

MARK ROBSON

BAD DAY AT BLACKROCK

As a cub reporter in the early 80's my greatest joy was covering Ulster Rugby. These guys were my heroes and Ulster was my team. I had once been selected in the Ulster Under 20 squad. It was the best and worst week of my short and very average rugby career. Picked and then a few days later the Ulster branch informed me that I was two weeks too old and I was withdrawn from the squad. So close to pulling on the white shirt. But never did. Des Lynam once said "If you can you play. If you can't you write. If you can't write you broadcast" For me it was the lower trough of that particular food chain.

There was a time, when dinosaurs roamed the earth, when the media and the players actually got on very well together. In fact we were all part of the same happy band. There was trust and that critical sense of omerta. Which, by the way, I still respect to this day. We, as journalists, instinctively knew what stories we could run with and which stories would remain, as Inspector Cluasseau once famously put it, "Under the covers". Away Interprovincials were a particular joy. The modern day professional rugby player will find this hard to believe but the players, staff and journalists all travelled on the same bus. And all partook in the same activities. Well off the field anyway. Participation in the aforementioned activities was not voluntary. One had no choice. Refusal was pointless. A much worse fate would follow if you dared to question the higher authority. In my early days as a journalist covering Ulster Rugby the higher authority was the Captain Willie Anderson who also skippered Ireland. To argue was to invite death.

We even had dinner together. Players, staff and journos all around the same table. These days any journalist who comes within several hundred metres of a restricted area would be gently lead away by a kindly taser wielding media officer. But not then. And here I was for the first time actually having dinner with the entire Ulster team on a trip to play Leinster in Dublin.

Big Willie decided that it was time to initiate young Robson. No doubt I'd be told to down a pint in 5 seconds. Something simple. Nothing too horrific. These rugby men were adults after all. I was positioned, on a huge round table, beside the Captain. To his right. What an honour. I felt blessed. Until the initiation started. Willie started it off by horsing a vast amount of food. Meat, mashed Spuds and vegetables. This was then passed BY MOUTH to the next player to Willie's left. I watched in horror as the saliva soaked mess moved in slobbering fashion through twenty five half pissed behemoths. I, of course, was last man on this Circle of Doom and knew my fate long before the disgusting gooey mess finally reached me. At least the rest of the guys simply had to pass on the dripping gunge. As it came my way Willie told me that as the last man I would have to swallow it. Gulp ! I was now initiated.

One season Ulster won the Inter Pro title with a fine win against Leinster in Dublin. The post match function was at the famous Blackrock Rugby Club. A club that had produced many legendary Irish players including Fergus Slattery and Willie Duggan. This was during the "Troubles" and the Ulster side included several members of the RUC. They were IRA targets and a police escort took the team bus to the border and there the Gardai's version of the Special Branch took over. Throughout the Ulster team's time in the Republic a dedicated Gardai protection officer kept a close eye on the RUC guys.

So Ulster won and off we all went to Blackrock for what would be a particularly raucous celebration. We were all completely pissed. Unfortunately included in this number was the perhaps not quite so dedicated Gardai protection officer. He may have been the most hammered guy in the room. Anyway I got talking to him and asked him if he had a gun on him. Affirmative. Is it loaded ? Affirmative. He took out his revolver and showed me the bullets in the chamber spinning it for dramatic effect. All very "Fistful of Dollars" But what a night. Merry badinage and jolly japes. I think. The next day I couldn't remember anything about it.

Remember we were all on the same bus. Gargantuan hangovers would be our companions on the way home. Hair of the Dog was suggested by our half Ian Brown. Brown, one of the funniest men I've ever met, was usually a central figure on these occasions and a Master of Mischief. I was down at the back of the bus in amongst the players but sitting beside me was my Boss who often travelled on these rugby trips. My Boss was a lady. Joy Williams. Mr. Brown thought it would be great fun for us all to strip naked on the bus and swap underpants. Oh Christ Ian NOOOOO ! Bad enough in isolation but not in the presence of Joy. But as always there was no choice. You did what you were told. So there I was naked sitting beside my Boss while Ian put about 25 pairs of underpants into a black bin bag. Then Brown drew the secret ballot. You would wear someone else's pants for the rest of the trip. Ian called my name and pulled out the pants of Irish International Willie Duncan. As I pulled them on I noticed the skid marks. Repulsed ... but cornered. Can you imagine sitting for three hours in somebody else's soiled knickers ?

We arrived back at Ravenhill late on the Sunday evening and said our farewells at the back of the bus while collecting our gear and downing the final dregs from the remaining bottles of beer. I couldn't wait to get to bed. The taxi dropped me home and I was comatose very quickly.

The phone rang at six the following morning. It was the Ulster and Ireland prop forward and RUC man Jimmy McCoy. He sounded a little frantic. "Robbo. At Blackrock I saw you talking to our Gardai guy." I had no idea where this was leading. "Well he's bricking it. Could you look in your pockets. He's checked his revolver. Two bullets are missing" A quick rummage and I felt my fingers on hard metal. I had travelled through the Newry checkpoint at the height of the "Troubles" with two bullets in my trousers. If we'd been searched by the Army at the border and they had found these I would have been in serious (understatement) trouble. Jimmy was stressed because A) Robson had bullets and B) His Gardai chum had to account for his ammunition. Missing bullets were frowned upon unless they were embedded in someone they didn't like. Double quick McCoy arrived at my house and the bullets were spirited away to be fast tracked back to their owner. Maybe this is where the phrase "Edgy Journalism" came from.