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BIG
ON JAPAN



EVERY club has one alickadoo who stands out from the rest and in Dolphin it was Billy Neiland.

He's dead 13 years now but the many stories about this colourful rogue live on in the club and resurfaced again this week ahead of Ireland's final pool game, due to his association with Steve Jackson during the Samoa head coach's brief stint with the club in the late 1990s.

Billy had many distinguishing character traits but the most defining were his commitment to Beamish stout and penchant for outrageous storytelling (some would call it lying), where he would spin exaggerated yarns to gullible new members chiefly revolving around his time in the British military.

The truth was he spent a year peeling potatoes at army camp in Germany in the late 1950s but the fantasy revolved around a succession of fables chronicling his crucial role in winning the Second World War.

A personal favourite was Billy's oft-recounted tale of fighting for Field Marshal Montgomery ('a thundering b****x') during the North Africa campaign and being sent out on a camel into the desert to report on the movements of Rommel's Panzer brigades.

"Disastrous decision to bring Kleyn"

'I was three days in the Sahara looking for those *****g Germans,' Billy would tell his spell-bound audience, 'and on the morning of the fourth day, my camel collapsed from exhaustion.'

'So, I radioed back to base... "Mayday! Mayday! Camel ruptured, camel ruptured!" ... but the line was terrible, they thought I said "Rommel captured" and partied for a week.'

It was amazing how often fellas would fall for this kind of pony until one day on the way back from an AIL match in Clontarf an older player, Richie Abbott (who knew Billy well over many years), decided to call him on it.

'Billy, I'm sick of listening to this s***, I've actually seen your birth cert and, in 1942, you were only six years of age.'

There was a deathly silence. Billy paused, took a deep swig from his can of Beamish, and fixed his accuser with a withering stare. 'Richie,' he replied, 'it was kill or be killed...'

Billy was part of the deputation that gathered in the club on a balmy evening in the summer of 1997 to welcome Jackson, Dolphin's marquee signing for the new season.

Having just been promoted to Division One for the first time, the Kiwi No8 had been brought over on a tasty deal (£40k, house and car) to spearhead the campaign.

Even though the rest of the squad were amateur, anticipation trumped any resentment and, as

'MESSIAH' OUT TO RUPTURE IRELAND'S FADING AMBITIONS

well as a gathering of senior players, the alickadoos, including Billy, were all present in full blazer regalia.

'Jesus wept,' said Billy, surveying the excited scene as the car containing Jackson pulled through the gates, 'is it the Messiah we're after signing?'

The nickname stuck and Jackson is still known around Musgrave Park as 'The Messiah' to this day.

Unfortunately, due to a succession of injuries he never quite lived up to that moniker but, when he did play, the Messiah was a level above.

His try-scoring performance in the shock win against Garryowen (one of the Division One heavyweights) is still talked about and sparked one of the great nights of celebration in the clubhouse, in which Billy partook heavily.

The following morning, still suffering, Billy fell asleep at mass and when he was jolted awake by his long-suffering wife, Bina, stood up and shouted 'Come on Dolphin!' before the startled congregation.

Realising what had happened, Billy, still slightly befuddled, offered a memorable apology to the bemused priest — 'Apologies, your honour' — before resuming his seat.

How much of an influence

Jackson's time in Cork had on his subsequent rugby career is debatable but, having followed it from afar, Jackson brings a distinguished playing and coaching CV into tomorrow's clash.

Samoa's coach carries a deep rugby knowledge — including time mentoring Ireland's adopted centre Bundee Aki — and it is fuelled by a dangerous level of desire to exit the World Cup with a powerful statement.

The disparity in resources between the two nations is profound and incredibly challenging for Jackson and his coaching team but, in terms of emotional intensity, Samoa will not be found wanting.

As well as the inherent pride in representing their country, many of the Samoans are also viewing the opportunity of claiming a major scalp on rugby's biggest stage as a shop window for securing lucrative contracts in European rugby.

It adds extra edge to an encounter that, on paper, Ireland should win without too much fuss but, given the cloud hovering over Joe Schmidt's troubled campaign, the reality is nothing can now be taken for granted.

Samoa's ultra-physical style frequently spills over the edge and that is a major worry for Joe Schmidt considering the injury



Level above: Steve Jackson with Dolphin in 1998

issues that continue to haunt Ireland's efforts — losing key players at this juncture would be disastrous, as we know all too well from the last World Cup failure.

Yet the loss to Japan ensured

"Samoa will prey on our insecurities"

there was little opportunity to protect frontliners ahead of the knockout stages and it is essential Ireland reclaim the drive and ruthless focus they have not displayed since the opening victory

over Scotland. That requires blocking out all the background noise over typhoons and their potential effect on Pool A's pecking order and zeroing in on a confidence-regenerating dismantling of the Samoans.

It is not that long since Schmidt was seen as the 'Messiah' of Irish rugby but that legacy is being steadily diminished by the uncertainties surrounding this World Cup odyssey — going back to the disastrous decision to bring Jean Kleyn to Japan ahead of Devin Toner.

Samoa will do their utmost to prey on those mounting insecurities, with Jackson and his players relishing this chance to rupture Ireland's fading ambitions.

As his old pal Billy might put it... it's kill or be killed.

THE goodwill surrounding Japan's staging of the World Cup is rapidly fading. As well as rising fury over the farce of weather-related cancellations, there has been an unfavourable spotlight thrown on officiating at this tournament.

World Rugby being forced into calling out poor decisions by officials they appointed and standing down the likes of Angus Gardner is a bad place to be and the overall standard has been appalling. Aside from the sendings off and debates over tackle laws, the general looseness in more

routine aspects of the game has been a source of consistent frustration. Crooked lineout throws and forward passes are overlooked while the ruck area has seen Wild West levels of lawlessness with bodies allowed to fly off their feet from all angles. But the most damning oversight has been lack

of policing of the offside line with players permitted to rush up from well beyond the hindmost foot to shut down rapidly diminished space. This is having a hugely detrimental effect on teams' ability to properly express themselves, which will be reduced further

when mismatches vanish in the knockout stages. Staging rugby's premier tournament in Japan was a fantastic opportunity to broaden the game's appeal but World Rugby are making a hash of it. The post-mortem promises to be particularly grim.