Another occasion when you gasped for breath

RUGBY does not get much more gladiatorial than Thomond Park last Saturday night.

Those experiencing the tension of the venue on such make or break occasions were lost for words and those of us lucky enough to be present were left to savour every exciting moment.

Television almost captured the occasion but you have to be one of the 13,000 crammed into this wonderful Limerick venue to feel the true passion.

Top of the Celtic League, a place in the play-offs of the Heineken Cup and now a home draw as well indicates that maybe, just maybe, Lady Luck is at last turning her smiling face towards the southern province.

This Tuesday the draw will be made in Cardiff for the semi-finals and Munster will be hoping that their good karma will continue.

This morning most of the Munster side reported for international duty with Eddie O'Sullivan's Irish squad.

They will bring a lot of positivity with them as will the Leinster boys after their brilliant away win over Bath in the Rec yesterday.

For the rest of us the memories of this win over Sale will remain bright in our memories. It was the stuff of legends and you could not write a better script nor a more dramatic grand finale.

The Sale pack contributed. Firstly they lost possession at the back of their own put-in with Chabal looking a bit bewildered after being tackled by both Stringer and Wallace. When Munster were awarded the put-in, the fourth try chance was on. The delivery out the line was superb, Halstead opening up the space for Shaun Payne to take the ball to within a few metres of the try line and when Wallace got back to pick up at the back of the ruck, the Sale resistence was wafer-thin.

Try . . . and Thomond Park went wild for the fourth time on a night to remember.

The Sale coaching team won't be too happy with the way their side contributed to the Munster bonus point that sends them to Biarritz on a quarter final mission almost impossible. Successive kicks by Jason Robinson gave possession back to the Reds and had they cleared from that late scrum, they could possibly have survived.

COMMENT

Munster have been superb over their last three games and Eddie O'Sullivan now faces a few big decisions when he cuts down his squad of 35 for the meeting with Italy on February 4 in that opening Six Nations game in Lansdowne Road. On this performance, he would be justified in putting the entire Munster pack out there against the Azzuri.

The two 'finds' of the season, Barry Murphy and Ian Dowling, again made a major contribution. 'Murph' has added the pace to the threequarter line that has been missing for two seasons and Halstead's ability to stay on his feet rather than go to ground after gaining a few metres, is providing the platform for the pack to exploit the space and set up scoring chances out wide.

Now it's fingers crossed that the 'injury curse' will not strike again over the coming eight weeks. Munster have never been beaten by Perpignan on Irish soil and on their current form they are capable of advancing to the last four.

These again are great days for Munster rugby. Last Saturday in Thomond Park was almost like days of the Collisseum in Rome. All we were short of was Nero, sitting in the stand, acknowledging the achievement of the triumphant gladiators.

Unbelievable Munster!

By AIDAN CORR in Thomond Park

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WE want the team!

And who could blame the thousands of Munster fans who stormed onto the hallowed Thomond Park turf in recognition of one of the greatest ever performances by the province last Saturday.

You can easily run out of words of praise when Declan Kidney's side are in this devastating mood. They were awesome, soaking up intense early Sale pressure, showing tremendous discipline and striking with the speed and accuracy of a viper's tongue.

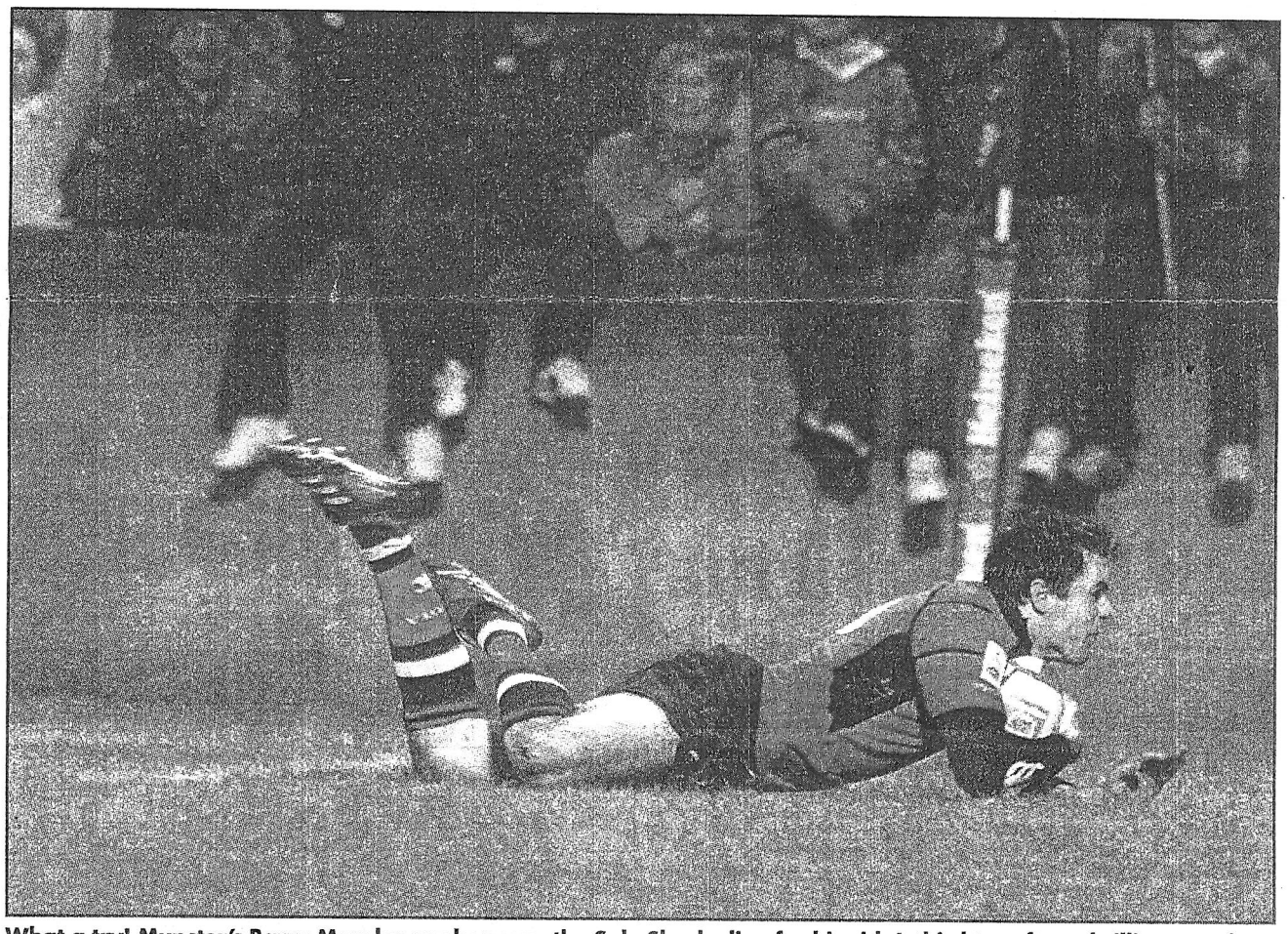
Make no mistake about it, Sale were up for this game. They were well prepared, they looked threatening even in the warm-up and there was a theory that the melting pot atmosphere of Limerick's Thomond Park would not faze them.

Ten minutes before Joel Jutge's half-time whistle, the Sharks were on dry ground and looking rather helpless. Despite their best efforts, they found themselves trailing by 15 points and it was going to be damage limitation after that.

It became clear that Sale coach Philippe Saint Andre had read the riot act in the visiting dressingroom under a packed stand. Sale took his advice to some extent. They tackled as if their professional jobs were on the line and seemed content once the ball was in the Munster half.

They frustrated Munster and there were few in the ground with three minutes to go that felt confident of the fourth try that would eventually send the Sharks to San Sebastian in the quarter final and give Munster a home game against Perpignan at a venue to be decided.

If the first half was fluent, fiery and fraught with tension, the second 40 minutes developed into something close to a heavyweight slogging match. Munster found it difficult to get a good platform in the last third and on the occasions that O'Gara found touch close to the Sale line, they were deprived either by a refereeing decision or some excellent defensive play.



What a try! Munster's Barry Murphy crashes over the Sale Sharks line for his side's third try after a brilliant run from his own half at Thomond Park last Saturday. (LL)

It continued to be a night of Munster heroes with their newest 'find', Ian Dowling on the left wing, cementing his place in the side for the immediate future. Apart from his first half try, his overall play was truly magnificent with one recovery from a Cueto kick and chase worth a few 'rewinds' on the video.

As the minutes ticked by and Munster's inability to get a rolling maul going against the stubborn Sale pack continued, we had settled for the win and the away trip in the last eight.

Then came the drama that appears to constantly go hand in hand with Munster's Heineken Cup crusade at this unique venue.

The minutes that led up to the crucial score were not inspiring. O'Gara was caught trying to run the ball out of his own '22' and followed that with a poor kick to touch and another that failed to find the touchline inside the Sale half.

Then came the change of fortune that sometimes has deserted the Reds. John Kelly made a break but Marcus Horan, in support at pace, knocked on in the tackle. 'That's it,' we thought.

If there is one thing about the psyche it is their inability at times in sport to stand up and be counted when the going gets really tough. Two mighty tackles on 'the Beast of Sale', Sebastien Chabal, had taken its toll and when the number eight found himself with the ball at the back of a scrum, he did not know what to do with it. Stringer, the smallest player on the field, wrapped him up, Munster won the scrum and their final chance of a try was on plate for them.

They gobbled it up, Halstead making the space for Payne and David Wallace crashing over. Game, set and match to Munster.

It was a nerve-tingling first half with the tackles of a ferocity that we have not seen at this venue for some time and total commitment.

Munster had to show some tremendous courage in defending their line during an opening 15 minutes during which Sale had the edge.

They used their big pack to good effect but the Munster defence was truly magnificent.

An unsavory incident after Munster were awarded a penalty in their own half on three minutes saw Sale lock Ignacio Fernandez Lobbe go to the sin-bin. It had little bad affect on the visitors and after Ronan O'Gara had kicked the home side into a 3-0 lead from a penalty on four minutes, Sale levelled on ten minutes with a Charlie Hodgson penalty following a silly foul by Shaun Payne.

The intent of this Munster side was emphasized from the restart. Chabal took O'Gara's kick but was hit with a massive tackle by Paul O'Connell. The pack took on the drive and forced a throw in within the Sale '22'. Leamy took the throw, the maul was formed and Anthony Foley got the touchdown which O'Gara converted to put the home side 10-3 in front after 13 minutes.

Sale responded well with Chabal pulling off a classic kick and catch to force the penalty and Charlie Hodgson landed the kick to keep the visitors very much in the hunt at 10-6.

It was very tense at that stage and Munster badly needed to get the next score. They did in classic style. Chabal was hit with a tornado of a tackle in midfield by Anthony Foley and that was a turning point. Them Mark Cueto kicked aimlessly into John Kelly's hands and the winger pinned Sale back into their '22' with a 'grounder.'

It was the platform that Munster needed. They stole the lineout, Stringer opened up going left, O'Gara, Murphy and Halstead showed good hands and Ian Dowling brought Thomond Park to its feet by squeezing in for the try in the corner. O'Gara's conversion was classic stuff, splitting the posts from a few metres from the touchline.

From the re-start it became clear that Sale were going to try and mix it with the home side and a fracas both Marcus Horan and Chris Jones were shown yellow by Monsieur Jutge.

On 35 minutes Munster scored a dramatic and sensational try. Halstead made ground and when O'Gara's kick was charged down, Barry Murphy snapped up the ball, raced clear going right and left to remain in open space, before crashing over despite Robinson's tackle. O'Gara again landed the kick and at 24-6 and three tries in the bag, this game was going all Munster's way.

In fairness to the Sharks they kept the pressure on in search of a try that could have kept them in the hunt. Hodgson was wide with a penalty from 38 metres but from closer in three minutes later, the out-half left 15 points between the sides at 24-9.

In keeping with the half, injury time was also eventful. Marcus Horan, who had an outstanding game, buried scrum-half Sililo Martens with a big tackle, Munster ran a penalty from halfway and after being awarded a second opportunity from the same spot, we witnessed O'Gara's only miss of the game — the ball dropping short of the posts.

Munster — Shaun Payne; John Kelly, Barry Murphy, Trevor Halstead, Ian Dowling; Ronan O'Gara, Peter Stringer (Tomas O'Leary 83); Marcus Horan (Federico Pucciariello 36, 83), Jerry Flannery (Denis Fogarty 83), John Hayes; Paul O'Connell (Mick O'Driscoll 83), Donnacha O'Callaghan; Denis Leamy, David Wallace, Anthony Foley (Stephen Keogh 83).

Sale Sharks — Daniel Larrechea; Mark Cueto, Mark Taylor, Elvis Sevealai'I (Epi Taione 27), Jason Robinson; Charlie Hodgson, Sililo Martens (Richard Wigglesworth 59); Andrew Sheridan, Sebastien Bruno (Andy Titterell 59), Barry Stewart, Ignacio Fernande-Lobbe (Dean Schoefield 59), Chris Jones (Chris Mayor 69); Jason White, Sebastien Chabal, Magnus Lund.

Referee, Joel, Jutge, France.