

MARK ROBSON

THE BATTLE OF BRIVE

One of my favourite people in rugby is the former England International and British and Irish Test Lion Dewi Morris. An absolute nugget of a scrum half and a bloody good bloke. He was part of a British and Irish Lions side that won a series in New Zealand. Dewi was that good and someone I respected hugely and worked with a lot in my early days at Sky Sports. In the office they called us "The Blues Brothers". We spent a lot of time together and were a commentary team for several years. Sky had a programme, produced by Jez Mann, called the Rugby Club and Dewi was a resident studio analyst alongside Stuart Barnes.

Dewi lived near Manchester so would fly down for the midweek recording of the show in the London based studios. Morris, or "The Monkey" as his England International colleagues called him, used to stay at the rather grand and very posh Petersham Hotel in the well leafed suburbs of Richmond.

At the hotel they called Dewi "The Major" (or maybe I gave him that nickname !) after the famous character in "Fawlty Towers". The Major being the full time and rather eccentric but loveable resident. "Papers Fawty ?" was his catchphrase. Dewi and "The Major". In some ways they felt like well matched bedfellows.

Dewi brought fabulous qualities to the commentary booth, the irony, in broadcasting, was that names in general and the English language in particular were, occasionally, a challenge. Jez actually kept a notebook in which he listed the most memorable Dewi - Isms. "They'll attack like the Four Horsemen of the Acropolis" was my favourite. Here are a few more from Jez's Secret File:

Morris: 'You can't miss him - shocking ginger hair.'

Robson: 'Don't you mean a shock OF ginger hair Dewi? We're not gingerest here.'

'A tough kick...those posts are getting thinner and thinner and thinner'

Over a series of TMO replays...' Yes, it looks like Banahan has grounded the ball, with some part of his arm, his elbow maybe. Is the elbow part of the hand?'

'I'm struggling to see here because the sun is shielding my eyes.'

'England have got no creativity. They're just playing by numbers: A,B C'

'I've got one word for you: Grand Slam.'

'Ellis... as sharp as a daisy.'

'We just keep talking about this until we are blue in the teeth.'

As-Live with Johnnie.

Hammond: 'So Dewi, 2 games today and another 2 tomorrow. Which one are you looking forward to the most?'

Morris: 'Oh, all 3'

'Stuart, there is no excuse for pace.'

'The Crusaders at that stage had got to them not just mentally, but psychologically as well.'

'Giving the ball away there is quite literally suicide.'

'They were just looking around like headless chickens.'

If you read the above literally, well, they're just funny. But if you think about them all laterally they are sprinkled with a strange kind of genius. Jez never told Dewi about the file. He was never quite sure how to break the news. Because like everyone else he loved the man dearly. But the material is simply too good.

In commentary life would generally toggle along quietly with Dewi delivering his usual authority and ticklish brand of humour and then he would suddenly fire in another one of his "right but not quite right" Ism's. Player's names sometimes caused problems. Morris keeps telling people that I was making these up but this is how I remember it. And I'm not the only one.

The superb All Black Flanker Josh Kronfeld, who had a spell at Leicester, became, in Dewi World "George Kornfield". French players brought a particular challenge. Jean Luc Sadournay was "Jean Luc Sauvignon"... centre Denis Charvet was "Denis Chardonnay" The way that Dewi often confused surnames for fine wine was hardly a coincidence. Phillipe Carbonneau, a spiky International scrum half, was Phillipe Carbonnara. Dewi liked his food too. There's a theme here

In the late 90's Brive and Pontypridd met in the Heineken Cup. It didn't go well on or off the pitch. The two sides came together three times in a short period. The two teams quickly developed a bitter relationship and the darker thuggish side of the game pockmarked the encounters. Especially the opener. Myself and Dewi commentated on the first clash in Brive in September of 1997. Brive were the reigning European Champions and had a fearsome reputation at home. An old school French reputation but Pontypridd were not to be intimidated.

At one stage all 30 players were fighting in the in goal area. Dale "The Chief" McIntosh and Brive flanker Lionel Mallier were sent off. "The Chief" gave the Brive fans the thumbs up as he walked down the touchline. To be fair the game was also sprinkled with superb rugby and it finished 32-31 to the home side following a controversial last minute Brive try. But the match, while it included red cards and brawls and head butts and punches and everything else on the WTF scale, was only the hors d'oeuvres. It was what happened post match that has gone down in Heineken Cup history. This was how the Independent Newspaper reported on what became known as "The Battle of Brive"

The relationship between the great rugby powers of Wales and France lay in tatters yesterday, after a bar-room brawl that put three Brive internationals in hospital and three Pontypridd players in court. Chris Hewett and Adam Szreter report on a body-blow to the game's image.

The punch-up on the field was bad enough, but the Wild West-style saloon brawl that succeeded it was infinitely worse. Pontypridd, roundly accused as the instigators of Sunday night's bloody excesses in the centre of Brive, will be called to account by Heineken Cup officials this week and may well find themselves thrown out of the competition in disgrace.

Dale McIntosh, the Ponty No 8, Phil John, the Welsh club's hooker, and Andre Barnard, a recent midfield recruit from South Africa, appeared before a French prosecutor yesterday afternoon following a spectacular free-for-all between rival players and supporters in the Bar Le Toulzac, a popular watering hole situated in the ironically named Place-de-Patriotes Martyrs. The three players, accused of "violence and degradation", are to be brought before an investigating judge, and in all 12 Pontypridd players may end up being questioned.

The team had been due to fly out of Brive yesterday at 9.30am, but at 8am the police arrived. The chartered plane later left without the players who, wisely, spent the rest of the day in their hotel

McIntosh had been sent off as a result of his role in the original mass set-to in the 26th minute of Sunday's game, which Brive, the reigning European champions, won by a point on the back of a disputed injury time try. The abrasive New Zealander antagonised the home crowd by smiling mockingly and giving them "victorious" thumbs-up signs as he headed for the dressing-room and was later suspended for 30 days. Lionel Mallier, the Brive flanker dismissed for his part in the same incident, received an identical punishment.

Depressingly, the matter did not rest there. Eye witnesses said a number of Brive players were drinking in the bar, jointly owned by Jean-Marie Soubira, a former player, when the Welsh contingent arrived. Something approaching bedlam promptly ensued and when the dust finally settled - or, rather, the police tear gas evaporated - M Soubira, was left to contemplate the extensive damage to his property caused by flying bottles and furniture.

Philippe Carbonneau, the Brive captain who had incensed the Welshmen by openly butting Stuart Roy during the match, needed hospital treatment for a broken nose, as did Christophe Lamaison, his colleague in the French Test side. A third international, David Venditti, suffered a bite wound to his hand and was also treated.

Speaking to French radio, Carbonneau said the Pontypridd group "started to bother us, hit us, then after that it was crazy. Before the police came we were really afraid." Lamaison ruled out any possibility of Brive travelling to Sardis Road for the return match on Saturday week. "It would be impossible for us," he said.

Brive may be spared the trouble of making that particular stand. The directors of European Rugby Cup Ltd, the high-powered body established to oversee the Heineken Cup and safeguard its growing reputation as the brightest jewel in the crown of northern hemisphere club rugby, have demanded written reports from both managements. The ultimate sanction is stark and simple: expulsion, not only from this season's competition but indefinitely.

Roger Pickering, the tournament director, stuck firmly to the diplomatic line yesterday, insisting that no assumptions could be made until the full facts had been made available. But the French were in no mood to hold back. Bernard Lapasset, the president of the country's rugby federation, called for Pontypridd to be banned from the tournament and any proven ringleader to be excluded from the Heineken Cup for life.

The Welsh Rugby Union was also demanding an explanation from Pontypridd. One WRU source said: "The view here was that Brive were the more culpable in causing the brawl that broke out on the pitch. But the bar incident is something else again. It could hardly be more serious."

Here's how the 100 times capped Welsh International Martyn Williams, a Pontypridd legend, who played in that match as a cub 21 year old, described that night in his autobiography "The Magnificent Seven"

"There didn't seem to be any problem at all, but then, all of a sudden you could see a fracas developing in the corner and it all kind of kicked off"

"Later, I found out that Carbonneau and Phil John were the two involved at the start of it.

"Phil thought Carbonneau was winding him up, so there was a bit of aggro between them.

"That was sort of brought under control after a bit and we all decided it was best to leave.

"But then as we were leaving, a bottle was thrown at us from where the Brive players were standing and it caught Jason on the head. That was it. That was the signal for all hell to break loose.

"After that, it was just like what you see in Wild West films. There were chairs flying through the air and smashing into the shorts bottles behind the bar as the barman dived for cover. It was just chaos in there.

"Eventually the police arrived and just basically cleaned the place out, handing out a bit of treatment to the boys as they did so."

Venditti, capped 14 times by France, gave a Brive take on things as the trouble unfolded.

"I was talking with Neil Jenkins when I saw that McIntosh and Phil John were threatening Carbonneau," Venditti claimed at the time.

"I asked Jenkins to calm them down but it was too late. They were fighting already.

"Lamaison got a chair in the face. Carbonneau was hit by a broken glass.

"When the police arrived my shirt had gone and I was bleeding all over. It was like a Western movie."

7,900 turned up at Sardis Road for the second Pool stage meeting a fortnight later and it finished 29 all. The atmosphere was intense and febrile but both sides knew the consequences of further hostility and while fierce the match passed by with relatively limited levels of incident. But what nobody wanted was another meeting back in the Brive Bear Pit and, of course, that's what happened when the two were drawn in the knockout play offs.

Pontypridd were without three players for the final clash because they were banned from entering the Brive Corrèze region while police investigated the bar brawl. It had only been two months since the "Wild West" scenes in Le Toulzac. The European Rugby authorities were very nervous and so was I. So was Dewi. SKY sent us out thinking it fitting that we finished off the trilogy. I was very nervous before that match for obvious reasons. Wanting to get the words right in such a big game and also to be able to deliver the right tone and language if "it all kicked off"

What would have helped was something to break the tension. In that respect Dewi was the perfect wing man. I needed a Dewi - Ism and Morris did not disappoint. He came up with a classic and even better it was before the match started. I was still chuckling by kick off. The nerves had gone.

So here's what happened. Brive had a remarkably huge black second row forward called Patrick Lubungu. Myself and Dewi were up in the commentary position early to try and get ourselves into the right mindset. I scanned my team sheets and match notes. My eyes fell on the name Lubungu. I turned to Dewi and said, "How are you going to pronounce that ? That won't be an easy one for you" I chuckled sarcastically. Dewi looked very cool. He responded. "No problem. To avoid any issues I'm going to call him by his nickname.".... "NICKNAME...?" I said. Dewi carried on, "Yes his nickname. I saw it written on your match notes". I was confused. "Dewi where is it on my match notes ?" Dewi was getting irritated and animated, "It's there ... look. DR. CONGO !!!" and he pointed at where I had scribbled this down. D.R. CONGO. Oh Lord I thought. Thank the heavens we caught this one early. "Dewi, that's not his nickname. That's where he's from"