

LookUp
Malachy Clerkin



Irish rugby should strongly lean into the ‘arrogance’ angle while the jug is full

No, but seriously – how few players could Ireland afford to field and still beat Wales this weekend? And would they even all need to be rugby players? Could we, for example, get by with a few of the Kiwis and Aussies, maybe keep Peter O’Mahony for vibes and fill out the rest with people from Dancing With The Stars? Let’s have Kayleigh Trappe, Jack Woolley and Rhys McClenaghan in the front row. Could Salomé Chachua do a job at 10?

I picture a second half in Cardiff with a steaming Welsh pack grabbing each other’s shoulders and shouting, “Heave!”, only to be pushed backwards by an Irish scrum powered mainly by Jedward’s hairspray. Or perhaps we go the whole hog and put out a Sevens team. Craughwell GAA won the Kilmacud Hurling 7s last summer – maybe we give them the gig? Bottom line, the Off The Ball (OTB) thing going viral is very funny. We can all agree on that, right? One minute the lads

are shit-talking Wales off the top of their heads – kidding-not-kidding about whether a 13- or even 12-man Irish team would beat them – and next thing you know, there’s otherwise sane people all around the Six Nations accusing Irish rugby of arrogance. This is objectively gas. Arrogant? Irish rugby? Say it ain’t so! Rugby in Ireland has always seemed like such an unassuming milieu, filled with hardscrabble, down-at-the-heel types. And now you’re telling us that some of these people are, in fact, full of themselves? Well, knock us down with a feather.

Allegations of hubris
The best part is that it’s not the Ireland team, it’s not the management, it’s not even the hip-flask and sheepskin brigade who have brought these allegations of hubris down upon the nation. Rather it’s three lads from the rugby hotbeds of, eh, Sligo, Mayo and Kildare. And not even posh Kildare. Ger Gilroy is from Athy, for God’s sake. (This is no slight on Athy, by the by. The opposite. This column knows Athy. This column married into Athy. It might be the least arrogant place in Ireland. Head in to Frank O’Brien’s some night and try to find yourself some arrogance. This is not a notions type of town.) Anyway, I say we double down. You want arrogance, Wales? We’ll show you arrogance. Did you know that Ireland’s Call has three verses? If it looks like we’re chancing our arms by singing two anthems the next time you come to Dublin, wait till

we leave you standing there for half an hour in the Aviva while we warble on into the late afternoon. Of course, Ireland should lean into this. When Dan Sheehan goes in for the coin toss, he should arrive wearing a single black leather glove. And instead of proffering his hand to Jac Morgan to shake, he ought to slowly take the glove off finger by finger and haughtily slap Morgan around the cheek with it. We should go the whole hog with this stuff. Turn down conversions. See if we can win without lifting lads in the lineout, which is a cod anyway. Only count tries scored from crossfield kicks. You think we’re arrogant now? How about we do the Grand Slam wearing flip-flops and boxing gloves? Then we’ll show you arrogance. Now, look. We get it. Sport is sport and no good ever comes from preening when it’s going well. If anyone from outside Ireland doubts how well we know this, they need only listen to how we generally talk about sport here. Be in no doubt – if we have a right to be arrogant about anything, it’s poor-mouthing our prospects. Seriously, there’s a whole language around it here. A hurling team will win by 14 points and swear blind that it won’t be good enough the next day. A jockey on a seven-length winner will claim to have been lucky the finishing line came when it did. A striker who’s just found the top corner will say he just swung a leg. The deathless truth is that we have a sports culture here that is about as far from chest-beating as it’s possible to get.



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This is all the more true when there’s actual success in the mix. We warn over-celebrating youngsters to “walk easy when the jug is full”. We brush off congrats with “a pat on the back is a few inches from a kick in the hole”. We are preternaturally indisposed to enjoying praise. A few years back, at a post-match press conference after a Dublin All-Ireland win,

Jim Gavin said – with a perfectly straight face – that their rivals were already in advance of them in preparation for the following year. This was an All-Ireland-winning manager an hour after winning the final! And he meant it sincerely. This is Irish sporting culture. **Blithe confidence**
Do you want to know the truth? The actual truth about Irish rugby? We know this is temporary. We know this won’t last forever. Other rugby countries are bigger than us, richer than us, more devoted than us. They’ll work it out eventually and we’ll fall down the pecking order. Maybe not as far as we’ve fallen before, but down a peg or two. Or three. Or whatever. We know this. Don’t you think we know this? Didn’t you hear the OTB lads’ nervous laughter as they were cracking wise? Arrogance is an unknowing act, a blithe confidence in your untouchable pre-eminence. There is doubtless a portion of the rugby support which is blithe to the moment, but most of us are anything but. We presume this will pass eventually, we’re waiting for the other shoe to drop. You’ll love us again when it does. In the meantime, maybe don’t take any of our out’ crowing so seriously. Most of it is in jest. All of it is pointless. Some of it may well be the deadly serious analysis of a particular strain of Irish rugby person but,’ trust us, that’s always best ignored. Most of us have been doing so for 150 years, in fact.

Remembering Michael O’Sullivan

‘He was just a beautiful person’



Denis Walsh

To hear those who knew Michael O’Sullivan talk about him is to hear laughter, admiration and unconditional love

In a tender and open-hearted eulogy at the beginning of Michael O’Sullivan’s funeral mass, William O’Sullivan celebrated his son’s life. Through the unfathomable pain of their loss William trapped Michael’s light in stories. In a couple of the yarns there was gentle ribbing that drew laughter from the packed church; in every line there was radiant, unconditional love. William recalled two days at Cheltenham, when the outcomes were poles apart and William and Bernie’s son felt the spotlight on his face, bright and hot. In 2018 Michael rode a horse for his uncle Eugene in a handicap chase for amateurs, his first ride at the most revered place in jumps racing. Oighear Dubh was an unfancied 16/1 shot but Michael rode the horse with such cold, precocious confidence that they jumped to the front at the last. With the race at their mercy, though, Oighear Dubh jinked left at a stretch of temporary white tape and careered off course. “Eugene,” said William, “wrapped his arms around a devastated 17-year-old.” Less than five years later, Michael returned to Cheltenham as a novice professional and announced his talent in racing’s biggest town square. On the opening day of the festival, he rode two winners. The double paid 417/1 with the bookies. In reality, the odds were a million to one. “When I watched his takedown of Facile Vega in the Supreme Novices’ aboard Marine Nationale,” wrote Patrick Mullins in the Racing Post, “all I could think of was, ‘Man, this guy is cool!’” After his win on Jazzy Matty in the juvenile hurdle Michael gave an interview to Racing TV in which he berated himself for a mistake at the last. On the greatest day of his young life as a jockey, he couldn’t just bask in the afterglow and let it pass. His humility demanded a full confession.

“He was very self-critical of himself, always. Unnecessarily. I suppose all those good sports people are,” says Davy Russell, who spent a season in Eugene’s yard at the beginning of his career and knew Michael since he was a boy. “I remember he rode a horse I was involved in one day in Galway. We spoke beforehand about what we were going to do, and he did it to a tee – to the minute. He got chinned on the line and he was very critical of the ride he gave the horse, and I said, ‘Are you f**king mad?’ I kind of had to tell him that he was wrong.” In the flood of tributes since Michael’s death last Sunday, there was a fast consensus. Everyone wanted to say how brilliant he was in the saddle, while making sure that you weren’t blinded by that brilliance alone. They wanted to talk about his intelligence, his charisma, his inherent good nature, his university degree, his integrity,

his fluent French, his zest for living. In the public eye, sportspeople are often reduced to outcomes and opinions that fly off a conveyor belt. Such a travesty couldn’t be entertained here. “He wasn’t afraid of the big stage,” says Barry Geraghty, former champion jockey who now works with the Irish Jockeys Association. “He thrived in that environment. He was full of ambition, full of passion. Being a jockey was his thing. It filled his cup. He was just a beautiful person.” Nearly 100 jockeys and friends of Michael gathered at the Curragh Racecourse on Monday afternoon. Dr Jennifer Pugh, the senior medical officer with the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board (IHRB) had issued the invitation. She had arranged for one of the critical care doctors who had tended to Michael after his fall to be present, as well as critical incident counsellors. She thought that maybe “10 or 15” people would turn up. The response reflected how many people were struggling. For three hours, they stayed in each other’s company. “It was a really powerful thing to go through,” says Geraghty. “Just the conversation. To normalise the grief and the guilt potentially in, you know, ‘Why Michael and not me?’” In the 10 days between the fall at Thurles and Michael’s death, Dr Pugh had put very brief updates into the public domain, scrupulously conscious of the family’s privacy. For the jockeys, though, she had provided daily bulletins. In the news vacuum all kinds of unfounded stories were in circulation. The duty of care radiated out from Michael in concentric circles. “We tried to keep people informed, even if it was just to say there was no change,” says Dr Pugh. “They had to continue to ride while holding this fear and anxiety. At the absolute heart of this is Michael’s family, but grief is everybody’s, no matter how well you knew Michael. I feel a responsibility to make sure everybody gets through this. “On Monday it felt like they all just gave each other a big warm hug. They were very appreciative of the moment, just to pause and get together and reflect. There is no easy way, but we can do it knowing that there is help and support. “This was a safe space to talk about what had happened. When I talk to jockeys now who were around when Kieran Kelly died they carried a lot, and a lot of that was carried internally, because there was no safe space to talk about it, no safe space to say, you know, ‘this is really dangerous.’”

Monumentally insensitive
Kieran Kelly died after injuries sustained in a fall in Kilbeggan, 22 years ago. Just a few months later Sean Cleary, a Flat jockey, died after a fall in Galway. Race meetings were staged in Ireland on the day after both riders passed away. The response was tone-deaf and monumentally insensitive, and maybe it was of its time. News of Kelly’s death broke with two races left on a jumps card at Gowran Park. In his autobiography, Ruby Walsh recalls approaching the stewards with Norman Williamson, pleading with them to abandon the rest of the meeting. The stewards prevaricated. “I expected them to just say, ‘Yeah, Jesus, of course we will. Sure it’s only right,’” wrote Walsh. “But instead, the chairman of the stewards said, ‘Let’s get this straight – ye’re not refusing to ride. So, if we decide to race, ye’ll ride?’ In the end they called the two races off, but they weren’t happy about doing it. They were worried about what they’d tell the public. I



told them to show me where the microphone was, and I’d make the announcement myself. So, I did.” There were no supports in place for the jockeys. People were left to their own devices. “It had a huge effect on a lot of the younger lads around Kieran at the time,” says Russell. “Some got over it, some didn’t.” “Every jockey who was there when Kieran Kelly died will still remember where they were when it happened,” says Dr Pugh. “The people who rode on the day of Michael’s fall [in Thurles] will continue to ride but Michael is woven into their story.” **Emotional maturity**
When lightning struck again, all racing in Ireland was cancelled and it didn’t resume until Thursday, the day after Michael’s funeral. Counsellors have been made available around the clock, says Dr Pugh. Everybody understands that that the healing process has no timescale. “We’re a lot more aware of the profundity of this I think and how it has affected us all,” says Andrew Coonan, head of the Irish Jockeys Association. “A lot of these riders are more aware. Maybe you can call that emotional maturity now compared to where we were. The HRI [Horse Racing Ireland] and the IHRB have been really good in focusing on the enormity of this and how the riders might be affected.” On Monday, the jockeys were briefed on why Michael’s injuries were different. How rare these circumstances were. Why his helmet might not have made much of a

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difference in this case. Why the air ambulance was called. Trying to fill in gaps possibly contaminated by misinformation. In jumps racing, the danger cannot be eliminated. The constant drive is to mitigate the risks and somehow manage them. Over the last 20 or 30 years, the landscape has changed enormously. When Dr Pugh started as an amateur rider in her teens, back protectors were primitive and only worn in races. Looking at old photographs from Pat Healy’s archive recently, she was astonished at how small the helmets were, and how thin. On racetracks there were concrete posts at the running rail. Everything about it was cavalier. Now, everything is subject to constant review. A fortnight ago, new European standards for helmets were published. The body protector was changed again within the last 12 months. Birch hurdles will disappear from Irish tracks in the next 18 months to be replaced by plastic hurdles with white toe boards. Track configurations are always under review. Field sizes. Fence presentation. Three fences were taken out of a race at Punchestown on Thursday because of low sun. That happens on a regular basis now. Twenty years ago, it was rare. Injury statistics are published in the IHRB’s annual report. Last year’s figures will be published soon: the 2023 report showed that the number of falls per 1,000 rides had been steady at about 50 since the turn of the decade and injuries per 1,000 falls had been about 150 in the same period.

“We analyse all our injury stats,” says Dr Pugh. “What the injuries are. What the falls were. We were involved in a big spinal research study with the BHA [British Horseracing Authority], and we’re currently doing a massive review of all our concussion data for the last 15 years with the Health Research Board. We have great contacts in DCU who analyse and look for trends every time there’s an intervention. Helmet change, body protector, what impact did it have?” **Freakish circumstances**
Jockeys are more involved now. Their input is sought and respected. For generations, they were at the bottom of a steeply hierarchical pyramid. Everybody they addressed at the racecourse had a name starting with “Mr”. Now, they raise issues if they’re not happy, and their concerns are acted upon. Coonan calls it a “quiet revolution . . . the riders now are regarded as stakeholders”. The elimination of all risk, though, is still impossible. “We have a safety review every year,” says Coonan. “We have rolling reviews, to keep challenging [the risks]. In this case the circumstances were freakish.” As jockeys, they don’t think about the risks. It is not in their nature. “Riding a horse would have been the same as riding a bicycle to Michael O’Sullivan,” says Russell. “It would come that easy to someone like him.” Geraghty adds: “It’s what you do. It’s what you love. You don’t recognise the danger.” William had been a jockey too. Michael’s brother Alan and his cousin Maxine are also jockeys. For the O’Sullivans, it is in their blood. Towards the end of his eulogy William arrived at Michael’s last moments in the saddle and alighted on the essence of his son’s life and death. “The other trainer I’d like to mention is Gerard O’Leary [who gave Michael his last ride],” William said. “Michael loved riding for you. And it gives us comfort to know that his last thoughts would have been of anticipation, determination, excitement. We wish you and your team well.” At the end of the eulogy, William tried to peer over the towering wall of grief and look forward. “While we are broken-hearted, we will now focus on what Michael would have wanted for us,” he said. “He would want us to mend over time. He would want us to support Alan [Michael’s brother] in his life choices and find joy in his achievements. He would want us to find joy in his cousins and friends and his many weighing-room colleagues. May you all stay safe. Michael will always be in our hearts and minds.” Amen.

■ Michael O’Sullivan with Marine Nationale, whom he guided to an unlikely win at Cheltenham in 2023. Below: a hearse containing Michael’s coffin makes its way away from his funeral in Glantane, Co Cork, last Wednesday. PHOTOGRAPHS: MORGAN TREACY/INPHO; BRIAN LAWLESS/PA WIRE

