

The Second Coming

Then on Sunday, assembly at Hawkins', as usual. All are in recovery mode, more from the bus trip than the game. Geoff and Michael, always focused, are digging in to administrative details.

Michael starts in, "Jeezus, we just squeaked by Fort Worth this weekend. We've really got to lift things if we're going to keep on track. We need to do something about the coaching. It's not working. With Bryan leaving we've got no one running the backline. What are we going to do for a backs coach? We've got to find someone to run the backs at training, someone to add a little more polish."

Geoff, who is a realist, doesn't take this as an insult. He knows his limitations and is comfortable with them. He doesn't have the knowledge or skills to coach the backs at the level they need. Remember, the triumvirate – Michael, Bryan and Geoff – has taken back over the coaching duties since Haggis had left. Things have been going okay, but now Bryan is gone, too. Bryan had been taking the a-side backs at training with Geoff taking the seconds. Now there's a manpower issue.

Geoff offers, "What about Jerry? He could do it."

"Yeah. I think he's the best choice. I don't see anyone else taking it now."

"I could run it around the old boys, again?"

This had been tried before. None of the old boys had the time or interest in doing it. We'd tried this after Haggis departed, which wasn't that long ago, and come up with zilch. They had all moved on with their lives. In the U.S., since the game is about playing and there's no "club", as such, outside of the games and training, the old boys tend to move on. There's no brick and mortar club house to keep them tethered. There's no social home where to put one's feet up. Other than O'Malley's, that is, and the old boys can't get away with going there too much. They've all become normal, staid, respectable members of society now – wife, kids, mortgage, etc. That wouldn't last long if they kept hanging around O'Malley's.

Geoff and Michael kept at it while the rest of us recovered: watching TV, bull-shitting, taking baby steps, slowly taking the edge off. We didn't want to be

part of that conversation. For us, it would be beating our heads against the wall. Heads that were already mush from the night before. We are just here for the playing, well, yes, and the beer.

We are all tired. There's been little sleep since getting back in the wee hours. The good thing is that Hawkins' place is a relatively safe haven on a Sunday. No one is in hard, read that obnoxious, party mode, yet. We can even take a nap, usually unmolested. It is a laid back, live and let live atmosphere.

I don't know what the coaching decision was, since I snoozed away the afternoon. Before I am ready, though, it is time to go to work. I have the Sunday night shift at O'Malley's. Not a lot of business or earnings on Sundays. It is one of the few shifts I could work, though, without a rugby conflict, so it's my regular night. I say my goodbyes and leave for the job.

As I expected, it's a quiet night. Most of the regulars are away on some junket fishing trip out in the gulf with O'Malley. They won't get back until late. So, mostly, I just sit around and shoot the breeze with Ana, throw darts and watch my life pass me by.

Around nine o'clock, a guy comes in – tall, lanky, a foreigner. He orders a beer and looks at my Caballeros shirt.

"I heard there was rugby team that comes in here," he says. "I was hoping to find you guys tonight."

"You found us," I reply. "Do you play?"

I know the answer to this question. I can tell by his accent that he is South African. They all play – at some level or another. It's the national sport, and passion. Of course he plays.

"Yeah, a bit back home," he answers. "I've been traveling. I'll be here for awhile and was looking for a team while I'm in Houston."

"That would be us. Best team in town. In Texas," I tell him somewhat immodestly. You need to sell your club to new recruits, can't let them have any doubts. In this case, it was pretty much true. Just no need for understatement.

"What do you play?" I ask, getting right down to it.

"Flyhalf. Or, center. Fullback... anywhere in the backs really."

Cha-ching. My eyes light up. All things come to he who waits. Or, maybe it's he who needs. In this case, we haven't been waiting too long. Bryan stopped playing just last week. The lord taketh away – read that, Bryan – and the lord giveth – read that, new guy here.

But I'm getting a little ahead of myself. We haven't even seen him play. He could be crap. That's happened before. Someone shows up with an accent and gets slotted right in. Turns out they don't know shit, or are afraid of contact, or have hands of stone. You name it. There's some problem.

Usually, though, they turn out to be quite useful. They may be crap back home, but at our level, they are stars. This guy, I could see, had the physical attributes, and that air of confidence. He was going to be an asset, even if he didn't turn out to be the best thing since Webb Ellis decided to pick the ball up.

Since O'Malley's is dead, we continue to shoot the shit. Ana is behind the bar with her nose in a book, studying for a test, or something.

"Where's the team?" he asks.

"Not too many of them come out on Sunday. They're probably still recovering from yesterday. Had a game in Fort Worth. We just got back late last night, or rather, early this morning."

"How'd that go?"

"We won. Won the party too. It was a good trip."

"When do you train?"

"Our training is Tuesday-Thursday. Over at Memorial Park. We start at 6:30."

"And when's your next game?"

"Saturday. We've got a game every week for the next month, or so. We're building up to the championship pretty soon. It's actually almost the end of our season."

Now that we'd become such good friends, I have to ask, "I'm Tom. What's your name?"

"Willem. Willem Kruger," he says as we shook hands. Good grip. This is looking better and better.

"Where you staying, Willem?"

"I'm staying with a friend from Cape Town. I just got in yesterday. She told me this is the place to go to find rugby in Houston."

Ah, the benefits of having an established watering hole. O'Malley's has always been a great recruiting tool for us. People from everywhere know that they'll find rugby at O'Malley's. We've gotten a lot of recruits that way. A few have actually panned out.

So we continue. He is on a sort of rugby walk-about. He's come to Houston because he has a friend and a place to stay. Figures he'll be here for a few months, then move on, probably to France.

He wants to know if there was any support the club could give him – financial, that is. I have to tell him, no, we're strictly amateur. The club is living a hand to mouth existence as it is. There's no extra cash for players.

At this time, the whole sport is amateur. There is, officially, no payment or financial reward for playing. It has been a gentleman's pursuit since the beginning and even more so since the split with League.¹ It is frowned upon to take monetary reward for playing. Excuse my understatement. It is down right excoriated. Those who are caught are raked over beds of hot coals. The powers that be are very passionate about it. But, of course, the IRB and the big clubs all fill their coffers with gate receipts and advertising money. That is okay. They need the cash to fund the game; make it available so that the players can donate their time, sweat and blood.

Anyway, as it turns out, Willem is of a more down to earth nature. He is looking to profit from the game and his god given skills. He is pretty up front about it, too. He's heard that there is considerable cash being paid out under the table in France and he is headed there soon. He just wants to see the States first. I know he won't be here long.

After a few pints, Willem, or Willi as he told me to call him, is ready to go. He'll be out to training on Tuesday, he says. I get his phone number and give him mine. Does he need a ride? No, he can manage. Does he know where Memorial Park is? His friend can find it.

And, he is out the door in spite of my attempts to get some more substantial

¹ A few words about League are necessary. In 1895, twenty-two teams from Yorkshire and Lancashire in the north of England, left the Rugby Football Union to form the new Northern Union. The RFU was the ruling body of rugby at the time and was centered in London in the south. The game in the south was played by public school old boys who were interested in maintaining the ideals of amateur sportsmanship and the game they had played at school.

In the north, the game had spread to the working class. The Victorian ideal of sportsmanship had given way to competition and an expression of manly virtues. The northern game had become a contest rather than a test of the public school idea of character. Along with increased competition came, inevitably, a tendency towards professionalism. One of the major sticking points for the Northern Unions, and a primary driver of the split, was what had come to be known as "broken-time payments". This was simply compensation for players who missed working time to attend matches. In the industrial north, this seemed reasonable enough, as the manufacturing workers – still on a five-and-half or six day work-week in the nineteenth century – could ill afford to lose wages to go to the Saturday games. The southern gentlemen, and de facto owners of the game, however, saw this as outright professionalism and contrary to their amateur ideal.

The end result was the bifurcation into Rugby Union and Rugby League. The sport of our story is, of course, Rugby Union. League will have to be the subject of a different story. Let it be said, though, that the direction taken by League was in many ways prescient of things to come for Union.

hooks into him and make sure he doesn't turn out to just be a figment. So often they do. I, for one, tend to be pie-eyed in this kind of situation. I spend a lot of time counting chickens while they are still eggs.

I call Michael as soon as Willi is gone, "Doc, I think we've got our flyhalf answer...."

Michael is nonplused. He's a little better grounded than I am. At least he is in this case. He hasn't seen, or known, the bona fides.

"We'll see on Tuesday, *if* he shows up."

And we did see. He shows up to training early on Tuesday and the man is magic – great physical ability, fantastic handling skills, he can punt the ball a mile – magic. He slots right in at flyhalf and by the end of practice is running the backline better than ever, better even than Bryan.

By Thursday, Willi has taken over practice. He was a fitness trainer back in South Africa and he takes a personal interest in increasing our fitness levels. This, of course, as a bunch of amateurs, is probably the greatest area for improvement for the Gents. We're all employed at something or other that limits our time to work on fitness. We can't let fitness work cut too much in to our O'Malley's time either. Willi is making it a mission to squeeze as much as he can in to those few hours of training every week. And we feel it.

We do distance work before training starts. Sprints and pyramids at the start. Core work after.

He has us on the ground doing leg lifts. We follow his directions.

"Six inches. Hold. Twelve inches. Hold. Forty-five degrees. Ninety. Six inches.

"Tommie? Why are we waiting?"

I can't keep my legs up and they are on the ground. He singles me out immediately. Everyone has to hold until we all complete the exercise – barracks discipline. It's very effective in a sporting environment. I get them back up. My feet are lead. The burn, incredible. But, I am holding at six inches.

Then, "Derrick? Why are we waiting?"

Oh, god no. Keep holding.

Then, no one is exempt.

"Mikey," meaning the Doc. Everyone automatically got the diminutive with Willi. That meant you were in the club, on the bus. You were part of it. "We're waiting."

Eventually it ends and our legs are flaming. We stand up and wobble, trying to find our sea-legs through the burn.

“Okay, sprints,” Willi calls. “Down on the end line.”

There is no rest. But, we respond. He is a natural leader and we follow. We make every effort to do what he asks. It’s not like he is asking us to do something impossible. He is doing everything he asks of us, and perfectly. We try to follow. Together, as a group, we know we need this. We know it is that point in the season where we have to make the commitment. We have to keep making the step up a little higher, to stretch a little further, to finally reach where we have been saying we are headed. Willi just gives us that direction and a kick in the pants.

After all the fitness work, there is little time left for handling and unit skills. For the first couple of trainings they are pathetic. We are so beat we can’t do anything right. Our minds are gone and our hands and bodies follow. By the third or fourth practice, though, things start to improve.

It doesn’t really take long before Willi’s regimen starts to work. We are beginning to see the benefits. The handling improves as well as our work rate. Not only have we found a flyhalf, we have found a coach. Or, more accurately, he has found us.

And he is an incredible asset on the field. He takes over at flyhalf and begins to control the games immediately. He can kick the ball seventy meters. It goes so high it comes back with ice on it. That’s an incredible weapon. Anytime you start to get in trouble, just boot it down the field and regroup. Because the ball travels so high, and stays aloft so long, by the time it comes down the situation is reversed, our opponent is now under pressure, not us.

Willi had seen some gridiron games on television and starts asking about their kickers. He wonders if he can maybe get a tryout as kicker for the local professional team. He is always looking for a way to fund his existence.

We buy him a football to practice with. It is smaller than a rugby ball² and

² The rugby ball is an ovoid. The particulars are laid out in the law book as: 280-300 millimeters (that’s about 11-12 inches) in length; 740-780 mm (28-30 inches) end-to-end circumference; and 580-620 mm (23-24 inches) circumference in width. The weight should be 410-460 grams (14-16 ounces). Air pressure is specified at 0.67-0.70 kilograms per square centimeter (9.5-10 psi). The law book even specifies the pressure in kilopascals! What detail oriented, A-R twits we are about our game. We get the point. Enough already.

Suffice it to say that it is bigger and fatter than a gridiron football. It’s easier to hold, but because of its size, harder to hold in one hand. You need a large hand if you want to do the loaf-of-bread routine, even though that’s pretty much frowned upon by coaches everywhere.

doesn't fly as well. He starts working on it, though, with the same focus he puts into our training sessions. Anyone who can kick a rugby ball like he can would have to generate some interest from the gridiron side. He could punt or kick from placement. All he needs is a little time working with the different instrument.

It's spring, though. Gridiron is out of season. That gives him time to work on his technique with the football. It also means he'll have to wait before he can be tested.

He moves into Michael's extra room. Apparently, the welcome at his friend's place has worn out. Michael and Willi start going around together becoming friends. Michael has moved from the doubting Thomas of that first phone call to a believer. Here is someone that could be a real benefit to the Caballeros – in more ways than one. Yes, we'll use him just as he is using us. We all benefit.