

Should the GAA keep the knockout format

To keep or not to keep, that is the question?

The GAA introduced a knockout format for this year's football championship to combat the effects of COVID-19. As the championship by most accounts has been a roaring success, the big question is, should the GAA continue with it or revert back to the system of old?

Former Roscommon star Seanie McDermott and current player Cathal Compton are divided on the matter which highlights the fact the question doesn't have a relatively simple answer.

Although a victim of the knockout championship himself with Roscommon losing to Mayo in their first game this year, Compton still maintains the format is worth keeping.

"It worked well this year, maybe not for us," he said in a humorous tone recognising his own team's defeat.

"This year, there just seemed to be more of a buzz around the championship than previous years."

Compton also admitted that the knockout championship gives the underdogs more of a chance.

"No offence to Cavan or Tipp but it's hard to imagine them in a semi-final in the old system," he said.

While Tipperary did in fact actually reach a semi-final back in 2016, Compton's point on underdogs rarely reaching this stage of the championship is still largely true.

It would be nice to have a safety blanket if you lose but I think it would make the wins even sweeter too," he said.

Compton also pointed out that he believes games this year are much tighter than games of the past.

"I think if you look back on this year's results, you will see the games have been much tighter than those of the past," he said.

On inspection, it seems that Compton does have a point. Taking the results of this year's provincial finals and comparing them to those of the past makes for interesting reading.

The previous five years of provincial finals from 2014 to 2018 have an average winning margin of three more points between the teams.

The finals in 2019 were however tighter games in fact which show us that knockout football does not automatically mean games will be closer.

With Tipperary and Cavan both reaching All Ireland semi-finals this year, perhaps knockout football does add that extra bit of nerves to the favourites. Bookmakers are still convinced Dublin will still win this year's championship but maybe the knockout format would add that bit more pressure to them in the future.

While the knockout format does add to the fans' excitement, does it factor in the feelings of players who are involved in the games. While Cathal Compton was behind the knockout format, Seanie believes that these are the feelings of the minority.

Seanie recounted his own experiences of being inside the Roscommon dressing room and outlined that the view from the players at the time was to have as many competitive games as possible. He does not see knockout as a viable option for the GAA because of this.

"I don't think knockout football will be a runner next year," he said. "With the effort lads are putting in with their club and county for most of the year and then be out in one game doesn't really seem just," he said.

While Seanie admitted he did enjoy this year watching as a spectator, he maintains that the GAA should go back to what we know.

"It was great this year, I enjoyed it but realistically as fans we want to see as many games as we can during the summer," he said.

"There's no doubt about it, it catches people's attention but I know from my own time in Roscommon, lads want more than one game no matter what happens," he said.

The decision on the knockout format might come down to what the GAA want from the championship as a whole. Should the Championship be designed to benefit the underdogs and even the odds up? In this case a knockout format would suffice as less fancied teams would only require one heroic performance against more fancied sides. Or should it be designed to discover the best and most consistent football team each calendar year with the format we have all become accustomed to.

As a spectator, will knockout football be a better spectacle? On one hand it will make games more exciting as they will essentially become do or die games but will they also become more defensive and nervy because of this.

Galway in 2001, Tyrone in 2005 and 2007 Kerry in 2004, 2006, 2009 and 2014 and Cork in 2010. These are four teams who have won the All Ireland through the back door since 2001. If knockout football was intact, then these teams would not be remembered the same way they are today. The other side of the coin is that four other teams would be remembered but would these team's feats have felt as special as those who had to dust themselves down after losing.

While knockout football would no doubt return provincial finals to their former glories in terms of significance, the fact that a team could potentially be crowned the best team in Ireland after winning just four games just doesn't seem just.

Let us not forget also that the GAA has missed out on millions of euros this year due to the absence of crowds, over €70m in fact according to GAA president John Horan. Reducing games next year means reducing their flow of income when they need it most.

It seems very unlikely that the GAA will keep the knockout format because of this especially with a nationwide recession likely coming down the tracks too.

While this year's knockout championship has been one of the most exciting in recent memory, the debate on whether to make this memory a reality will likely wage on until the end of the 2020 championship.