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Amhrán na bhFiann does not represent Irish rugby – it's time to stop playing it

FIFTEEN Irishmen, brave and true, line up before a rugby Test match. The crowd falls silent, the team face the flag, and the band strike up for the anthem.

'God save our gracious king,' the singing begins, 'long live our noble king, God save the king.'

Given the number of disgruntled types who make a great show of sitting down at the first chords of Ireland's Call, one shudders to think how they would react in the circumstances described above.

Up to the 1950s, though, Ireland regularly played Test matches in Belfast, with home games alternating between there and Dublin.

And the agreement was that in Dublin, Amhrán na bhFiann would be played before the match, and in Belfast, it would be God Save the King (and later, Queen). There are accounts of southern players unhappy at having to stand for it, which is a reminder that some tensions run deep and long.

Anthems are a fixture at international sports events, but in this country, we are accustomed to them at GAA games, too, with some atrocious versions of Amhrán na bhFiann sending many dashing Gaels into action across green spring and summer fields.

Among all the distractions, irritations and absurdities visited upon attendees at big sporting occasions now, anthems are a blessed diversion, and a connection to some tremendous memories.

They are a product of nationalism, but then so is international sport. As much as the concept of nationalism has been dirtied by grasping and manipulative political actors, on this island and far beyond it too, it remains an organising concept in sport.

Us against them is, in many facets of life, a dreadful thought, but it's the point of competitive sport, and at international level, it relies on a sense of belonging, of being part of a community, of caring about an us.

The Irish rugby team is an intriguing variation on that theme. For nearly a century and a half, it has managed to mean more than a border that caused thousands of deaths and that fed the passions of generations of murderous cowards.

The Irish rugby team managed to be us to southern nationalists and northern unionists, to devout Catholics and committed Protestants, to communities that history and a tirelessly climbing death toll warned us could never be convinced to share. And it did this without the issue of anthems ever becoming a great problem.

There have been periodic eruptions of controversy, the most recent 16 years ago. It was around a World Cup warm-up game that Ireland played in Ravenhill in August 2007. It is less remembered than the other rugby anthem story of 2007, which is a reminder that anthems are stirring and uniting, when it suits us.

So Jerry Flannery and John Hayes reduced to tears by the emotion of the songs in Croke Park in 2007 was the talk of the country, as

was the impeccable respect displayed for England's song.

There was less discussion about the decision not to play God Save the Queen at Ravenhill six months later. It was in one way a logical decision: 12 of the starting team that night in Belfast were from another jurisdiction, men born and raised in the Republic.

This looked a case of pragmatism winning out, but it caused some

'THE NATIONAL ANTHEM IS NOT DELIBERATELY EXCLUSIVE, BUT IT EXCLUDES'

anger among unionists. Some reasonable Ulster rugby people wondered why it was okay for players from the unionist tradition to stand respectfully in Dublin for an anthem they didn't consider their own, but that courtesy could not be returned for a rare Test match in Belfast.

Thousands of those in attendance at Aviva Stadium on Saturday week for the France game will be from unionist backgrounds. They'll stand for Amhrán na bhFiann but watch as some make a great show of sitting down for Ireland's Call. This is

an especially exaggerated tendency in the press box, and it constitutes one of the weirdest gestures in Irish sport, a place that has provided shelter for its share of them.

Ireland's Call may not send the heartrate wild, but teams don't rely on old songs about long-dead warriors for inspiration any longer. We should be celebrating the fact that the Irish rugby side weaned itself, after generations of helpless dependency, off the drug of cheap, easy and passing emotion.

That England game in 2007 was a high point for inclusiveness, for the power of the anthem, and it should also have marked the end-point. That team crashed later that year, enduring a World Cup of such misery that even in the annals of Ireland's World Cup misadventures, it has an especially ghoulish aspect.

Eddie O'Sullivan would be gone in 12 months, and by 2013, the transformation to a more clinical and controlled approach was under way, with the appointment of Joe Schmidt.

A World Cup disaster closed off his time in Irish rugby, too, but among the substantial benefits he brought to the game here, his insistence on a more considered, detached and studious approach to the game was of huge importance.

His Ireland thrived, as the Ireland of Englishman Andy Farrell does, because the team are the products of a high-performing sys-

tem, because they are expertly coached from juvenile level, and because they are helping sustain a world-leading brand.

Try and fit that into a couplet to make a hooker cry.

The antipathy towards Ireland's Call has never made sense beyond the narrow thinking that teams need an anthem to rile them up.

THEY don't, and nor do supporters, and that is why it's time to stop playing Amhrán na bhFiann before Test matches in Dublin.

It is not representative of the entire tradition of Irish rugby. It is not deliberately exclusive, but it excludes.

There is a great deal of fluffy talk about a new Ireland, about visions for a shared island, about making good on the vision of the Good Friday Agreement, cataracted as that has become.

Irish rugby has been the pre-eminent cultural force in showing how Irishness can have an expansive meaning. It is a cause of great pride to the rugby community, and it should be.

Now, they can lead again.

The time is right. In fact, it's past time. If there is to be a move towards a more convincing engagement between the bristling traditions on the island, it requires new ways of thinking, but also new ways of acting – and that's why, inadvert-

ent as the offence may be, teams singing 'Up the Ra' needs to stop as well.

Not everything needs to be aspirational. Action can be taken now.

Jarlath Burns caused a fuss in 2015 when he said he would support the removal of the Tricolour at GAA games, and he would stop playing the national anthem, too, if either of those decisions made Gaelic games feel more welcoming to the unionist community.

He also said he didn't see it happening. Burns knows the GAA inside out, but he also understands, as a towering figure in Gaelic games in Ulster, that inching Ireland towards a freer future will make demands of all of us.

Surrendering the right to mumble through the national anthem a couple of times of year in Lansdowne Road does not sit high on any list of privations.

The thought of it will annoy some, but they will be good people to annoy, the kind who practice their own kind of no surrender.

Reasonable people won't be much put out either way.

This is no big deal. It won't bring peace dropping slow, or quick. It won't free the Stormont logjam.

But it would be a small, dignified, fitting gesture.

And it would allow Irish rugby to, once again, show the power of sport in the cause of kindness, and goodness, and decency.



SHOULDER TO SHOULDER: Ireland get ready for action



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Golf's LIV crisis was only ever about power and money



CANDID: Rory McIlroy pointed out the impact LIV golf has had on the PGA Tour

NOT FOR the first time in his life, Rory McIlroy might wonder about the cost of his candour.

He spoke honestly in the past about his identity, a delicate endeavour for a public figure from Northern Ireland at the best of times, but particularly fraught when that person is on the verge of global superstardom.

McIlroy's contention in 2012 that he felt more British than Irish drew a stale and predictable wrath from many in this country (and in hindsight, the simplistic tone of the adverse reaction was an early indicator of how difficult conversations about a shared island will be).

Then there were the sagas around his Olympic intentions, as well as some pitiful criticism in years when he skipped the Irish Open – a competition that owes its relevance to the support he provided for years.

These scrapes were local matters, but global opprobrium came his

■ **THE** departure of Ray Dempsey as manager of the Limerick footballers shows that there is no time to spare in the new football calendar.

Limerick look highly unlikely to keep their place in Division 2, but a probable Championship meeting with Cork in Munster does give the players a chance to redress the damage done by a 24-point League defeat.

The appointment of Dempsey was a risk that backfired badly, and in a highly concentrated schedule, counties simply cannot afford to get big decisions wrong, no matter what their level.

way in 2017 when he played a round of golf with then-President Donald Trump.

McIlroy explained he played out of respect for the office, but years later said he wouldn't do so again.

That episode has a relevance for the LIV golf controversy, and in particular McIlroy's admission this week that the new tour was good news for elite golfers.

Men like Donald Trump proliferate in professional golf, inside and outside the ropes. Anyone who has spent any time at a major will have seen them. The crowd at the Masters is full of them, fat men with big cigars and voices that could clear a room quicker than a fire alarm.

They are the stereotypical golf fan, validating the cliché round after round.

McIlroy must have met thousands of these characters since he was a teenager.

Trump was just the most powerful of them.

And it is an environment formed and controlled by staggering riches that LIV golf has so successfully disrupted.

What McIlroy said this week about the breakaways making the rich even richer came after the PGA pumped more money into competitions and introduced a number of tournaments with no cut – an innovation for which the LIV tour was derided.

Anyone surprised at what he said hasn't been paying attention.

This was a story about money from the start.

If others complained about sports-washing when criticising the LIV project, that was not an urgent concern of those defending the PGA tour.

McIlroy was at the forefront of that defence. Given golf has spent so many years serving the needs of

McIlroy's admission testifies to the soothing effects of dollars

autocrats desirous of good PR, it was naïve to suppose the sport would find Saudi money tainted.

The source of the money wasn't the problem, power was, and the past year has been about a tussle

for control of a multi-billion dollar industry.

The changes announced by the PGA are part of the eventual accommodation that will be made between the establishment and the rebels. There is nothing surer, because there is too much money at stake to risk the damage caused by a lasting schism.

McIlroy's honest admission testifies to the soothing effects of dollars.

None of this should make anyone outside the world of elite golf feel pleased, of course. The LIV tour is an act of naked, offensive sports-washing, no less putrid than the use of Newcastle United by the Saudi regime to try and launder its repu-

tation. The same goes for the Abu Dhabi's ownership of Man City and Qatar's hosting of the World Cup.

All these examples expose a dismal truth: it works. Argentina's victory last December completed the greatest World Cup in living memory, maybe the greatest ever.

And when we think of the 2022 tournament, we remember the final, the defiance of Kylian Mbappe and the coronation of Lionel Messi.

Controversies about armbands and the treatment of gay people and migrant workers are, though, only hazily recalled.

Sports-washing works, and that is why the influence of LIV Golf should be regretted and criticised – but so should the high-profile establishment tournaments played in petro-states.

But criticism of LIV from within the golfing fraternity was not about sports-washing, rather about control, which is why the way McIlroy was feted for his criticism of the project, and the players who chose to support it, was never convincing.

Last July, he told CBS Sports that 'if LIV went away tomorrow I'd be super happy'.

This week, he said that 'LIV coming along, it's definitely had a massive impact on the game, but I think everyone who is a professional golfer is going to benefit from it going forward'.

What changed? How the PGA does its business, and what it pays. Money talks, always.

They're good but not great Scots

ALONG with cockroaches, the confidence of Scottish rugby supporters is something else that could survive a nuclear winter.

No matter how poor their team has been over the past two decades – and they have been lamentable at times – the fans have maintained a sense of belief so potent that it invariably bubbled over into arrogance.

Now, finally, they seem to have a team to match those levels of expectation. And given that they have never feared an Irish side,

they certainly won't be apprehensive about taking on Andy Farrell's side in Murrayfield this afternoon.

Yet it does feel that this immovable faith in their team has leaked from the stands into less partisan analysis of the side.

They have played for periods to a very high standard this spring, but they deserve to be considered significant outsiders in today's Test.

While they squeaked past a creaky England in Steve

Borthwick's first game in round one, the opportunity to beat a France side some way off the level of last season wasn't taken.

In the autumn, they could not find ways past New Zealand and Australia in tight matches.

In defence in particular, Ireland look a much more accomplished side, and that will count in a game that should see both teams score tries.

That's assuming, of course, that the forbidding forecast does not come to pass.

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IDENTIFYING the Neanderthal who assaulted a referee in Roscommon on Wednesday night should be easy. Footage was widespread across social media within hours of what happened to Kevin Naughton in Ballyforan.

The fervent wish is that the actions of the aggressor are investigated, and that justice is done. And if that happens, then one symptom of a sickness that represents a serious threat to the GAA will have been addressed.

But beyond some short-term deterrent effect, a malady that has been allowed to eat into the well-being of Gaelic games like a fungus, will go untreated.

The instinctive reaction to yet another referee assault is to call for quick, merciless justice, and then maybe muse on the need for a cultural change. Then we can forget all about it, and busy ourselves with arguments about split seasons and whether Dublin are in transition or not, and maybe a bit about the glory of the clubs.

And with the forgetting, the sick-

Insulting referees has become a type of degenerate norm

ness thrives, because the status quo remains untouched.

The governing thesis around the GAA holds that great sacrifice is made by those involved. Even at club level, players make a commitment that a generation ago would have been expected of inter-county teams. Managers devote dozens of hours every week to training and preparation.

Then there are the volunteers to consider, traditionally described as unsung but whose efforts, in fact, are so widely recognised, so lovingly detailed, that they constitute the point of most pride to the association and its members.

And then there are the referees. They are, in any objective perspective, as central to the action as the match-ball or the opposing goal-keepers. Yet the best they can hope for is anonymity. The old saw has it that a referee is doing a good job if no one notices them.

They are there to facilitate the action, not to participate in it.

The problem with that, in sports where the rules have existed in an ambiguous state for as long as anyone can remember, is that judging the referee's performance is in the eye of the beholder.

And if the beholder happens to be a bully with the self-control of a startled mongrel, the consequences can be abhorrent.

Football and hurling regulations, are, in practice, played through great swathes of grey, a liminal space where law and disorder mix and meld. And it is in these ungoverned territories that the fate



of referees is sealed. It is here that the sideline scrutineers can pass instant judgement on how the official is performing.

The right to criticise is not at issue here, and the right to grumble about the ref killing their team is one for which even the most reasonable of supporters must sometimes reach. But it's a fact that every evening of the week at some grade of game, a referee is having disgusting insults fired at them.

And that simply isn't healthy. That the incident in Roscommon took place at a minor match makes it feel worse; the sight of parents and other adults degrading themselves as they terrorise referees is one of the most depressing in all of sport.

The great problem is that because none of this surprises us, and because it has become some grotesque cultural offshoot of its own, stopping it will be very difficult.

A person who decides to take issue with an official's call by entering the field of play and assaulting them is a menace, but they are, to an important degree, enabled by generations of silted tradition in which abusing the ref is a commonplace. That is a fact.

Goading, jeering and insulting match officials has, over decades, been allowed to become a type of degenerate norm.

Pundits routinely eviscerate them. All-Ireland winners devote columns to traducing them.

Famous managers tear them apart and question their motives.

This is not the same as clattering a referee on the jaw, but it's easy to see how the thug that will take their unhappiness to that extreme is simply reaching the grotesque limits of a pervasive culture.

And rolling back all those years of hate won't be easy. Blaming it all on Croke Park won't wash, either.

If this shame isn't tackled, then officials have the right to walk away

Referees are certainly entitled to feel aggrieved at the inconsistent treatment of miscreants when they appear at disciplinary hearings.

A well-informed lawyer or vigilant administrator will exploit sloppiness in procedure or rule, and the guilty get off and the yellow and red cards that brought them to account, come to naught.

Troubling as that recurrent weakness is, though, it is not at the root of the GAA's refereeing crisis.

Attitudes are, and the fact is we have all tolerated the treatment of

officials, and their classification as necessary irritants, for too long.

We're getting our comeuppance now.

This weekend's strike by referee in Roscommon is an honourable course of action, and the chances of an island-wide protest must be high, come the next eruption of cowardly abuse.

But what if it happened next weekend? What if every referee in the country decided to follow the lead of their Roscommon counterparts and refused to take part for a whole round of fixtures?

Club championship season is underway, and big local matches, worthy of the frothiest sponsors' hype, are spilling out of the match lists.

But what if the referees put a stop to all that for 72 hours, and said that from Friday until Sunday, there would be no whistle brought to lips?

It sounds far-fetched, and it would be resisted, albeit in fierce whispers, at local and national level.

Yet it would also provide exactly the kind of jolt that the GAA needs. And the GAA means more than the director general and the president, and the senior officials in Croke Park and at board level in every county.

The GAA means exactly what the blurb says: it means the community.

And communities have to accept that the abuse of referees is a great

Time to shout 'Stop!'

Abuse of referees is out of control and now an all-out strike is needed

shame, and that if it isn't tackled properly, then officials have the right to walk away.

It won't close every big mouth, and a lunatic fringe will always find their way in under the wire, to games of all standards.

Reasonable people, though, need to be made aware of what happens when a referee is assaulted, of the effect it has on their families, and on their careers, and on their sense of self-worth.

Assaults routinely ruin people's lives. There is enough witness testimony reported from the courts every day to illustrate that.

A trauma inflicted in front of a handful of people on a peaceful midweek evening in a quiet corner of Roscommon, can have as catastrophic an impact as an assault that happens outside a nightclub in the early hours of a Sunday morning.

This has to stop. The particulars of the Ballyforan case will emerge fully, one hopes, through the appropriate channels, and individual miscreants, where guilty, must be harshly treated.

Automatic lifetime bans from any association with the GAA should be the least of their worries, but they should nonetheless be introduced.

But picking individual weeds won't stop the blight.

That requires a more sustained, dramatic, unequivocal stance.

And an island-wide strike would be a powerful first step.