

# CHAPTER 33

## 2004 Elation once again

**Ireland's  
golden  
generation  
beat Scotland  
to win a first  
Triple Crown in  
nineteen years**

The young squad that Eddie O'Sullivan brought into the 2004 Six Nations championship would, in time, back-bone the most successful Irish rugby generation in history. No fewer than fifteen of that panel would eventually win Heineken Cups with their provinces and ten would still be around six years later to bridge a sixty-one-year gap by winning the Grand Slam. But that all seemed a long way away in early 2004 as Ireland went into the championship more, it seemed, in hope than in expectation.

Having been emphatically put in their place at Lansdowne Road the previous March by Martin Johnson and friends, Ireland had gone to Australia for what was ultimately a disappointing World Cup in the autumn of 2003. Despite running the hosts close in their pool match, their quarter-final against France was over within the first twenty minutes. With it went the career of Keith Wood, Ireland's inspirational captain and O'Sullivan's right-hand man, who retired at the end of the game.

Other factors contributed to a sense of foreboding as Ireland faced into the Six Nations that year. There had been some controversy shortly after the World Cup when the team's fitness coach Mike McGurn declared in a newspaper interview that the Ireland team had only been operating at around 70 per cent of the fitness levels they should have had during the tournament and called for 'a fitness revolution in Irish rugby'. Speaking out of turn like that had not gone down well with the IRFU.

There was another personnel wrinkle to contend with in the run-up to the championship when O'Sullivan had attempted to get his assistant coach Declan Kidney eased aside. Kidney had been appointed to the role when O'Sullivan had taken the top job as much out of recognition for his work with Munster as anything else. Sadly, they had just assumed that he and O'Sullivan would click as a coaching ticket, but by the end of the World Cup, O'Sullivan could see that they hadn't and weren't going to. Kidney was offered a contrived position within the IRFU looking after elite underage talent, but turned it down in favour of continuing to work with O'Sullivan through the championship. It made for a distinctly uncomfortable dynamic.

On top of everything, Ireland were facing into a Six Nations where they would be playing England and France away from home. In the



seventy-four runnings of the championship since France joined the home nations, Ireland had only twice won the competition outright when having to travel to Paris and London. The omens were anything but good and when it came to light that new captain Brian O'Driscoll would miss the season-opener against France through injury, it seemed Ireland were doomed to another unfulfilling season. One French newspaper called them '*Les Irlandais Orphelins*' – the Irish orphans who would be lost children without Wood and O'Driscoll. The absence of both Geordan Murphy and Denis Hickie surely wouldn't help either.

And so it proved. Ireland came home with the sound of a 35-17 beating ringing in their ears. Coupled with the behind-the-scenes stories that were doing the rounds and the fact that they'd now lost their last two Six Nations games by a total of fifty-six points, it made for grim prospects for O'Sullivan and his team. But in the face of extreme media criticism, they stood firm and swore there were green shoots to be seen in their performance. 'This wasn't like the bad old days,' said Shane Byrne, Wood's replacement at hooker. 'We were actually angry with ourselves because we could have won that game. Silly mistakes cost us. We let France get some easy scores, we let ourselves down. So it wasn't the same old story. Not by a long shot.'

That may have been the case for the players, but beyond the squad the

Gordon D'Arcy was the Player of the Tournament

general public was going to take plenty of convincing. And the general feeling of doom around the place was only deepened by the imminent arrival at Lansdowne Road of Wales who had looked scintillating against Scotland in their opening match. The Welsh had just endured a desperate couple of years in which they'd won only one Six Nations game out of ten but this win over Scotland was being hailed as the beginning of a revival.

O'Sullivan wasn't especially worried, however, and nor were the players. They were well used to beating the Welsh players with their clubs in the Heineken Cup and Celtic League so they didn't hold any great fears now.



On top of that, they had been genuinely encouraged by the performance in Paris and became convinced that with a bit of a harder shell, they'd be a formidable force. When the Monday training session in Naas became cranky and physical – with a couple of fights breaking out along the way – O'Sullivan was delighted. The conditions for an ambush couldn't have been more perfect.

The return of O'Driscoll prompted a little lateral thinking from O'Sullivan when he chose to drop Kevin Maggs instead of Gordon

D'Arcy as most had presumed he would. D'Arcy had mostly been a wing or a full-back and had played a little in the centre for Leinster, but having made a couple of decent breaks in Paris, he got the nod ahead of the more combustible Maggs. The other change saw Donncha O'Callaghan come in for Malcolm O'Kelly to partner Paul O'Connell. Nobody predicted it then but for the rest of the decade, the partnerships of O'Connell and O'Callaghan at second row and O'Driscoll and D'Arcy at centre would be more or less set in stone when each player was fit. The Wales game at Lansdowne in February 2004 was where that all began.

Ireland simply blew them away. Byrne got a try on the board within fifty-three seconds of the kick-off and even managed to add another later on. Ireland sailed away from Wales, beat them up and left them in a state. At one point the scoreboard on the East Stand read 36-3 to the home side.

David Wallace  
scores for Ireland

A couple of late Tom Shanklin tries left it 36-15, but the point had been made. The Welsh revival could wait.

‘We pretty much stuffed them I have to stay,’ said Reggie Corrigan. ‘There was a lot of talk beforehand, about Welsh rugby being back and all this kind of stuff. We had to endure that and listen to it all week, which isn’t easy when you’re playing in your home town. It was hard to take.’

Just like that, the mood around Irish rugby changed. One win over a fellow home nation side and already there was loose talk about a possible Triple Crown. All of a sudden, it was taken as an article of faith that England were vulnerable, that the fog of their post-World Cup hangover hadn’t cleared yet and that they might be ripe for the picking. Initially, it seemed fanciful thinking – after all, Ireland had won just one match at Twickenham in twenty years and Clive Woodward’s side were unbeaten at the ground since 1997. But without the retired Martin Johnson and the injured Jonny Wilkinson, England were missing the heart of the team that had won them the World Cup the previous October. Ireland had a chance, certainly.

They would be helped along by a combination of little x-factors. For one thing, they were still smarting over the previous year at Lansdowne Road – not so much the red carpet incident as the 42-6 hiding that followed. For another, the fact that this would be England’s first game back at Twickenham since being crowned world champions appealed to the Irish sense of mischief. The place would be bedecked, with the whole of English rugby expecting a performance. To spoil the party would be delicious.

When the Irish team arrived at Twickenham for the traditional captain’s run, they found a location dedicated to the all-powerful might of English rugby. On the frame of a dressing-room door, there had been twenty-two plaques affixed, one to mark each of the games in their seven-year unbeaten run at the ground. England did not look as though they would be wearing their success lightly. There was an arrogance about them that could very easily set them up for a fall and Ireland decided to use this to their advantage. They hit on the idea of clapping them onto the pitch before the game, to puff them up and fuel their sense of their own immortality. Then Ireland would launch into them.

That was the plan anyway. But the night before the game, O'Driscoll came to O'Sullivan and told him some of the players thought clapping England onto the turf was taking deference and respect a little too far. The consensus was that a guard of honour would be plenty. O'Sullivan said that was no problem and asked if there had been anyone in particular against the idea. 'Maggsy,' replied O'Driscoll, referring to the Bristol-born centre. 'He nearly went fucking crazy!'

The day went better than O'Sullivan could have dreamed it would. Ireland welcomed England onto the Twickenham grass and then leathered them off it. Without Johnson and Wilkinson, England were indeed ponderous and leaderless and the Irish forwards ground their pack into dust. In the backs, D'Arcy was a revelation and it was his break that set-up the move for Girvan Dempsey's match-winning try. In the end Ireland walked away with a 19-13 victory, the largest winning margin by an Ireland side at Twickenham since the day Mike Gibson made his debut in a green shirt in 1964. And by God, they made sure to enjoy it.

'I think when we walked into the dinner was the best moment,' said Corrigan in Peter O'Reilly's account of that season, *The Full Bag Of Chips*. 'There were about seven hundred people at this dinner and it was very much set up as a World Cup celebration. You had the Webb Ellis trophy here, a string quartet there. We arrived in and suddenly noticed it went a bit quieter.

'You could see all these old lads sitting around sipping glasses of wine. You knew you hadn't just spoiled a party, you had ruined it. Maggsy was hilarious. He was straight up to the bar in the middle of the room, ordering beers all round in his loudest voice. He was really rubbing it in – he was loving it obviously. You just sat down and looked around. They were very quiet. It had hit home.'

What had also hit home by now was the possibility, for the first time in nineteen years, of an Irish Triple Crown. Not only that, but the chance to close it out at Lansdowne Road as well. Only Scotland stood in their way now and they would surely make for beleaguered opponents having lost to Italy earlier in the afternoon. The scene was set for three weeks of Ollie Campbell and Ciaran Fitzgerald and Michael Kiernan stories, three weeks of a monkey on the back of Irish rugby that needed to be thrown off.

First though, Italy would be coming to Lansdowne Road. In many ways, it was a welcome distraction for an Irish team that hadn't won anything yet and could well do without having to spend a full three weeks hearing the phrase 'Triple Crown' at every turn. All questions could be deflected until after Italy had been dealt with. In the end, Italy were duly beaten 19-3 on one of those rotten Lansdowne days where the main objective was to get in out of the weather as quickly and efficiently as possible.

The following seven days dragged interminably. Wise old heads with bitter experience of Irish rugby's propensity for walking into open manholes warned against complacency, newspapers compared the teams of the 1980s with O'Sullivan's of 2004 and every player who came within a yard of a microphone was asked about his memories of Triple Crowns past. David Wallace, who was brought into the side for his first appearance of the championship in place of Keith Gleeson who broke his arm against Italy, was one who played along obligingly.

'I was nine years old and was living in Cork at the time,' he said, 'and I suppose we always had a few rugby balls in the house and a few broken window panes. We spent a fair bit of time playing rugby in the garden. If

(Left to right)  
Peter Stringer,  
Geordan Murphy,  
Gordon D'Arcy and  
Shane Horgan  
celebrate





Brian O'Driscoll and  
Eddie O'Sullivan

I imagined myself as one of that Ireland team, it was probably Michael Kiernan – he was working with my dad and he was probably one of my idols. For me to be back, with a chance of emulating that team by helping Ireland win a Triple Crown, is unbelievable really.

And yet, despite all the reminiscing, there was certainly a sense that the prize of a Triple Crown wasn't quite the bonanza a lot of people made it out to be. By the end of the decade, of course, Ireland would win Triple Crowns as a matter of course, but even then, there were dissenting voices that said perhaps everyone should be dreaming bigger dreams. Writing in *The Irish Times* on the morning of the game, columnist Donal Spring questioned just how relevant an achievement a Triple Crown would be in the modern era.

'In a political sense the continuation of the Triple Crown up to Irish independence or even to the end of our membership of the Commonwealth made sense,' he wrote. 'But we are now very much Europeans and the only special tie with England, Scotland and Wales is our use in common of English as a main language.'

'During the amateur era, it was without doubt a coveted prize but it probably contributed to an Irish inferiority complex when it came to playing the French. Great progress has been made in overcoming this

complex in recent years, particularly by winning in Paris [in 2000]. The quarter-final of the World Cup, however, was a major setback and we definitely seemed to be lacking in confidence and self-belief when we played France in Paris in February. I believe if we were to meet them again at this stage of the season it would be a better contest.'

And although in time, most of the Irish rugby public would come to agree with Spring as the team achieved more and set their sights higher, on 27 March 2004 he was something of a lone voice. The vast majority of patrons in south Dublin that day just wanted to see the Scots routed and history made once again. They didn't even seem to mind very much that local businesses were making a killing out of the whole thing – the Director of Consumer Affairs later found that six pubs in the Baggot Street/Haddington Road area of the city hiked their prices by up to a euro on the day of the game.

It wasn't plain sailing at Lansdowne either, just as O'Sullivan had spent the week drilling into everybody's head that it wouldn't be. With half an hour to go, the score stood at 16-16 and it was the visitors who were in the ascendancy, having scored the first try of the second half through flanker Ally Hogg. For a moment, the dreaded notion of Scotland wrecking the party raised its head. But a trademark David Wallace try in which he wriggled through a bank of blue defenders and squirmed over the line to touch down sent Ireland on their way five minutes later before first Peter Stringer and then Player of the Tournament D'Arcy ran up the total. It finished 37-16 and Ireland had won their sixth Triple Crown, their third successive one to be secured at Lansdowne Road.

Earlier in the week, 1985 veteran Donal Lenihan had texted fellow Corkonian Ronan O'Gara saying that at least this time around he'd do him the courtesy of staying until the end, unlike the nine-year-old O'Gara the year Lenihan had won his. He wasn't the only one who stayed. Although there was no trophy presentation – the tournament sponsors Royal Bank of Scotland eventually commissioned an official Triple Crown plate in 2006 – the crowd lingered and demanded a lap of honour. After years of heartache, Irish rugby finally had something to celebrate. Not just the achievement but the promise of more to come as well.

However, that day will always be remembered with a tinge of sadness.

At various points in the game, the PA announcer at Lansdowne Road had asked if there was an Ian McCall in the ground and if there was, that he make himself know to the stewards. As it happened, Ian McCall was sitting at home watching the game on TV and by the time the IRFU finally got hold of him, it was half-time. The news he received was the worst imaginable – his son John had died that afternoon playing for Ireland in the under-nineteen World Cup in Durban, South Africa. He'd had a cardiac arrest arising from swollen heart muscles, an ailment more commonly known as Sudden Adult Death Syndrome. He was nineteen years old.

The players got the news in the dressing room straight after the game, quelling their jubilation. Brian O'Driscoll's cousin Cillian Willis had played scrum-half for Ireland in Durban that afternoon so the sense of how small the Irish rugby world is was lost on nobody. The champagne in the corner remained there, unopened.



Within a few short years, the lap of honour at Lansdowne in 2004 would come to look almost quaint. Having gone into that Six Nations with only six Triple Crowns won in 105 years, Ireland went on to win three more on top of it in the following five seasons.

Memorable as those days were, though, each of them had their climax

Scoreboard  
announces Ireland's  
seventh Triple  
Crown win



away from Lansdowne Road. In 2006, Shane Horgan's last-minute try to clinch the Triple Crown was at Twickenham (where Ireland became the first team to hoist the newly-minted trophy). In 2007, Ronan O'Gara scored all the points in a 19-18 win over Scotland in Murrayfield to complete Ireland's first back-to-back Triple Crown double since 1949. And in 2009, the Grand Slam was famously finished off in the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, with O'Gara's immortal drop goal and Welsh out-half Stephen Jones's dropped-short penalty attempt. Great journeys all, started at Lansdowne Road in the spring of 2004.

IRELAND: Girvan Dempsey; Shane Horgan, Gordon D'Arcy, Brian O'Driscoll (capt.), Geordan Murphy; Ronan O'Gara, Peter Stringer; Reggie Corrigan, Shane Byrne, John Hayes, Malcolm O'Kelly, Paul O'Connell, Simon Easterby, David Wallace, Anthony Foley  
Subs: D. O'Callaghan for O'Kelly; M. Horan for Corrigan; F. Sheahan for Byrne; V. Costello for Wallace; G. Easterby for Stringer; D. Humphreys for O'Gara; K. Maggs for D'Arcy

SCOTLAND: Chris Paterson (capt.); Simon Danielli, Tom Philip, Andrew Henderson, Simon Webster; Dan Parks, Chris Cusiter; Allan Jacobsen, Gordon Bulloch, Bruce Douglas, Scott Murray, Stuart Grimes, Jason White, Cameron Mather, Simon Taylor  
Subs: G. Kerr for Jacobsen; J. Petrie for Taylor; N. Hines for Grimes; M. Blair for Cusiter; B. Laney for Henderson; R. Russell for Bulloch; D. Lee for Danielli

Referee: Nigel Williams