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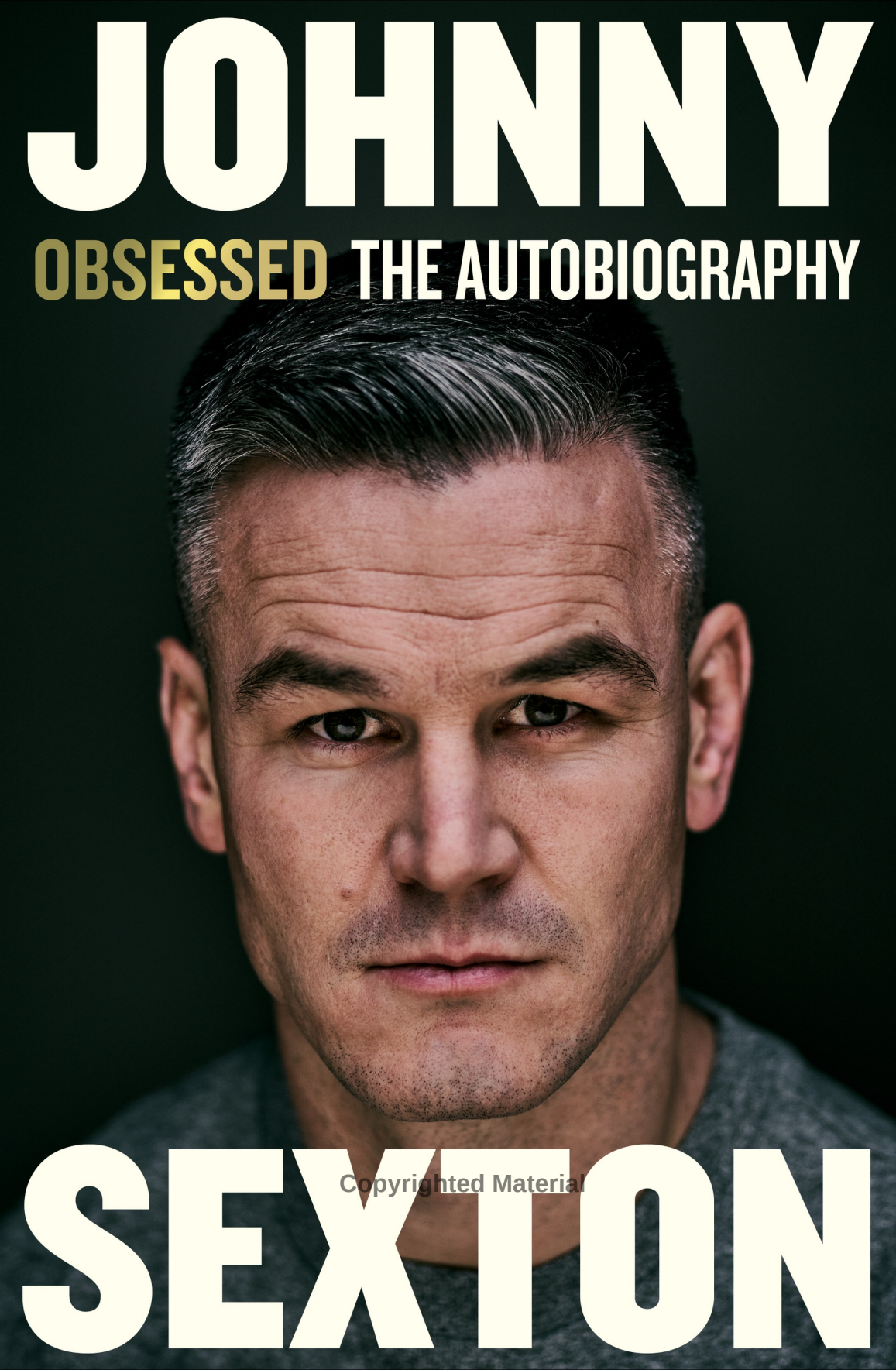

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The Autobiography

JOHNNY SEXTON

with Peter O'Reilly

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To Laura, Luca, Amy and Sophie

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Prologue

Sitting in the kitchen on a grey morning a couple of days after returning from the 2023 Rugby World Cup, I was hit by a sudden realization: I had time on my hands.

In some ways, this was a good thing. The Sexton family hadn't been together for nearly two months. Retirement from rugby meant that I'd be able to drive Amy, Sophie and Luca to school, which was lovely, because it had been such a rare occurrence while I was a player. There were other simple things to enjoy. Like going out for breakfast with Laura. Or going to the driving range. I had great plans for my golf, like getting down to scratch. Why not? I had the time.

But that morning in the kitchen, I had too much time. Laura was out and the kids were at school and suddenly it was just me and the dog and my thoughts.

When you're a player, every minute in your life is accounted for. Even the time that you spend doing absolutely nothing, just lying on a couch recovering from a training session, is all part of a plan designed to make you better at your job. Laura used to laugh that I was 'world class' at recovery. I was tops at basically doing nothing. I could always claim that sitting on a couch watching rugby matches had a purpose. Even if it didn't look like it, it was work.

Now that purpose was gone and it felt weird.

I was suffering from withdrawal symptoms. Only a day or two previously, the Ireland squad had dispersed at Dublin

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Airport and we had gone our separate ways. Now I'm sitting in the kitchen, thinking: I wonder what the lads are up to.

The previous summer-into-autumn had been the happiest time of my eighteen-year career. In fact, that comment probably applies to every Andy Farrell camp over the previous two and a half years – ever since we'd started winning consistently. So many laughs, so much positive energy. OK, so our journey ended earlier than we'd planned but that didn't mean the end of our friendship.

A couple of hours after we lost our quarter-final to New Zealand at the Stade de France, we were still in the changing room, still in our gear, drinking beers and trying to come to terms with the finality of it all.

It was never my style to be in a rush to pack up after games. That dressing-room cocoon is special. It strengthens connections. This time I was even more reluctant to leave because, consciously or subconsciously, I knew that my connection to this group was beginning to weaken. You think: I'll never be in a changing room with these guys again. The same realization occurred on the bus back to our hotel that night: I'll never share another post-match bus journey with these guys.

Once back in the hotel bar, we sat around in a big circle, players and partners. We had beers and took turns as DJ. Keith Earls and I were presented with magnums of a fine red wine, to mark our retirements. The bottles were meant to be kept for a special occasion but they didn't last long. This occasion was special enough.

Laura took Luca up to bed at around 3 a.m. – the two of them commuted to France every weekend during the tournament, while Amy and Sophie stayed with Laura's folks. Luca was now like a zombie-child, having been up all day.

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I kept going for a while. Part of me wanted to see the sun come up, but sometimes tiredness just gets the better of you. I knew we'd have all of the Sunday together anyway, as we weren't checking out until the Monday morning – players, coaches, back-room staff, partners, kids. It would be like an old-fashioned Irish wake: a big gang brought together in communal sadness, numbing that sadness with drink and song and laughter.

Our hotel was about an hour north of Paris, a golf resort out in the country. That Sunday afternoon, we found a village with a bar that was showing the England v. Fiji quarter-final. More beers. From there, the lads got a bus into Paris but I grabbed a cab back to the hotel to see Laura and Luca. I didn't fancy being around anyone other than my team-mates, coaches or family.

When you lose a big game like a World Cup quarter-final, you go through different emotional stages. That Sunday night, I was in the self-pity phase: raging at the injustice of it all, fuming at decisions that had gone against us. Watching France lose their quarter-final to South Africa by an even narrower margin (28–29) was weirdly comforting. France were hosts and justifiably one of the favourites to win the trophy but they got no breaks that night, with the Springboks getting all of the 50–50 calls. It reminded me that no one has a right to win a World Cup. It cheered me up. Well, a little bit.

The next morning, we had to check out by 11 o'clock, basically to make way for the Springboks, who were checking in. The irony. The team we'd beaten in the pool stages were now preparing for a semi-final, while we were heading home.

If you'd seen us in our private lounge out at Charles de Gaulle, you'd never have guessed that we were in mourning.

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Our flight wasn't until that evening so we went back on the beer again. By the time we boarded, the mood was very giddy. In-flight entertainment was provided by Jack Conan and Bundee Aki, who took turns on the public address. Jack invited passengers up to business class to give me a retirement hug. I was in no need of consolation, though. I was feeling no pain.

At some point, I made one final request to the group: even though I was retiring, along with Earlsy and our hugely popular team manager, Mick Kearney, the RWC2023 WhatsApp group would stay intact. It was such a special collection of people.

I was only kidding myself, though. It's over. I need to accept that reality.

It wasn't just me suffering from withdrawal. Laura had grown close to so many wives and girlfriends, so the ending was cruel for her, too. And Luca was miserable after our return. The time when we started our unbeaten run of seventeen games, during the tour of New Zealand in the summer of 2022, was around the time that he had started to understand the game. Ireland losing was a new experience for him. He didn't enjoy it, and he wasn't used to seeing his mum and dad so upset. For someone so young it was a lot to deal with.

He was only nine, a few years younger than Gabe Farrell, Ellis Catt, Ffredi Easterby and Paddy O'Connell – our coaches' sons – but they kindly let him pal around with them over in France, whether in the hotel or sometimes on the team bus to training. They looked after him like a younger brother. Now he was back at school, hanging around with lads his own age again. Or his two younger sisters, who were oblivious to the World Cup. What a come-down.

'Will we still go to the Six Nations?' he asked me, hopefully.

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'We'll see,' I answered.

'But we won't be able to go out on the pitch again, will we?'

No, we wouldn't get to go out on the pitch again.

At least Luca got to see the players again soon – only three days after we got home, in fact. Someone lobbed a suggestion into the WhatsApp group: we needed a reunion. I was all over it. I invited everyone to the house that Thursday evening for beers. And everyone came. It was great. From there, we had pints in Ranelagh and then on to Dillinger's steakhouse, before heading into town.

We had a blast – but it was followed by that sense of emptiness again the following morning. Like an addict failing to shake a heavy habit, I was only prolonging the agony.

And all this time on my hands. Time left with your thoughts. I couldn't bring myself to watch the quarter-final back. I don't think I ever will. I don't need to. I've mentally replayed every second, over and over. It finishes the same way every time. Rónan Kelleher still ploughs into Brodie Retallick and Sam Whitelock. Whitelock goes in for the poach, clearly without releasing, but somehow Wayne Barnes awards him the penalty, even though it has all happened under his nose – and it's all over.

And as I stand there, hands on hips, staring in disbelief at Barnes, Rieko Ioane still comes up to me and tells me: 'Get back ten metres.'

Huh?

'Penalty,' he says. 'Back ten.' And then, after Barnes blows the final whistle, he says: 'Don't miss your flight tomorrow. Enjoy your retirement, you c**t.'

So much for the All Blacks' famous 'no dickheads' policy. So much for their humility. I walk after Ioane and call him a fake-humble fucker. It doesn't look great, me having a go at

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one of them just after we've lost. But I can't be expected to ignore that.

Later, I got in touch with Joe Schmidt to explain my behaviour. Joe was part of the All Blacks' coaching team and we go back a long way. Typically, he'd been gracious in victory that night. He took time to say nice things to Luca, on the pitch, shortly after the game. The Barrett brothers – Beauden, Scott and Jordie – were real gentlemen, too, as was Ardie Savea, who had some lovely words of consolation for me. I appreciated that.

Replaying those scenes from the Stade de France was an inevitable part of the recovery process but it was also a waste of my new-found free time. I decided to put things in order at home. I tidied my office, then went to work on my 'gear room'. It's a small enough space upstairs, originally intended as an airing closet, where I keep all my training stuff – tops, shorts, socks, piles of Adidas boots and trainers. Laura used to keep it in some sort of order. She's a clean freak, borderline OCD – not unlike her husband. Now I had to decide what to keep, what to give away to charity, what to bin. So I folded and I stacked and I categorized and I chucked.

Laura joked that I was nesting, like a woman in the latter stages of pregnancy. I had to look it up to see what she meant.

Nesting was good because it kept me busy and marked the start of a new phase in my life. I no longer had any use for all my old rehab equipment, so I dropped it down to Leinster's training base: recovery pumps, compression sleeves, a 'Game Ready' machine that reduces all the swellings and bruises. I had invested in the best of the best over the years.

Then I considered my next step. I was only thirty-eight – old for a rugby player but still young. I'd planned for afterlife, of course. For the previous two and a half years, I'd been

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preparing to go into the world of business with the Ardagh Group, a global supplier in sustainable glass and metal packaging, receiving training whenever my schedule allowed. The plan had been to start full-time the January after I'd retired.

Suddenly I was wondering if I'd made the right decision. What about all this rugby knowledge that I've built up over the years? Should I go back to the IRFU and Leinster and ask them about the opportunities that they'd proposed to me? I've been in this game for eighteen seasons. Am I mad to just walk away from it completely? I found I was also being asked by various companies to share my thoughts on leadership and high performance, and I enjoy that type of work.

I decided to consider my options on our family getaway to Dubai over Hallowe'en. There was just one more item on my to-do list, something that had been hanging over me since we'd got back from France. I needed to thank a few people. Lots of people.

During a quiet moment in the team hotel pre-departure, I'd made a rare enough visit to my Instagram page. Normally, I'll only ever see my 'direct messages', those posts sent by friends or people I follow. But this time, curiosity made me check my 'requested messages' – in other words, messages sent by anyone and everyone who'd felt inclined to do so.

This included a few Scots, South Africans and Kiwis who wanted to give me a Rieko Ioane-style send-off. You get used to this sort of toxic waste after a while. Besides, I was blown away by the avalanche of goodwill – literally thousands of messages conveying love and best wishes and thanks and warmth, from people all over the world, including well-wishers from Scotland, South Africa and New Zealand, incidentally, but predominantly Irish. People who said I'd made them proud to be Irish, people whose kids had been

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inspired to play rugby by watching me play, people wishing me good luck in my retirement, people who just wanted to say that the team – my team (their words) – had given them so much pleasure. I was overwhelmed by it all.

In the days after we got back, many more cards and letters came through our letter box. To reply to everyone individually would have taken months. Laura suggested that I should say something publicly, on social media, to acknowledge all this goodwill. I'd never formally retired from rugby so here was a chance to make it official and thank everyone at the same time.

So I sat down with a pen and a notebook and tried to figure out exactly what I wanted to say and how I wanted to say it. I wanted to express gratitude but I also needed to confront the way that everything had ended, the sense of failure, of incompleteness. I started and stopped and restarted God knows how many times, editing and deleting and struggling to find the right words. It took me about a week to get it right.

We'll come back to my farewell message later. What I found interesting about the exercise was how it forced me to think about things in a broader context. Stuff like: how you want to be remembered, not just by the people who matter – your family, friends and team-mates – but by the public in general, by people who might read this book.

The nature of professional sport and sports commentary is that you are defined by what you achieve – the caps, the medals, the points-scoring records, the Lions tours and so on. I was fortunate to play in some highly successful teams and to work with some outstanding coaches, so by any measure I had a successful career. When I look back, though, I realize that for the majority of that career, probably up until the Andy Farrell era really, it usually felt like a battle.

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Of course there were moments of great satisfaction and celebration and laughter. But for the most part, when I was in the thick of it, it felt like a fight – to prove people wrong or to bounce back from snubs and disappointments. For so much of the time, I was at war – with opponents, with rivals, sometimes with coaches, often with myself.

I've never been very good at hiding my feelings, at being anything other than direct. At times this made me a demanding team-mate, I'm sure, but my first and last loyalty was always to the team. I also think that with experience, and guidance, I learned how to be a better leader, and always an honest one. That honesty should make for an engaging story, and hopefully a revealing one.

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I

My first sporting arena was the soccer pitch at Kildare Place primary school. It's a ten-minute walk from where I now live – a collection of pebble-dashed buildings with a small patch of green alongside.

That pitch is where I first kicked a ball in anger. Genuine anger. It's where I had my first run-in with sporting authority. This is where I heard the awful words:

Jonathan, you're going in goals for the second half.

First, some context. I'm ten years old and soccer is my main sport. My dream Christmas present is a new Serie A top – preferably AC Milan or Juventus. Every Saturday morning I watch the *Football Italia* programme on Channel 4, marvelling at the skills of Gabriel Batistuta and George Weah and joining in on the catchphrase that signals every ad break:

GOLAZZO!!!

On week nights, we are allowed to stay up past bedtime if Manchester United are on the box. That's me and Mark, my younger brother by two years.

Ryan Giggs, Eric Cantona and Roy Keane – these are my heroes. We've always been a Man U family. Well, Mum and my sister Gillian aren't really that interested. But the boys – Dad, myself, Mark and Jerry Jr, the baby of the family – are all committed fans. We took Dad over to Old Trafford a few years ago, as a treat for his sixtieth birthday.

As a kid, I dreamed of playing for Man U. The first step on my road to stardom was the Mars Skills Challenge, a sort

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of scouting system set up by the Football Association of Ireland disguised as a skills competition. Kids from primary schools all over Ireland were encouraged to practise a variety of drills: a certain number of keepy-uppies, long passes to a target, dribbling between cones and so on.

The keepy-uppies were no bother to me. I practised them for hours on my own in our small back garden in Rathgar – a busy suburb south of Dublin, also close to where I live now.

Dad set the challenge: twenty quid if I could get to 200, which he soon changed to 300. He'd sit in the kitchen, his armchair angled in such a way that he could keep one eye on his newspaper, one eye on me. Whenever the ball hit the grass, I'd look to see if he'd been watching.

I never caught him out.

I was picked to represent Kildare Place at the 'All-Irelands' that took place in Templeogue College. This was a big deal. You had to bring your own ball and wear your school jersey, do the drills as you were watched by FAI scouts.

I went to bed the night before in the jersey, ball beside the bed, not sleeping a wink. Word was that the winners would be on TV.

After the drills, we were told: *We'll be in touch if you make it.* I waited impatiently. Eventually I stopped pestering my folks to see if anything had come in the post, and I stopped asking Mr Morton, who doubled as school principal and PE teacher.

Mr Morton was the teacher who told me I had to go in goal that time. I was livid. We were leading Taney primary school 1–0 at the break, thanks to a brilliant goal by our number 10: me.

When we came in for the half-time huddle, Mr Morton says he's making me goalie! Goalie? Was he nuts? I told him where to go.

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Years later, Kildare Place sent the letter back to me. They still had it on file and someone thought that it might be amusing for me to look back on.

Dear Mr Morton,

I'm sorry for using bad language yesterday . . .

No one thought it was very amusing at the time. Mr Morton was the principal, after all. He came into the class the next day and made me sit in the 'bold' seat, up under the blackboard, facing the wall.

You stay there, Jonathan.

The school had phoned my mother after the incident. Mum was mortified, ate the head off me. But I was more worried about what Dad would say.

In this parenting set-up, he was very clearly defined in his role as bad cop. If we ever misbehaved in his absence, Mum would give us the old line: Wait until your father gets home. When he did get home, and the beams from his headlights were visible in the drive, there would be a race to get up the stairs and under our duvets with the bedroom lights off.

I don't remember him losing his cool over the incident with Mr Morton, though. He told me that I couldn't speak to a teacher like that. Never. But I could see he was stifling a smile.

Later, I overheard him reasoning with Mum. 'Sure what was yer man thinking, putting him in goal? He's the smallest lad on the team, for Christ's sake!'

I was a titch in those days – small, but competitive. Territorial. Mum remembers feeling sorry for me the day she arrived back from maternity hospital with Mark, my new brother. A friend of hers called over to help and apparently when this woman took Mark in her arms, I threatened her with my toy gun:

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That's my baby. Put him down!

Mum was probably feeling a little sorry for herself, too. Dad had dropped her home from hospital and headed straight to Lansdowne Road. His brother was making his second appearance for Ireland that day, against Scotland. That's Willie Sexton, my Uncle Willie, a flanker who played for Garryowen and owned a well-known rugby pub in Limerick.

Uncle Willie won three Ireland caps. This was his first Five Nations appearance, which was obviously a massive deal. On top of that, Dad would have to 'wet the baby's head'. Two reasons to drink pints!

Soccer was my first love but I was aware of rugby's importance in the family. A picture of Willie in his first Ireland jersey is still framed and hanging on the wall of my granny's living room in Listowel, County Kerry. That's where Dad's from, a place better known for GAA and horse racing than for rugby.

He learned his rugby as a boarder in Castleknock College, and at University College Dublin (UCD), where he captained the Under-19s to win the McCorry Cup. The winners' pennant was also encased and hanging on the wall in my grandparents' place in Listowel, as a reminder.

From what I'm told, Jerry Sexton – Dad – was a tall, physical scrum-half, good enough to get selected in the first ever Ireland Schools team, in 1975, alongside a handful of future internationals, including Moss Finn, who played in the Ireland team that won a Triple Crown in 1982.

Dad was an international, too, as far as I was concerned. He had represented his country. I'd seen the photo of him in a green jersey, with a shamrock on the crest, and his shoulder-length hair.

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I used to love hearing stories about Dad. Syl Delahunt, his old friend from UCD, told me that several Dublin clubs wanted Dad to join them after college. Club alickadoos used to mistake Syl for Dad – they looked very alike – and ply him with pints.

In the end, Dad chose Bective Rangers, in Donnybrook. He never quite delivered on his promise, partly because of injuries, but he stayed involved in Bective, mainly as a coach.

Bective was also his social hub. It was where he met Clare Nestor. Mum.

Mum is also tall, also sporty. There were rugby links on her side of the family too. All her brothers played for Bective or for Palmerston RFC. But the best sportsman in her family was her dad, John Nestor.

Grandad John was an international golfer and held the course record at Milltown Golf Club for years. I still have the framed scorecard at home – 66 shots, 7 under par: Milltown was par 73 back then!

For a while I had plans to go one shot better. It won't happen now. I still have Grandad John's sand wedge in my golf bag. It's the only one of his old Wilsons that I can use. The sweet spot on those old blades is just too small for a six-handicapper like me.

He did show me how to hold a golf club, though. When I play with good golfers they regularly spot that I've a proper grip.

That's probably not all that I inherited from Grandad John. Older members in Milltown recall that he was a stickler for golfing detail – whether it had to do with the rule-book or with technique. He wasn't slow to ring up a journalist if something had been misreported. The golf writer Dermot Gilleece once referred to his curt manner and from then on,

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whenever Grandad John left a message, he would sign off as 'Mr Gruff'.

Jody Fanagan, a Walker Cup player who broke my grandad's course record, told Gilleece a story about him. He once asked Jody what he looked at when he stood on the tee. Jody said that he looked at both sides of the fairway.

Grandad John said: 'That's wrong. You must pick out an exact spot, just as if you were hitting to a green.' It's like something you'd tell a place-kicker.

I used to do odd jobs for Grandad John – cleaning golf clubs, tidying his garden shed. He had a soft side. He told me I was 'a great lad' and encouraged me to practise my swing. It's one of my regrets that I never got to play with him in Ballybunion, a few miles from Listowel and probably my favourite golf course.

He died when I was fourteen. The post-funeral reception was in Milltown, where I was a junior member. I remember sneaking out for nine holes while the adults were at a reception in the bar but my heart wasn't in it. It didn't feel right.

In my memory of him, health was always an issue. Emphysema got him in the end. He was a drinker and a heavy smoker. When we visited him in hospital in his last days, he was wired up to all sorts of tubes and you could see how his chest was blackened by all the poison in his lungs. I remember the awful rattle in his chest.

Dad told me: That's why you should never smoke.

I've never had even a drag of a cigarette. I used to give Mum an awful time if I ever caught her on the fags. Why would she do that to herself when she could see what it had done to her dad?

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Mum probably smoked to ease the stress of being a working mother. Mum's a hairdresser who opened her own salon only a matter of weeks after Gillian was born – Rathgar Hair Studio is bang in the middle of Rathgar village, about fifty metres and ten doors away from the house.

They say you should never go into business with friends or family, but Mum and Dad did just that, buying the lease on the premises with a friend. Dad's an accountant, so he put together the business plan. I remember my parents sitting at the kitchen table on a Friday night going through the books while their kids created havoc around them.

It was only when I got older that I began to appreciate how hard they worked and how much stress they were under. Mum had a six-day week and worked late on Thursday and Friday. On those days, Dad would get home before her and cook dinner for us, except on Thursday when he'd be home late too and our childminder would prepare dinner.

He had a stressful routine, too. For a good few years he was with a timber company in Artane on the north side of Dublin, which meant setting off early to beat the cross-town traffic.

He used to drop me and Mark to Kildare Place at around 7 o'clock in the morning, and the school wouldn't open until eight. Child neglect, they'd call it now! At least he gave us an umbrella when it rained.

We'd sit there, wedged into an alcove by the gate, elbowing each other, waiting for the milkman to arrive so that we could nick a couple of cartons. When the caretaker opened the gates, we'd carry in the crate as if to pay for our crime. We were first in, every morning.

Until we were old enough to walk home alone, Mum would collect us. Once, she forgot. I must have been six or

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seven. Instead of telling someone, I just walked to Rathgar, the guts of a mile along busy roads in a downpour, and then made a dramatic entrance into the salon while Mum was half-way through doing someone's hair.

Imagine her embarrassment as I stood in the middle of the salon floor, a puddle of rainwater forming at my feet, a vision of anger and disbelief:

MUM! YOU WERE SUPPOSED TO COLLECT ME FROM SCHOOL!!

Team-mates of mine will know the look.

I was a fairly intense kid and not a very easy mixer. Worry wart – that's what Uncle Willie always called me. I was shy in unfamiliar company.

I was sure of myself on the soccer pitch in Kildare Place, or in Bective where I played mini-rugby. But if Dad brought me to Bushy Park Rangers for a try-out, I'd hold back, keep to myself.

It was the same on summer holidays in Kerry. He'd take me to try Gaelic football with the Listowel Emmets and I'd hate it. In the garden on my own, I could spend hours soloing and hand-passing to myself, re-enacting entire matches between Kerry and the Dubs, muttering the TV match commentary. But around strangers I was reserved, almost mistrustful. It's a trait that stayed with me as I grew up. It takes me a while to get to know people.

Child psychologists say that the eldest child is typically competitive, keen to win approval from his parents. Only occasionally did I get into what I would have deemed serious trouble and when it happened, I was eaten up with guilt, unable to sleep for nights on end.

I'm thinking specifically of a shoplifting raid with a friend

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at the Late Shopper in Rathgar, one afternoon when I was old enough to make my own way home from school. This kid was from America, a year old for our class and a bit wild. We walked in to the Late Shopper with an umbrella and used it to collect all sorts of treats. Then we just walked out of the shop with our loot.

The chocolate and sweets disappeared quickly. My guilt didn't. I couldn't live with myself. That night, I'm watching TV with Mum and *Garda Patrol* comes on. They show close-circuit TV clips of hold-ups at petrol stations and identikit photos of robbers. Suddenly I'm genuinely petrified that I'm about to make my first prime-time appearance on RTÉ.

Mum?

Yes, love?

What would happen if you got caught stealing from a shop?

You'd be in trouble, Jonathan.

(*Pause*)

Jonathan, have you something to tell me?

The next morning I was sent down to the Late Shopper with my pocket money to confess my crime. The shopkeeper took the money but seemed to find the whole thing very funny.

Confusingly, I got into more trouble with Dad for what was a lesser crime – taking some glue from the house that I used for making model aeroplanes. The same American friend was involved. We'd found this big tree with a hollowed-out trunk in a corner of the school grounds, perfect for a hideout. We just needed some planks to glue together for a base and a door and we were all set. We had great plans.

But when Dad discovered the missing tubes of glue in my bag, he got the wrong idea. To say he was angry was an understatement. I wasn't allowed go back to my friend's house again after that.

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Dad has mellowed with age, but he had a short fuse back in the day and took no nonsense from us. You'd get a hug at bedtime, but if you did something that was unacceptable – or if you didn't try your best at anything – he was angry.

I've no problem with the fact that Dad gave me the odd clip. I probably deserved it and I don't think it did me any harm.

He was a product of the tough boarding-school environment. His parents both had busy working lives in Listowel, so boarding school made sense. His stories about corporal punishment at Castleknock fascinated us. Whenever he would start a sentence with 'When I was in boarding school . . .' our ears would immediately prick up.

He told us great stories about a priest known as the Boxer – so called for obvious reasons. By Dad's account, the Boxer was likely to greet you on the corridor with a smile and a 'Good morning', but if your shirt was untidy or your tie was undone, he'd suddenly snap: 'Your tie is undone, boy!' Then he'd deliver a dead arm. Any misbehaviour and it was a cane across the palm, not just once but several times. Hearing about this sort of thing thrilled us.

But the bit we found most amazing about Castleknock was what happened if you were caught fighting another boy. Your punishment was to scrap it out in the boxing ring in the school gym, with the whole school watching.

No wonder Dad came out of there with a hard-nosed attitude. The irony is that I find it difficult to discipline my own kids – Luca, Amy and Sophie. Laura tells me that I shouldn't let them get away with things so easily, but they have me wrapped around their respective little fingers. With them, I'm a complete softie.

My sensitive side comes from my mum. She went far too

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easy on us, and we made her pay – me, Mark and even Jerry Jr. We'd wind her up – answering back, not doing what we were told. Eventually she'd lose her temper.

Once, she took off her slipper and went to slap Mark on the arse. He swung his hips, Mum had a 'fresh air' and we all fell about the place laughing. Then she lost it altogether. She flung the slipper – a chunky enough item of footwear with a solid heel – at us. Me and Jerry both ducked and Mark got it on the temple. He bawled. Mum was in tears, too, especially when Mark's eye started to swell and blacken. We still wind her up about it every now and again.

Mark and I are very close. He turned out to be a fine rugby player – a strong, intelligent centre who won an All-Ireland League title with St Mary's. He was good enough to make it as a pro but was forced to quit because of injury. He's now in the coaching game and helped Ireland's Under-20s win back-to-back Grand Slams. He's someone I consult regularly for his opinions on the game.

It was different when we were kids. We fought all the time. I was protective of him at school, of course. I remember staying with him for his traumatic first day, sitting beside him in Junior Infants while he sobbed away inconsolably. In general he was acceptable company when it suited me, but if I had a better option I would take it. And once we were all indoors of an evening, it could get niggly.

There were six of us in a three-bedroom house. When I was in my mid-teens and when the folks could afford it, they converted the attic and threw me up there. But up until then, bedtime was never a serene, relaxing experience. Gillian, as the only girl, had her own room, and the boys shared a room: myself and Mark in our bunk beds, and Jerry to one side. The whole structure added up to a kind of raft. If one of us

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moved, the whole thing creaked. Then the arguments and scraps would start.

Eventually we'd hear the thunder of Dad running up the first few stairs. In a flash, the bedroom light would be off and all three of us would be under our duvets, eyes closed.

'If I hear one more peep,' he'd growl. And that would usually do it.

Dad's escape was Bective – escape from the stress of work. His playing career might have finished early but he stayed involved, helping to coach the first and second teams. Basically, the club seemed to occupy nearly all of his time when he wasn't at home or at work.

Mum tells me that as a two-year-old, I often did what I could to stop him leaving the house. As soon as he'd arrive home from work, I'd nick his keys and hide them somewhere, or take one of his shoes and stick it behind the sofa.

This was never going to work as a long-term plan, though. If I wanted to spend more time with Dad, I'd need to go with him to Bective. And that's what happened.

Mum got fed up minding four kids on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday. She insisted that Dad take at least one of us with him. More often than not, this was me. I wasn't complaining.

Bective is in Donnybrook. The small stadium it shared with Old Wesley is something of a spiritual home for Leinster rugby people. It's where Leinster played home matches before the move to the RDS, where I went to watch St Mary's play Schools Cup matches. It's where my dreams were formed, basically.

Donnybrook is an important cultural landmark for generations of Dublin south-siders with no connection to the

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sport other than the fact that they had their first kiss at a disco hosted by either of the tenant clubs. The grandstand in Donnybrook has been upgraded, so too the terracing. Grass pitches have been replaced by synthetic ones. Wesley have refurbed their clubhouse, but to walk into the Bective clubhouse is to step back into the 1950s. The same floorboards still creak in what was once the dance hall, the same panels in the ceiling still look loose. In a sense, I wouldn't want it to change. That building is a big part of my childhood. The whole stadium is.

It's where I played my first rugby. I still have medals from Under-7 blitzes and a photo from the time we won an Under-10 tournament, where we're wearing club jerseys borrowed from a team many years our senior – so long on us, they'd leak out through the bottom of our shorts. We were the club's first minis section, set up by the late Joe Nolan, club president at the time and a lovely man.

We trained or played games every Sunday morning on a patch of grass outside the clubhouse that's now covered by a car park and some terracing. I remember one of the dads clearing the surface of beer bottles and cigarette packets before kick-off, and whatever other incriminating evidence might have been left over from the previous night.

We were an interesting mix, mostly kids from the kind of well-to-do families you'd expect to find in a club in the heart of Dublin 4 but also a few lads that Joe invited down from Beech Hill estate – like Derek and Scott, who I came across again recently when they came to do a roofing job for me at home. We had a laugh recalling the time on the Under-10s when Scott went missing just before kick-off and was eventually spotted lighting a fire up in the old stand.

I liked that aspect of Bective, the fact that we were from

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different backgrounds yet still tight. I reckon it was good for me to experience that before going into a privileged, fee-paying education in St Mary's College.

A lot of my early rugby education took place just from trailing around after Dad on the club rugby treadmill from September to April. Soccer was my favourite sport to play – or at least it was until I went to Mary's aged eleven – but it took up relatively little of my time. Rugby became a way of life.

On Tuesday and Thursday nights between September and April, I'd be at Bective's training pitches in Glenamuck, hassling Johnny O'Hagan for a ball – Hago was Bective bagman, a close pal of Dad. Dad and I wouldn't get home until maybe 9.30 or 10 o'clock, when my siblings were asleep.

Sundays, I seemed to spend the whole day in Donnybrook: mini-rugby from 10 o'clock, then long afternoons when Dad would be 'minding' me. Typically, this meant a game of tip with his mates on the back pitch, followed by a lunchtime pint in Long's pub before watching Bective's second XV.

By then I'd have found a game of my own, probably a two-a-side involving Mark and the O'Flanagan brothers, Stuart and Barry. Their dad, Tim, was the club doctor and our family GP. He and his wife Carol were great friends with my parents. Stuart is now one of the doctors for Leinster and Ireland.

Donnybrook was a vast, sparsely populated playground on those Sundays. Even if there were games on the front and back pitches, there was mischief to be had on the tennis courts, at the back of the main stand or behind the clubhouses at either end. If it rained, we could take our rugby matches into the hall in Bective, until a light bulb got smashed and we had to run for cover.

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Later, it was home for Sunday dinner. We'd have been eating crisps and peanuts all afternoon and we'd have no appetite. This was no excuse, as far as Dad was concerned. As a boarding-school veteran, he just couldn't accept the idea of food going uneaten. *You'll sit here until you've finished all the food on your plates*, he said. So we sat there, for hours sometimes, broken only by trips to the bathroom, where you could flush away the Brussels sprouts that you'd smuggled out in your pockets.

Saturdays in Bective were best, especially if it was an All-Ireland League Saturday. There was a buzz about the AIL in those amateur, pre-Heineken Cup days. It was the next best thing to watching Ireland in the Five Nations. I can remember the sudden hush in the crowded clubhouse bar whenever RTÉ would show the results from around the country at 5 o'clock.

Bective were only in Division Three, but they were pushing hard for promotion under the guidance of Noel McQuilkin, a gruff Kiwi whose son Kurt played in the centre. Dad was Noel's assistant, and this gave me access all areas.

From the age of eight until I was eleven or twelve, I was part of the scenery in Bective, a regular in the dressing room even when Dad wasn't coaching the team. I'd just nick a couple of Jaffa Cakes from Hago's stash, park myself in the corner and soak up the banter and the fumes from the tubes of Deep Heat.

I'd listen as the chat gradually became more game-focused and the tone got more serious, more angry, the language more earthy. This was normal. I knew the language and I knew the routine. The ref would check the players' studs about fifteen minutes before kick-off, and then those studs would start to beat a rhythm on the smooth stone floor of

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the dressing rooms as the players jogged on the spot for what passed as a warm-up. Only then would I slip outside. After the game, I'd slip back in and soak up some more.

I couldn't imagine a child being exposed to all that now, but this was the way that I learned rugby's vocabulary, how I learned its basic laws. By this I mean the rudimentary rights and wrongs of the game but also its code – the smart thing to do strategically in certain situations, the right way to react.

I also had an ear for any rugby gossip that was kicking around. One autumn the big news was that Bective had recruited a hard-man from Barnhall, Trevor Brennan. My dad's friend and subsequently his boss, Ray McKenna, had organized a job that sealed the deal. I remember seeing Trevor play in an Under-19s game on the back pitch, soon after he'd joined. He took no nonsense. I remember a fight breaking out close to where I was standing on the sideline and Trevor didn't hold back. He became an instant hero in our house. That would be the season when Bective were promoted to AIL Division Two – 1993/94. I was eight. I remember the game when they clinched promotion, but more for the fact that I got into big trouble with Dad after the game.

We were somewhere up north with a big travelling contingent and the celebrations were massive. Dad gave me £20 to get myself a drink and a bag of peanuts and I went outside with the other kids.

I lost the change. When he came looking for it, I tried lying, saying that I'd already given it to him. He knew this was untrue. He lost the rag with me, in front of everyone. It wasn't that I'd lost the money – although I'm sure he was pissed off about that, too. He was furious that I'd lied to him. I was mortified.

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The trip home was a weird experience. The bus was awash with drink and filled with song and there I was, up the front on my own, feeling sore – arms crossed, staring out the window.

The Bective players tried to wind me up – calling my name from the back, then ducking their heads when I looked around. Then one of them would give me the two fingers, in jest, and I'd give them the two fingers back. They called me down, determined to put a smile on my face.

I warmed up eventually, but Dad maintained the cold front. I guess he wanted to teach me a lesson. He had strong ideas about that sort of thing, about doing what's right.

Fortunately, there was one place where I could do no wrong, where I never got in trouble, where I was treated like a king. Listowel.

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My dad's home town is a picturesque spot in north Kerry, a small place with a big reputation because of its two annual festivals – Writers' Week in May and the Listowel Races in September.

Its most famous inhabitant is undoubtedly John B. Keane, the playwright and novelist. John B. died in 2002 but he is still very much a presence in the town. His pub, now run by his son, Billy, is something of a tourist destination.

John B. is widely remembered for his wit and his insights into human nature. In our family, he's remembered for losing his patience with a young J. Sexton, who was constantly kicking a ball against a wooden gate in the lane behind the pub: *When the hell is dat young fella heading back up to Dublin so we can all get a bit of peace?*

John B.'s is only three doors down from my grandparents' shop. My granny, Brenda Sexton, was still selling clothes well into her eighties.

My dad and Billy Keane were best pals as kids, shared a flat together when they were studying in UCD, and are still best pals. Like his dad, Billy is both publican and writer. He is also my godfather, one of my biggest supporters, and a real character.

He would have seen a lot of me when I was growing up, especially during high summer. My grandparents came to Dublin every July to buy clothes wholesale for their shop. After they'd done their business, one of their grandsons – usually

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me – would join them on the train journey back down to Listowel. I'd set up residence until the rest of the family joined us in August.

Nothing compared to the weeks I got to spend alone with my grandparents, as an eight-, ten-, twelve-year-old. Spoiled rotten, I was.

They had a house on the edge of Listowel but in summer we'd stay above the shop in William Street, with me often sharing a room with Granny and Grandad. Everything was so relaxed. I didn't have to get up until around 11 or 12 o'clock each day and only then because it was time for a full cooked lunch, always meat or fish with boiled spuds and baked beans.

Granny hired a Sega Mega Drive from the video shop across the street just for the two weeks I'd be there – a real treat, as we'd nothing like this at home. I played video games for hours. Or my grandad – Daddy John, as we called him to avoid confusion with Grandad John Nestor – would take me playing pitch and putt. Most evenings, Daddy John would bring me down to a pub to play pool against the locals. It might have been 10 o'clock, past my bedtime at home. But there were no rules in Listowel.

Those pool challenge games in Flanagan's or the Saddle Bar were my first experience of playing sport for money. We'd be up against farmers, the sorts of characters you'd find in John B's plays. Country cute.

We were cute enough ourselves, a real double-act, taking alternate shots. Daddy John was competitive. He'd consider every shot carefully, whispering strategies in my ear. Winners held the table. No celebrations, just a quiet wink of acknowledgement from Daddy John while the next challenger racked the balls. Hold the table for a few games and you felt like you owned the place.

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We mightn't get home until after midnight and if there was golf from the US on the box we'd stay up and watch that until, eventually, my eyelids dropped.

I grew very close to Daddy John. I never called him Grandad, to avoid confusion with my mum's dad. He wouldn't have allowed it anyway. He was determined not to grow old.

He worked well into his old age, in McKenna's yard and hardware store. Even when his leg was at him, he'd refuse a stick. I liked that about him. I didn't even begrudge him the one cigarette he enjoyed every now and again. And he seemed to like me. I provided entertainment for him. I suppose I helped to keep him young.

Daddy John wasn't my only companion during those Kerry summers. When the sun shone, I'd be dropped out to Ballybunion to pal around with my first cousin, Roy Sexton – Willie's eldest kid, only ten days older than me and still a close friend. Willie had a caravan out on the coast so I'd often stay over, wedged into a bunk bed.

Then August would bring a change of pace as the hordes arrived on their holidays – aunts, uncles, cousins, Mum and Dad and, of course, my brothers and sister. We'd stay in my grandparents' bungalow in Caherdown and every morning Dad would drive us out to Ballybunion.

The road to the coast was dead straight but with dramatic dips and humps we knew so well that we could anticipate them in unison from the back seat of the car.

My dad's four brothers would take great pleasure in winding me up about being a Dub, especially when the football championship was on. They'd remind me about the fact that I'm half-Kerry. It's probably the fiery half, the narky half, the half that gets me in trouble.

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Ballybunion was great because there was always something on. We had large, ridiculously competitive games of family football on one of the beaches with the pitch markings scraped out on the hard sand with a stick: typically myself, Mark, Roy, a load of uncles and my Auntie Rachel, Mum's sister, who was a great player, the tomboy of her family.

Or there was golf. Mum always insisted that if Dad was going out golfing, then he had to take one of his sons along. That was the deal and there were no arguments. I'd get to caddy for my dad at Ballybunion, where my Uncle John was club captain, and occasionally, when the course ranger wasn't looking, one of my uncles would throw a ball down for me and I'd give it a whack.

Generally my folks seemed at their happiest on those holidays. They always brought a babysitter to look after us in the evenings so they'd get to go out with my aunties and uncles and enjoy themselves.

We didn't take much minding down there, to be honest. Come evening time, we'd wander up the hill from the beach towards the amusement arcades and the bumper cars and we'd have dinner: a bag of chips and some periwinkles, picked out of their shells with a pin. Heaven.

I don't get down to Kerry as often as I'd like these days but I want my kids to experience the magic of the place. My main point of contact is Billy Keane, who still runs the family pub when he's not writing columns in the *Irish Independent*, usually about Munster rugby.

He still goes on about a question I'm supposed to have asked him when I was twelve: When I win my first cap for Ireland, will you frame the jersey and put it on the wall in the pub? I would never have been that presumptuous, but

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Billy would never let the truth get in the way of a good story.

My chances of becoming a decent rugby player were helped significantly by being sent to St Mary's College in Rathmines, a twenty-minute walk from Rathgar. Mum says she gave up the fags to help with the school fees, and that it was worth the sacrifice. She always says: 'Mary's was the best thing that I ever did for my boys.'

Rugby was only a small part of the benefit I got from Mary's. I made friends for life there, and had several teachers who had an enormously positive influence on me.

It helped my confidence that I was able to repeat fourth class, which meant I went from being one of the youngest in my group in Kildare Place to being one of the oldest in my class in the junior school at Mary's.

It took me a while to settle, though. There was friction with new classmates and I was the cause of it, for sure. I was determined to make an impression, whether it was in PE class, in the school yard or on the rugby pitch. It wasn't long before people's noses were out of joint.

It wouldn't take you very long to figure out that rugby is pretty important at St Mary's. The school is just off the main drag in Rathmines, a busy area only a mile from Dublin's city centre. Walk in the gate and the first thing you see is a 4G rugby pitch – the 'junior' pitch, where many of my earliest rugby memories were formed.

At ten years of age, I was still a scrap of a thing, a scrum-half like my dad but a confident, aggressive one, determined never to give an inch. This was partly down to something I'd overheard my dad say to his pals at the bar in Bective.

One of them said something complimentary about my

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footballing skills and Dad replied: 'Jonathan's skilful but he's a bit small for rugby. He could be a good soccer player. But wait till you see my younger fella, Mark. He's as aggressive as anything.'

It's funny the way these things register with you.

I knew my way around the pitch, from my time with the Bective minis. I was going to let these Mary's lads know it, too, especially the main men on the team, the guys who'd been there since before I arrived, who had older brothers in the school, who had some cred: boys like Eoghan Hughes, Colin Burke and Brian McDermott. I ruffled their feathers, rubbed them up the wrong way.

It wasn't part of any conscious plan. It was just me. It's probably no bad thing, in a physically competitive sport, for people to be on edge. But sometimes your best traits as a sportsman can be your worst traits as a person.

I ended up being best pals with Eoghan, Colin and Brian, but things were tense for a while. They were understandably territorial, and they had numerical advantage over me, so they froze me out where they could, initially. Mum can recall times when I would arrive home from school miserable, in foul form.

Usually being good at a team sport helps your popularity, but it didn't always work out that way for me. One day during my first year in Mary's I was singled out in the sports hall by Dave Breslin, our PE teacher who was also coaching the Junior Cup (Under-15) team in the senior school. He brought five or six of the Js in, mid-class, and threw me a ball.

'Sexton, grubber-kick off your left foot.'

I did as I was told.

'Now off your right.'

No problem, sir.

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'Spin-pass off your left.'

Easy.

And so on. He was using me to highlight the level of skill that these older kids needed. I was more than happy to be used. I remember Dave saying: 'This kid is going to be good.'

But you can imagine what my U-10 team-mates were saying behind my back. I was chuffed, of course, but felt even more isolated in the school yard. I was part of neither one group nor the other.

There were other ways to integrate, of course. I played the part of Maid Marian in the junior school's stage production of *Robin Hood*. It was a part that required few lines, but I live in fear that someone recorded it and that the video will resurface.

So it wasn't all rugby at Mary's. Yet rugby was inescapable.

It was a relatively small school, with only sixty or seventy boys per year, but historically we have punched above our weight in Schools Cup competitions. Rugby was part of the ethos of the school, as devised by the Spiritan Congregation, formerly known as the Holy Ghost Fathers. Father Flavin used Spiritan imagery to coach us how to receive a pass:

Hands towards the passer, fingers spread and pointing upwards, thumbs touching.

Our hands were to be shaped like the outspread wings of a dove – the symbol for the Holy Ghost.

None of the priests were still teaching classes, but there was a small community of Spiritan Fathers who lived in a building adjoining the school. Father Flavin and Father McNulty were obsessed with rugby. My guess is that they had a subscription to Sky Sports before most Irish households did.

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Father Flavin talked to us about having a saucer-shaped backline in attack. It gave us twelve-year-olds another clear image of how we should align ourselves to run on to the ball. Maybe the St Mary's coaches had figured it out that we had to be smart technically and tactically, because we didn't enjoy the same weight of numbers as some rival schools.

It was in the months of February and March – cup season – that rugby really took over. That's when I got my first taste of really belonging to the school, days when all rivalries were put to one side. Being up for Mary's was all that counted.

We weren't forced to attend cup matches. It was just expected that you'd go along, wear your blue rugby jersey with the white star-shaped crest and sing your heart out.

It helped that the juniors had cup runs to the final in my first two years in the school. Cup weeks were massive. We'd all be herded together in the school yard to practise the various songs and chants. In art class, we'd make posters flagging the match.

Then match-day would arrive. No afternoon classes. Yessss!

Someone's mum would collect four or five of us and we'd grab a chicken fillet roll somewhere on the way to Donnybrook or to Lansdowne Road, where the finals were played. Blue face-paint, school tie wrapped around the head, Samurai style. Then it was through the old turnstiles at the Bective end and straight into the stand, where we'd be packed tightly together, a block of blue, taking a lead from the cheerleaders. We'd be on our feet throughout, belting out the songs, completely hoarse by the end of it all.

My first Mary's hero was Shane Jennings. I have this image of him piling forward, the ball under his armpit, with Belvedere lads hanging off him. Jenno tells anyone who'll listen

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that I even asked him for his autograph after one game, but that's his imagination running away with itself. I wasn't one for autographs – but I did idolize Jenno. He was a superstar in school. Probably one of the greatest schoolboy players ever. Crowds would turn up to watch him, his reputation was so big.

'Jenno' would be a fairly typical Mary's nickname, by the way. Basically if it's possible to stick an 'o' on the end of your first or second name, that's what will happen. The school and club are habitually referred to as Maro's. Soon enough, I became Jono, and I still am to most who knew me growing up, including my wife.

To everyone else I was Jonathan, until Michael Cheika referred to me as 'Johnny' in a press conference and that stuck. He has a lot to answer for.

Anyway, back when I was in junior school, Jenno seemed like a giant. The Junior Cup, populated by monsters like him, was somewhere off in the distant future. Fortunately, there was a miniature version of it at Under-13 level – the Provincial Cup, as it was called, contested by a handful of Spiritan schools like Willow Park, St Michael's and ourselves, in the first year of secondary school. We tended to have a good record in this competition as well. That was mainly down to the guy who coached the 13s, year in, year out: Richie Hughes.

We all loved Richie. He brought such positive energy, so much encouragement, so much fun. I'm still very fond of him, and we're still in regular contact. He was my English teacher for three years, one of those teachers who can command attention without having to be stern. Richie doesn't really do stern. He's small with soft features, twinkling eyes behind large spectacles and a big walrus moustache, now silver.

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