

The Great Fence Rail Fight

As you can imagine, we are pretty dejected about the loss on Saturday. It seems like our season has gone awry. In reality, it isn't all that bad. We are still top of the table. We just aren't as perfect any more. The chinks in our armor have been exposed. Come Tuesday and practice, we are still feeling down.

Adding to the worries, Haggis leaves that afternoon. Say and think what I might about his shortcomings, at least, after he got into it, he was providing the organization for practice. That was one thing the rest of us didn't have to expend effort on. We could concentrate on our jobs, focusing on training and playing, without distraction.

Tonight Michael, Bryan and Geoff put their heads together to get something organized. The rest of us were playing touch to fill the time. Touch is a great learning tool if played right and it doesn't degenerate into a sevens style mess. Keep the focus on creating and exploiting space, passing to the open man, supporting across and up the field and a lot can be learned about attack and defense. It's one place where the game can actually be simulated without introducing contact, breakdowns¹ and all the stuff that takes the focus off the specific skills needed for attack.

To go back a bit, Lug and I had had words after the 'Canes game. I think we were both feeling the disappointment and trying to explain it. Naturally, we couldn't accept that we had any degree of fault individually. We had lashed out at each other. I had told Lug that his tackling was non-existent, that he had missed more tackles than days at work, which might be a great number considering his commitment to work, or lack thereof. His reply was that I had had a nice walk in the park, that if I'd put any effort in, I might have gotten there to miss a few tackles myself, that the tackles I did attempt looked more like group hugs at the People's New Age Church of Feel Good. It escalated from there. You know the stuff, I'm okay, but something's wrong. It must be you that sucks. We didn't actually come to blows, but it felt like we were close.

¹ Breakdowns are the markers for the open phases. They occur after a tackle where the ball is recycled and play starts again. In rugby, you must release the ball when tackled to the ground. The ball is brought out and it all starts over again – the next phase. Or, if it doesn't come out, then we restart with a set piece, the scrum.

Adding to the fire, Lug had been laid off work a couple of weeks ago, so he was actually missing a few more days. To compound the situation, although I didn't know it at the time, his fiancée, Nancy, had told him to take a hike as well. The end result was that he was spending a little too much time, make that way too much, at O'Malley's, in the company of his favorite bottle.

So, come Tuesday night, as I said we are at training playing touch. Lug shows up late and we see him wobbling through the trees on his way out to the pitch. We all know what's up. He's been drinking all day, wallowing in it, and we give him a wide path.

He comes on to play touch and nobody says anything. Touch is supposed to be non-contact, but Lug is just making a misstep here or there that results in an incidental bump. At first we think it's just that he's too drunk to avoid us. Then we start to see a pattern, and the bumps get harder. He dips a shoulder and clatters me to the ground.

"Goddamn it, Lug," I say, trying to let Saturday night slide and not hold a grudge. It was just a familial spat. Right? "If you're too fucked up to play, just go home and sleep it off."

He doesn't deign to answer this and just turns his back as he returns to the line. Play goes on.

A few movements later, the ball well away, he takes a side-step into me and I'm on my butt again. My blood instantly goes to two-hundred-twelve degrees and I can feel my face and whole head flush. I notice this and am aware of the entire physical universe within and without me. At the same time all reason and reasonableness have gone out of my head. This has got to stop now.

I get up, throwing my best round-house swing and connect solidly with Lug's jaw.

Now, you've got to understand that Lug dwarfs me, much heavier and three inches taller. But also, he's a bad, sloppy drunk and goes slow and soft under the influence.

The blow, landed with all the power I have, hits square and has no impact. Lug is not even stunned. The only thing is, the embers of anger start to glow a little brighter in his eyes, shining through the alcohol. He starts to realize somewhere down in his stupor that he's getting what he subconsciously wanted, a chance to release all the pent up rage, all the frustration that's built up in him during the last few weeks.

He starts to wind up for the return blow.

Luckily for me, our teammates have reacted instantly. Michael has blindsided me and moved me out from direct confrontation. Derrick and Bryan have grabbed Lug from behind and are dragging him towards the bleachers.

The red, the temperature, the blood pressure all dissipate quickly. It's over. I'm okay. Just a little over reaction. Let's get on with practice. And we do.

We do our stretching, then split up into backs and forwards. Michael decides to do a little mauling practice. You know, the basic, simple, divide the forwards into two groups, throw a ball in the middle and let them fight for it. Real organized. Real productive. Basically a mess.

Somehow, Lug and I get on opposite sides. We come together a few times, struggling for the ball. The maul smells like alcohol.

Michael doesn't like what he sees and keeps blowing the whistle. Do it again he says. Three or four iterations into the drill, Lug and I end up making direct contact. His forearm finds my neck. I think it's high and return a rabbit punch to the kidneys, no effect, of course.

The whistle goes again and the groups split. The next one, Lug just targets me and makes a flying body block into my legs. As we get up off the ground, I give him a shot with my best weapon, an elbow. It lands on his chest and I feel the wind go out of him. The blow stuns and slows him, but really doesn't change his condition much.

We square up. I can see that it's full-on now. The fires are stoked in Lug, even if he is still impaired. Fighting, especially fist-fighting, is not my forte. I know that this will end badly for me, even with Lug in his current state. I switch to something I'm good at – wrestling. Double-leg take-down and Lug is on the ground. I put the head-lock on him before he has time to figure out that the rules have changed.

The others have reacted now and Derrick pulls me off from behind. Michael, again in the middle, is holding Lug with help from Darryl. Old Ben Lugan is seething with the unfairness of not being able to even get in his best shot and struggles for a few seconds. Then, after the brief show, he seems to calm down. Michael and Darryl relax their grip. One massive twist and Lug is free. Instead of coming after me again, he stomps off into the trees. I'm hoping he's going to seek solitude and meditate on his sins.

It's all water off this duck's back. The rest of us get back to practice. We've

got a rugby mission to fulfill and can't waste time with these distractions. We all hope that he'll sober up and let us get on with the business at hand.

The team is back at it now, split into backs and forwards. The backs are practicing passing and running plays. The forwards going over scrummaging against the sled and then lineout moves. After another thirty minutes or so, we come back together to run some unopposed.² It's a typical rugby practice, nothing too out of the ordinary, especially since we'd just lost the creativity of a dedicated coach.

That is, nothing out of the usual until Lug comes back out of the trees. He's carrying what looks like a twelve-foot long galvanized pole, used for the top rail of the chain link fencing in the park. It's on his shoulder like a baseball bat, ready for the home run swing. I guess he's been constructively employing himself destroying city property for the last thirty minutes.

"Come on, Brown," he screams, calling me out by name. "I'll take you and all your little friends, too. Just let me get a shot in before they hold me back."

He's come out of the trees at the far twenty-two. We're down at the other twenty-two, just getting ready to start our run back down the pitch.

I've had enough at this point. Needling me in front of the team was bad enough, but I couldn't take the insinuation that I was relying on them to protect me. They were holding *me* back, too. I took off at a dead sprint, heading straight for Lug.

It's probably the fastest I ever covered fifty or so meters. It's a wonder what a little adrenaline will do for your athletic performance.

As I approach Lug, he turns getting ready for the home run cut. He starts his swing. I guess he miscalculates my pace a little, as well as how hard it is to overcome the inertia of the twelve-foot long pole. I leave my feet while the pole isn't halfway through the swing.

Impact! It is the best and hardest tackle I've ever made. My shoulder lands in Lug's gut. He doubles over at the waist as momentum carries his massive frame and me another five yards down field. We land, Lug on his butt and me on top. Then we start to roll. No damage done here as we are too close to land blows of any significance.

Then it's over. As soon as I'd bolted, everyone else followed. They arrive

² This is basically just running through patterns and plays without opposition, polishing the attacking moves and developing the muscle memory for perfected execution.

shortly after me and pull us apart again. And, as before, after just a few seconds, Lug composes himself. Calmed, he shakes it off, turns and heads for the parking lot. He must have gone home and slept it off. We don't see him the rest of the night.

I, on the other hand, am pumped. The adrenaline rush sticks with me the last thirty minutes of training. I am a step faster to every breakdown. I am out-running the back line. If I could only bottle this and bring it out when I need it – game day specifically – what an asset it would be. But, no, by the end of practice, I am back to normal. Just the yeoman doing his daily work.

Well, the “great” fence rail fight, might not have been so great. And, the rail didn't really feature all that much, did it? It's just the absurdity of it. The things that the mind will do with a little altering substance applied, whether it be alcohol or adrenaline, it can make us do crazy things. The image of that pole swinging at me will never leave me. Nor will the image of what might have happened if it had connected. I'd probably be a vegetable, living as a potted plant somewhere. It's a little insane to take the risks we do.

It is on to O'Malley's after training. Although settled on the outside, I still need to get to that inner-calm. A little general anesthesia will help. Since it is Tuesday night, it is relatively quiet. The music isn't even playing when I walk in. There are just a few regulars sitting at the bar enjoying some adult beverages.

Michael and I get a pitcher and head for one of the booths. Ah, a couple of pints. Nothing like it to sooth the barbarian ruggar.

Michael starts in on me, “You can't let Lug get to you like that. You've got to stay above it.

“What does it matter what he says? You know he is just trying to work out his own demons. Just let it go.”

“Yeah, I know,” I reply, contrite. “I just gave in to it. I guess I still needed to work out the frustration of loosing Saturday. That's still hard to come to terms with.

“Then when I saw him with that pole, I just lost it. The blood boiled. I can still feel the heat in my temples. He kept needling me and I couldn't take it anymore.”

On the outside, I am contrite. But, on the inside, I am still a little smug, feeling better about the release of anger and emotion. It brings some of that inner calm that I had been craving.

Michael goes on, “You’re better than that, though. Don’t take yourself down to his level. We need you steady to keep the team going. We get a rift between you and Lug, no telling where it will stop.”

He is right, as always. Looking at the big picture and staying objective. That’s why he’s captain and the rest of us are the foot-soldiers. We follow his lead. I let the smugness slip out of me and resolve to patch it up with Lug the next time I see him. Luckily, it doesn’t have to be tonight. Lug has gone somewhere other than O’Malley’s for solace and recovery. That works for me.

O’Malley’s is starting to pick up. Bryan and Geoff come in, then Dopey, then Derrick. Someone has started the music. The low pulse is beginning to throb. The life is coming back. Water off the duck’s back.

Dopey comes up beside me.

“Smell my finger,” he says in my ear.

I jerk back, laughing, “Get away, you freaking pervert!”

The catharsis is complete. Life at O’Malley’s is back to normal. No need to look back anymore. Let’s move on. And, have another pint.

While I’m drinking it, Genie comes in, alone. She stops by the bar and surveys the scene. Our eyes meet. Those eyes. They always melted me. She comes over and sits next to me. This is getting interesting

“Hi, gorgeous,” I say, as she slides into the booth.

“Kurt and I have split,” she says, straight to the point.

“I’m so sorry,” I say more than half facetiously, but still with a little empathy. I put my arm around her. She doesn’t pull away.