pattern of the game remained largely the same during this period, Lurgan College dominated and Wallace defended, and when the hooter sounded to signal the end of extra time, the Wallace support were ecstatic with the 0-0 scoreline. They firmly believed the scales were tipped in their favour given the number of times Wallace were forced to go to penalty strokes throughout their cup campaign.

Natalie won the toss for the College, opted to go first and stepped up to convert the opening stroke. Wallace responded by equalising with their first. Serena Barr and Kim Scott for the College both had good efforts saved by the in-form Wallace keeper, while the second and third Wallace strokes were converted, leaving the College trailing 3-1.

Jordan Davidson stepped up to score number four and young Jill Costley made an inspirational save to deny Wallace their fourth. Hannah Grieve made no mistake with number five and Jill, knowing that she had to save Wallace's fifth stroke, responded with a well anticipated lunge to her right. The scores were tied 3-3.

A series of sudden death strokes followed, this time Wallace going first, with the first team to miss, resigned to being runners up. Wallace's first stroke hit the upright so Lurgan College needed to convert to seal the game. The enormous crowd were silenced as Natalie Barr stepped up to the mark, but a last minute change of direction by Natalie didn't fool the Wallace keeper and she saved the captain's effort. The nervous tension was now almost unbearable as Wallace number two approached the spot. Her body language was not confident and Jill Costley sensed this, anticipated where she was placing the ball and saved a crucial penalty. The College's Hannah Grieve, well used to performing in pressurised situations, calmly strode to the spot, waited for the whistle and slammed the ball into the left corner past a despairing keeper, to give Lurgan College their long awaited victory.

SQUAD

N. Barr, K. Scott, L. Murray, J. Davidson, C. Bell, K. Stevenson, G. McBride, J. Edgar,
R. Lauder, C. McCann, B. Barr, S. Barr, E. Mullen, K. Allen, J. Costley,
H. Grieve