

The First Coming

This year we are needing a coach. Two years ago, our coach, James Fitch, who was also our number eight, had moved up north to go to school. He was a Kiwi who had come to the U.S. as a tourist and stayed. In New Zealand, he had been a junior All-Black. An injury had put him out of the running for the full international side, so he had decided to go on a bit of a walk-about. He ended up in Houston with the Gents for a few years. He was, while he was here, by far our best player. His presence is sorely missed.

The first year he was gone we tried to coach ourselves. Michael, Bryan Dodgen and Geoff Hawkins formed a triumvirate to handle the coaching. Michael took the forwards, Bryan the backs and Geoff was the administrative/second-side¹ representative on the coaching team. None of the guys really had the depth of experience to handle the coaching duties. Plus, they were all still essentially players. They, Michael and Bryan, at least, were putting all their effort into playing. There wasn't enough left in them to coach effectively. Then, Geoff was really more of a social player, anyway. Let's just say that the first coach-less year didn't go well. We finished the cup season well back in the pack. The second year we did better but felt we needed coaching help to get us over the hump.

Last summer, the brain-trust started looking for another solution. Finding a coach is no easy matter for a rugby club in the states. The first option is to run it through the old boys network and see if anyone is interested. This involves checking with all the alumni still in town, at least those that you would trust to have the rudimentary knowledge and demeanor for coaching. Then, if you find a likely candidate, and this is by no means a given due to the relative youth and inexperience of U.S. clubs, you have to get him to take the job. It's not easy to convince someone who has already given up the sport to make the commitment in time and energy to come back into the fold.

The clubs in the U.S. are generally run on a shoe-string. There is no budget

¹ The "second-side" is the B-Team, generally the players not up to playing with the first team. In rugby, there are multiple "sides" on a club. Because of the limited substitution rules, each side gets their own game. That way, everyone gets to play on the weekend, usually against competition of a similar level.

for paying coaches, or any staff, for that matter. If you can find an old boy to do it out of love for the club, you're that much better off. If not, then you have to look further afield. You try to find a job for any likely candidate and then let them bunk with one of the players. It's not much, but if you can find someone who has a penchant to visit your fair city, and do it on the cheap, you might get lucky.

It so happens that Michael T had gone on a rugby tour while he was in college. They had gone to England and Wales, played a few games and had a hell of a time. He still kept in touch with one of the guys he met there, a tall, Scottish second row named Alastair McIlhenny, affectionately known as Haggis. It seemed fortuitous, then, when Michael received a July letter from Alastair in which Haggie let slip that he was currently without gainful employment. Michael wrote back immediately: Do you want to come to Houston? How do you feel about coaching? He's not much for mincing words.

Alastair was up for a bit of a wander and wrote back he could come anytime. It was August by then. Michael talked him up to the club. He'll be a huge asset. He's got plenty of experience and will command respect. He's the man for the job of coach.

The powers that be agreed. The club decided to fund his plane fare, a round trip ticket from London. Alastair would stay with Michael T, who had an extra bed in his apartment. He could work for Geoff in his construction business. Geoff always needed a laborer or two. Or, if he didn't need one, he could still find something to keep an itinerant rugger busy. It was settled, then. Haggis would be arriving in Houston in mid-September.

After Labor Day, practice has already started. Michael, Bryan and Geoff are handling it again until Alastair shows up. Cup season doesn't start until the end of September. We're thinking we should be okay.

While we wait, Michael T tells us more about Alastair. He tells us how he led his team, the London Scottish, in tremendous rolling mauls that ate up thirty, forty, fifty meters against Michael's college team. He tells us how Haggie took practically all the lineout ball in the game; how Haggis scored two tries and dominated the entire game. It wasn't nearly the Scot's first side, but still a pretty good team compared to Texas standards.

Then Michael tells us how Haggis can drink. He can drink all night and all day without slowing down. Michael had stayed with him in London. It was

three days of a blind piss-up. Haggis is going to be a great asset to the Gents.

When the day comes, it's a Saturday. We have an off weekend. Michael and I go to pick up Alastair at the airport. We wait outside customs for Haggie to come through. Michael is on edge. I can sense it. He is excited about seeing his old friend. He is pent up to relive the famous days of the tour. They were fabulous, care-free days of nothing but rugby and drinking. Alastair's arrival is like a time-machine bringing that golden era back. He can't wait.

Michael sees Alastair's head bobbing over the shorter crowd spilling from the customs gate. He waves a full arm salute, back and forth.

"Halloo, Ali!"

Then the crowd parts and I hear an "Oh, my god!" hiss under his breath. It seems Haggie has been doing nothing but eating and drinking since the days of the tour. He has gained fifty or sixty pounds. His massive chest has dropped to his beltline. This is not the picture of the man we had expected to save the season for the Caballeros.

"I need a drink," says Ali as he heartily shakes Michael's hand.

"Seeing me puts you in the mind of drinking, does it?" Michael answers.

"It was a bumpy flight. There's been no drinking for hours. I'm thirsty. And, yes, it does."

"OK. We'll get you a drink. This is Tom."

Haggie grinds my metatarsals together as he envelopes my hand with his. It is clear that there is still a hard man under the new, soft exterior.

We stop at the airport bar on the way out of the terminal. Michael orders a round of Buds. We each take a long draught from the frozen mugs. Haggis spits his back out on the table.

"This piss really is piss!?" It's a statement and a question. He is aghast.

"That's American beer," Michael explains. "Get used to it."

Haggie takes a more tentative sip. He keeps it in this time, but I can tell by the look on his face he's not happy about it.

"I come all this way to see you, and this is what you give me to drink? I wonder if it's too late to catch the return flight?"

"Quit your whining." Michael isn't sympathetic. "Drink up and we'll go to O'Malley's. There's a few more options there."

Aside from the rugby crowd, O'Malley's caters to the ex-pat community. They carry several imported beers and ales on tap. Haggie'll be okay if he can

just make it that far. We down the Buds and head for the car.

It is Saturday afternoon and there isn't much going on at O'Malley's. A few of the regulars are propped up against the bar and another group over by one of the TVs watching a collegiate gridiron game. Other than that, we have the place to ourselves.

We order a pitcher of Bass and a pitcher of Guinness and start reliving the glorious days of the tour. Michael and Haggis are immediately transported back to that time. "Remember when..." and "What about the time that..." and on it went. And so did the beer. I am just a passenger on this ride as the two of them reminisce. It's hard to believe that two souls connected so completely in that three-day period eight years ago, but there's no doubt that the connection is there. It takes nothing for them to reattach.

The day morphs into evening and then night. A few of the guys show up to meet the new coach. Bryan and Geoff had been told that we'd bring Alastair to O'Malley's so they come by. We are already well wasted. It doesn't take them long to catch up.

Even under the influence, Bryan and Geoff are still all business.

"So, what are your plans for the club?"

"I dunno," Haggis responds honestly. "I'll come to training to see what you've got. I don't want to impose a system that isn't suited to your club."

What this really means is that he hasn't thought about it yet. Up until now he has just been focused on getting over here and seeing Michael again. Even so, the response seemed reasonable to Bryan and Geoff. What is not so reasonable was Haggie's large, unfit appearance. This is not the picture that the Doc had painted of the man.

That is, other than the drinking. He could certainly consume vast quantities of malted beverages. I, on the other hand, am wilting rapidly. I am not used to starting so early in the day.

Bryan and Geoff continue the inquisition, "So you played second-row in England?"

"Yeah, for the London Scottish. I played my schoolboy rugby in the backline. Then, as I started to sprout, I gravitated to the pack. By the time I was at University, I was playing second-row and occasionally eight."

Geoff, "Did you do any coaching?"

"No. I captained my side on the Scottish. I haven't played in the last couple

of years. Too busy at work. At least until this summer, when they decided they didn't need my services any longer."

Bryan, "What style of play do you prefer?"

"I dunno. A winning style? We played a lot of ten-man rugby, keep it in with the forwards then after the third or fourth phase, out to the backs for a little scamper."

Michael, "Give it a rest guys. Haggie's just got here. We can start the rugby stuff on Tuesday."

And so, the interview ended. Credentials, or no, Haggis is our new coach.

By this time it is after midnight. I am developing a huge yen for my bed. I can't keep up with Michael and Haggis in their mad drinkathon. Their manic urge to get reacquainted after all these years is feeding them adrenaline fuel that I just don't have.

"I've gotta go. Haggis, it's been a pleasure," I slap him on the back, avoiding a hand-shake after the grinding I got at the airport. "I'll see you guys tomorrow."

Turns out that I don't. I manage to stumble home, but they keep at it. After O'Malley's closed they go to Michael's and keep going. Then Sunday, it is back to the bars. I never catch up with them. They continued Monday and Tuesday, I find out later, Michael skipping work, and only leaving the bars because in Texas, 2:00 am is closing time.

They both show up bleary-eyed for Tuesday training.

We start our usual training routine, a run around the loop and a little touch for warm-up. Afterwards, we stretch, and then start some drills, basic handling, rucking, mauling, to get us going.

Haggis steps up at this point, and says, "All right mates, I've got a new one for you. It's called 'Four Corners'. It's a passing drill.

"Let's have four lines. One at each corner of a square. And a ball at the head of each line.

"Now, the player with the ball, carry it diagonally across the square, then pop it to your opposite number. Let's walk through to get started."

We try to follow his instructions, but have a little trouble with it. Even walking, Derrick runs into Lug. Bryan throws the ball to the ground. I sit and watch when I should have been moving. Very confusing actually. Kind of a total cock-up.

Ali, bleary as he is, has patience. Or maybe not, “Come on, lads. Your grandmother could do this. It’s simple. Run across the square and pass the ball. Are you retarded?”

We know this is rhetorical, so we don’t respond, but try again. Slowly we get better at it. As we start to gain some confidence, Haggis changes it.

“Okay, now set the ball and the next player pick it up.”

This results in a few more collisions and a few expletives. After a few cycles, we start to get this variation as well.

Then it’s on. Haggis starts barking the commands and we respond.

“Pass left.” And we vary our passing direction.

“Run right.” We run down the side of the square instead of across it.

“Pass low.”

“Run left.”

After awhile, we are executing like, if not a well-oiled machine, at least a team that has seen a rugby ball before. It’s a good drill for working on passing the ball in traffic. That is, basically a game situation without the contact. Also, if you keep the lines relatively short, it can be a good workout. Everyone who has ever laced-up rugby boots has probably done it. This is our introduction.

After Haggis has enough of putting us through our paces, he hands off to Michael.

“All righty, Michael. You take it for awhile. I’m just going to observe for a bit now.”

Michael, bending over to catch his breath and looking a bit peaked, says, “Right. We’ll split up now. Bryan and Geoff, take the backs. Forwards, over here with me.”

And the forwards go with Michael over to the scrum-sled to do a little scrummaging work followed by lineouts. Haggie, being a forward by nature, follows us and observes. In fact, he observes the rest the night without offering any more insight. He has brought us the “Four-Corners” drill, so it wasn’t a total bust. We can see already, though, that we aren’t going to be going through any Gorbachevian “perestroika”. Our restructuring might take a bit longer than planned unless Haggis finds a way to up his input.