

## The Emergency Room

Things are hotting-up now in the cup race. We're still in the running and Austin is coming to town on Saturday. Another grudge match. Aren't they all? Austin's been in great form the past few games and it's going to be a real challenge. We're up for it though. The intensity and seriousness, plus the numbers, come back to our training sessions. Michael, Bryan and Geoff get the look of commitment in their eyes. It transfers to all of us.

Also hotting-up are things between Genie and I. Or, I should say, lukiing-up. She's left Kurt and paying more attention to me at O'Malley's after training, actually sitting with me and talking for a while. I'm thinking I like the way this is going. Now, if I can just keep it on the warming trend.

Then, on Wednesday, I get a call from Tina. She's coming over to Houston for the weekend. What's going on? Can we get together?

I haven't said anything to Genie about the game yet. She's never been to a game anyway. And, the fire's not burning that strong, still just smoldering, so to speak. It can wait until next week. Tina will be here this week. So, to Tina I say, "Of course! We've got a game Saturday. Why don't you come by Memorial Park and we'll get together after."

It's a date. I hadn't seen Tina since the wedding. Apparently, she was still interested even though we'd run into some pitfalls during the wedding extravaganza. What a wonderful girl. She can see past the outer blemishes to the real me inside. This could be something. My search for a surrogate Ana continues.

Thursday night training is brutal. Our intensity is up. Our numbers are up. But, we're just not clicking. The ball goes to ground. People are in the wrong place. We run into each other when trying to run through penalty moves. It's ugly. We're obviously wound-up a little too tightly for Saturday.

Haggis, before he left, had implemented a new penalty play for us. Actually, it was a whole series of plays off the same movement. The scrumhalf would tap the ball through the mark then pass it to the front row, who were set up off to the side as a wall with their backs to the opposition. He would then run to where the front row were standing and either: a) take the ball back and pass it

out to the back line spread out on the open side of the pitch, or; b) not take it, but continue running as if he had. In case b) above, the prop holding the ball at the end of the wall had the option to: c) take it himself to the blind side or; d) pass to one of the other forwards who were now rushing toward the wall in a group. The forward who took the pass would then run at the spot where the hooker stood in the middle of the human wall. At the last instant, the hooker would step aside, and the ball carrier would pop through the mini-wall to the great surprise and consternation in the defense.

If you're confused now, good! That's what's supposed to happen. The play is designed to generate confusion in the opposition. It creates a tremendous soft spot between the forwards who are rushing up to the point where the wall is set up and the backs who have to linger out where the back line is waiting in case the ball comes out wide.

It was my job, in this play, to take the ball and "pop" through the wall. The first time we ran this, it worked brilliantly. I came through the wall and cut to the open side of the field. After just a couple of steps I was past the opposition forwards who were surprised by my appearance. The defending backs were still out covering our back line. I waltzed in for an easy try and glory.

Tonight, it isn't working like what you might call clockwork. As I said, we ran into each other. I dropped the pass. Cy didn't get through fast enough causing a delay that gave the defense time to come up and cover. You name it – it went south.

Harsh words are said. Is this what a team is about? Well, a little strife does come into every family, doesn't it?

Eventually, we give up on penalty plays and end up doing a lot of running and fitness work – not the best thing two days before a crucial game, but it's the only thing we can get through in our keyed-up state. After we're done, we retire to O'Malley's.

Luckily for me, I don't see Genie when I get there. I won't have to deal with why she shouldn't come to the game on Saturday. It's a non-issue.

Things are getting better already. We have a few beers, and then a few more. And maybe sing a ditty, or two.

... One black one, one white one,  
And one with a little shite on,

And one with a little light on  
To show us the way<sup>1</sup>.

Ah, the tension is coming out of the spring now. There's nothing left but performing on Saturday. We've done it before and we'll do it again. It'll be all right... in the middle of the night... or make that Saturday afternoon.

When I get home, there's a message on my answering machine. It's from Mayra. She's coming to Houston tomorrow for a seminar in the Med-Center. Can we get together for the weekend?

I'm cornered. Mayra could be the one. I've always felt it. But, the distance keeps the relationship cool. If she didn't live in Baton Rouge, if she were in Houston, I'm sure I would be making a full frontal attack. She could be the one to make me stop thinking about Ana and the forbidden fruit.

I decide to punt. I won't call her back until next week. What else can I do? I've already committed to Tina. I can't back out of that now, can I?

Saturday rolls around and it's more of the usual. Out to the pitch early, we set up the field, then start warm-ups. Before you know it, it's game time and we're into the thick of it. By the second-half we're ahead by a try – a hard fought battle, but we are in control.

There comes a time in every ruggers' career when they have to make a visit to the emergency room. Some of us, if we don't play for too long, may only be making the trip with a teammate who is injured. But, when you play for more than a couple of years, you'll probably end up in the hospital at some point – gashed, bloody, bruised or broken.

We ruggers, and probably any athlete, tend to think of our bodies as tools to be used in our sport. Our bodies are subjected to so much stress, that sooner or later it gets pushed too far and snaps. We accept the little breaks and tears. Let's just get them healed and stitched-up so we can get on with it. The pain or bodily damage doesn't bother us, but the time away from the game *does*. We're impatient to get it over with and rejoin the contest. That's why we don't do well with the more serious injuries. They change our lifestyle too much, for too long.

Today, we are about twenty minutes into the second half when we are

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<sup>1</sup> Anon., The Hair on Her Dickey-Di-Do (a.k.a. The Mayor of Bayswater), a rugby traditional.

awarded a penalty on the Austin twenty-two meter line. Michael chooses to run our famous penalty play, the option where I get the ball. Everything is going as planned up to a point. When I get the ball and come through the wall, looking for daylight, the only thing I see is Austin's big, hairy, ugly, drooling prop and his bigger, uglier second row. They certainly aren't fooled. They look as though they are expecting me. The thought passes through my mind that they might have seen this play before. Too late. They pick me up and drop me unceremoniously on my head. It wasn't so much a tackle, as tag team wrestlers doing a pile-driver take down. That's the last thing that I remember.

Finally, I come back to the world of the living, or nearly living. I look around and everything is strange, as in the cliché, dreamlike. Then, the eternal question wanders through my mind, "Where am I?"

As my mental focus and acuity start to ratchet up a little, I start to recognize some of the trappings of my environment: the cabinets full of medical equipment, the blood-pressure monitor, the guy in scrubs with his back turned. I'm laying on a gurney. I'm in the hospital! The emergency room, to be exact. How did I get here?

Michael comes in the door, a smile breaking out on his face when he sees my eyes open, "How are you, Tee?"

"Okay, I guess. Where are we?"

"Ben Taub. Man you were out a *long* time! The ambulance guys thought this was the best place to take you."

And it is. Best in the world, if you're dying or near death. But if your condition is not all that serious, just a few broken bones, a bad cold or even a serious headache, you would prefer to be somewhere else. You're not going to get a lot of attention. They'll get to you when they can. It's just that they have bigger fish to save.

Michael's smile gets bigger as he watches the cobwebs clearing from my head.

"You know, you have some friends here that are worried about you."

"Who's that?" I ask as I wince with the throbbing pain now noticeable in my head.

"Oh, let's see," he says with an ever widening smile, "There's Tina, of course. And then there's Genie. And, oh, what's her name from Baton Rouge? Mayra?"

“Oh my god! They’re all here?”

“Yes indeed.” Michael is wetting himself with glee now. “And they are playing so well together. None of ‘em are saying a word, but they look up at each other, then they look down, then back up.

“I can see it going through their heads... What are you doing here? No, what are you doing here? I hope he comes out of this soon so I can kill him!”

“Oh my God!”

Welcome back to reality. How did this happen? It turns out that they all managed to find their way to the pitch, each having a modicum of interest in me. Invited, or not, they thought they would show that interest by supporting me in my athletic endeavors. Now they all know that I seem to have a whole support group.

Michael turns and heads back out to the waiting room. I wait for the doctor to make his rounds. Since it is Ben Taub, it takes awhile.

After about two hours, I’m finally done. I walk out to the waiting room, full of trepidation, afraid for the scene I’m about to meet and with no idea of how to handle it. I don’t know if it is lucky for me, or just ominous, they had apparently all decided I wasn’t worth the wait. They’re probably right. Michael is the only one left.

Michael is smiling, big smile, “Um, I think your harem decided the tension was too much. They all left. Let’s get going. We can still make the party at O’Malley’s.”

In spite of all warnings to the contrary, the doctor’s advice and the medical protocol for after concussion activity, my head still hurts and I need a drink. I say to Michael, “Let’s go.”