

## Hurricanes Match

Our match against the Hurricanes, the *other* team in Houston, is the local derby. (That's "DAR-bee" to the uninitiated.) There's no love lost between the Gents and the 'Canes. It's one of those situations where we can lose every other match all year, but all bets are off playing the cross-town rivals. If we win that match, the season isn't a failure. We've got local bragging rights and there's a lot to that. So, form doesn't necessarily matter. Players lift their games, they come out of the woodwork, they have miraculous recoveries from injuries, they somehow find a way to make it for this one. It's the All Blacks versus the Springboks, on a local scale, going head-to-head all over again.

The good thing about playing the 'Canes is that there is no travel. It is essentially a home game, especially since we both use the same pitch. The city isn't extravagant enough to provide two pitches for rugby. And, of course, we're not exactly of independent means. Purchasing our own ground is such a distant dream that Oz actually seems more of a reality.

On the day of the game, we rise, eat and start thinking about the game. If it's not done yet, polish up the old boots. Since the Hurricanes are hosting this year, there's not much else for us to do. They'll line and prepare the field. They've arranged the referee, the after-party, the food, the beer, the fun. All the Caballeros need to do are show up, pull on our jerseys and make a good account of ourselves once we're in the playing enclosure. Simple.

And it really is simple, when you look at it. The IRB "Playing Charter" defines the object of the game as "...two teams, each of fifteen players, observing fair play, according to the Laws and in a sporting spirit, should, by carrying, passing, kicking and grounding<sup>1</sup> the ball, score as many points as possible". That's it.

In spite of it being the local derby, we take an inadvisably relaxed attitude to the game. After all, we're top of the table in Texas. The Hurricanes have done what? Won maybe one game? We're obviously thinking it will be a walk in the park. A couple of guys are missing this day, including Bryan, our flyhalf. Each

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<sup>1</sup> This is the process of scoring the "try" that we have talked about.

must have pressing matters at hand. Several more arrive late. We're just barely kitted-out and on the pitch when the ref's whistle blows.

The 'Canes kick deep. Our regular fullback, Jumpin' Jerry Sanders, is among the missing. Instead, we have Dopey Dave back playing fullback for us. No matter, right? We're going to win this anyway. Aren't we?

Dopey fields the kick well enough, but he doesn't have the leg, or foot, that Jerry does. Dopey hoists it back to touch. It goes out at our own ten-meter line. Instantly, the 'Canes are attacking in our half.

Does this shake the cobwebs off? I'm afraid not. They take the lineout and ship it to the flyhalf, he dummies out then side-steps back in, past Geoff, who is another stand in on the day, covering for Pils at stand-off. Suddenly, the 'Canes number ten is in those vast open reaches behind the two packs with the backlines out to his right. The only one left in front of him is the fullback, Dopey.

Lucky for us, one thing Dopey can do well is tackle. He stands firm and scythes down the flyhalf, leveling him on the spot. Unluckily, the number ten is able to off-load to their wing flying up on the outside. Their wing is a small guy, fast and quick. Normally, Derrick handles him with no problem whatsoever. Derrick, however strong and fast, is a large guy, but you wouldn't say quick, especially not laterally. With this much space, the 'Canes wing jukes left, then right, then left again and is right by Derrick. He scores under the posts. Very portentous beginnings.

Michael is livid. He's going at us hammer and tongs as we wait for the conversion.

"You guys out for a walk in the park today? You thought they would just lie down for us? Did you forget who you're playing? Jeezus, wake up! We've got a game here!

"Tee," he says to me, never wanting to just abuse without offering some solutions. "You have got to cover their flyhalf on the inside move off the lineouts. Close that gap and give Geoff some support. If you don't get there, we're going to have a long day."

On he went to offer suggestions to the rest of the team. That's the Doc for you. He will explode with passion and beat you raw. I guess he just wants to make you malleable, because, in the end, he comes back to the positive and becomes constructive. He's always working on the solution, not throwing fuel

on the fire. That's what leadership's about.

Our kickoff goes deep. The 'Canes field it and kick it back, not finding touch. Dopey catches the ball, runs up and connects with the Gents forwards. The game becomes a pounding affair. Each pack of forwards running into the other, trying to grind down the opposition – wear them out, achieve victory by attrition.

Generally, this is a good strategy for us. We're bigger and fitter than the Hurricanes. Our record shows that we're the better quality side. On this day, though, the 'Canes rise to the task. Their adrenalin pumps are working overtime. Every punch we figuratively throw is returned by an equal or harder counter-punch. The mass of forwards begin to meander back and forth between the twenty-twos. It's the old gridiron "three yards and a cloud of dust". Today, it seems it's only the cloud of dust, gradually wending back and forth.

The ball rarely comes out. When it does, we have a propensity for knock-ons. It is just not going to hand. We can't generate any kind of attack at all. The 'Canes, on the other hand, are looking polished. They are putting together multiple combinations and phases, keeping the pressure on.

We can't seem to tackle. No one can bring down the ball carrier on the first attempt. This means two or three players are required to make the tackle, leaving the 'Canes with overlaps. We're not wrapping. We're not hitting with passion and commitment. We're just not getting there.

This, as you might imagine, is making big holes in the defense. Dopey is having a difficult day. He's up to the task though. He's the only one tackling, doing it with precision and emphasis. He saves our skins again and again.

It's a strange game. We just can't get rolling. The whole team is caught in one of those dreams, everything slow-motion, our feet stuck in the mire and there's no way to pull ourselves out. Without the services of Dopey, we would have sunk long ago.

At half-time, the score is still seven to nil. We haven't even threatened to score. It's time for coach Alastair's big speech.

"You guys are shite. You might as well have stayed in bed this morning. You're playing against a crap team and playing down to their level. Get out in the next half and show what you're worth."

I'm inspired. Aren't you? Maybe it was the reek of stale beer exuding from

old Haggis that did it for me. Or, maybe that I knew he didn't make it to bed at all last night. He closed the pub then went on to continue the drink-up at home. I don't know. He's certainly shown the commitment that he's asking of us, hasn't he?

In spite of the charismatic half-time exhortations, the second half is more of the same. Geoff, me, everybody else missing tackles. Dopey doing yeoman's work to protect our line. We just don't get out of the funk. All the will power in the world won't change it. The 'Canes have the advantage, the "momentum" as we like to call it in sport, and they keep it rolling.

The game ends seven to nil. We hang our heads and cry. Our wonderful, championship run has gone off-track. A little mourning is required.

To mourn our lost season, we have a wake. The party is at the 'Canes' bar, at least their current one. They seem to change it every few months. Whether it's from being asked not to come back or just a lack of interest in the current watering hole, the Hurricanes are known to be wanderers when it comes to drinking establishments.

The current pub is truly far from the pitch. When we get there, we find it is a real dive as well. But the beer is cold and plentiful. They feed us spaghetti with sausage and meat sauce. We sooth our bruised egos in drink and comfort food.

After eating, a few dirges seem to be in order. We start warming up our singing voices.

An engineer told me before he died,  
A-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump.  
An engineer told me before he died,  
A-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump.  
An engineer told me before he died,  
And I've no reason to believe he lied,  
A-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump,  
A-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump-titty-rump.<sup>2</sup>

Ah, a true tear jerker. The 'Canes, of course, can hardly contain themselves. They are so delighted at their victory. They've rescued a season that was going

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<sup>2</sup> Anon., The Engineer's Song, sung to the tune of Froggy Went A-Courtin'.

down the toilet in a hurry. They've won the local derby and have bragging rights now. The truly bad thing about it is that they are so magnanimous in victory, such gracious hosts to us, and when you look at it from our perspective, downright condescending.

But we have to take it. And do. Ruggers are supposed to be gentleman. Maybe another song would help.

I don't want to join the army,  
I don't want to go to war.  
I'd rather hang around,  
In Picadilly Underground,  
Living off the earnings of a high born lady...<sup>3</sup>

So, slowly, we start to recover our spirits and begin to lighten our load. After all, the loss is past. What's past is past. We need to look forward to the future and the next game. We've got another cup match coming up with Austin. No time to wallow in sorrow. No time to be bitter. Let's look forward, at least to the next beer.

That evening, after the singing, after the festivities, after the wake, we've retired back to O'Malley's. Michael and I are sitting in one of the booths commiserating over a couple of pints. Haggis comes to join us with a sorrowful look on his face.

Michael and I are already doing the head down, hang-dog, sad puppy routine. But, Haggie, he is truly dejected. He must be taking this harder than the whole team. And he's not even that drunk yet. We've seen him totaled and this ain't it. He sits down.

"Ah, laddies," he starts off. "I've got some sad news for you."

Sadder than the loss today? Oh, please Haggie, don't be heaping sorrow on sorrow.

"I've got to head back. The wife and I have decided to give it another go. I've got to give it another shot for the little one's sakes. I've booked a flight back on Tuesday."

This is a shock, and the voice of sobriety, too. Frankly, I didn't know he had

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<sup>3</sup> Anon., I Don't Want to Join the Army (a.k.a. I Don't Want to be a Soldier), traditional English WWI tune.

kids. Or a wife, either.

We take it hard. At least, Michael does. Haggis is his friend, after all. He's refused to see Haggie's shortcomings, out of loyalty, I assume. I'm not so broken up. I don't think Haggis has delivered in the few months he's been here. The Caballeros are doing well this season, but I feel it's been more in spite of rather than because of his coaching abilities.

"You can't leave," responds Michael. "What about the rest of the season? You're not going because of the performance today, are you?"

Michael refuses to see the reality of it. All he sees is losing a friend, roommate, and especially, drinking partner.

"How long have you been planning this? Why didn't you talk to me about it?" Michael goes on, as he starts to come to terms with the concept.

"Fiona and I have been discussing it for about a month. I didn't want to put it on you. Besides, you might have tried to talk me out of it. This is between Fiona and me."

"But what about the team? What will we do for a coach?" Michael continues. He, and I, can't believe that anyone would put anything before the team. The team, the game, rugby itself is our life. It's got to be first, always.

This is twisting the knife in Haggis hard. He used to be the same way, coaching skills or not. He's moved on now though, and looking at the bigger picture of his family and the rest of his life. How can he do that?

"I know I'm letting you down," Ali replies. "I made a commitment, I know. I just can't keep it. I'm pissing my life away here on drink and not really adding that much as coach. You guys will be all right. You've got the talent. It will be okay."

Michael is beginning to understand it, see the logic in it and, therefore, accept it.

"You're right, Haggie. I shouldn't put pressure on you. We'll be all right. We always are. You go ahead and take care of Fiona and the kids. It's the right thing."

Of course it is. We know it. He knows it. There's no fighting it. And we *will* be all right. The Caballeros will survive, even get stronger. It's just a shock at this time. Sorrow on sorrow.