

# MARK ROBSON

## DENVER CRUSH

I only ever did cover one Churchill Cup ... or the "Churchill Stag" as it was better known. But it was eventful, raucous and ultimately sloppy. And when I say sloppy think of the literal sense of the word. Not the sporting interpretation as in "Ireland having to deal with sloppy ball" No I really do mean sloppy.

The Churchill Cup was a tournament designed for International "A" teams and with a few competitive Tier Two Nations added to make for a spicy festival of rugby. The 2009 version was held in Denver, Colorado. Mile High City. It coincided with a British and Irish Lions tour to South Africa and to be honest, while we took the broadcasting seriously, as every game was live on SKY Sports, outside the TV windows the boys made absolutely certain that they enjoyed themselves. The players and the travelling media.

There were a lot of big nights out. The party mood would occasionally slip into my commentary. Hardly professional but sure wasn't it just a bit of fun in a competitive but ultimately low key tournament. Certainly compared to the Lions Tour which was getting the hyperbole overdrive. So I relaxed a little. Ultimately that drove me into a very exposed and vulnerable position. I got sloppy and it ended up VERY sloppy.

There were plenty of stand out moments from that trip. Ones that made me laugh and ones that made me gag. Literally. I even amused others on occasion too. Though not on purpose. Denver sits in the shadow of the Rockies and in June is prone to big storms with tornadoes or "twisters", as the Americans prefer to call them, sometimes spinning across the plains below the mountain range. The players and the broadcasters had been given a protocol to follow should a tornado hit a match venue. We had all been briefed.

Ireland "A" were playing Georgia at Infinity Park in Glendale on the outskirts of Denver and from commentary there was a great view to my

right of the aforementioned sweeping flatlands. The forecast had warned of potential storms. So I had written down the tornado protocol.... just in case. The game was underway and, during a break in play, I looked towards the mountains. Far in the distance I was sure I could see a tornado. I told the director and he picked up as good a close up as he could manage. It was still many miles away. Then the first siren blew at the stadium. This was the protocol: Siren One = General warning. Siren Two = Tornado in Vicinity. Siren Three = Get the Fuck Out as quickly as possible. Or words to that effect.

I actually couldn't believe my luck. I was, potentially, about to commentate on an actual "Twister" smashing into a rugby stadium during a game. This felt like it might be a lot of fun. I said something like "That siren you hear is the initial Tornado warning. It means there is one nearby. We are not in any imminent danger but I'll keep you posted" The adrenalin began to run. Our director tracked the storm and it was definitely coming our way. The tornado seemingly moving quickly lifting vast swathes of dust as it tracked towards Glendale. Ten minutes later Siren Two blasted from the Stadium's tannoy system. I now felt as if I was starring in an actual real life unfolding disaster movie. Narrating, live, on impending doom. What a blast ! This commentary will be remembered forever. I lifted the tempo. "That is Siren Two folks (The Director cut up shots of the tornado now looking dark and seriously menacing... and a lot closer) This means that we could be in danger soon if the Twister keeps its course. Strap in folks it might be a bumpy ride" Yes I know an awful hackneyed cliché there but remember I was in full Hollywood mode by now.

We cut between shots of the game and shots of the storm. Then the rain came with massive drops harpooning down on the players who kept on going but we were all nervously waiting for that "Run You Mothers" final klaxon. I was getting quite scared to be honest but massively excited at the same time. And then I heard it. Siren Number Three. The director again cut to Tornado-Cam.

I switched seamlessly into action hero voiceover mode. "That's it folks we are about to take a direct hit from a massive tornado. We are going to have to evacuate fast. The players need to get off the pitch and into cover. Someone like Isaac Boss (the replacement scrum half and

smallest player) could get directly sucked into the vortex. I'm serious people any second now and it's potential Armageddon here at Glendale"

No-One moved. I was confused. The Match Producer pressed his talk back button and whispered, quietly and calmly, directly into my ear. "Er.... Robbo... that wasn't Siren Number Three ... it was a .... passing fire engine. The tornado has drifted East it's not coming anywhere near us"

Not the most accurate piece of journalism in my broadcasting career. I felt my twitching ego dissolve as I proffered a cringing explanation and apology. Of course the resulting ribbing was relentless. The players got to hear about it too and were particularly merciless. But they would be wouldn't they ?

Could this trip get more embarrassing for me ? Tornado Gate was nothing compared to what happened on the final night. Ireland's Coach Declan Kidney had appointed the Ulsterman Neil Best as Captain. Bestie was a wild man and I apologise to any wild men out there who feel that they have just been understated. We reckoned that's why Declan had made Neil skipper. It was a vain attempt to calm Crazy Horse down. On the pitch it actually worked. Best proved to be a capable Captain in a fine team - Johnny Sexton was the out half - and lead the team to Churchill Cup triumph. Ireland A hammered a strong England Saxons line up 49-22 scoring 6 tries in a wonderful final at the even more wonderfully named "Dick's Sporting Goods Park" Neil was a bit of mate and I just couldn't resist giving him some stick in commentary. "Making Neil Best Captain is a bit like ....." sort of thing. I thought it was all very funny of course. No actually I thought I was cutting edge and hilarious. Mr.Best didn't quite see it the same way. There he was Captaining his country. His finest hour. And here was I, a fellow Ulsterman, taking the piss.

There was an after tournament party. A huge bar in downtown Denver. We all went. Players and media. Everyone gave it the whole nine yards. A massive drink fuelled night. The bar was full of Argentinians, Georgians, Americans. All of the teams were represented. Neil Best was there too. Word had got back to me that the Captain was less than amused. The family had been watching live back home and news of my

coruscating humour had reached the Ireland wing forward. Neil Best sober was scary. Neil Best with a couple of drinks was Michael Myers without the knife. I thought I should face up to him. Sort it out early. Avoid problems later. I found Neil at the bar. "Sorry chum. Was just trying to add a bit of colour to the commentary. Bit of craic.....so it was" I burred nervously. Bestie looked unperturbed. "No problem Robbo. All taken in the spirit intended. Have a great night" What a relief for me. I relaxed. Which was a huge miscalculation.

The alcohol flowed. I was standing in a corner chatting to (I think !!!) the Irish Props Cian Healy and Tony Buckley. I was having a great time. Laughing and joking with the boys. Sure could life be any better than this ?

Then I felt the grip. Strong arms locked my elbows behind me and before I knew it I was on my back on the bar room floor. Pleading and shouting for my captor to release me. Then I saw the smug smile on the face of my assassin. Neil Best of course. As I struggled he clamped his face on mine. Yes his FACE. And then he drove a very sloppy tongue deep into my throat. It was a long and aggressive washing machine on spin cycle kind of French Kiss - with lots of saliva. Lots. After several decades Best withdrew whooping and hollering in triumph. The sting had been carried out to perfection. He left me panting and gagging and retching on the floor. That was twenty years ago and I still feel nauseous when I think of that night. Members of the Irish squad were all around doubled over with glee enjoying the sloshy demise of the smart arsed SKY Sports commentator.

Could this get any more stomach churning ? Oh yes. Isaac Boss, the Irish scrum half of "Sucked into the twister" fame was standing beside me. When I had recovered a scintilla of composure Isaac tapped me on the shoulder. "It's worse than you think Robbo".... "What do you mean ?" I gurgled. Bossy replied, "Before he snogged you he pissed in a glass and swished it around in his mouth"

FOOTNOTE: That was the last time that Neil and I kissed. Or, to be more accurate, the last time that the 18 times capped Irish International Flanker (and no that's not a spelling mistake) kissed me. Although a few years later Best did kidnap my brother. And threatened to murder him. I

had a phone call. It was Neil who was with his brother Darren. "We've kidnapped your brother" See I told you it was true. "We have Allen trapped behind our sofa. The ransom is two crates of Carlsberg" (If Carlsberg did people you didn't want to mess about with etc). I replied, "What happens if I don't come up with your demand".... "Well we might kill him." I decided to call Neil's bluff. "Go ahead then it doesn't really bother me either way" And I put the phone down. I'd gambled that while Neil Best had his idiosyncrasies he probably wasn't a psychopath. My brother Allen was kept hostage for quite a while. But he survived. No ransom paid. My clever tactic had paid off.

This might sound strange but I actually got on very well with Neil despite his capacity for the unexpected. A very fine very hard player. Best was a cult figure at Ulster and then at Northampton Saints where he and fellow Ulsterman Roger Wilson were held in high esteem by the Franklin's Gardens faithful. Best should have won more caps. Maybe the higher authorities at the IRFU were a little afraid of him. Maybe not. They should have asked me. I could have told them with complete confidence that not only was Neil Best an exceptional wing forward he was also an excellent kisser. As long as you didn't mind the taste of urine.