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‘You’re a lock.’

That was all I was told before my first rugby involvement on games day on a Wednesday afternoon at Christian Brothers College in Cork. Incredibly, this was on a pitch that directly bordered Collins Barracks where, unknown to me, my grandfather had been court-martialled and sentenced to death fifty years earlier.

Coming from a Gaelic football background, I didn’t have a clue what I was being told. Locks? Weren’t they for doors and keys? It’s amazing how life can hinge on small decisions.

Growing up in St Luke’s Cross on the northside of the city, it was all about playing on the streets, playing hurling and football, batting a slotar or a ball off the gable end of houses. I was always out with a ball, morning, noon and night.

In primary school in St Patrick’s we used to have an hour

and a quarter for lunch. I'd run home, have my dinner and run back to school immediately for a match. There would be a soccer match every day in the yard; we'd play with the same teams for a week before having to go through the selection process again every Monday lunchtime. That was it, five days a week, all rough and tumble. Playing sports was all that mattered. But rugby didn't come into it.

Rugby was a game we never played. We never had a rugby ball and it was not part of our childhood; though I do remember as a kid, when the Five Nations was on the television we'd go out, pretend the soccer ball was a rugby one and start passing, but that was about it. Rugby was never on the agenda until I went to secondary school.

I grew up playing hurling and football for Old Youghal Road in street leagues run by Brian Dillon's Hurling and Football Club, and also had great craic playing for the club for a number of years.

St Patrick's National School was well rated in GAA circles in Cork. My teacher, J. J. Fennessy, was part of the fabric of the scene and he always had great time for me.

My first sporting highlight and subsequent disappointment came at eleven years of age when we reached the final of the Cork city primary schools' competition, only to be beaten. Consolation came with the selection at centre-back for the Cork primary schools' team to play Limerick at the old Athletic Grounds. Had we won the final, I would even have captained Cork as the only St Pa's representative on the team. Captaining teams and being a leader on the field I guess came naturally to me and was to be a constant theme throughout my sporting career.

As a child, my dream was to play Gaelic football for Cork,

but all that changed when I went to Christian Brothers College. One of the main reasons my parents sent me there was because I was very young starting primary school and CBC offered a six-year secondary cycle; most of the other secondary schools in Cork were five-year cycles. It also helped that it was ten minutes down the road from here. As a fee-paying school, Christians, along with Presentation Brothers College, were seen as the snobby schools by many of my classmates.

If my parents had sent me to one of the other five-year-cycle schools I would have played Gaelic football and might never have touched a rugby ball. I'd like to think I would have played football for Cork, maybe even have won a Sam Maguire, but as I walked nervously through the gates of Christians little did I know what lay before me and how everything would change completely.

When J. J. Fennessy learned that I was going to CBC, he talked me up to the Christian Brothers reckoning I had potential to be a great rugby player. Catching, fielding, jumping all came naturally to me and he was always very supportive. He saw something in me.

Leaving the security and familiarity of St Patrick's for CBC was daunting enough but I was lucky that I had Brother Phil O'Reilly as my class master as well as games master. It was he who introduced me to rugby, told me I was a lock before explaining what it meant, and instilled a great love for a game that has been a massive part of my life. On that first Wednesday afternoon, my life changed for ever.

Even if rugby was never in my family, my father, Gerald, does recall trying it out with his great friend John B. Keane, a school-mate of his growing up together in Listowel, County Kerry,

and claims he played for the local club. As with the rest of the kingdom, though, Gaelic football was the sport of choice in Listowel. My father was a fine player and ended up playing wherever his job took him, often under a false name as he was lining out for a few different teams at the same time.

He won a Cork senior county football medal for St Nick's, the sister club of Glen Rovers, playing alongside such legendary figures as future Taoiseach Jack Lynch and the great Christy Ring. I remember when I first made it on to the Irish team, Jack Lynch was a VIP at matches and at the post-match reception under the stand. He would always make a point of coming over to me for a chat. Some within the IRFU were wondering what was going on – what was so special about Lenihan?

My father also boxed for the Glen Boxing Club and was Irish junior heavyweight champion. He got one cap for Ireland at senior level, boxing against Germany. He was a big strong man, very athletic by all accounts, and also won an All Ireland junior football medal with Cork.

Up to when I was twelve years of age, Dad was away for five days a week working wherever his job took him. When I was growing up in primary school, he was always away. It was only in the early 1970s when he became a contracts manager with Rohans in Cork that he was at home during the week.

I remember him coming home on a Friday evening, always with a bag of sweets for me and my two sisters, Jo and Audrey, before heading off at dawn again on a Monday morning. He wouldn't have been going to my games, but it was different then. Nowadays parents drop kids off everywhere and they're all on the sideline. There was no such thing when I was growing up. When I played for Cork primary schools, my mother,

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Chris, did go to the match, but unfortunately Dad never saw my one and only appearance in a Cork jersey.

At the time, Gaelic football was my passion and all I wanted to do was play for Cork. I was brought up going to Cork-Kerry matches, national league and Munster championship games in Cork and Killarney.

Although my dad had played for Cork he was a passionate Kerry man, and as a young boy I was a bit confused trying to figure out which he was. One Cork-Kerry clash in the Athletic Grounds stands out, however, and sorted any confusion I may have had as to where his loyalties lay.

Mick O'Dwyer was playing for Kerry and was being marked by Seamus Looney, a great young dual player for Cork. Looney must have been giving Micko a hard time so Kerry switched Mick Gleeson in on him. Within minutes there was a massive digging match and both were sent off. We were sitting on the freezing cold concrete seats in front of the old stand. Gleeson was being helped off around the perimeter of the pitch with the whole of the Cork crowd shouting and roaring at him as he passed. Next thing I know, my father jumps up and starts shouting and clapping furiously. 'Well done Mick Gleeson!' I thought we were going to be killed! It obviously helped that many in the Cork crowd knew he was a heavyweight boxing champion but I didn't appreciate it at the time. Even to this day, if you suggested to him that he was a Cork man, he would take the head off you.

It was my dad's friend John B. Keane who wrote about how close my grandfather John (or Jacko as he was known) came to death at the hands of a firing squad.

It was 19 February 1982, the night before a Triple Crown

decider against Scotland in Lansdowne Road. The hype surrounding the game was like nothing I had ever experienced before. Then again, that wasn't overly surprising given that the match was only my fourth cap.

What was unusual was that, for the likes of the vastly experienced players in the team, decorated men such as Fergus Slattery, Willie Duggan and my Munster room-mate Moss Keane, this game was different. It represented a first real opportunity for them to win a Triple Crown, and you could sense it. Ireland's last Triple Crown had come in 1949, with our one and only Grand Slam the year before. History was beckoning.

Slattery had been robbed of his chance ten years earlier when Wales and Scotland had refused to travel to Dublin because of the escalation of the Troubles in the North. Having beaten both England and France away from home already that season, he was denied a potential Grand Slam.

The Championship was won by Ireland in 1974, but in many ways it was an almost forgotten title. If it wasn't a Triple Crown – the game with Wales was drawn – did it mean as much or get as many headlines? It never stuck in my mind, though the game the following season when the IRFU celebrated their centenary with a match against a World XV in Lansdowne Road stands out clearly.

Myself and one of my closest friends in school, Barry Coleman, got the train to Dublin for the game and we were crammed in on the East Terrace getting a glimpse of our heroes. I'll never forget running on to the pitch at the final whistle and managing to tap Willie John McBride on the arm as the players made their way back to the dressing room. He turned and shook my hand. Who would have believed that this lanky teenager would

be playing under Willie John for Ireland and the Lions just a few years later?

I could sense the edge to Moss when we returned to our room before dinner having collected the evening papers in the foyer of the Shelbourne Hotel. The coverage of the match was incredible and unprecedented for a rugby international, with the *Evening Herald* producing an eight-page Triple Crown supplement to preview the game.

Moss passed it over to me as there was an interview by Karl MacGinty with the headline ‘Donal Lenihan – Cool, Calm and Collected’ adorning the back page. But it was the piece by John B. Keane on page two of the supplement that captured my imagination.

John B. wrote proudly of the Listowel connection going back to my father, Gerald, and grandfather, Jacko, who was arrested for the shooting of Royal Irish Constabulary District Inspector Tobias O’Sullivan in the town in January 1921. I was always told that, while he was an active member of the Listowel Company of Irish Volunteers during the War of Independence, he’d played no part in the murder of the inspector.

The killing of Inspector O’Sullivan had actually been carried out by Con Brosnan, a future Kerry All Ireland-winning captain, and two of his colleagues, Dan Grady and Jack Ahern.

While researching this book, I was introduced to Con Brosnan’s son, Jerry, who at eighty-eight years of age was a fount of knowledge on those troubled times. The first thing Jerry showed me when I visited him in the old family home in Moyvane, just a few miles outside Listowel, was a picture of a rugby team. I recognized the setting immediately. It was a British Navy team playing the British Army in Twickenham in

1928, and in the back row stood Con's brother, Michael, who had trained to be a doctor in the British Navy and by all accounts was the first Kerry man to play in Twickenham – certainly the first from Moyvane anyway!

In the aftermath of the killing of Tobias O'Sullivan, my grandfather Jacko was revered in the area as he never squealed on Brosnan or his fellow Volunteers despite being sentenced to death for an atrocity he played no part in.

'Time passed,' wrote John B. 'And then on a never-to-be-forgotten morning he was awakened by his gaolers and ordered to dig his own grave in the prison grounds. When the grave was dug he was told that the date for his execution was a mere forty-eight hours away.'

One night, while my grandfather was being held in Buttevant Barracks, the IRA massacred a dozen British Army men at nearby Headford train station. Six of the dead were brought back to the barracks and the Black and Tans, along with the military, were going nuts around the towns and villages looking for revenge. Jacko and the five others in custody feared for their lives.

A British soldier went into my grandfather's cell that night and whispered, 'Say the rosary, Paddy, I think you are for it.' The soldier handed him a set of rosary beads and said, 'I got this in Palestine, I think a lot about it.'

Jacko was fully expecting to be shot in reprisal but they left him alone and he survived the night. However, for seven days after the ambush, the prisoners were left without food. For the rest of his life Jacko also had terrible back troubles which came from having to sleep on flagstones while in prison.

Later that year, when the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed, his sentence (along with those of many others) was commuted and

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he lived to marry, have kids and live out the rest of his days in Listowel, a carpenter by trade. I was nine when he died and I remember him well, bringing me to his local pub in Listowel, sitting me up on the stool with a glass of orange and a bag of Taytos. He would also bring me into his workshop in the back of his house on Charles Street where he would show me an underground hiding place where the IRA guns used to be hidden. Although the RIC often raided the premises they never found his hiding place.

Unfortunately the workshop is gone now, as is McKenna's Timber Yard, which was situated across the road and was where my father would be sent to buy wood for Jacko. There he met and became friendly with an office clerk by the name of John Sexton. Little did they appreciate that, many years down the road, they would be reacquainted when their respective sons, Willie and I, played together for Munster and Ireland. I am sure John Sexton would have been equally proud of the many achievements of his grandson and namesake Johnny, who continues to lead the charge for Leinster and Ireland.

My father completed his apprenticeship as a carpenter under Jacko's direction by the time he was seventeen. His sister Eileen was married to Jack Sullivan, an Irish soldier stationed on Spike Island, so he was sent down there for two-week holidays. He was all set to join up with the rest of his siblings, Breda, Sean, Dinny and twin brother Donal, who had all followed their eldest sister Mai to Huddersfield in England where Mai had trained as a nurse during the Second World War, but he ended up getting a job in Cobh and has lived in Cork ever since.

'Rabble', as Brother Phil O'Reilly was affectionately known, was an iconic figure in Irish Schools rugby and I was so

fortunate to have played under him at Christian Brothers College. He was an incredibly innovative coach, way ahead of his time, doing things that are taken for granted now. He delivered eight Munster Senior Cups in ten years for Christians and brought through a huge amount of rugby talent. I went through my whole time at CBC without ever losing a cup match.

We had a culture of winning and seven or eight of us from Christians went on to play together in UCC – University College Cork. Rugby gripped me from the outset. But Schools rugby was alien to my family. They wouldn't have seen me play until I was made captain of CBC's Junior Cup team. At that stage they probably thought they'd better see what all the fuss was about. My father was working permanently in Cork by that time and they'd started going to the Schools games. Overnight, their lives changed too as they followed all the cup games and built up a core of friendships with the parents of the other players.

I played with my friend Barry Coleman all the way through Christians. His father Norman had played for Munster in 1954 against the touring All Blacks and was a great club man with Dolphin for years. When the first ever Irish Schools team, captained by Donal Spring, played in 1974/75 to mark the centenary of the IRFU, he drove us up to Dublin to watch the game. Watching the Schools players in the green of Ireland that day, I started to think that maybe it could also be me playing out there one day. It instilled a desire in me to emulate those players. Playing for Ireland was becoming a goal.

I got a final trial the following year, though I was still only sixteen. I didn't make the cut, but in my final year I became the first from CBC to get selected. That made it even more special. We played Wales in Lansdowne Road and years later my father revealed that of all the games I ever played, the first time I wore

a green jersey at any level was the one that stood out the most for him.

Norman Coleman was also there with Barry that day, and at the final whistle he called me to the sideline to shake my hand. I have no doubt that one of the reasons he brought Barry and me to that first ever Schools game was to open our eyes to the possibilities that lay ahead.

When you're playing for an Irish Schools team it starts to dawn on you: maybe I could play for Ireland some day. It sows a seed in you. You wouldn't have many expectations of yourself at that stage. Other fellas, their fathers, brothers, uncles, might have played rugby, but I had no history or background in the game. But then when you're in the Irish Schools set-up you start to think to yourself, 'Maybe I could be doing this, maybe I belong?'

Even after my career took off at full international level, I remained a fanatical supporter of Cork hurling and football teams. During the summer break from rugby I would travel to all the Cork matches, but you would always get some gombeen shouting at you, 'Aren't you at the wrong game?' Yeah, right.

It would drive me mad that some within the GAA would see themselves as being more Irish than we, as rugby players, were. Often it was people on the periphery that would be lobbing in the odd little comment. One incident in particular really hit home, when we stopped off in a watering hole in Mitchelstown on the way back from one of the greatest Munster hurling finals Semple Stadium had ever seen. But I'll tell you that story later.

By the time of that incident my Gaelic football dreams had been left far behind in my childhood. I was captain of Ireland. I'd won Triple Crowns, played for the Lions and appeared in a World Cup. And I'd played a lot of games since turning out for Irish Schools, with both heartbreak and celebrations in between.