

Tipping Point

Malachy Clerkin



Lord, it's a long way to Tralee if you haven't got a beer

Saturday morning, 10 o'clock. The train pulls out of Heuston Station, Dubs by the dozen on board.

Across the way, four young lads, early 20s. Heads on them from Paddy's night in town.

One jimmies the top off a bottle of Heineken and the rest shrug and join in. Hung for a sheep, hung for a lamb.

Half a bottle in, the fog starts to clear. Volume rises. Stories tumble.

"This is the furthest I ever went on a train."

"We're only in Adamstown."

"I know, yeah."

"Sure we went to Dunboyne that time."

"That was on the Dart, yah sap."

"Oh right, and what's the Dart, a fookin' tractor?"

Onwards. Down through Newbridge, Kildare, Portlaoise. The boys talk football for a bit and then they talk life. Deep stuff. Core beliefs.

"Here lads, just remember: it's Tralee we're going to. Every woman down here has been called a rose at least once in her life. We'll need to come up with better lines than that."

Change at Mallow. Six carriages

become three for the rest of the way. More lads, more lassies, more bottles, more yakkedy-yak.

More rebel songs the further we go. By the time we hit Kerry, the train has two communities – Dubs On Tour and people in headphones. Lord, it's a long way to Tralee if you haven't got a beer.

(To the Tune of *Baby Give It Up*)
NA-NANA-NANA-NANA-NANA-NAAA
PHILLY-PHILLY MAC, PHILLY MAC
- HE'S A CORNER BACK.

NA-NANA-NANA-NANA-NANA-NAAA
HE LOVES TO ATTACK, TO ATTACK,
PHILLY-PHILLY MAC.

"Do-doobie-do do-do-do," you find yourself humming in your head. Can't beat 'em, don't wanna join 'em.

But there's no badness in them either, and a catchy tune is a catchy tune.

Soldout
Austin Stack Park, Tralee, 4.30pm. The game's at seven but the press box is small and the early bird catches the power socket.

Turn the corner to find a couple of hundred punters already gathered outside. It's been sold-out for weeks and

there isn't a ticket going, if that's what they think.

It isn't. They're just early. Way early. Even the stewards haven't been let in yet. And still the diehards are here 2½ hours before throw-in, dying hard so as to put their name on a plumb seat.

Dubs take up position
Row by row, the stand fills. Then the terrace on the far side, most of them roaring at Marty Morrissey.

Then the terrace behind the town goals, where the Dubs take up position. Cocksles And Mussels. Boys In Blue. Hill 16 is Dublin only.

Over the tannoy, an ad for the Kerry GAA lotto plays on a loop. Starts every time with, "Hi, I'm Marc Ó Sé."

But because there's no music around it, Ó Sé's distended voice comes out of the blue each time and starts to sound as if Marc himself is standing out the back with a microphone reading a script. Soon the Dubs send up a cheer any time he comes on: "Hi Marc!"

The Kerry backroom cameramen set up in the press box.

You'd tell them there was no room for

66

Onwards. Down through Newbridge, Kildare, Portlaoise.

The boys talk football for a bit and then they talk life. Deep stuff. Core beliefs.

'Here lads, just remember: it's Tralee we're going to. Every woman down here has been called a rose at least once in her life. We'll need to come up with better lines than that'

them except you'd likely find out there was no room for you, if it came to it. And anyway, they're grand company. Pure Kerry.

A young lad comes up to the press box looking to charge his phone, only to find out that there are lost tribes in the Amazon who have more access to electrical sockets than we do at this very moment.

"Poor young fella," cracks one of the Kerry backrooms as he walks away, shoulders slumped. "He'll have to watch the game now. God love him."

All human life is sitting in front of the press box. The reigning Rose of Tralee stands in for a picture with Barney Rock and Jimmy Deenihan.

Deenihan asks where she's from and when she tells him Chicago, Deenihan only has to make two more gentle inquiries before he rustles up someone she knows over there. That, kids, is a politician.

Game time. In plenty of ways, Tralee is the wrong venue for this game. The capacity is only just under 12,000, and they would have had double and maybe treble that in Killarney. And the lights are old and wan in comparison with some of

the more modern set-ups. But here and now on Saturday night, the place is crackling.

Both sides want it. Both sets of supporters won't let them away with anything less. Jack Barry, the new Kerry midfielder, does his future no harm by dogging Brian Fenton from minute one onwards. He throws Dublin's young midfielder prince completely out of his rhythm.

Streets hum and pubs swell
On Kerry's to-do list, that's potentially a line struck through one of the jobs near the very top. Come the summer, that might become the prime reason we remember Paddy's weekend.

Game up. A draw. Everyone back to their corners and out into the Kerry night. Not a hotel room to be got, not a quiet snug to be found. As if you'd want one.

The streets hum and pubs swell and there's talk of football and life and how to chat up women long into the night.

Tralee won't do business like it until the Rose festival in August. And who knows? The lads might be back for it. The league is the time for practising your lines, after all. Championship is championship.

Rugby Six Nations Championship

Murky end to Paris finale leaves France with questions to answer

Noves's men the better side but tactics at the death against Wales raises eyebrows

France 20

Tries: Lamerat, Chouly

Cons: Lopez (2)

Pens: Lopez (2)

Wales 18

Pens: Halfpenny (6)

MICHAEL AYLWIN

at Stade de France

We could have another blood-gate on our hands. Whether you believe Dean Richards's misdemeanour was the vilest crime perpetrated against a trusting world or just another storm in a teacup, the fact is it came with a three-year ban – and there is little to distinguish it from the manoeuvre France appear to have engineered in Paris.

What's more, unlike Harlequins's fast one, France's worked. In the most dramatic of circumstances.

Damien Chouly's try, at the end of the 100th minute of a game that seemed as if it would never end, secured France the win that clinches their first finish in the top three of the Six Nations since 2011.

But the method by which they secured it is sure to attract the attention of the folk with access-all-areas badges. And then there's the livid bite mark on the left arm of George North. That's sure to be investigated too.

France were well worth the win. They had been ill-treated by Wayne Barnes all match, their dominance at scrum time scarcely rewarded, even penalised at some points, while a deliberate knock-on cost them a yellow card, an offence for which Wales escaped twice without diminishment of their number.

Immaculate kicking
Meanwhile, Wales owed their 18 points to the immaculate kicking of Leigh Halfpenny,



Referee Wayne Barnes awards France's Damien Chouly's winning try against Wales at the Stade de France.

PHOTOGRAPH: MICHAEL STEELE/GETTY IMAGES

knocking over six penalties, half of them for nothing offences on or around the 10-metre line. But what happened in the 80 minutes will quickly be forgotten, if it hasn't been already.

It is the 20 minutes thereafter that will live long. Wales's management are furious about how France resuscitated that edge at scrum time, just as the game reached its critical point, which was two minutes after the clock had turned red, Rob Howley describing France's antics as undermining the integrity of the game.

As the teams prepared for a

scrum on Wales's five-metre line, the French doctor pulled off Uini Atonio, the replacement tighthead, for a head injury assessment. HIAs are sacrosanct, no referee or independent doctor able to overrule them. Howley accused France of abusing that privilege, pointing to the fact that Atonio had told the referee moments earlier that he had a sore back but was otherwise fine.

He also pointed to the fact that Rabah Slimani, France's best scrummager and the man they wanted back on the field for the critical scrums that followed, had been warming up beforehand, a la Nick Evans at the Stoop in 2009.

Howley also observed how a member of the French coaching panel had just left the technical area, which he's not allowed to do, to speak with said doctor.

Barnes was clearly suspicious when that doctor then hauled Atonio off, to be replaced by Slimani. France thus rediscovered their dominance at scrum

suiting their cause immeasurably. It was only when Barnes asked whether Francis's earlier substitution had been tactical or injury-related that they were obliged to send him back on, the former having been the case.

That said, it would hardly have surprised anyone if they had dreamed up a convenient cramp to prevent his return. How they must wish they had.

2011

The last time that France secured a finish in the top three of the Six Nations Championship

time, winning penalty after penalty, until they finally forced their way over the line for the winning score.

When Samson Lee, Wales's replacement tighthead was sent to the sin bin, they were in no rush to send Tomas Francis back on, uncontested scrums

much it means to him.

Hogg will almost certainly not be on that tour to Australia, however – the 24-year-old is nailed on for his second tour with the British & Irish Lions, in New Zealand this summer, after another impressive tournament. He scored three tries and was the provider for three of Scotland's four tries in the 29-0 win against Italy, finished by Matt Scott, Tim Visser and Tommy Seymour. Guardian service

SCOTLAND: Hogg, Seymour, Jones, Dunbar, Visser, Russell, Price, Reid, Ford, Fagerson, Gilchrist, Dell, Reid (56), Brown (66), Berghian (66), Du Preez (66), Murray (49), Weir (49), Scott (75). **Not used:** Swinson. **Sin bin:** Barclay (49).

ITALY: Padovani, Esposito, Benvenuti, McLean, Venditti, Cannata, Gori, Lovotti, Gega, Cittadini, Fuser, Biagi, Mbanda, Steyn, Parisse. **Replacements:** Viali for Gori (53), Panico for Lovotti (63), van Schalkwyk for Fuser (53), Ruzza for Biagi (75), Minto for Mbanda (53). **Not used:** Ghiraldini, Chistolini, Sperandio. **Referee:** Pascal Gauzere (France).

the post-match press conference, we were treated to the extraordinary scene of Guy Novès, France's coach, biting himself on the arm, in an apparent attempt to show that such wounds can be self-inflicted.

It was a suitably surreal end to the day. It almost certainly, though, will not be the end of this. Guardian service

FRANCE: Dulin, Nakaitaci, Lamerat, Fickou, Vakatawa, Lopez, Serin, Baillie, Guirado, Slimani, Vahsamahina, Maestri, Sancornie, Gourdon, Picaud. **Replacements:** Huger for Vakatawa (54), Trinh-Duc for Lopez (53), Dupont for Serin (19), Ben Arous for Baillie (55), Chat for Guirado (72), Atonio for Slimani (55), Le Devedec for Vahsamahina (78), Chouly for Sancornie (55). **Sin bin:** Vakatawa (19).

WALES: Halfpenny, North, J. Davies, S. Williams, L. Williams, Bagg, Webb, Evans, Owens, Francis, Ball, A. Jones, Warburton, Tipuric, Moriarty. **Replacements:** Roberts for S. Williams (54), Smith for Evans (80), Lee for Francis (60), Baldwin for Ball (60), Charteris for A. Jones (52), Faletau for Moriarty (54). **Not used:** G. Davies, S. Davies. **Sin bin:** Lee (80). **Referee:** Wayne Barnes (England).

Briefs

Rugby

Racing 92 and Stade Francais 'super club' merger abandoned

Racing 92 and Stade Francais have announced that their proposed merger is off.

The two French powerhouses shocked the rugby world last week when they revealed plans to pool their resources from next term and form a Top 14 Paris super club.

However, the controversial move has now been called off, with Racing chief Jacky Lorenzetti saying: "I have decided to give up this beautiful project."

The planned merger has courted criticism since last Monday's announcement, which stunned players from both clubs, including those on international duty with

France.

On Wednesday Stade's squad went on an "open-ended strike", before later in the week staging a protest alongside supporters outside the headquarters of the Ligue Nationale de Rugby in Paris.

The fall-out continued on Friday when both of the clubs' respective Top 14 fixtures scheduled for this weekend were postponed.

However, with further talks between Top 14 champions Racing and Stade having initially been scheduled for today, the two clubs announced on Sunday that the merger would no longer be happening.

Men's hockey Hockey World League Two final

Ireland progress after wins over Wales and France

Ireland added Hockey World League round two gold yesterday to advance to the next phase with a 4-2 shoot-out win over France at Stormont. Their 3-1 win over Wales on Saturday ensured Ireland finished in the top three with goals from Shane O'Donoghue, Ben Walker and Neal Glassey to ensure they go forward to round three.

The first-half of the final was a subdued affair with flowing hockey at a premium. With the half petering out, France's Victor Charlet rammed home the opening goal. After Ronan Gormley won Ireland's only corner Shane O'Donoghue nailed for 1-1 with eight minutes to go.

In the shootout Conor Harte, Eugene Magee, Cole



David Harte's two shootouts saves ensured victory

and McKee all scored while David Harte's pair of saves ensured victory.

IRELAND: D Harte, J Bell, M Bell, R Gormley, E Magee, N Glassey, S O'Donoghue, J McKee, P Gleghorne, C Harte, J Duncan. **Subs:** B Walker, M Nelson, S Murray, L Cole, J Wright.

FRANCE: A Thieffry, P van Straaten, J L Kieffer, T Genestet, H Genestet, S Martin-Brisac, V Lockwood, C Masson, G Deront, J-B Forques, V Charlet. **Subs:** C Peters-Deutz, B Rogeau, N Dumont, G Baumgarten, F Goyet, E Teynevez, C Saunier.

Cricket

Stirling helps Ireland to six wicket victory

Paul Stirling's second consecutive man-of-the-match display helped Ireland to a six-wicket win against Afghanistan in the 3rd ODI in Greater Noida.

The 26-year-old agonisingly missed out on a deserved century, bowled on 99 by Mohammed Nabi – joining Middlesex colleague Eoin Morgan as the only Irishmen to be dismissed for 99 in ODIs.

Stirling's brilliant innings was more sedate than usual, stroking nine boundaries and clearing the ropes once as his 99 took 114 balls.

He shared stands of 96 with Niall O'Brien (30) and 59 with Andrew Balbirnie after Ireland had been rocked with the early wickets of Ed Joyce and William Porterfield in their pursuit of Afghanistan's total of 264 for 8.

Rowing

UCD win Gannon Cup colours race

UCD Boat Club capped a very good week with an impressive win for their senior men's eight in the Gannon Cup colours race against Trinity on the Liffey on Saturday. The crew, stroked by David O'Malley, took the lead not long after the start at O'Connell Bridge and had three lengths to spare come the finish at St James's Gate.

UCD's performance is all the more admirable as O'Malley, Shane O'Connell and Shane Mulvaney are lightweighters – indeed all competed for Ireland at the World Championships as under-23 lightweighters.

Trinity novice men's eight took the Dan Quinn Shield while in the senior women's race UCD won the Corcoran Cup. The women's novice race, for the Sally Moorhead Trophy, also went to UCD.

LIAM GORMAN

Hogg hopeful Scotland will continue to rise under Townsend

Scotland 29

Tries: Russell, Scott, Visser, Seymour

Cons: Russell (3)

Pens: Hogg

Italy 0

GERARD MEAGHER

at Murrayfield

Stuart Hogg paid a glowing tribute to the departing head

coach, Vern Cotter, but believes his replacement, Gregor Townsend, can continue Scotland's upward trajectory after a Six Nations campaign that featured three victories for the first time in over a decade.

Townsend takes over at the end of the season in a change that has looked increasingly surprising as the Six Nations has progressed with the New Zealand, now moving to Montpellier, signing off as the only Scotland coach of the professional

era with a win ratio better than 50 per cent.

First Pro12 title
Townsend's credentials are obvious, however. Hogg was part of the Glasgow side he guided to a first Pro12 title in 2015 while the Warriors have beaten Leicester and Racing 92 home and away this season to reach the Champions Cup quarter finals for the first time and, perhaps most significantly, he is Scottish.

"We've got a tour of Australia in the summer and, with [Townsend] coming in, the Glasgow boys are fully aware of what he can bring," Hogg said. "It's exciting times for Scottish rugby. Nothing for us really changes from Glasgow to Scotland. Both coaches want us to go out there and play an expansive game and ultimately score tries. It's an exciting time."

"Vern's a very passionate guy. He's put everything into Scotland and you can see how

much it means to him.

Hogg will almost certainly not be on that tour to Australia, however – the 24-year-old is nailed on for his second tour with the British & Irish Lions, in New Zealand this summer, after another impressive tournament. He scored three tries and was the provider for three of Scotland's four tries in the 29-0 win against Italy, finished by Matt Scott, Tim Visser and Tommy Seymour. Guardian service

SCOTLAND: Hogg, Seymour, Jones, Dunbar, Visser, Russell, Price, Reid, Ford, Fagerson, Gilchrist, Dell, Reid (56), Brown (66), Berghian (66), Du Preez (66), Murray (49), Weir (49), Scott (75). **Not used:** Swinson. **Sin bin:** Barclay (49).

ITALY: Padovani, Esposito, Benvenuti, McLean, Venditti, Cannata, Gori, Lovotti, Gega, Cittadini, Fuser, Biagi, Mbanda, Steyn, Parisse. **Replacements:** Viali for Gori (53), Panico for Lovotti (63), van Schalkwyk for Fuser (53), Ruzza for Biagi (75), Minto for Mbanda (53). **Not used:** Ghiraldini, Chistolini, Sperandio. **Referee:** Pascal Gauzere (France).

much it means to him.