

Tourists in Town

The Welsh are coming. The Welsh are coming.

It's a long honored rugby tradition to go on tour, see strange places and make new friends, all based on a little friendly competition. There was a time that the oil economy was booming, Houston was booming and the dollar was down. Many teams decided to make the trip across the big pond and visit us. The typical tour would include Houston, Dallas, Austin, sometimes San Antonio and sometimes New Orleans. It would be a quick two week stint in Texas for some rodeo rugby and a little western culture.

A Welsh team is coming to Houston. They are from some where around Cardiff, Cogan RFC. Their trip had started in New Orleans and their bus is bringing them to Houston, arriving mid-afternoon. The designated disembarkation point is, of course, O'Malley's. Since their arrival is to be Tuesday afternoon, a few of us decide to skip work and meet Cogan when they arrive.

I get to O'Malley's about two-thirty. No one is there, yet, only Sam, the bartender. Sam worked days, and went to night school. He was working on some graduate degree, philosophy or psychology or some such thing. It was taking him forever. He was getting into his thirties and still wasn't sure what he wanted to do with his life. So, he postponed the decision by extending his education and working at O'Malley's to pay the bills.

I sit down, order a beer and warn him, "Get ready for an inundation. There's a bus of forty or fifty ruggers about to hit the door."

"Oh, great," he says, putting down the book he was studying. "And, I've got a test tomorrow. Oh well, I could use a little extra cash. Rent's due Monday."

"Yeah, don't count on a big day in tips. These guys are from Wales. You know they don't understand much about tipping over in the UK."

"Shit," is all he can say.

Michael T walks in and comments, "There's a big-ass bus pulling up outside. I think they're here."

A moment later, the door imploded and a mass of Welshmen and noise flowed into the quiet calm that had been Sam's study room. Give us drink.

Give us drink. Forget the food for now. We want drink. They were parched by the six hour ride from New Orleans. There are only about fifty of them, but they fill O'Malley's large space, if not physically, at least with their intrinsic energy and noise. And, they are running Sam ragged. He'd never been so busy, even on a Friday night. He's totally occupied trying to get beers poured and whistles whetted.

Michael and I introduce ourselves and eventually find the Welsh captain, Gareth. He is with the tour leader, Llywelyn.

"How was New Orleans?" we ask.

"Brilliant!" they reply. "It was fantastic. What a city!"

"And the game?" we ask, trying to get a handle on Cogan's level of play. It's always a crapshoot with a touring side. You never know what you're going to get. That is, when you have one of these unknown club sides come through. We've had well known teams travel to Houston and we knew what was coming. For instance, there was the time that Waringa, from Sydney, came through. Then, there was Boroughmuir, from Scotland. You know you're going to get thumped, but it's a learning experience. There were others, too. It all becomes a blur. Too many knocks on the head, I guess.

"We handled them okay," is Gareth's reply, staying modest and understated, playing his cards close to the vest. After more prodding and prying, it turns out that they hammered New Orleans, fifty-four to ten. We are going to have our work cut out for us.

The work begins now. We've got to arrange an itinerary that will sap their strength to the fullest, softening them up before game time. It's Tuesday and the game's not until Wednesday night. So, we have some time to achieve our evil purpose. For their part, the tourists are conflicted between having a good time, after all this is their vacation, and committing to competitive rugby. It's a fine line, but they enjoy walking it. That's what touring is all about.

After much wrangling, a schedule is worked out, and Gareth and Llywelyn can get down to serious enjoyment now. Read that drinking. Sam is still wearing out his arm pulling draught beers from the tap and we don't help matters. Add to it that the Gents are starting to show up and I have to wonder if he's going to make it. The cook had been helping him some. Now, with beers in hand, the tourists have started to get hungry. They're ordering food – O'Malley's specialty, burgers and fries – so the cook has to get back to the grill.

Just as Sam is about to reach the breaking point, the evening shift comes in to the tune of a cavalry charge. He's rescued.

In spite of the pressure put on him, Sam is smiling when he goes home. I think someone had a talk with Cogan about tipping before they came over. Sam's made three month's rent off the tips with enough left over to keep him in beer and pretzels during that time. He hadn't cared much for ruggers before. Now he'll be more than happy to work the next tour that comes through.

It's getting on towards six and time to work out the billets. This being a rugby tour, most of the participants are one step out of the poor house, or their parent's house. Few of them have money. The planning for a tour starts many months, even years in advance. There is fund raiser after fund raiser by the traveling club, figuring out ways to generate enough money so that even the most destitute player has the opportunity to make the trip. Each player gets a share according to the effort he puts in to the fund raisers.

So you can see that cost cutting is always a good idea for a tour. One of the most popular ways to save on a trip is to have the destination clubs billet the visitors. This is fun for all as the billeted team members get to see into the actual way of life of the visitees, while the billetors get to meet new people, make friends and have an excuse to get out and party a bit. And that's where our "softening up" plan goes awry. It's usually as hard on the home team as the visitors.

The billets are doled out, generally matching up with guys they've just met downing pints at O'Malley's. Gareth and his mate, Lew as we start calling him since Llywelyn is such a mouthful, come with Michael T and me. The plan is to take everyone home, get situated and head out to Cowboys, the local purveyor of drugstore cowboy chic.

Since dinner has been served at O'Malley's, we go shower, freshen up and head straight for the bar. By eight o'clock we are all there for a little introduction to Texas culture. That means Wranglers, shit-kickers and cowgirls – well, the urban variety, anyway.

Gareth and Llywelyn are awestruck by the place. They don't have anything like this back in Cardiff. There are more women in tight jeans than they can ogle with both eyes doing separate duty. The Houston women, by the way, are known for being exceptionally friendly, especially when someone like the Cogan club members have that built in advantage, an accent.

Soon, Gareth, Lew and the rest of the tourists are out on the dance floor making a miserable attempt at a two-step. They're terrible. Truth be told, so are we, but *they* don't care. They keep trying. They're not going to see any of these people again. So around and around the dance floor they go – laughing, stumbling, tripping and trying.

With the two-step tradition out of the way, it's on to bull-riding, of the mechanical variety. It's a strange creature, with no head or extremities, only a back and saddle. It's mounted on a circular podium so that it's elevated, giving the rider the regal feel of being atop the real bovine variety, but it's probably more just to give the surrounding crowd of spectators a better view of the rider's coming embarrassment.

There's always a big line for this event so we have time to get extra tanked while we wait. Gareth and Lew complain endlessly about the weak American piss, beer that is. What they don't realize is, it's still got the alcohol content. It's only lacking in the extra thick taste of British malted beverages. The end result is the same, only it surprises the tourists who don't realize the state they're getting in.

Finally, we get down to some Welshmen challenging El Toro. The first few don't do too well, not making it past the fourth or fifth buck of the bull. Then it's Lew's turn. He wobbles up to the bull, hops on, grabs hold and is ready. He's a big man, second-row, tall and lanky. His arms and legs, with all their length, are wrapped tightly around the bull so that he's veritably plastered on to it.

Buck one and he seems to be okay. Buck number two and there's some noticeable grip slippage. Buck number three and adhesion is broken. Lew is hurled heels over head above the crowd and splatted against the back wall. Dying with laughter, Gareth and I hustle over to peel him off as he slides slowly down. Trying to look truly concerned, we ascertain that it's only his pride that's been injured and we can now break out in a new roar.

Gareth's turn. He's relatively short and stout. Arms and legs short levers for the best application of power in the front row. A hooker by trade. What is it with hookers and the captaincy? I guess you have to respect the man who puts his neck on the line for the team every time the scrum packs down.

As hooker and captain, he naturally clove to Michael T during the billeting assignments. Hookers seem to have their own secret sub-fraternity within the

rugby brotherhood. After games, at the social, they seek each other out. Passing in the street, hookers previously unknown to each other, give the secret high sign, recognizing their brethren and instantly knowing the deepest secrets of each other's souls. When two hookers are speaking, they discuss the intricacies of their trade and the times they narrowly averted disaster in the various front-row collapses they managed to survive. This, of course, is only conjecture on my part, not being a member of that special fraternity. It seems every time I get close to a couple of hookers speaking, my eyes glaze over and my mind goes to mush. It's something about the intensity and focus they have for each other. Outsiders are excluded.

So, anyway, Gareth approaches Señor Toro and attempts to mount. He can't quite get up to the height of the withers and slides back falling prone on the ground. Dignity sorely injured now, he pops up and begins the second assault on the summit. He gets his foot over the hindquarters. His hand gripping the back, he's hanging from the side. Unwilling to allow further injury to his pride, he refuses to release and have a go at a third attempt. This is it. Slowly, excruciatingly, through strength of arm and will, he drags his torso up on to the back of the expectant, mechanical monster.

All this does not go unnoticed by the man behind the curtain. You didn't know there was a man behind the curtain? Of course there is. Someone has to maintain control and protect Cowboys from unwarranted law suits. Interpreting the difficulty of Gareth's mounting maneuver as inversely proportional to his level of sobriety, the man turns the dial. The pointer moves from the standard eight down to a safe and risk-averse two.

Needless to say, Gareth comes through intact, never approaching a tumble. At the end of his "canter" on the back of the beast, and not having noticed the subtle adjustment to the dial, Gareth has the temerity to remark, "Is that it? Is that all there is? What's the matter with you wankers? That was eeeeeeeee-zzzzzzzzzzzzzzz!"

This will not do. The man behind the curtain, after all, is a Texan, and his hackles have been raised. The hubris of the foreigner, thinking he's actually achieved something.

He says, before Gareth can attempt his triple flip, double axel dismount, "Wait a minute! I think there was a problem. Try it again."

And forgetting about lawyers, bank accounts and the future of this venerable

establishment, he twists the dial from the elementary two up to a spinal tapping eleven. This will be good.

Gareth nods assent and grabs the expectant beast tightly. The man, with a twinkle in his eye, flicks the switch and Señor Toro shudders to life with a tremendous, thrashing jerk upward. Gareth thought he was ready, but his feet are dislodged and his body propelled into a vertical handstand above the beast. His arms are still wrapped tightly around the headless neck, keeping him from being expelled on this first spasm. On the down stroke, he comes back in contact, belly and crotch on the back of the bull, with an impact that looks like it has to hurt. The next jolt, equally powerful and slightly backward, loosens his grip on the neck. He manages to catch hold of the saddle and maintain contact with the throbbing beast.

The third convulsion, however, is an unparalleled paroxysm that could have put Sputnik in orbit. It does so with Gareth who loses all pretext of adhesion and is launched vertically to the ceiling. He ricochets towards the floor, luckily landing soft-side down, that is, buttocks first, and pops to his feet immediately in front of me. With a straight face and pointing to his glass that I've been holding, he says, "I'll have that beer now."

The crowd erupts into thunderous applause and fits of uncontrollable laughter. Perfect tens are awarded all around. They've been privileged to witness one of the truly special confrontations between man and mechanical beast. Man has survived, even though, as always, the beast wins.

But, *the* man behind the curtain knows that honor has been restored. With a smug grin, he pulls the curtain closed. Let the contest continue.

We've had about all the fun here that we're allowed. Tourists and homies alike head back to O'Malley's.

When we get home, away from home, the Welsh decide it's time for a little concert. If there's one thing that the Welsh are more passionate about than rugby, it's singing. The only permissible excuse for missing a rugby event, practice, game, whatever, is to attend one for singing. Back home in Wales, they have singing clubs that grown men actually attend and relish.

Here in Texas, singing in general is looked down on as somewhat effete, unless of course it's "Country". The only way we ruggers get away with it is by converting it to the ribald sort of entertainment expected of the rugby lifestyle and our life out here on the edge.

Not so the Welsh. Did I neglect to mention that in Wales, rugby is part of the mainstream, rather than an alternative lifestyle as it is here in Texas? Rugby in Wales is normal, even respected. Ah, for the land of Beulah!

Gathered at O'Malley's now, they feel like singing, and sing they do. They start with some Irish tunes, playing them straight. There really should be a CD, "The Welsh Do the Irish". Maybe they can address that when they get home.

In Dublin's fair city, where the streets are so pretty
There once was a girl named Molly Malone.
She rolled her wheel-barrow, through streets broad and narrow
Singing cockles, and mussels, alive, alive-oh!
Alive, alive-oh! Alive, alive-oh!
Singing cockles, and mussels, alive, alive-oh!¹

I omitted relating that the tourists had brought a mascot with them on tour. Mr. Thomas is a short guy, maybe twenty-four inches tall, carved of ebony, or some other such dark wood, and probably of West-African descent. He is clad only in a grass skirt that doesn't quite manage to cover his enormous equipment. He is an idol, a fertility god, a symbol of this Welsh team's virility and their intent to do the whole state of Texas.

Now Mr. Thomas' care has been entrusted to one of the tour's rookies. He's a young lad, a winger also named Gareth. Is everyone in Wales named Gareth? It smacks of inbreeding, or at least of a lack of imagination. Have they never heard of Travis? Or Shane? They need to get some good, old Texan creativity.

It seems that Gareth the Younger has left Mr. Thomas guarding the pool table while the team is giving the concert on the back patio. Michael and I encounter Mr. T on a trip to the bar for refills of our empty mugs. Instantly, we know what we have to do. A few quick, furtive looks around confirms that we are unobserved and Michael slips him, stealthily, under his arm. Mr. Thomas is transported quickly to the far, dim end of the bar and deposited safely in the dark space under one of the benches at a booth.

We have stolen the essence of Cogan's strength. Surely, the game now is a foregone conclusion. We might as well not even bother to play it.

¹ Anon., Molly Malone, traditional Irish tune.

With our glasses replenished, and contented smiles on our faces, Michael and I return to the patio. We join in the last of the Irish ditties.

... and it's no, nay, never,
No nay never no more,
Will I play the wild rover,
No nay never no more...²

Now it's the Caballero's turn. We're not as polished as the Welsh, but we are enthusiastic. We pick one of our standards. This ditty has variations that, when taken to completion, involve the whole choir disrobing. It all depends on the relative inebriation of the choirmaster and his choir. Tonight, Michael T is leading, and he's not that drunk, yet.

I'm singing in the rain, just singing in the rain,
What a glorious feeling, I'm happy again...³

It's time for a break. All this singing works up a thirst. While waiting at the back of the queue for fresh pints, Gareth the Elder's third sense kicks in. He's feeling incomplete. Something's missing. Ah, that's it. Time for one of the hoary rituals of the Cogan tourists, a paean to Mr. Thomas. He calls to Gareth the Y. Bring forth the talisman. It's time for a celebration.

G.Y. bounces to the back of the barroom, where Mr. T had been left enthroned on the pool table. As he approaches the pool table I can see the transformation of the eager acolyte, shoulders drooping, pace slowing, bounce flattening. The realization floods over him that Mr. T has gone missing. Oh, Jesus! Oh, my God! Oh, Mr. T!

Michael T and I observe from a distance as G.Y. returns slowly, head bent, meek and penitent to where G.E. still waits on queue. We sidle slowly backwards, towards the dim end of the bar, sensing the impending explosion. G.Y. whispers in G.E.'s ear. Night overcomes G.E.'s countenance.

There are no words. There's no shouting. But, communicating by sense of smell, like fire ants whose mound has just been trampled, the tourists instantly

² Anon., Wild Rover, traditional Irish tune.

³ Freed, Arthur, and Brown, Herb Nacio, Singing in the Rain, ca. 1929.

swarm the bar looking for the lost idol. The whole tour party has immediately transformed to a single, community purpose. They whirl around in packs, searching every cranny.

Meanwhile, it seems that Lug had taken up a game of quarter-toss in the very booth where Mr. T lays ensconced. Michael and I join him and Dopey for a few rounds while the tourists continue the frantic, whirlwind search.

On, or about, his fifth lap past us, G.E. catches something of a smirk on us even though we are practicing our best Texas Hold'em poker faces. He slows for a more complete inspection. Yes, we're smirking and it must have some meaning. His eyes scan the table, then the benches and then, the floor.

What's that? Is there something there in the dark, in the corner, trembling expectantly, waiting to be found. Yes! G.E. dives under the table to grab the errant idol. In the process, Mr. T's most prodigious appendage is unfortunately severed.

Honestly, he didn't have to be so violent. We would have returned Mr. T, once found, in the same condition as we had found him. But, what's done is done. No matter. A little super-glue and he'll be right as rain.

There is much consternation and gnashing of teeth at the sacrilegious injury done to the diminutive idol. There is also much joy at the prodigal mascot's return.

In the end, some one has to pay for the loss, if only temporary, of the team's essence. It's the Fisher King all over again. Except, Cogan doesn't really have a king. Instead, they pick a virgin, Gareth the Younger, for the sacrifice. After all, the care of Mr. Thomas was his responsibility. Without benefit of judge, jury or trial, he is summarily strung up, drawn and quartered, disemboweled, flogged and otherwise publicly humiliated, then shot for good measure.

Afterwards, I try to make amends with Gareth the Y. and buy him a beer. He's not smiling and not having it. Although it was he that left Mr. T to fend for himself, we've ruined his night and probably his tour. I note, in G.Y.'s cold stare and grudging acceptance of my apology, that I've made an enemy here. I'll have to watch my back on the pitch. Gareth may not leave vengeance to the lord when it comes game time.

As befitting to the end of any day's drink up, we decide to go for a meal before heading for home and bed. The tourists are here to enjoy themselves. They can sleep when they get back to Wales or are dead, whichever comes first.

This time of night, there's only one place to go in this part of Houston – Antonio's, purveyor of fine cuisine of the Mexican variety. Or, maybe it's just starchy substances and grease. Whatever. It's hard to tell at this hour of the night and this level of insobriety, which, of course, is the only time and state that a visit to Antonio's is in order. The important thing is that they are open twenty-four hours.

Antonio's is part of the standard plan to soften up the tourists. We live here. We can handle it. Our digestive tracts are already equipped with the necessary microbes to process a meal at Antonio's. Visitors, however, are virgin territory for whatever it is that lives in Antonio's fare. They invariably come down with dysentery, cramps, the runs and a multitude of other forms of gastric distress. The plan is to weaken and incapacitate them by game time. At this point, they don't know that. They are just hungry, and eager to extend and maximize their time on tour.

So we – Gareth the E., Lew, Michael and I – pop in the car and speed up the darkened, nearly deserted streets to the Heights and Antonio's. We're followed by several car-fulls of billetors and billetees.

As with many of the Gents' plans, where we go awry is that, we too are there into the wee hours. Although we've come to develop some tolerance for the food, we're still up late and many of us have work to attend to the next day. Like many American clubs, we don't have a network of committee men, old boys and general hangers on to handle the softening up. So we do it ourselves. We don't mind. We enjoy it. It's just that we end up at somewhat cross purposes.

Our grand plan is to send them down to the beach at Galveston tomorrow, Wednesday, and fry them up nicely before the game in the evening. Then, Thursday, put them on their bus for a NASA tour before they depart. Everyone always enjoys this one. Or, at least, they endure it as a necessary interlude between drinking binges.

The tour management susses this one out immediately and demands a switch in the itinerary: NASA tour on Wednesday, beach on Thursday. Oh well, at least they'll be nice and crispy for their next stop. I hope Austin appreciates what we've done for them.

The tour continues at a frenetic pace. Cogan takes the bus to NASA on Wednesday while the Caballeros return to suffering through the drudgery of

ONLY A GAME

our everyday work lives. The game is in the evening, because so many of us can't, or can't afford to, get off work.

The game seems an after thought following the intensity of the pre-match rituals and build-up. I'll not bore you with the details of the game. Suffice it to say that the Gents, despite the softening up, are soundly walloped by Cogan. Physically, we are equal to them, but we lack the skill and years of experience they bring to the game. We manage a couple of face saving tries in the second half and go down, forty-four to twelve.