

O'Hanlon Cup

The 2016 O'Hanlon Cup has drawn to a close, with **Gonzaga** crowned winners of the division. The champions, who led the tournament by 7.5 points at the time of the last update, managed to extend their lead to 10.5 by the conclusion of matches, courtesy of victories against Ballinasloe, Celbridge and Elm Mount. By so doing, they managed to rack up a total of 53 points, a record since at least 2004, which is as far back as the LCU website archives go.

The race for second place and promotion was a lot closer: last time, a three-horse race between **Gorey**, **Skerries** and **Ballinasloe** was predicted, with the Wexford side on a three point cushion. Ballinasloe had soon dropped out of contention with a defeat to Drogheda and a whitewash against Gonzaga. A disappointing final third of the season saw last year's BEA runners-up score only 4.5/16 and ultimately finish some way back in fourth, on 31.5 points. However, this still represents a very solid début season in the O'Hanlon and should give them a lot to build on for next year.

Meanwhile, Gorey and Skerries were embroiled in a duel for second place. Gorey were the first to blink with a draw to a resurgent St. Benildus followed by a surprise loss to Bray/Greystones. Skerries, on the other hand, picked up two victories, giving them a half point lead going into "Super Sunday" where they were to face Ballinasloe. Gorey needed only to draw level with Skerries thanks to a better head-to-head, and threw down the gauntlet with an impressive 4-2 victory over Drogheda. Skerries, however, were not prepared to let their lead slip and pulled off a fantastic 6-0 victory over a weakened Ballinasloe.

Although the top four teams had looked good for their respective positions from quite early on in the season, the positions below that had been anyone's guess. Fifth place (on head to head) went to **Drogheda**. Huge credit is due to the Louth outfit, who at my last report, lay in 11th spot. Turning their form on its head, they embarked on a fantastic streak of two wins, a draw, and a close loss to promotion contenders Gorey on the last day. Their run of form will have them seriously eyeing up next year's title should they manage greater consistency in team selection. One spot back in 6th were **St. Benildus**. The Stillorgan side, despite also being in danger with three matches left to play, pulled off a heroic draw with Gorey, despite conceding a walkover on board 6, and finished strongly with two victories. As with Drogheda, consistency will be Benildus' mantra next season should they wish to challenge for promotion, fielding no fewer than 18 players this year. With two sides in the O'Hanlon next year, they will prove formidable opponents for anyone, and captain Eddie Gahan will be eager to build on their mid-table spot.

Inchicore were perhaps the competition's only true mid-table side, and true to form, they comfortably finished in 7th place on 30 points. Indeed, only 1.5 points behind fourth, they will be a dark horse in next year's competition. **Royal Lopez** and **Elm Mount** tied on 29 points. Their head-to-head match was a draw, but Royal Lopez finished ahead by virtue of board elimination. Lopez will doubtless be disappointed with their finish to the season, which saw them lose to St. Benildus and Bray/Greystones. Struggling for playing numbers, the 2008 champions slipped four places in the league in their last two matches. Elm Mount, while never in danger of going down, will also be disappointed with their conclusion to the season, scoring only five points from their final three matches.

At the bottom end, **Bray/Greystones** completed a Houdini-esque escape by defeating Royal Lopez 5-1 on the last day. Having not won a match until round 7, the Wicklow side put together a run of 4 wins to escape relegation by a point and a half, on 28, having been bolstered by Colin Byford on board 1. Byford's presence certainly proved inspirational as his side pulled off one of the results of the season, beating Gorey 4-1. However, with Bray escaping relegation, one of the teams above them had to take their place. Despite fielding a

full team in all three of their final matches, **Aer Lingus** were the unfortunate victims. However, although they couldn't avoid a crash-landing into the BEA, it looks likely that they'll be serious promotion contenders next season. At the foot of the table, on 24.5 points, were **Celbridge**. Their odds of survival hadn't looked good for long periods of the season, but with three 3.5-2.5 defeats, most notably away to Gonzaga, they can hold their heads high after a valiant fight to stay up.

Individually, one player stands out as the league's star man: **John Loughran**, captain of Skerries. Loughran had an unbeaten season to finish on 10/11, with an extraordinary nine wins and two draws. Across all of the Leinster Leagues, only Enniscorthy youngster Dovydas Pocevicus in the BEA and FM O'Donnell, playing for Gonzaga in the Armstrong, equalled Loughran's score. The only other board prize in the competition went to **Andy Keenan**

(Gonzaga) who scored the minimum required -8.5/10. Outright 3rd in the points table went to **Manuel Gardenes** (Gorey), who scored eight. Gardenes was denied a board prize on the final day by a fantastic draw from **Eoin Murphy** of Drogheda, who was outrated by 670 points. **Ben Cullen** of Gonzaga (7.5/9) and Gorey's **Eddie Humphrey** (7.5/11) shared fourth place, while the top ten was rounded off by **Sean Loftus** (Elm Mount), **Dan Aldridge** and **Fred Harte** (both Skerries), **Marc Lincoln** (Gonzaga) and **Ernie McElroy** (Royal Lopez), all of whom scored 7 points.

As the dust settles, it is clear to the casual observer that the O'Hanlon Cup remains one of the most fiercely contested divisions in Leinster, with only 7 points separating bottom placed Celbridge from fourth placed Ballinasloe. With the margins so tight, it's extremely difficult to predict a winner for next year, but look to Gorey, Drogheda and Ballinasloe, as well as newcomers Enniscorthy and, should they keep their form up, Bray/Greystones and St. Benildus, to all serve up some exciting chess in the next 12 months.

Andy Keenan (Gonzaga C. C.)