



# AN AWESOME YEAR

**I**T'S been 22 years since Steve Jackson arrived through the gates of Dolphin Rugby Club in Cork. A twist of fate that saw him tog out for the Musgrave Park outfit during an unforgettable year.

Jackson would return to his native New Zealand, beginning an adventure, both as a player and a coach, which has led him to a meeting with another Irish side this weekend — namely Joe Schmidt's men in a crucial World Cup encounter. The 46-year-old is now head coach of Samoa, the final obstacle in Ireland's quest to qualify for the knockout stages.

And here we are, meeting in the lobby of his team's hotel in Fukuoka two days out from that pivotal Pool A clash.

## GLORY DAYS

It's been quite the journey for Jackson. A highly-rated player in his youth, he represented New Zealand at U17, secondary and U19 level before graduating into Auckland's ranks. At the time, the mighty province were coached by Graham Henry — a man who would go on to guide the All Blacks to the World Cup in 2011.

It was Henry who dropped a bombshell on Jackson a few weeks before the beginning of the new season.

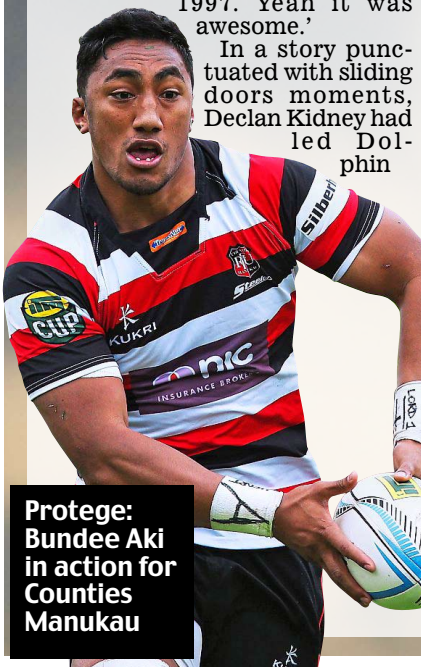
'He sort of said to me, "Steve, if you want to play, mate, you'll have to go to another province". That was probably about two weeks before the season started,' Jackson recalls.

'I was a bit down and out. Then I got a phone call from an agent out of the blue. I'd never met the guy before and he said, "Look, would you be keen on going over to Ireland and playing footy over there", and I was like, "Yeah, of course I would".

'And I was getting married that year so it sort of worked out to fly to Fiji, get married and then get on a plane and head to Ireland, so we did. Yeah, that's how it came about.'

You could say Cork was his honeymoon destination? 'Yeah, exactly! There's nothing better than going over for your honeymoon and playing footy! 'I arrived there at the end of 1997. Yeah it was awesome.'

In a story punctuated with sliding doors moments, Declan Kidney had led Dol-



Protege: Bunde Aki in action for Counties Manukau

**RUGBY WORLD CUP  
EXCLUSIVE  
STEVE JACKSON  
INTERVIEW**

**RORY  
KEANE**

in Fukuoka



into the top tier of the All Ireland League, where heavyweights such as Shannon, Young Munster and Cork Constitution resided.

Then Kidney got the call to coach Munster and was out the gap, but Dolphin still fancied their chances, particularly with a promising Kiwi forward coming on board.

Born Vaeluagamatagi Steve Jackson in the west Auckland suburb of Henderson, he was known to his new team-mates as 'Jacko', a teak-tough No8 who proved an instant hit — scoring the winning try on his debut in a 25-24 victory over a star-studded Garryowen side, featuring the likes of David Wallace, Dominic Crotty and Jeremy Staunton.

'I remember getting carried off and they were all cheering.

'There was a little old guy, he used to have glasses. He fell asleep in church the following day and he woke up and stood up at the top of his voice and said, "Come on you beautiful Dolphin!" He just didn't realise he's been in church, he'd been on the chop all night.'

He recalls another clash with Highfield — another institution of Cork rugby — when Glen Jackson, now a seasoned international referee, was playing out-half, another young globe-trotting New Zealander.

'Those were the glory days of the old All-Ireland League when big derby games would attract bumper crowds while the club-house bar would be packed to the rafters for hours after the final whistle.

He and his wife, Penny, were welcomed into the club with open arms and spent Christmas Day among their new comrades at Dolphin HQ.

'We got there at 7.30 in the morning and the place was chocka. We were on the beer at seven in the morning and they had the turkey in the oven. By the time we got to lunch time the turkey was perfect but I was p\*\*\*\*d!

'It will be a time in my life that I will never forget.'

A back injury hindered his involvement but Jackson is still

## Samoa coach Jackson has never forgotten his spell in Irish club game

fondly remembered at the club. He still has his old Dolphin jersey. Eventually, Jackson got the call to return to his native New Zealand when a former Auckland U21 coach offered him a place in his Southland squad.

'I was ready to head off and spend a couple of years just travelling around and seeing what the world but I ended up coming back.

'Then it started there for me.'

## ONE DIRECTION

He would carve out an impressive career on the Kiwi club scene, turning out for Southland, North Harbour and Tasman.

Most notably, he represented the New Zealand Maori and played alongside Greg Feek — Ireland's scrum coach.

Former All Black Todd Blackadder — who coached Bath against Leinster last season — would give Jackson his big break at Tasman when he offered him the role of forwards coach. He would then move on to Counties-Manukau and work with Tana Umaga. They are known as the 'Steelers' for a reason, as the suburbs of south Auckland is a tough environment.

The commute from his home on Auckland's Waiheke Island would prove punishing, but it would pay off in the end. 'Everybody in my family said, "You're bloody mad", because for people on Waiheke Island, you've got to catch a ferry into Auckland and then it takes you 45 minutes to an hour to get to training.'

'There was no payment, there was just some petrol vouchers. 'It cost me about a grand a month to actually go down there and coach.'

The payoff was the opportunity to mentor a young and vibrant squad containing current Samoa players Tim Nanai-Williams and Rey Lee-Lo, as well as a raw and explosive midfielder named Bunde Aki.

He will line out against the land of his fathers tomorrow, but Jackson could not be more proud of his former protege.

'We had four guys in our team, we used to call them One Direction,' he recalled.

'They were a singing group and Bunde was part of that. Lots of mischief but he's a great kid. Him and Ree Lee Lo were part of it and Tim Nanai Williams.

'They were kids that had nothing. South Auckland boys, Bunde Aki was living out in Ranui with his family.

'I watched him play his first Test (for Ireland) and I shed a bit of a tear.

'To see him succeed and see what he's done. Even Ray who's in our team at the moment, they feel like your sons.'

Jackson continues: 'He didn't have much and if he didn't get put on the right track he could have ended up somewhere else. He's done so well at Connacht and now look where he is.

'I know him. I know you have those people who say he's not Irish and all that but I know that he's the type of kid that will throw his feet into everything and become an Irishman.

'I'm bloody rapt for that kid. I can't wait to catch up with the guy. I just want to tell him, he's got enough money now, he's got to get a tooth in his mouth! Every time he smiles, he's still got that gap!'

## ANSWERING THE CALL

Now, Jackson will be sitting in the coaches box tomorrow after another whirlwind 12 months in his coaching career. After stints with North Harbour and Auckland Blues, a chance meeting with a friend revealed that Samoa were advertising for the position of head coach.

'I applied for the job and a week later I was on an aero-plane and in Samoa going for my final interview and two days later I got the job. Then I had to name a team for the northern hemisphere tour in three days!

'I was just like, "Who's available?"

I wake every day pinching myself after the journey I've had.'

He has implored his three sons, Will, Cole and Taine to explore the world when they get older.

He has implored his squad, who are playing for pride tomorrow, to enjoy their final outing in Japan.

'We've just told our players you've got nothing to lose, go out there and throw everything at it. I know that Ireland will do exactly the same.'

As France and Wales found out earlier this week, a Pacific Island team with no fear is a dangerous proposition.

As for Jackson, he will re-evaluate his next move after this World Cup campaign. He turned down a gig with the Southern Kings in the Pro14 last year but knowing 'Jacko', he could end up anywhere.

'My contract with Samoa finishes at the end of November and then I'm not too sure,' he concludes. 'I could be back on Waiheke Island pumping gas or something! So, we'll see what happens.'

Whatever Jackson does next, one thing is guaranteed: it will be exciting.



Fresh: Steve Jackson has been Samoa coach for 12 months

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to make sure that whatever destiny we do manage to attain is including another game and we get to stay on for another week, whether it's to play the All Blacks or whether it's to play South Africa.'

Scotland will be eliminated from the tournament if Sunday's game against the tournament hosts in Yokohama is cancelled.

It would be a cruel blow to Gregor Townsend's squad, who suffered a 27-3 loss to Ireland on the opening weekend of the World Cup.

But skipper Rory Best, who has been recalled to the starting line-up, said there is little room for sentiment.

'I think ultimately safety has to be paramount and that has to come first,' he said.

'I can't really comment much on it until the dust settles. We're here at a press conference ahead of a Samoa game. If we get the result we want, we're into a quarter-final. Whether we get to watch an 80 minutes to decide who tops the pool, that remains to be seen.

'Ultimately, for us, all we're focusing on is the Samoa game. If we get to the final whistle and we get a performance and a result then we'll look at what's happening. For us it's about making sure we get to a quarter-final.'

**"It's always an advantage to have a really long lead-in"**

Should Ireland progress to the quarter final stage, they are likely to face an All Blacks side with a fortnight's rest under the belts after their final pool game with the Azzurri was called off.

'I think when you've had a long lead-in like we've had, and we've had some games concentering together quite closely, I think it's always an advantage,' said Schmidt.

'That would be my personal opinion. I think it would be the opinion of any coach you ask. I did read a little bit on Eddie Jones. He looked fairly disappointed that he was going to head off on a mini-camp and do some really good training on the Saturday and have a few beers.

'They're doing that we'll be rolling our sleeves up trying to combat a Samoa side that has heaps of talent and will be inevitably physical because that's how they play the game and that's how the game tends to be played at the top level.'

Robbie Henshaw has recovered from a hamstring injury and will make his first appearance of the tournament at outside centre tomorrow.

Tadhg Beirne has been selected on the blindsides flank ahead of Munster team-mate Peter O'Mahony and will form a new-look backrow alongside Josh van der Flier and CJ Stander.

After Jack Conan returned

home due to serious foot injury and his replacement Jordi Murphy suffered a rib injury against Russia, Schmidt has had to dig deep into Ireland's backrow reserves.

'We're trying to share the load to be honest, we've tried to rotate the back-row a little bit after the six and five-day turnaround,' he added.

'Some guys had to double up and they've had more involvements than what we had anticipated. Plus losing Jack Conan who we named to play against Japan but had to make a late change which meant we had to use up more of the mileage available in the back-row.'

Meanwhile, Bunde Aki has been backed to set Ireland's emotional tempo against Samoa this weekend.

Aki was born in Auckland to Samoan parents but joined Connacht in 2014 and qualified for Ireland on residency.

The 29-year-old has warmed to life in Galway and has become



Leader: Rory Best loosens up at Ireland's training base

# 'Break is a boost for New Zealand'

an integral part of Joe Schmidt's Ireland side.

The 22-cap powerhouse centre will take on the likes of close friend and Samoa full-back Tim Nanai-Williams this weekend but has been tipped to thrive on that particular pressure.

Lock James Ryan hailed Aki for pushing his team-mates to greater heights with his abrasive approach, setting the physical and emotional tone.

'He leads with his actions when he plays; he puts in big hits, he makes big carries,' said Leinster lock Ryan.

'He's a very easy person to follow in that regard. He really leads in the way he plays.

'If he puts in a big hit or goes forward with the ball, I think it gives everyone a lift.

'Ever since he came in, Bunde has added real value. He's looking forward to this week. He met a couple of the Samoan boys yesterday for food.'

Twitter @RoryPKeane