

Cup Season

The Saturday after Denny's death is the San Antonio, a.k.a. the Vatos, match. It is the kick-off to our cup season. We meet at O'Malley's for the convoy to S.A. Same drill, only a little later since it was only a three-hour drive to San Antonio, and a different mood – more serious since it is a cup match and more somber due to the loss of Denny.

All week we'd worked on fitness. After our showing in Baton Rouge, we knew we needed it. And, I think, it was a kind of self-flagellation, a way to assuage our guilt at letting Denny go on without us. We started with sprints and ended with "Hennie Mullers". In between, all the drills focused, one way or another, on running.

The "Hennie Muller" is an evil invention, named after an old South African rugger. I suspect that the Kiwis actually invented it, since it came to us from my old Kiwi coach. The Kiwis probably hated Mr. Muller, at least playing against him, so they named this instrument of torture in his honor. In the "Hennie", as it is affectionately known, the victims must run the length of the pitch, go around the corner flag, run diagonally across the pitch to the far corner flag, down the far side, around the flag, and diagonally back to the starting point. This is all done at pace, and repeated as necessary, until the team has been tortured to the brink of extirpation. Sometimes, the team will run together, sometimes split into forwards and backs, and, occasionally, broken down into sub-units. The forwards might be started first. (Don't get caught.) with the backs following after some appropriate delay. (You better catch them.) If the coach is feeling benevolent, he can have the team run "short" Hennies. That is, instead of running the touch-lines, you run the try-lines. It saves about sixty yards. Regardless, it's a good way to punish players for their indiscretions, for not working out on their own, or just to satisfy the coach's sadistic tendencies.

The upshot of all this running is that, rather than making the team fitter, we are really just more worn out. Two days (Tuesday and Thursday training sessions) will not suddenly convert recalcitrant athletes to fitness. Given a month, you might begin to see some impact, but two days just wears you down. This is the condition we are in, heading to San Antonio early Saturday morning.

The ride to S.A. is pretty much a straight shot. The short, three-hour trip doesn't lend itself to stops for breakfast, etc. Have your business done before you get started. This being a cup match, there are fewer late arrivals. The cutting up is subdued, there's a glint of seriousness in everyone's eyes and no one is ready to release the anguish brought on by death, nor our dreams of rugby glory. The convoy hits the road, more or less on time.

The Caballeros reassemble at the Vatos' pitch. It's in a public park and hard as concrete, except one corner where a broken sprinkler runs eternally leaving that corner as a perpetual mud hole.

When we get out of our cars, we find there's a north wind blowing, ninety miles an hour, straight down the pitch. This will have a definite impact on the way we play this day. Kicking into the wind will be an adventure. Down wind, well, let's just say that even I could launch a seventy-meter bomb.

We strap on the boots. The coin is flipped. We lose the toss. S.A. elects to defend the south end, taking the wind in the second half. Although it's conventional wisdom, take the wind in the second half when the teams are getting tired, I think it's a mistake for S.A. My rule of thumb for the wind is: if you're favored against a team, take the wind in the second half and rely on your defense to keep it close in the first, then come on strong in attack with the wind at your back; if you are expected to lose, or evenly matched, take the wind, try to get a lead and then hang on for dear life. The real tipping point for me on the wind is that you never know when it might change anyway. Take it while it's there and use it. On this day, at least based on our previous matches, we're favored, by a big margin.

S.A. kicks to us, into the head wind. The ball flies up, starts to move forward, then curves back, plummeting. It lands about a meter in front of the mid-field start point. It didn't travel the required ten yards. We'll take the scrum center, please, sir.

The scrum is easily won and the ball shipped to Bryan. Pils launches it into the corner for a lineout, five meters from the try-line. The Vatos' throw-in is blown crooked by the wind. That's a scrum to us, five meters out, for the throw not being straight. Playing at eight, I pick the ball up from the scrum and go toward the blind side. The S.A. wing-forward meets me and I lower my shoulder for impact, driving him back a couple of yards. I turn in the contact, and dish the ball to our scrumhalf. Cy dives across the line for a try. Bryan's

conversion kick gets carried well awry by the wind. Two minutes gone and we're up a try. See what I mean about taking the wind?

With the wind at our backs, the first half is played pretty much in S.A.'s end. They keep the ball in hand, because kicking into this wind makes no sense at all. It's a somewhat successful tactic, made better by the fact that Denny is missing from our line-up. Dopey has moved up to take Denny's spot. Though he lacks the pace, the punch and just the plain instinct for the game that Denny had, he does his best. His best just doesn't quite translate into closing down the Vatos' attacks. They manage to make a few forays out of their half, relieving the pressure. I can't blame it all on Dopey. The whole team is listless and seemingly in slow motion. Even with the wind at our back, we can't seem to show any sense of urgency.

In spite of this lethargy, and with the wind aiding to provide the pressure, we still manage to score two more converted tries. Nineteen to nothing at the half. Is it enough, though? With this kind of advantage and spending a full thirty minutes out of forty in their half, you'd think there would be more points scored. Wouldn't you?

The second half begins, and, damn, the wind hasn't changed. It's still coming gangbusters out of the north. We kick off. The ball is shipped to the S.A. flyhalf who boots it back down the field, wind aided, into touch, twenty meters from the try-line. This starts a sequence of churning play where we manage to win possession, boot it to touch, but never very far, and San Antonio comes back at us on attack.

It seems like an eternity even though it's probably only been five or six minutes, when the Vato number eight makes a break around the end of one of their lineouts. I dive at his ankles just missing the tackle. He pops the ball quickly over to his flyhalf who is steaming down on Bryan. The S.A. inside-center, Felix, runs a crossing line behind their flyhalf which freezes Pils. The flyhalf dummies the pass, steps left past Bryan and is in the clear, twenty meters to go and only our fullback to beat.... Freeze the flyhalf here for a second and let me interject: this is where we miss Denny, or at least one of the places; he would have been there to cover Felix on the scissor, freeing Bryan to concentrate on the flyhalf. It's just one of those subtle nuances that can make or break a game, one of those shades of advantage that make the difference when you get to real competition. Thanks, and sorry for the interruption. Back

to the action. ...Geoff is playing fullback today and does the right thing: he goes for the tackle. Just before contact, S.A.'s flyhalf does a little flick pass to their outside-center, running in support. No knock-on here, the center strolls in, ahead of hot pursuit by Derrick, Cy and Michael. He scores an easily converted try under the posts. Nineteen to seven, now, only shortly into the second half.

The second half proceeds according to plan, at least the Vato's plan. They use the boot and keep the ball deep in our end. We manage to work the ball out of our half a few times, only to lose possession and have the S.A. flyhalf or Felix chunk it back down inside our twenty-two. We narrowly avert giving up a try when we spill the ball from a tackle in our own half. They ship the ball out to their wing, through like five sets of hands: zing, zing, zing, zing. The wing's uncovered now and flying towards the try-line. Michael manages to catch him by a shoe-string, knocking him into touch five meters short.

We take the lineout and Bryan clears the ball. With the wind, his kick doesn't even make it to the ten-meter line. The pressure remains – on. Midway through the half, their center, our good friend Felix, breaks through the line and cross-foots Geoff. We've played against Felix for years and know he's a great player, fast and solid. We also know he's always going to break left. It helps when you're covering him to know which way he's going to go. Geoff forgot this, or maybe just couldn't translate the knowledge into action. Whatever the reason, he stumbles and Felix goes by left, sprinting another thirty meters for the score. Conversion good. Nineteen to fourteen now with twenty minutes to go.

S.A. keeps the pressure, pressure, pressure on. Felix makes another break from mid-field, but Derrick and Geoff converge to corner him. He loses the ball in the tackle ten meters out. Knock-on. Our scrum. Harried by the Vato scrumhalf, Cy bobbles the ball out of the scrum and dribbles his pass back toward Bryan. An S.A. wing-forward picks up the bouncing ball and slips it to their number-eight. I just manage to catch his ankles and he falls across the try-line for the score, also converted. Nineteen to twenty-one. We're down, with like five minutes to go. This isn't the way the season was supposed to start. This is not the way to honor Denny's passing.

The shock of being behind, in a game we should win handily, shakes loose the malaise that has gripped us throughout the game. It's way past time to take this seriously.

We kick-off and S.A. boots it back down into touch just inside our twenty-two. Lineout. We collect the ball from our lineout and start grinding the ball up the pitch in a rolling maul, slowly, resolutely, moving towards the San Antonio try-line. A rolling maul is a hard thing to stop, legally, that is. We take turns holding the ball at the back, me, Michael, Lug, with the rest of the pack pushing, driving forward, step by step, meter by meter. We roll right, then back to the left. We've gained thirty-plus meters. We're inside the Vato half.

Then it stalls. Time to get it out and run with it. I take the ball and run left, towards the open side. Cy is following just outside me. I draw the S.A. flanker and turn to pop a pass to Cy, just a little late. Their flanker reaches out and knocks the pass to the ground, it bounces behind Cy, who turns and stumbles trying to collect it. Bryan flashes up from flyhalf and bends to scoop it, only to knock it on, again.

The referee's whistle goes off, and he stops play. He was playing advantage¹ from the first knock-on by the S.A. flanker. We go back to the spot and he awards a scrum to us, still forty-five meters from the try-line.

The backline hasn't been functioning well today. The wind is blowing passes astray. They're feet seem sluggish, too, the wind in their face slowing them down. Michael calls for a number-eight pick-up. We'll keep it in the forwards.

From the scrummage, I pick the ball and go right, to the blind-side. SA's flanker catches me by the ankles at the gain-line. As I tumble to the turf, I get the pop-pass off to Cy who has looped around me. He collects it this time, without problems, and makes a beeline for the Vato wing, with Derrick coming up on the outside. The S.A. wing has no choice. He's got to go for the tackle on Cy who slips the pass to Derrick in the clear. Cream takes it down the touch-line towards the in-goal.

With the open-side left, the Vato fullback was shaded way left to cover our back-line in attack. He's not going to make it in time. However, Felix, flying in desperate pursuit, has a bead on Derrick. He catches him, just inside the

¹ The Advantage law reads as follows: "The Law of advantage takes precedence over most other laws and its purpose is to make play continuous with fewer stoppages for infringements. Players are encouraged to play to the whistle despite infringements by their opponents. When the result of an infringement by one team is that the opposing team may gain an advantage, the referee does not whistle immediately for the infringement." What this means is, play on. If one team commits an infringement and the other team gains a "tactical or territorial" advantage from it, keep going. The advantage could be that the non-offending team gains possession and an opportunity to advance the ball. Or, if they already have possession, they may gain territory, in which case they have gained the advantage – "advantage" over, play on. The territory has to be significant, though. A meter or two won't do it.

twenty-two.

Derrick has got four inches and forty pounds on Felix. Derrick makes a career of running through and breaking tackles. We're all hoping he does it this time. But, Felix is no pushover. He lines Derrick up and goes low, under the fend², wrapping Derrick's knees and clattering him into touch, just at the edge of the muddy patch in the corner. Vato lineout with not much time left.

S.A. takes the ball in the line at the two-jumper, bringing it down and then driving a few steps. Their scrumhalf takes it and makes a bullet spiral-pass to the flyhalf.

With Denny gone, I'm playing at the end of the lineout for the Gents. I have to hold while they drive it. When the scrumhalf passes, and maybe even a shade early though the ref doesn't see it, I'm off through the mud to pressure the flyhalf. He's got a ten-yard cushion because of the lineout laws. Normally, I wouldn't have much chance of getting to him. It's usually pretty easy to clear from a lineout.

Today, however, fortune is smiling on the Gents. The pass from the scrumhalf is good and fast. It hits the flyhalf right in the hands. He snags it, no problem. But, he's standing in the mud hole. As he steps to kick, he slips. His second step slips, too. Then he regains his balance.

I've seen my chance. Still five meters to go, I launch myself, parallel to the ground, arms extended, racing dive. His little misstep is enough. I've actually overshot. The flyhalf follows through with the kick. Instead of blocking the ball with my hands and arms, I take it full-on in the face.

Now, a rugby ball is fairly large, made of pig's-bladder and leather, filled with air, but it doesn't have much mass. It hurts like hell to take one off my face, but doesn't really do any damage. My vision goes dark for about a tenth of a second, and instead of the proverbial stars, it's more like fireworks, red and gold sparks flickering on and off in the darkness. Then there's the pain. It burns, but at the same time my mind knows it's not a serious problem. I'll live. The burning races through the nervous system to the spine, then on to the brain. The brain says deal with it. Adrenaline and endorphins kick in so the body can chemically deal with the shock. Along with that my mind translates the pain, and what it can remember of the action that just happened before the

² The "fend" is known in the U.S. as a "stiff-arm". The ball carrier uses his hand and extended arm to "fend" off a would-be tackler.

blackness, then comes up with the realization, “Hey, I’ve just blocked that kick!”

Even though the time could be measured in micro-seconds, it seems that movement through time has been suspended, or at least slowed down to the mud-sucking pace of our play. My vision comes back, slow-w-w-w-l-y. I’m still sliding in the mud and I see the ball in front of me, traveling toward the try-line. In normal circumstances, a ball kicked with this much momentum and then blocked, would just fly out of the back of the try-zone, past the dead-ball line. Today, though, the mud reaches up and sucks the ball down, holding it fast, two meters from the try-line.

As I start to get up, I see the S.A. winger and Michael converging on the ball. The winger gets there first and tries to hack³ it through the try-zone. The mud and ball reject this idea. They hold fast. Michael, right behind him, and still standing upright to play the winger, tries a hack, too. Same result. Coming behind Michael is Dopey. He bends and, suction weakened by the two fly-hack attempts, picks the ball to his chest, wraps it in both arms and flops over the try-line, splatting the ball down for the score.

Pils’ kick, fighting the wind, is not even close. The ref blows the whistle for full-time and the game is over. We’ve wrangled a twenty-four to twenty-one win – not very satisfying, but still a win. There’s much quiet rejoicing, as it would still seem disrespectful to celebrate so close to Denny’s death. The emotional loss is still dampening our joy, even after winning at our chosen pursuit.

The best thing about it was that it was a team victory – something that could conjure up a little, welling pride in all our hearts and start to replace the emptiness. Everyone participated and played their part. It was a coming together of our collective wills and energies to overcome the void that had been left in us, individually and as a team. Each of us had our little failures and little successes. The overall result was on the plus side. It was, for us, a way to cope, a way to build back the parts inside that had been damaged. Every little positive helped.

That night, the party is down off St. Mary’s street, in a little club called Flojo’s. It is a new club for S.A. rugby, the first time I’ve been there. The party

³ A “hack”, or “fly-hack”, is kicking a ball that is on the ground. You generally kick it forward to clear it from a cluttered group of players. Chase the ball, and once in the clear, you have a better chance of collecting it. This seems a good theory, but it rarely works.

is typical, just more subdued. The S.A. guys seem to understand and are laid-back themselves. They, of course, know the whole story on Denny. Word travels fast in the close-knit rugby community.

Even so, I have to get away. I can't force myself to be happy, or to revel in the victory. I find Michael and tell him, "Let's get out of here for awhile."

"Yeah," he replies, "It's feeling a bit close in here. Let's go."

It would have been what we like to call a 'wee frenzy', adopted from a Scottish mate who introduced us to the concept, but there was no frenzy involved. In a frenzy of the wee variety, some small group of revelers escape a larger party and go off to another location for a few quick ones. Then, you return before anyone, read that wife or girlfriend, notices you are gone. Here, Michael and I are just getting a break.

We slip out the door and head up St. Mary's. The first bar we come to, in we go. It's packed with what looks like students and recently ex-students. After forcing our way through the crowd and getting the bartender's attention, we get a couple of tequila shots, down them immediately. Then, back out on the street.

We saunter past a t-shirt shop, no doors or windows, just open archways letting the light spill out into the night and passers-by see the merchandise inside. There are two girls in the shop, dressed in bikinis. They aren't customers, but sales staff. In we go, not to get t-shirts.

Chatting the girls up is easy. They are bored. No one is coming in to buy shirts at this hour. All the tourists have headed back to their hotels. Those left on the street are heading for the bars and a little general anesthesia.

The girls are Tina, petite and bronze, and Maria, taller, huskier and darker. I started to work on Tina and Michael on Maria. How you been? What you doing? What do you do when you're not here? What about the weather?

As I said, they were bored, ready for any distraction, no matter how mundane. After ten or fifteen minutes, we start getting thirsty again.

I say to Tina, "Hey, we've got to get back to the bar and our team. Why don't you two come with us?"

"We've got to stay here until closing. We'll be done at nine, though. Where are you going to be?"

"Just down the street at Flojo's."

Tina looks at Maria. Maria looks back. The agreement is made. "We'll meet

you there after we close. Okay?”

“Oh, yeah. More than okay. We’ll wait for you.” I look at my watch. It’s eight-thirty now. We won’t have to wait long. “Don’t waste time closing out the register.”

“Oh, we won’t. We’ll be there.”

“Okay. See you.”

Michael T and I hit the sidewalk and stroll back toward Flojo’s. Funny how a bit of diversion with the opposite sex will change your outlook on life. We were just down in the dumps and now there was a little spring back in our steps, something to look forward to, something to take our minds off our worries.

Back at Flojo’s most of the guys are gone. I guess they didn’t feel like partying, either. Felix, from San Antonio is still there. So, we sit down with him for a chat. He is not happy about losing, especially when they had the lead so close to the end. He is their captain and takes losing personally.

“We had you guys,” he starts off. “If we just could have held on.”

“It happens that way sometimes,” Michael consoles. “You played a great game. You kept the pressure on the whole time. We just finally got our act together at the end.”

“Yeah, you did. That was probably the only time you got into our twenty-two in the second half. If it wasn’t for that freaking mud hole, Daniel,” he says, meaning their flyhalf, “would have cleared that ball and we would have won. I don’t know how many times we’ve asked the city to fix that pipe and it still leaks.”

“You know,” I chip in, “I’ve always hated playing on that field because of that reeking mud. I think I’ve changed my mind, though. Sometimes a little mud can be a real friend.”

Felix was nonplussed, “And the guys here, they’re just not committed. We only had sixteen at practice Thursday. There’s only two or three that are serious about the game. How can we expect to achieve anything like that?”

He *is* serious about rugby. We can see it in his play. We can see it in him now. His almost clenched teeth. The veins standing out at his temples. We can see he is really struggling to come to terms with losing, and not just this game.

“Don’t tell anybody,” he says, and looks over his shoulder to make sure no one was listening in. “I’m thinking about moving to Dallas. I talked to their coach about it over the summer and he says I’m welcome. It’s too late now that

cup season has started. If something doesn't happen here, though, I'm probably gone next year."

I had to feel for him. It's a tough decision. There's a general dilemma between ambition and loyalty. You can't do anything by yourself in rugby. Goals have to be reached through the framework of the team. The team has to support the desire and direction. If it doesn't, then there's a real problem.

Plus, switching teams is generally frowned upon. This is rugby, not gridiron, or baseball, or basketball, where the players shop their skills each year for the highest dollar. We're amateurs and we play for the fun of it, for whatever it is inside of each of us that makes us get out and test ourselves against the competition. Whether it's the sheer pleasure of the game, the need for physical activity, the desire to dominate someone else or just a need to get away from a strident wife for a while, we've all got reasons to be part of the team. We've all got a need to be admitted into that band of brothers that completes us.

It's a matter of degree, more than a black and white question. Some teams are more social, and then there are some that are more competitive. In Felix' case, his ambition had grown past the commitment of his team. They could no longer support his need to excel. The really tough part was that he had grown up with San Antonio RFC. The club held his best friends, his teammates, his brothers. His roots were deeply embedded. To leave would be rejecting them. It would be leaving them without his considerable support for their goals and needs. Major surgery would be required to extract him from the relationship, a surgery that might kill the patient. Like I said, I felt for him.

Tina and Maria, some clothes pulled on over the bikinis, came into Flojo's and let the air out of the situation with their smiles. Turned out they knew Felix, too. I can tell you, Michael and I were glad to see them. We felt for Felix, but didn't need the extra angst.

"Hola," I say to Tina. "I wasn't really sure you would come."

"Of course we came. I said we would, didn't I?" she replies. Then, smiling even broader and motioning towards Felix, she adds, "You know this guy?"

"Oh yeah. We've been friendly competitors for a few years now." Understatement always seemed the best policy to me.

Then she turned to Felix, and pointing at us, said, "Are these guys okay?"

Felix gave her the sign of the "O" with thumb and forefinger, "Of course they are. They're ruggers, aren't they?"

With this resounding recommendation in hand, I thought it was time to get the party started. I went to the bar and brought back a round of drinks.

And, the night went on. It was about nine-thirty when we started. Somewhere along the way, I don't remember when, Felix took his leave of us. So did the rest of the Gents. They were all gone, heading back to Houston. We continued to drink and flirt.

Michael T was okay with the flirting, but he wasn't going to go beyond that. He had Ana back in Houston and he was totally committed to her. Although I had, in a manner of speaking, Mayra over in Baton Rouge, neither one of us were "totally" committed to the other. She had something holding her back and that made me hold back from taking the full plunge. So here I was in San Antonio, immersing myself in the fresh thing that was Tina. Tina Garza.

Around midnight, through the fog Michael T makes the realization that we still have to drive back to Houston. He's got a commitment with Ana on Sunday that can't be missed.

"We've got to go," he says. "I need to get back to Houston."

"So soon?" asks Maria. I guess she hasn't figured out yet that this isn't going anywhere for the two of them.

"Soon?" Michael responds. "It's midnight. It'll be three before we get home."

"Ahhhh, party pooper," she pouts.

"Michael's right. It's a long drive," I add. I have to be supportive. After all, we came in my car. I can't let him down.

Michael and Maria get up and head for the door. Tina and I follow. Her hand finds mine and we hold hands as we walk out of Flojo's. Outside, I slip my arm around her waist, my hand resting lightly on her hip and pull her, gently, closer to me as we walk to the car.

"Can you guys give us a ride back to our car?" Maria asks from in front as we walk.

"Sure. No problem," I answer.

When we get to my car, Tina turns toward me, and I pull even closer. Looking into her dark eyes, I can see she's searching mine for some sign of intent. The problem is, I don't know my intent, other than I'm definitely interested and want to see where this goes. I kiss her lightly on the lips and then pull back. Her eyes are still flicking back and forth, searching in depth for

something. I kiss her again, harder and longer. Then, I pull her closer still and hug her for a long, long moment.

When we part, I say, "We've got to go."

"I know," she replies, still boring deep. "Call me?"

"You know I will." We'd already exchanged numbers in the bar.

Maria and Michael are sitting inside the car, waiting, when we get in. It's a short drive to drop the girls. Then we hit the highway for the late night dash back to Houston.