

## CHAPTER 3 – WALES

# RELEASE THE HOUNDS

Getting your rooming arrangements wrong can lead to trouble. Just ask Rudolf Straeuli, the former South African coach, who twinned locks Geo Cronje and Quinton Davids for a Springboks training camp before the 2003 World Cup. It was a marriage made in hell. Two men who were literally fighting for the same place – Cronje, the unreconstructed Afrikaner, complete with his *Voortrekker* beard, and Davids the ‘Cape coloured’. When Cronje refused point blank to share the same shower as his rival, it sparked a controversy that raged for weeks, causing suspensions, resignations and a storm of ill-feeling. All because of a dodgy rooming list.

Things are slightly less volatile in the Irish camp but the rooming list is still something that needs to be got right. Joan Breslin, the IRFU’s International Squad Administrator, decided on the pairings in conjunction with one of the players, rooming secretary David Humphreys. In the past, there may have been a political aspect to certain partnerships. Following a fiery exchange in the 2002 Celtic League final between Leinster and Munster, Eric Miller and Anthony Foley were paired together by the Irish management so they could sort out their differences. Two years later, the situation had changed. In World Cup year especially, Ireland’s international players spent more time sleeping in hotel rooms than they did at home. The most important consideration – no, make that the only consideration – is that your roomie is someone you feel comfortable with. If that means Munster with Munster and Leinster with Leinster, then so be it.

Ronan O’Gara, for example, likes rooming with Alan Quinlan – both get wound up before test games but Quinlan’s nervy sense of humour puts a

## THE FULL BAG OF CHIPS

smile on O’Gara’s face. Quinlan was out injured for the Six Nations so O’Gara shared with Simon Easterby for the duration of the tournament. Both like to turn the light off early so they suited each other fine. Paul O’Connell enjoyed rooming with Foley because it meant he could pester him for ‘old school’ stories – he loves hearing all the boozy yarns from the amateur era. Humphreys, meanwhile, parked himself with Girvan Dempsey. No messing about with Girv, no high jinks. Just a solid night’s kip.

When it came to finding a room-mate for Shane Byrne, there was one quality required – the candidate had to be able to put up with a pair of one-year-old twins occasionally rummaging through his personal effects. Kerry and Alex Byrne would make the odd visit to Citywest or to the Radisson Hotel in Stillorgan, where the squad based itself the day before games at Lansdowne Road. They could cause quite a bit of damage in a short amount of time. Fortunately, there was someone who didn’t mind in the slightest.

After what he’d been through in the previous four years, Gordon D’Arcy could put up with just about anything except rejection. His was the classic tale of too much too young. He’d been preparing for his Leaving Certificate back in 1998 when a phone call came through from Warren Gatland to see whether he’d fancy a tour to South Africa with the senior Ireland squad. In retrospect, he bore a certain resemblance to English football’s wunderkind, Wayne Rooney – immature, slightly overweight, jaw-droppingly talented but in need of minding. The folks at Clongowes Wood reckoned it was a bad idea so he stayed at home to do his exams. By the following year, however, he’d made his international debut in the Rugby World Cup, aged 19. At the time, we could only guess at how many more caps he’d win before the next one came around in 2003.

The next World Cup came around and he’d won, er, five caps, all of them off the bench in what amounted to friendly games. D’Arcy’s sense of frustration was unbearable – and not just for himself. To Alan Gaffney, Leinster’s assistant coach for a couple of seasons, D’Arcy could be ‘... a pain in the hole, to be honest. I just thought, “Who is this upstart?”’ Matt Williams,

putting it more euphemistically, said D'Arcy needed some 'tough love'. He got it in spades.

It looked like it might work too. D'Arcy played a full 'A' international championship in a new, experimental role at outside centre – O'Sullivan didn't deem the experiment a success but his form and versatility surely meant he was in the frame for the World Cup squad of 30, to be announced in early September. All he needed was a decent tour of Samoa and Tonga in June. It didn't happen. He knew he was struggling when he failed to start either test match and drew no further encouragement when he made another appearance off the bench in a World Cup warm-up game against Wales. That said, he couldn't bear the notion of being told he wouldn't be going to Australia, so he left his mobile phone switched off on the morning of Sunday, 7 September, the day O'Sullivan would name his 30 players.

'I didn't want a call,' he said. 'I turned my phone off and got a voice message because I just couldn't deal with it. I woke up at around midday and got my message – "You're not going. You're in the shadow squad." I didn't know what to think. I knew coming up to selection that it wasn't going my way but the sudden fact of it really opened my eyes. I rang my mum to tell her and all the emotions that had been building up for the previous six months ended up just pouring out. There I was, bawling down the phone to my mum. I suppose that's what mums are for.'

There was sympathy at Leinster too. D'Arcy turned up for training the next day and his coach, Gary Ella, just shook his head. 'Jesus, mate, did you do something you shouldn't have done?' He was told to take two days off, to get his head straight. By the time he turned up for training on the Wednesday, he had done just that. He had one more year on his IRFU contract so he'd give it his all. If nothing came of it, he'd go abroad, maybe give up rugby altogether. Whatever happened, there'd be no more agonising, no more regrets. 'There are only so many times you can pick yourself up off the ground. You use people to pick yourself up – your parents, coaches and so on. They tell you you're great and that you'll get there. There's only so much of that you can take. I knew in my heart of hearts, this was going

## THE FULL BAG OF CHIPS



Brian O'Driscoll's hamstring came as a blow for just about everybody in or around the Irish rugby team – except Gordon D'Arcy. He grabbed his unexpected chance with both hands.

to be the last time that I was going to be able to take the disappointment. It was just getting too much to take. So yes, I would have weighed up my options a lot more seriously. In the end, I just got on with it. With everyone else away at the World Cup, I was the most senior guy playing for Leinster by about 30 caps so there was a little bit of responsibility. I got to play eight or nine games at full-back which I hadn't done in four years. I just got to play rugby. Gary never once said I couldn't do this or that. He never once put any boundaries on my game. "Just go play rugby," he said. I thought, Nice one.

'Then Drico goes and gets injured, and in his typical laid-back way, Gary asked what did I think about playing thirteen for the game away to Sale. It's

not that I was keen on the idea or not keen. I've always thought that if a coach asks you do something, you respond. I think I did. Like my defence that day – I'd about four tackles on Jason Robinson, which is a lot for anybody in one game on that guy. I caught him twice in open-field counterattacks, so I was very happy. Gary had faith in me and everything seemed to click into place.'

It would still take Eddie O'Sullivan time to have the same faith. O'Sullivan had been at an International Rugby Board (IRB) conference in Auckland the weekend D'Arcy ran amok in Sale and although he watched the video on his return, he needed more convincing. He'd never been sure about D'Arcy, knew he had talent but thought he lacked consistency. But the more he saw, the more convinced he became. Leinster played Cardiff at home and Biarritz away and on both occasions, D'Arcy looked like an international centre. Starting him in Paris was risky and O'Sullivan is not a risk-taker by nature. But all his game breakers were gone – O'Driscoll, Denis Hickie and Geordan Murphy. D'Arcy's form demanded inclusion.

The player himself was happy just to be named in the squad of 22. It was with wide-eyed pleasure he picked up his kitbag at Citywest on the Sunday. His mind was racing. Would it be Shane Horgan at thirteen and maybe himself on the wing? It didn't matter. He'd be involved in some way and that was all that counted. He was 'dumbfounded' when O'Sullivan revealed his team to the players on the Tuesday morning before the game.

15 Girvan Dempsey

14 Shane Horgan

13 Gordon D'Arcy

You f\*\*\*ing beauty, he thought. The rest of the team – and the rest of the day – was a blur.

O'Sullivan shielded him from the press in order to keep his mind on the job at hand. 'Eddie was protective of me and I think that was where our relationship started to evolve a little bit,' said D'Arcy. 'He told me to keep out of the papers, because if I was all over the papers, I was only building myself up for a fall. He told me to keep concentrating on the game but not