

Sideline Cut

Keith Duggan



Henshaw is a tug-of-love Connacht need to win for their future

Long before Brian O'Driscoll's goodbye-season reached a wistful zenith, the debate had begun about Ireland's possible centre-pairings for the World Cup. And it was the name least mentioned in the media who turned out to be the very player that started at number 12 for Ireland in the tournament: Robbie Henshaw.

His omission from those conversations two years ago would have puzzled the Connacht regulars thrilled by the player who was undergoing a metamorphosis before their very eyes from local-kid-made-good into one of the outstanding prospects in the game. He was cool-headed, ran smart lines, was a formidable unit and had a zest for tackling – always an advantage when you are playing for Connacht. The regulars must have been torn between the natural wish to see their boy elevated to full senior international status, which has inevitably happened and forevermore keeping Henshaw as he was for that season: the open secret of Irish rugby.

The general expectation is that Henshaw's imminent meeting with the IRFU's performance director David Nucifora next week will result in his agreeing terms to join Leinster next season. If that happens, nobody among the Connacht hardcore would wish him anything but the best –

even if they would privately prefer he joined any other club in Europe. The Connacht crowd dislikes losing to Ulster, hates losing to Munster and absolutely despises losing to Leinster and that isn't going to change because a favourite son turns up in blue. But a professional rugby life is brief and Henshaw is obliged to do what he feels is best for both his sporting life and his financial future.

However, the issue of where he plays next year hangs from a fundamental question of what Irish rugby wants Connacht to be – and become. The sight of Henshaw leaving will be nothing new to the Sportsground fans. It was accepted that the star players of any season would, sooner or later, leave for elsewhere.

Lastoutpost
Some, like Jamie Hagan, were Leinster academy players who thrived in the Sportsground only to find themselves frustrated by lack of playing time when they returned to their mother club. Bernard Jackman all but died for Connacht teams winter after winter and happily won a Heineken Cup medal when he came home to Leinster in the latter phase of his career. Jerry Flannery, John O'Sullivan, Eoin Reddan, Mike McCarthy, Ian Keatley are among those who have moved east or south with varying degrees

of success. But their departures came in the middle of a period when Connacht's status within Irish rugby was, at best, uncertain: the club existed somewhere between development station and last outpost but it was viewed as a place of limitations; the ground which all other teams dreaded visiting.

The case of Robbie Henshaw is different. Connacht's dramatic and emotional win in Thomond Park in late November was the most visible manifestation of a seismic deep-down shift of belief and intent within the club. For the first time in the professional era, they have acquired the necessary audacity to feel they can out-play as well as out-fight the established provinces. Previous Connacht teams coached by Michael Bradley and Eric Elwood produced exceptional, laudatory moments of skill and were capable of out-of-the-blue magnificent wins. But they were forever being asked to run uphill on a sloping field.

The general acceptance is that Pat Lam, who remained steadfast and calm throughout the turbulent series of results in his first season, is responsible for infusing this new sense of conviction and daring. The common blueprint of a Connacht performance – heroic resistance for an hour, visitors sending in big-name replacements to rescue the game, a killer late try, an iffy



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referee's decision – has not applied this season. The academy is producing players with terrific potential. Attendances are up. The Sportsground isn't perfect but it is far from the barren, windy height of old.

For the first time, rugby people are looking at Connacht with wonder and perhaps even envy. At some stage over the past five or six years the IRFU clearly decided that the best policy was to promote Connacht rather than privately wish it would sink into the Atlantic.

The union's investment in the club has helped to make possible the excitement levels and surging optimism generated by

the past few months.

The assumption is that the IRFU conversations with Henshaw will emphasise the obvious advantages of a move to the capital. Leinster remain the jewel in the crown and the trials of the past few seasons have probably convinced all parties of the wisdom of deepening Leinster's options by signing a young international star whose future is opening out before him. But will joining Leinster at an uncertain period in their development instead of remaining with a Connacht team that has found its feet be of real benefit to Henshaw in the short term?

Knock-on effect
Imagine the knock-on effect for Connacht if the theme of the conversation was to focus on Henshaw remaining with Connacht for two or three seasons. What if his next contract with the IRFU exceeded whatever terms he might be offered at Leinster in order to keep him with his home club? At just 22, Henshaw is already a folk hero in Connacht sport.

He made it to the high table of Irish rugby using none of the usual stepping-stones: Athlone and Marist College – their first player to win an Irish schools cap; captain when they won their first Connacht Senior Schools Cup since 1977 and then Connacht academy. His uncle

played for Connacht. Henshaw is walking proof of everything that is good and promising about rugby in the west.

If he plays for Leinster, Henshaw will, of course, be a big attraction. But he will still be just a star among stars. In Connacht, particularly for the youngsters from Galway city and the satellite rugby towns, he holds an illumination all of his own. He is the one they want to be. You cannot ever hope to gauge the value of his ongoing presence in Connacht because you cannot yet identify the eight-year-old from Roscommon, from Leitrim, from Galway, who may become the future Henshaw. And that is how the IRFU can grow and spread the game beyond the citadels – if that is their aim.

If he leaves, Henshaw will always be guaranteed a warm reception at the Sportsground and as a club Connacht will do what they have always done when one of their players heads for brighter lights: they will get on with it. But if he ends up staying for another few seasons, it will be almost like an official imprimatur from Lansdowne Road for Connacht to tear up the script and to stand, at last, as one of the four provinces. It would take some bold thinking and faith from all parties. But if there was ever a time for Connacht to win the tug-of-love over one its players, then that time has come.

Boxing

Hat-trick of wins for Walsh and O'Reilly

CIARÁN GALLAGHER
at the National Stadium

Dean Walsh claimed a hat-trick of National Elite Championship titles at the National Stadium last night after a split-decision win over Ray Moylette, while World Championship medallist Michael O'Reilly also accomplished the same feat.

In a rematch of their 2015 final, Wexford native Walsh, nephew of former Ireland head coach Billy, emerged after another tight battle with Mayo's former European champion Moylette.

The 2016 tournament took place over the last month as the Irish Amateur Boxing Association (IABA) opted to stage the national competition early in preparation for those Olympic qualifiers next year.

Ireland have so far qualified four boxers for Rio 2016 – Michael Conlan (56kg), Paddy Barnes (49kg), Joe Ward (81kg) and Steven Donnelly (69kg) – meaning finalists at those weights were only fighting for national pride, while all four of those qualifiers did not participate in the 2016 tournament having already booked their Olympic places.

But Olympic slots remain at the remaining six weight classes and Walsh and O'Reilly are among those likely to be on the plane to the European qualifier in Istanbul next April.

At middleweight, O'Reilly started at a fast pace against first-time finalist Connor Wallace of Newry and the defending champion from Portlaoise kept that up throughout the three rounds.

Wallace enjoyed some success in the second round, with the champion picking up a cut on his forehead, but O'Reilly was back to his best in the third en route to claiming a 3-0 unanimous win and a third Irish title in a row.

"I wouldn't say there was pressure on me but knowing I was the hot favourite made me more relaxed going in, more confident," said O'Reilly, who narrowly missed out on Olympic qualification at the Worlds last October.

"I'm over the moon now because I can go back and get ready for the Olympic qualifiers in April.

"That's the next hurdle for me," added O'Reilly.
Early results 49kg: Stephen McKenna (Old School) bt Regan Buckley (St Teresa's) UD.
52kg: TJ Waite (Ormeau Road) lost to Brendan Irvine (St Paul's Antrim) UD.
56kg: Kurt Walker (Canal) bt Myles Casey (St Francis) UD.
75kg: Michael O'Reilly (Portlaoise) bt Connor Wallace (St Monica's) NY UD.
60kg: David Oliver Joyce (St Michaels Athy) bt Seán McComb (Holy Trinity) SD.
64kg: Dean Walsh (St Ibars/Josephs) V Raymond Moylette (St Annes).
91kg: Darren O'Neill (Paulstown) bt Bernard O'Reilly (Portlaoise) UD.

Gaelic Games All-Stars



Chin up for taking a stab at Kilkenny dominance but county football is shelved

Eamon Donoghue
In Texas

Wexford's former dual player will focus on hurling to fulfil his ambitions

Wexford football will have to continue without the services of former dual player Lee Chin, possibly forever. The 23-year-old says his days of playing football at intercounty level are over – ruling out any return to the dual status he operated prior to the 2014 season.

It's too much he says, to play both codes at the top level, and when it came to a decision between the two there was only ever going to be one winner.

"At this moment, I can't see myself ever doing it again. I'm happy enough to keep tapping away with the club but not county. I never got the same pleasure out of playing football as hurling – the atmosphere, the love of the game... it's different for me."

Since making the decision to opt out of the county's football squad Chin has flourished in half back and midfield roles for the hurlers – one of the leaders now in Liam Dunne's young

team.
"Hurling took over from an early age. I enjoyed my time in football... Jason Ryan brought a whole new level of professionalism into it. That appealed to me as young player. I'm happy that I gave it a go because it gave me a sense of what I wanted to do.
"But it's hard enough trying to play the likes of Kilkenny when you're concentrating on hurling only but if you try to combine it with football, it's never going to work. That's the way I see it."

"I loved every minute of the football under Jason but you can't keep the two going at the level that's needed nowadays. I thought I could do both – mentally and physically – but it didn't really work out. I know I've made the right choice to stick with hurling."

"I knew when I left it in 2014 that I wouldn't be going back to it. I never played too much un-

derage football. It was mostly hurling but I just wanted to give football a go with Jason."
Current Wexford football manager David Power has already been buoyed in his efforts to bounce back from a disappointing opening season by the likely return of midfielder Dáithí Waters, who had last year committed to the county's hurlers, but for Chin the mind remains focused on hurling and a tilt at the Leinster championship.

"I never got the same pleasure out of playing football as hurling"

"Winning Leinster would be huge for us. Wexford haven't won it since 2004 – a very long time. It's a long time since we were in Croke Park too. It's hard to take that, that your own county haven't been in Croke Park for so long.

"We'll be there next year playing Dublin in the first round. It's almost like you're cheating the system. I always thought I'd get of chances to play with Wexford in Croke Park on a day we deserved to be there, in a Leinster final or whatever. But we're looking for-

ward to getting over pre-season in January and see where the season takes us."

Talking at the GAA/GPA All Stars trip in Austin, Texas, the DIT student says that while 2015 was a season to forget, it also gives the team fuel for the year ahead.

"There's a bit of a scar there from last year, the way we dealt with things. It's something we have to try and put right next year. 2013 was a good year but last year was no reflection in where we see ourselves and where we want to go."

Wexford shipped a 5-25 to 0-16 beating in the Leinster semi-final against Kilkenny, before an eight-point qualifier defeat to Cork.

"Moving well"

"We thought we were moving well after beating Westmeath but we didn't do ourselves justice at all against Kilkenny. We were disappointed after missing a chance to be promoted earlier on but it was nothing compared to the way we felt after losing to Kilkenny."

"It went pear-shaped against Kilkenny. They kicked on from the 42nd or 43rd minutes and we didn't stick with them. Up to then, we were doing okay but we didn't match them in the final quarter. We had has no answer to it. That really upset our year."

"Hurling took over from an early age. I enjoyed my time in football... Jason Ryan brought a whole new level of professionalism into it," says Wexford's Lee Chin.

PHOTOGRAPH: RAY MC MANUS/SPORTSFILE

Kilkenny, he admits, are at another level right now, but the key to beating them is belief. And so they'll need plenty of that if they want to bridge their 12-year wait for provincial glory next summer.

"Yes, there's a gap there. They have set a standard that everyone else is struggling to reach. Then you have another tier, maybe Tipperary, Galway and one or two others. That's what we have to try and reach. On a given day, teams can match Kilkenny so that's the aim... to reach a level where we can do that."

"It's hard to tell what makes Kilkenny so good. They know how to win – we all know that. They have a ruthlessness and a determination which is hard to match. They never give up. If you're going to beat Kilkenny it's by a point or two."

"We have to develop that winning mentality... a killer instinct, especially in the final quarter. We need to believe that we can beat anyone, regardless of what's between us at any part of the game."

Briefs

Golf

Kaymer within two shots of Donaldson at Amata Springs

Martin Kaymer fired a round-of-the-day 65 to move within two shots of leader Jamie Donaldson at the halfway stage of the Thailand Golf Championship.

The German posted eight birdies in sweltering conditions at Amata Springs Country Club, where Sergio Garcia, Matt Fitzpatrick and European Tour Rookie of the Year Byeong Hun An all stayed in contention.

Kaymer, looking for his first win since last year's US Open, posted back-to-back birdies from the 11th before bouncing back from his sole blemish at the 14th after

finding the rough with a gain at the par-four 18th.

The world No 27 picked up three shots in as many holes from the second and added two further gains to sit in a strong position heading in to the weekend.

Last week's Ho Tram Open champion Sergio Garcia opened with back-to-back birdies on his way to a three-under 69 to sit in a tie for third, with Fitzpatrick alongside him after a birdie-filled finish to his second round 67. BMW PGA winner Byeong Hun An lies five shots back as he chases a second victory of the year.

Cricket

Stunning Dharamsala ground to host Ireland World T20 games

The Ireland men's team and supporters will get to witness one of the most beautiful cricket grounds on the planet next March after the HPCA Stadium in Dharamsala was selected to host their three games in the first-round stage of the World T20.

Located in the far north of India, the 23,000-capacity stadium is situated at over 1,300 metres above sea level against a stunning backdrop of the Dhauladhar hill range.

Ireland will open their Group A campaign against Oman on Wednesday, March 9th, and also play Bangladesh and the Netherlands with the group winners playing hosts India, Pakistan, Australia and New Zealand



■ HPCA Stadium, Dharamsala to host three Irish games

in Kolkata and Bengaluru.

The Ireland women's team have been drawn with New Zealand, Sri Lanka, South Africa and defending champions Australia.

They will put in the air miles, with two games in Mohali, one in Chennai on the southeast coast and one in New Delhi.

Leinster PP Sch SF 'A'

Coláiste Eoin convince in final quarter

A strong final-quarter display paid dividends for Coláiste Eoin in UCD yesterday, as the gaelcoil booked their place in the next round of the Leinster Schools' Senior Football 'A' Championship thanks to a 1-10 to 1-7 win over Coláiste Mhuire, Mullingar.

The Westmeath outfit were two points ahead at the interval, 1-3 to 0-4. Troy Maher scored their goal after 22 minutes from a penalty.

Points were traded in the second half before Conor MacNioclais levelled matters when he flicked home on 38 minutes, Eoin then stepped up to the mark and finished with three points to spare.

A goal from Eoin Finnegan set St Patrick's, Navan, on the road to a 1-11 to 0-6 victory over Patrician Newbridge at Páirc Tailteann.

Rugby B&I Cup

Leinster take convincing win over Ealing

Leinster cemented their place at the top of Pool I with a 45-13 victory over Ealing Trailfinders at Donnybrook last night.

It took them time to wear down their English visitors, as their scrumhalf Alex Davies shared penalties with Cathal Marsh for six-all.

The breakthrough came close to the break from Peter Dooley's hard line onto the ball from close range.

They took off from there. Flander Josh Murphy claimed a try. Then Darragh Fanning found his way to the scoreline. Collie O'Shea went through for the bonus-point fourth. He got his second soon after before Cian Kelleher scored.

Ealing did come up for air for Chris York to strike. But, Royce Burke-Flynn picked up the final try late on.