

MARK ROBSON

SEEK AND DESTROY

In my early days covering Irish League football the Belfast Big Two Linfield and Glentoran dominated. The Blue of Linfield versus the Red and Green of Glentoran. When they met it was called the "Bel-Classico". These were always fractious affairs and sometimes violent. The riot police were usually in attendance. At one Irish Cup final in 1985 at the Oval the home of Glentoran in East Belfast the Glens fans had somehow managed to smuggle a piglet into the stadium. This was during the height of the troubles and body searching was regular. At Big Two games it was usually rigorous. How did they get it through security ? One can only assume that the pig had a ticket.

The manager of Linfield was the hugely successful Roy Coyle who won over 30 trophies in his time at Windsor Park. Naturally this made him a bit of a hate figure at the Oval (Ironically he went on to manage the Glens !) During the game the piglet was released onto the pitch from the Glens fan's end. On the side of the swine, sprayed in blue letters, was the word "COYLE" Funny unless you were the terrified pig or Roy Coyle. A cockerel then appeared. The cockerel was embroidered on the Glentoran badge. Their nickname was "The Wee Cock and Hens" as in "Glens" The game ended with the usual riot between the fans but the helmeted shield holding police were ready and used their snarling Alsatians to great effect. Pigs, chickens and dogs. A final straight from "Animal Farm"

I was commentating on the match for the wireless. Just 25 at the time but quickly getting used to covering sport during the Troubles. You would be a sports reporter during the football and then slip seamlessly into news reporter mode when the riot police came off the bench.

During the Troubles it was usually the Catholics and the Protestants fighting each other. Linfield and Glentoran were both very much Protestant clubs. Why they battled each other to such an extent on and off the pitch was always a tough one to explain to an outsider. Football rivalry and Belfast domination was the easy answer. They still are, in the

main, Protestant organisations - their Stadiums are set in hard line Protestant areas - but integration has been a huge part of their development.

The breakthrough for Linfield came, after being put under huge pressure from various sources, when they signed a Catholic player called Pat Fenlon from League of Ireland side Bohemians. The true start of cross denomination at the Club. There was uproar from the hard core Linfield faithful. But they softened. It helped that Pat was a top class player. The Linfield fans were soon calling him "Billy" Fenlon and many years after his retirement Pat returned to the club as part of the commercial staff.

When Linfield played Cliftonville the security was always mega tight. This was Protestant versus Catholic. And they truly despised each other. Armed escorts with heavy military and RUC presence was common. For many years Cliftonville were banned from playing Linfield at "Solitude" their North Belfast home following a raft of incidents. This should give you a flavour of the sort of atmosphere that sizzled when the big rivals played each other in the insular Irish League. When certain teams met there was a sectarian edge.

When Linfield and Glentoran weren't winning the title Portadown and Crusaders were the sides who were inclined to nip in and snatch the silver. Two wonderful managers lead those two sides at the time. Ronnie McFall at Portadown and Roy Walker at Crusaders. I don't think Roy liked me very much. I'm not quite sure why but I think Roy felt that I didn't always give Crusaders the credit they deserved. Roy lead "The Hatchet Men" as they were nicknamed to two Irish League titles. Roy was also unhappy when I ran critical features on their style or any of their players. Actually it maybe boiled down to criticism of one player. The legendary Kirk Hunter. Kirk won 7 trophies with the Crues and was inducted into their Hall of Fame in 2007. Kirk was a superb player and probably the most important cog in that hugely successful Crusaders side. So... Hunter ... a mighty fine player but a mighty fine player with a dark side.

Kirk was, in that era, one of the most heavily sanctioned players in the Irish League. To say he had a colourful CV is a considerable

understatement. As the superb veteran football journalist Jim Gracey put it in the Belfast Telegraph, " Feared and celebrated in equal measure, depending on your club allegiance, Kirk Hunter was, then and now, instantly recognised as the powerfully built and heavily tattooed Shankill Road bandsman whose reputation, on and off the pitch, tended to precede him, whose 6ft 3in frame marked him out for attention, not always welcome, and while he will tell you he never went looking for trouble, trouble had a tendency to find him." I love this quote from Kirk, "I wasn't sent off as many times as people might think... about seven or eight."

In just one of many infamous incidents on the football pitch Kirk was brought to court and sued for a career-ending leg breaking tackle on ex-[Larne](#) player Paul Murnin. In another incident Hunter was sent-off for fighting without touching the ball against North Belfast rivals [Cliftonville](#) in 1998 after being on the pitch less than 60 seconds. There was an infamous 1980s assault on the brilliant Joey Cunningham, then an emerging talent at Newry. It began in the tunnel and ended with Joey in hospital with a broken jaw, and Kirk in court being handed a suspended sentence. Kirk once dislocated the shoulder of the Ballymena goalkeeper. The goalie was standing up at the time !

A huge game was looming. Saturday afternoon: Crusaders versus Linfield at Seaview Crusaders home ground on North Belfast's Shore Road. The ground would be sold out. The League was coming to a climax and the Crues and the Blues were contending for the title. And Kirk Hunter would be coming back from yet another suspension.

By this stage in Kirk's career the rap sheet was long and colourful. So I decided, in a crazy flash of journalistic wisdom, to put together a TV feature to help preview the game which would be an amalgamation of Kirk's most heinous tackles and collisions. A hugely watchable 3 minutes of ill timed, high and scything tackles. I thought it was brilliant. Crusaders did not. Or to be more accurate a faction who supported the club did not. My catchline of "Should this man be allowed back in Irish football" didn't enhance their mood.

I was at UTV at the time and was their main football commentator but there was no outside broadcast for this one. The match would be

covered by a single camera. This single camera would be positioned on top of the dug out. Yes on top of the dug out. In the open. A microphone would dangle from the back of the camera. Mark Robson, sitting on a plastic seat, would grip the microphone and commentate. All very basic. All very vulnerable.

Crusaders had relayed their displeasure about the Kirk Hunter feature to UTV. Fair enough. They were quite within their rights. But then on the Friday afternoon everything changed. I was sitting in the sports department doing my preparation when someone from the Newsroom came in rather wide eyed and looking alarmed. "Robbo. We've had a message. It says that if you commentate at Crusaders on Saturday you'll be SHOT. And the message has come with an official recognised Protestant paramilitary codeword"

Naturally this made me ever so slightly nervous and the communiqué was quickly relayed to Des Smyth the Managing Director of UTV. I was summoned to his office. Des was, obviously, keen to pull me off the match. I didn't quite see it that way. I was determined not to give into the threat. Show courage. My colleagues in the Sports Department gave me their full support by calling me a foolhardy irresponsible dickhead with a death wish.

Des Smyth and other management members backed me. But they insisted on protection while I was around the confines of Seaview. This is where my Dad came in. Dad was a Magistrate and he sometimes needed Special Branch protection so he had all the contacts. My old man organised an armed officer for the match. Dad insisted on going. Not quite sure why you'd want to go to a game in the knowledge that your son might be murdered during it. I suspect that's Dad's sense of humour.

I got to the ground. I was very nervous and hyper vigilant. There were a few boos from some of the spectators who recognised me. I took my seat on top of the dug out. Now. If you wanted to put yourself in the perfect spot to take a direct hit from a determined sniper this was it. The sniper could relax. He had a full 90 minutes to pick his moment. Duck and Sitting. I kept on wondering what my armed guard would actually be

able to do. I mean if the sniper fired then it would all be too late. I felt very very naked.

But I was there to do my job. The match kicked off. After twenty minutes I wasn't dead. This was a bonus. Then "GOAL !" Crusaders. And who scored ? Well of course it was Kirk Hunter with a rasping angled volley. Pandemonium. It finished one nil. On the final whistle I checked. No matter how hard I looked I couldn't find a bullet hole anywhere.

I climbed down from my open topped commentary position and met my Dad. He looked relieved. Time for home he suggested hopefully. But I hadn't quite finished. I wanted to see this through to what I felt was the right kind of conclusion. I insisted on going into the Crusaders clubhouse and wait for Kirk Hunter. I wanted to speak to him. The whole incident had both scared and annoyed me. And I was keen to do it on my own. Yes I know dickhead with a death wish was right.

And then I saw him coming. Big Kirk with his even bigger body building brother. Kirk getting his back slapped after another robust match winning performance. Kirk spotted me leaning against the wee tea bar in the corner. And walked over. With a huge smile on his face. The smug grin of an assassin spotting his easiest kill ? In fact the opposite. "Robbo" Kirk guldered, "Saw the piece on the TV last week. Loved it. Pissed myself laughing." WHAT !!!!! You see that 3 minutes of television was Gold Dust to a hard man from the loyalist Highfield Estate because it enhanced his fearsome reputation. Turned out the death threat had come from an angry rogue Crusaders fan with "connections". We had a drink. Kirk then invited me to join the Crusaders table at the upcoming Football Writers Dinner. I had a great night with my new best friends.