

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Eddie O'Sullivan
Never Die Wondering

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Coaching Record

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About the Book

Hear the story of the rise of one of Irish rugby's great outsiders and, ultimately, his crushing fall.

As the longest-serving national coach in Irish rugby history, Eddie O'Sullivan produced a team that rose to third in the world rankings and laid down the standards for the team to fulfil its Grand Slam potential. Added to the three Triple Crowns he won in his six-year reign and the Corkman ought to enjoy legendary status in his homeland. Yet few figures in Irish sport divide opinion quite like O'Sullivan. Ireland's abject performance at the '07 World Cup in France prompted extraordinary levels of criticism and precipitated O'Sullivan's fall.

Here O'Sullivan talks candidly of the spectacular unravelling of confidence within probably the best Irish team in history; of the bizarre rumour mill that followed the Irish team through that World Cup; and takes us behind the scenes of a story that tossed an entire nation into mourning.

From his relationships with his successor as Irish coach, Declan Kidney, and indeed his predecessor, Warren Gatland, to his early struggle for recognition in the Irish game when the absence of a traditional rugby background militated against him, O'Sullivan pulls no punches in this revelatory story about far more than rugby.

About the Author

Eddie O'Sullivan is a former PE teacher who took an unorthodox route up the coaching ladder. O'Sullivan's first success was actually to deliver a national under-15 basketball crown to a small convent in Co. Galway. Yet, he would go on to guide his country to three Triple Crowns between '04 and '07. Now 50, he lives in Moylough, Co. Galway with wife Noreen and children, Katie and Barry.

Vincent Hogan is the Chief Sports Feature Writer of the *Irish Independent*. A former 'Sportswriter of the Year' and winner of the McNamee award for writing on gaelic games, his acclaimed autobiography of footballer Paul McGrath, *Back from the Brink*, won all three Irish Sports Book of the Year awards in 2006 - a unique achievement - as well as being voted 'Autobiography of the Year' at the British Sports Book awards.

**EDDIE
O'SULLIVAN**
Never Die Wondering
THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY



arrow books

To Noreen, Katie and Barry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Celebrity is an odd condition. In a small country like Ireland, it bestows certain privileges that can feed even the flimsiest ego. It might be a concert back-stage pass or an un-requested hotel-room upgrade, little kindnesses that elude the majority of paying customers.

But it has its flip side. Sometimes, under the glare of public scrutiny, it can feel as if your story becomes a movie about someone else's life. As Irish rugby coach, I was routinely depicted as dour and power-hungry. My reputation became a kind of caricature, family and friends often remarking that they could not reconcile it with the Eddie O'Sullivan they knew.

This was a relief because I didn't recognise the man being depicted either.

If I had one, over-riding motivation to write this book, that was it. To let people see behind that image and come to their own conclusions about me. To that end, I would like to offer my sincere thanks to Vincent Hogan for his help in gathering the threads of my story and weaving them into such coherent pattern.

I would like to thank Noreen, Katie and Barry - the three most important people in my life - for their endless love and support.

I would like to thank all those who helped Vincent put together the different strands of my story, particularly those who contributed their thoughts to the back of the book - Jack Clark, Brian O'Brien, Niall O'Donovan, Keith Wood, Brian O'Driscoll and Patrick 'Rala' O'Reilly.

It's hard to articulate adequately the respect I feel for all the people I've shared dressing-room space with across the years, be they players or staff. To list them all individually here would require a chapter in itself. Suffice to say, I've been lucky in the calibre of people I've worked with.

I'd like to thank John Baker for his solid guidance and judgement through rough and smooth.

And, finally, I'd like to thank editor, Tim Andrews, for his assistance in putting the finishing touches to *Never Die Wondering*.

I hope you enjoy the read. It tells the story of a man, not a caricature.

Eddie O'Sullivan, July 2009.

RUMOUR FACTORY

ITS NOT EASY to appreciate the comedy in a routine that identifies you as its punchline.

So I wasn't exactly slapping my sides the morning after our elimination from RWC 2007 when our final press conference in Paris pretty much became a stand-up's prop. Ristard Cooper's impersonation of RTE TV journalist Colm Murray drew a few guffaws from the floor. Good luck to him.

Maybe some find laughter therapeutic when their world has just caved in. And it's certainly all too easy to lose perspective in sport. We'd just had a shocking World Cup, but nobody died. Whatever wounds any of us were carrying to 'Charles de Gaulle' that day, the only real casualties were reputations.

In this instance, mine especially. I understood that. We'd been touted before the tournament as potential winners and, frankly, didn't run around frantically trying to douse that optimism. We knew what we had and what, potentially, we could achieve. If our game returned to the kind of choreography that had flattened England in the Six Nations, why not dare to dream?

It didn't though and, at my lowest ebb, the criticism now turned to open mockery in a Paris hotel. I thought it a little pathetic.

Much had been made of the IRFU's decision to give me a new contract *before* the tournament and now, of course, this fed an absolute frenzy of criticism. All that had gone

before counted for nothing. I wore the dunce's hat. A comedian posing as a journalist led the ridicule.

Our non-performance in France would feed a level of inquiry almost in keeping with the pursuit of corrupt planners and crooked bankers that has, in recent times, so fixated the Irish public. A Genesis report was commissioned, just as in 2002 when Roy Keane's departure from Saipan effectively split the country.

Everyone assumed there was a hidden story and I couldn't honestly blame them. Our time in France had been spent in such a blizzard of rumour and innuendo that the impression of major discord within the squad became inescapable. The rumours arrived in daily bulletins and, as best we could, we tried to make light of them.

Travelling to training, one of the resident court jesters (usually Frankie Sheahan or Brian Carney) would step to the front of the bus and call the 'protagonists' together. 'Drico, you are accused of punching Peter Stringer in the dressing room after the Georgia game. Gentlemen, come up here to kiss and make up ...'

Within hours of naming the team to play France, we were having dinner when the phone of Karl Richardson, our Media Liaison Officer, rang. I had left Geordan Murphy out of the match 22 and certain journalists seemed fixated on that decision. Karl was sitting beside me now, Geordan just across the table.

The reporter on the line said he'd heard that Geordan had stormed out of camp and gone back to Leicester. 'I don't think so,' said Karl.

'He hasn't left the camp then?'

'Well, he's sitting across from me having his dinner as we speak.' Karl then said in a pointedly loud voice, 'Geordan, there's a rumour that you've stormed out and gone back to Leicester!'

'Well, obviously, I haven't,' replied Geordan.

Other stories from the front line? Denis Leamy's form had suffered because I wouldn't allow him take his medication for diabetes! The Munster and Leinster players were at each other's throats.

Bear in mind, too, this was the week that *L'Equipe* did their contemptible hatchet job on Ronan O'Gara. I confronted the French journalist responsible after a press conference and told him he was a disgrace to his profession. His sole defence was that he had used the word 'rumour' in the allegations about ROG's private life. Incredibly, he took that as a licence to print lies.

We were aware of where he had sourced his information too, an Irish journalist who seemed especially sensitive to being seen anywhere close to our French 'friend' at that same press conference.

That Saturday, *L'Equipe* turned the gun on me. A real character assassination job. Pretty much no one noticed, though, because the game now dominated the newsprint. And it struck me that, whatever quibbles I might have had with the Irish media, I'd still happily choose most of them ahead of their French counterparts.

The night before our elimination by Argentina, a former international - Trevor Brennan - appeared on Irish television to plug his autobiography. Speaking on *Tubridy Tonight*, Trevor painted a pretty wretched picture of conditions within the Irish camp and he based that depiction on a conversation he said he'd had with Alan Quinlan. Now the story ran that after hearing about that interview I had stormed up to Quinny's room, hauled him out of bed and demanded an explanation.

The reality? Niall O'Donovan, the assistant coach, got a text from home about 11.15 p.m. saying Trevor had been on TV, quoting Quinlan about how bad things were in the Irish camp. Apparently, he'd considered 'doing a Roy Keane' out of France but reckoned nobody would even

notice if he had gone. So Niallo texted Quinny, something along the lines of, 'Trevor's hung you out to dry on RTE.'

Quinny was just off the lobby, checking his emails. He immediately texted back. Niallo had coached him since he was seventeen. The two were close. 'Can I see you in the lobby?' he said.

Quinny was absolutely disgusted with Trevor. He felt he'd been used opportunistically to create a stir. Me? I never even discussed the issue. Quite apart from not having hauled him out of bed, I didn't even bring it up in conversation. Twenty-four hours before a do-or-die World Cup game, it was pretty low down on my list of priorities.

I will admit to being pretty disappointed with Trevor, though. In 2002, I could have done with him for the summer tour to New Zealand. We were coming off a Six Nations hammering in Paris and he was just the kind of hard-nosed, uncompromising back-row forward I felt I'd need in the so-called 'House of Pain'.

But he had a shoulder problem that required minor surgery and, having just signed a contract to join Toulouse, I knew that coming to New Zealand would mean him missing pre-season in France. Toulouse was a massive opportunity for Trevor. We discussed it on the phone and he said he was happy to travel if I needed him.

'Look Trevor,' I said, 'get the operation out of the way and start your career with Toulouse on the right foot.' He was married with a kid and I was looking at the bigger picture. Trevor had his operation and never looked back. Five years later, I thought he could have shown more class.

But this was the kind of trivia fizzing all around us, sometimes at the expense of far more serious matters. One of the saddest aspects to our tournament would be the story of Simon Best falling ill with a problem that, effectively, ended his career as a professional rugby player. Simon took ill on a 'down day' in Bordeaux returning to the hotel feeling disorientated and having difficulties with his

speech. He was immediately transferred to the local hospital where an irregular heartbeat was identified as the problem. The realisation that his career was over shocked us all to the core.

But this, it seemed, wasn't interesting enough to get more than the most rudimentary of coverage against the more salacious works of fiction. I'm not pretending our World Cup base was Utopia. It wasn't. The hotel in Bordeaux left a bit to be desired and the food was certainly abysmal. Finding a suitable base had been hugely problematic. The hotels offered to us were uniformly mediocre and I'd had a huge row with two World Cup officials on this issue the day before we played France in the 2006 Six Nations.

They came to my room and were pushing for us to choose from the list, accusing me even of trying to undermine them by taking a reconnaissance trip of my own. This, I denied. 'You did and we have proof,' they said.

I stood up and announced 'Well this meeting has just ended. I'm not going to be called a liar ...'

Suddenly, they were aghast. They panicked and started to back-pedal. 'No, no, that's not what we're saying ...' I'd had enough though. I told them that, if they didn't get us a hotel that was up to scratch in Bordeaux, I would base the team in Paris for the duration of the tournament. This would have been calamitous for them. Bordeaux had paid the French Federation to get the Irish team down there. Us staying in Paris would, essentially, have seen the Federation break a contract. But most of the hotels we had been offered were appalling. They were two- or, at best, three-star by Irish standards. We sent a stiff letter to RWC to complain.

In the end, we settled on Sofitel, Le Lec. It wasn't great. Just a big, modern hotel in the middle of nowhere, plopped down beside a man-made lake. The plus points were that we had our own private gym, a massive team room, a

swimming pool and access to a perfect training pitch just ten minutes down the road.

The negatives? Well, let me tell you about the food.

We brought our own nutritionist, Ruth Wood Martin, to Bordeaux with us and the hotel chefs tried to work with her. But it just never seemed to click come meal time. There were maybe four typically French restaurants dotted around the hotel and the food in all four seemed to arrive either overcooked or undercooked. Ideally we would have used our own chef, but the hotel would not allow it.

In time I think everything about the place began to chafe. We were playing terrible rugby and, as a little uncertainty set in, the problems with our base seemed to amplify in the mind. I will say that the only complaints I heard from the players were to do with the food. One night a week, they'd take themselves to a nearby greasy-spoon style cafe, just to break the monotony. This wasn't ideal, to put it mildly.

Also, there was a sense of siege developing. When the players returned from training, most of them would head for a cooling dip in the pool. One day photographs appeared in a newspaper at home showing them poolside under the heading 'How do you expect to win matches when you're sunning yourselves by the pool?'

Another day, a group of them travelled to a nearby village for lunch and, when they didn't all leave together, it was depicted as some kind of collapse of team discipline. It was as if they'd been caught on the piss when, in fact, their behaviour was exemplary.

Over time, I've no doubt they came to hate the hotel in Bordeaux and everything about it. I know Ronan O'Gara wrote in his book that the original plan had been to stay in a brand-new Radisson, but 'it wasn't finished in time'. This wasn't the case. The Radisson was never going to be ready in time and, even if it had been, the French Federation would never have signed off on a five-star hotel.

So the Sofitel, Le Lec kind of became our prison. Between the swirl of rumour, the mediocre food and the general sense of disconnect that grew from being based, essentially, in an industrial estate, we couldn't wait to get out of the place.

And did I mention the rugby?

The build-up to RWC 07 was like a slow skydive into the mouth of a volcano. We lost two summer Tests in Argentina that were, essentially, 'A' internationals. I used them to give guys on the periphery a chance, the exact same plan we'd used prior to the 2003 World Cup, with one key difference. That tournament had started in October but, because the French now wanted a longer season for their own Championship, this one would begin the first week in September.

The scheduling cut out a month of pre-season, so we took a twin-track approach. Our best players would skip the tour and concentrate on that pre-season work. It was logical. The media, subsequently, dubbed the guys left behind as 'the untouchables', but I had outlined the plan at our winter camp in Portugal after the 2006 autumn series. Everybody knew (including the IRFU), and, generally, agreed.

We were supposed to then have three warm-up games, against South Africa, Scotland and Italy. The Springboks pulled out. Why? It was rumoured that they were miffed over New Zealand winning the vote to stage RWC 2011. Who's to say? They ended up, bizarrely, playing a game against Connacht in the Sportsground. We didn't replace the fixture.

I had a clear dilemma for the Scotland and Italy games. Did I field my best fifteen or wrap them up in cotton wool? The Six Nations had confirmed my oft-stated view that we didn't have the depth to be able to afford the loss of key players. Brian O'Driscoll and Peter Stringer missed the

game with France at Croke Park and I will always believe that cost us a Grand Slam.

So I chose the cotton wool approach, my priority being to keep guys healthy.

The Scotland defeat (21-31) at Murrayfield would be our only loss to them during my tenure as Ireland coach. I used the game to blood people like Tommy Bowe, Brian Carney and Rob Kearney. Shane Horgan twisted his knee in the warm-up and almost missed the World Cup as a result.

The alarm bells had begun to ring.

I could see that the Scots were ahead of us in terms of match practice. They looked much sharper, a team further down the road than us. We flew to a warm-weather camp in the south of France after and, sensing we needed more game time, I accepted an invitation to play the local side, Bayonne.

This was a mistake. With one of their key players, former French international Richard Dourthe, setting the tone through some pre-match verbals, they proved absolutely filthy. There was a point in the game where I remember thinking to myself, 'This is fucking lunacy!' I couldn't wait for it to end.

At half-time, I'd had words with referee, Wayne Barnes. In an extremely hostile environment, I felt he hadn't been giving us any protection. Barnes was furious with me. 'You can't come to me like this,' he said. However I was more preoccupied with player safety than with etiquette.

I told him that I'd take the team off the field if he didn't get control of the game. It had turned ugly once we got a couple of scores up and nothing was being done to rein it in. In the closing minutes, their New Zealand-born lock, Makaera Tewhata, threw a punch off the ball and an expression I'd last heard on the 2005 Lions tour now made my blood run cold.

'Drico's down ...'

That evening was spent in the hotel lobby, waiting for the results of an MRI on our captain's cheek. His face was swollen like a pumpkin. Eventually our doc, Gary O'Driscoll, arrived in with the news that Drico's sinus was fractured and he was touch-and - go for our opening game in the World Cup.

The Bayonne coach apologised afterwards and, at an official RWC function in Paris just before the tournament began, the French manager and captain - Joe Maso and Rafael Ibanez - both made a point of declaring the incident 'a disgrace'.

As France were in our World Cup group, maybe a few of the Bayonne people thought they were fulfilling some kind of patriotic deed. This notion, I was assured by Maso, would have been utterly repugnant to the French management. Drico was actually supposed to be at that function in Paris, but I wouldn't hear of it. We were flying out of Dublin the following day to our camp in Bordeaux and he had still to have his cheek formally cleared for the tournament.

He would make it in the end, but Tewhata's punch had been, literally, millimetres away from putting him out of the World Cup.

By now, of course, I had a real sense of foreboding. Our final warm-up game had produced a larcenous 23-20 defeat of Italy at Ravenhill. We were shocking, a late, disputed try by ROG giving us what I can categorically describe as the least enjoyable Test win of my time in charge of Ireland.

Even the build-up had been fraught. Huge pressure came on us from certain quarters to have 'God Save the Queen' played beforehand. In fairness to the Ulster Branch, it wasn't coming from them. There was a strong non-rugby element pressing hard. Then a few of our own people started pushing for 'Amrann na bhFiann'. It descended into tit-for-tat patriotism.

The flatness of our play was now a real cause for concern. I'd pretty much put out the full Test team, bar our captain, but there was no confidence in their play. I spoke to Niallo. He shared every single one of my worries. The players looked like they hadn't played enough rugby. In an ideal world, I'd immediately have rewound three months.

But this wasn't an ideal world. We were headed into the mouth of the volcano.

One of the sayings I've been known to use in rugby is: 'You can't un-ring a bell!'

And that was our essential difficulty in France now. We arrived at the tournament undercooked. My call, my mistake, I accept that. Suddenly, the team was in dire need of rugby and we'd run out of time to give it to them. Wrapping the players in cotton wool had backfired.

In Belfast I had seen them almost shy away from physical contact against the Italians. We had a crisis now and that crisis meant a rewriting of my original World Cup plan. I had intended selecting two very different teams for the openers against Namibia and Georgia. But, after struggling to beat the Namibians 32-17, I knew I had to put the Test side out again.

The Georgia game was nightmarish. I have an abiding memory of the Georgians camped on our line with ten minutes left and we couldn't get the ball off them. If they had scored, they'd probably have won the match and going out of the World Cup to Georgia would have been utter humiliation. We fell over the line 14-10 in the end and, afterwards, I had the senior players up to my room. We were shell-shocked, but there was no panic. Nobody was tossing the toys out of the pram, saying, Fuck this! We still believed that, if things came right, we could beat France in Paris.

But the mood at home had curdled now. I remember seeing a so-called 'fan' interviewed on RTE after the

Georgia game declare himself 'ashamed to be Irish'. And all I could think was, 'Fuck, I'm glad I'm not in the trenches with you, mate'.

I then heard that the Union's Director of Fitness, Liam Hennessy, was on his way to Bordeaux. The fire-fighting had begun. Liam and I go back a long way, almost thirty years in fact to our days together in Thomond College. He had been fundamental to our planning for RWC 2007 and the four-year bulking up of players we considered so essential after our tired elimination from the 2003 tournament.

Liam fully endorsed the 'cotton wool' approach, believing - like me - that our priority should be to arrive in France with a group of fit, healthy players. Now I couldn't help wonder what his intention was coming to Bordeaux.

I invited him up to my room the moment he arrived.

He immediately started questioning me about our training sessions and suggested that, perhaps, he might have 'a chat' with the players. I wouldn't hear of it. Our training was unchanged from what we'd always done. Training wasn't the problem. Lack of rugby was.

Basically, I told Liam to stay out of the way. The last thing I needed was him having little *tête-à-têtes* with players in the background. Bottom line, there was nothing being done in training that hadn't been agreed upon in advance. I felt he had arrived, essentially, to be seen to be hands-on.

'Liam, I don't want you around here,' I said. 'You've no business here. You're not going to be coaching the team, training the team or having meetings with the team. This is a war zone, things aren't going well. It's up to me to sort it out. The best thing you can do is go!' And he did.

In a sense, we continued this conversation the week before we played Italy in the following year's Six Nations. I felt that he had hung me out to dry in the Genesis Report,

claiming that I'd 'overpractised' the team. If I have a problem with someone, I'm not one for tiptoeing around it.

It was the Tuesday morning in Killiney and I asked for him to come to my room. He arrived up with Eddie Wigglesworth, the IRFU's Director of Rugby, and stood his ground. Said he had the paperwork to prove that the team was 'overpractised'. Then he came up with this term called 'the forty-eight-hour rule'.

'What's that?' I asked.

'You shouldn't train them in the forty-eight hours immediately after a game.'

'But we've always trained within forty-eight hours of playing.'

'No we haven't.'

'So if we play England in Croke Park on a Saturday evening and the game ends at 7.30 p.m., you're telling me we don't train before 7.30 that Monday night?'

I felt he was bullshitting. Based on the information I had received from the Genesis people, he had been the only one making any accusations against me and none of those accusations were backed up with any evidence. Not one of the players had complained of being pushed too hard.

I had been offered the opportunity to apportion blame myself and didn't take it. Any of the fitness advice we'd been given beforehand - be it our use of the cryotherapy facility in Spala, whatever - I agreed with. I wasn't now going to go and start throwing stones. Yet the word coming back from Genesis was that Liam said I'd basically burnt out the team.

I'd had enough. I admit I told Liam to 'fuck off' out of the room and that was the last time we spoke.

I'm not quite sure what people expected of me in the immediate aftermath.

Within minutes of our 15-30 loss to Argentina in the Parc des Princes, I was asked by a TV reporter pitchside if I

intended to resign. The question didn't surprise me, but I did think it was unfair. I hadn't even had a chance to speak to the players and she seemed to expect me to make some immediate announcement. To me, it wasn't a question looking for an answer. It was a question looking for a reaction.

I was very angry. It embodied the tone of the whole media coverage. 'Kick them when they're down' type of thing. We were on our knees emotionally and the general instinct seemed to be to give us a good kicking now. You could detect a palpable sense of delight in some quarters that things had gone so badly wrong.

I couldn't get away, of course, from the fact that we'd played abysmally in the tournament. Our play reminded me of pre-qualifying for the previous World Cup, when we'd gone to Russia and, basically, been a bundle of nerves. Confidence is a brittle thing and, right now, ours was in small pieces on the floor.

Right up to the French game, I think we genuinely believed we could pull things round. But referee Chris White blew us off the park that night and the defeat left us needing to score a minimum of four tries against the Pumas for a bonus point win. I have to hand it to the players, they never gave up. But we needed absolutely everything to go right for us, while Argentina just had to wait for our mistakes.

No question, they took great pleasure in knocking us out. If Argentina could have picked a team they wanted to piss off more than any other in the World Cup, I've no doubt they'd have chosen us. There was definite bad blood between the teams and that was reflected in the amount of on-field 'sledding'. Felipe Contepomi said something disparaging in the press about me afterwards. For a guy who got his medical degree in Ireland, I found that pretty ungracious.

In the dressing room after the game I sincerely thanked the players for their efforts. 'Nobody can point a finger at any of ye,' I said. 'Ye never once stopped trying. Ye never gave up.'

We had a sense of the kicking that now loomed, but we weren't alone. Wales were heading home as well. Australia would soon follow. New Zealand too. In fact, in my darkest moments after the World Cup, I used think of Graham Henry and the 24-hour *Talk Rugby* stations in New Zealand. Many of the All Blacks fans had decided to time their arrival in France for the semi-finals. They were flying in just as their team flew home.

Coming back, I was in a very dark place. I felt absolutely gutted and my biggest concern now was for the family. Some of the media commentary had become so lacking in insight or balance, all sense of perspective seemed lost.

I didn't consider quitting. To me, there was a logical reason for our non-performance. The Genesis report would say exactly what I expected, that (a) there was no trouble in the camp and (b) we just hadn't played enough rugby in the build-up. There was absolutely no suggestion of me losing the confidence of the players and, as such, I didn't feel there was any reason to walk away.

I'd missed our 25th wedding anniversary while at the World Cup, so Noreen and I now flew down to Nice for a couple of days while the tournament was still in progress. It felt strange watching France and Argentina get to the semi-finals. Essentially, the two teams that got out of our group finished third and fourth in the world.

To me, that just confirmed the opportunity that had slipped through our fingers. Had we brought our Six Nations form to France, we'd have been in with a real shout.

Instead, we were now facing into a hostile winter. And, if I didn't turn things around, the blood in the water would be mine.

ENDGAME

THE NIGHT BEFORE the Lions squad was announced for this summer's tour to South Africa, I sat in a tiny apartment in Boulder, Colorado, surfing the Net for speculation on Ian McGeechan's intentions.

It was about 11 p.m. locally and I will admit to a wistful thought that it could have been me striding into that Heathrow hotel the following morning to announce my selection to challenge the Springboks. Instead, I faced the more mundane business of haggling over the price of a rucking net and seeing if, perhaps, I could book a meeting room in Charleston free of charge.

Heading into the 2007 World Cup, I was considered a front-runner to coach the 2009 Lions. I'd have loved the job. Having seen at close quarters the mistakes made during the 2005 tour of New Zealand, I had very definite ideas on how the trip to South Africa should have been managed.

But my share value plummeted at the key moment, Ireland enduring that miserable World Cup and following it up with just two victories out of five in the 2008 Six Nations, my worst return in seven seasons as national coach. In a matter of months, then, I went from front-runner to - essentially - slipping off the radar.

I can't deny that this was hard to take. I think I'd have been a pretty decent Lions coach, had I got the opportunity.

Ireland's form didn't exactly reflect a meltdown. Two of our defeats (against France and Wales) were by a single

score, yet the loss in Paris alerted me to the pretty toxic attitude that now informed the work of certain journalists. The week after that game I took a call from one sportswriter wishing to 'disassociate' himself from the behaviour of two of his colleagues in the press box after one of the French tries.

Apparently, these two Irish journalists jumped up and cheered the score, almost involuntarily betraying their desire to see the back of me. Hearing that was one of my lowest moments as a coach. I felt sickened.

My last official engagement as Ireland coach had brought one unexpectedly pleasant surprise. We'd lost our final game in the Six Nations, thumped 10-33 by a Danny Cipriani-inspired England at Twickenham. Though I hadn't yet actually decided to resign, I realised I'd certainly have to consider my position.

In the dressing room afterwards, I stayed non-committal. There was a deathly silence in the place and I just thanked everyone for the effort put in. 'What happens next, I don't know,' I said. My words may have borne a tone of resignation, but I was genuinely undecided.

I then headed out to do the customary RTE television interview. On the way, I passed a young English journalist I felt I'd been quite helpful to over the previous few years. He didn't look up, but as I moved through a door, I could hear him murmur to a colleague, 'Dead man walking.'

To some degree I was lost in private thoughts at the post-game banquet as England captain Phil Vickery got up to speak. I didn't know Vickery and was a little startled to hear him mention my name. But he began to talk really touchingly of the contribution I had made to Irish rugby. He said he understood the pressure I was coming under now but that he hoped 'sense would prevail' and I'd be allowed to continue my work as coach.

I thought it was a wonderfully magnanimous thing for him to do at a time when my predicament had to be a long

way down any list of English priorities. Before I left the function, I went to his table and thanked him.

Our journey home from London the following day had a comical dimension. We'd flown into a private airfield on the Thursday and been taken straight to our base at Penny Hill Park. But high winds now closed the airfield, so we were re-routed to Gatwick. The place was like a zoo and, by the time we got airborne, four hours had been lost.

I went to Killiney to collect my car and had a quick cup of tea with my agent, John Baker, before heading home to Moylough. 'Have you thought about what you want to do?' John asked.

'I have,' I said. 'I just want a night to sleep on it.'

The IRFU, in fairness, had given me the Six Nations to fix things and, for whatever reason, I hadn't got them fixed. Our defeat in Paris had been a mirror image of previous near misses, the French building a lead only for us to almost catch them on the home straight; we'd lost to a single line-break against Wales and, then, we'd gone to Twickenham without our midfield, both Brian O'Driscoll and Gordon D'Arcy being out injured.

We certainly hadn't been conspicuously lucky but I sensed too that media negativity had begun to undermine confidence within the team. Now that same media was agitating for news. By the time I got home, I felt exhausted and went to bed. But before I did, I made the decision to resign. My reasoning has always been to sleep on a decision before making any announcements. If you wake contented, then you know it's the right decision. If not, it's time for a rethink.

I woke the following morning feeling a calm sense of achievement. Nobody from the Union had put the remotest pressure on me to go, but - on reflection - it was a 'no-brainer'. Much as I, personally, might have been tempted to stay on, would it have been the right decision for the team, for my family, for the IRFU?

The answer to all three, I had to admit, was almost certainly, 'NO!'

We decided to delay releasing the news until 9 p.m. the following day in the hope that it might fall somewhere between late bulletins and breakfast TV and, essentially, be 'old hat' within 24 hours. I didn't want a media circus.

On the Tuesday, I came to Dublin to put things in order and was sitting alone in a bedroom in the Citywest Hotel that evening as 'BREAKING NEWS' began to flash across the TV screen. I felt perfectly serene watching the announcement of my resignation.

Early the following morning, a photographer materialised outside the house, forcing Noreen to close the blinds. Her brother, Martin, who lives locally, informed the local garda sergeant.

The photographer's car was parked badly and the sergeant gently told him that it might be a wise thing to move it from the main road. Soon after, it started to rain heavily and, by the time I arrived down from Dublin, the photographer had departed.

Paul O'Connell had phoned me the moment the story broke. Brian O'Driscoll, Shane Horgan and Donnacha O'Callaghan subsequently wrote letters. Over time, I would get to communicate with most of the players I'd worked with so closely for the previous six and half years and I can say - hand on heart - I departed on good terms with them all.

It's funny how the media gets a view on a coach's relationship with certain players. The impression was always given that I didn't like Geordan Murphy, that we were endlessly at loggerheads. That wasn't the case. True, I often preferred Girvan Dempsey as my fullback, but this was a rugby decision, nothing more.

Geordan, after all, had six caps to his name when I became Irish coach. By the time I finished, he had almost sixty. I must have seen something in him.

Geordan is a guy I have a lot of time for. Of course, he was upset with me at times. What top player wouldn't be if he thinks he's been wrongly omitted from a team? But it was never vindictive, never personal. Maybe seven months after leaving the Ireland job, I was in London to coach an international fifteen in the 'Help for Heroes' fund-raising game for injured veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I bumped into Geordan at one of the functions and we had a really enjoyable chat.

Actually, we had a good laugh about speculation that had been linking me with the coaching job at Leicester, where Geordan is such a coveted player.

'Lucky for you I didn't get it,' I said, grinning.

'Jesus yeah, I'd have been ruined,' he said laughing.

That event was a real eye-opener. I met some extraordinary people there, guys whose lives had been turned upside down in seconds. It was an incredible dose of reality. We get sucked into sport and, sometimes, losing a big game can feel like the end of the world.

When we talk about rugby, we talk about courage and putting your body on the line. And we mean it. But the truth is we don't know what real courage is. The guy running 'Help for Heroes' put it to us in pretty stark terms. He said, 'You're at one end of the pitch and one of your buddies needs help at the other. What do you do? To a man you're ready to help him, right? Just one thing before you go. Unfortunately fifteen per cent of you won't make it back and another twenty per cent will come back badly injured. OK?

'Now off you go and rescue your buddy!'

It was a crash course in perspective that reminded me of a trip to Auschwitz with the Irish team in 2001. We were spending three weeks in Spala and, to break the tedium, decided to bring the players to Krakow for the weekend. En route, we took a detour to the scene of Nazi mass murder.

And on this glorious, sun-splashed Friday, we slipped through the gates of Auschwitz for a two-hour tour that proved incredibly harrowing. Maybe the most disturbing sight was a long room with this huge glass case running the length of it, filled with victims' shoes. Another was full of suitcases. Another of spectacles.

And it hit us right between the eyes that these items belonged to real people, real victims about to be sent to the gas chambers. We were told the putrid history of the place, saw the hatches through which cyanide pills were tossed and couldn't but notice the bullet marks in the walls.

Coming away that day, I will always remember the absolute silence on the bus, the palpable sense of incredulity at man's inhumanity to man. The following day, driving back to Spala, we were watching the movie *Stand By Me*. When the credits came on at the end and the theme song began to play, 45 voices on the bus spontaneously sang it out in unison.

And I couldn't help think that, somehow, Auschwitz was still in people's heads.

To begin with, my time out of work was strange. I'd been a part of the Ireland coaching set-up for eight and half years and, so, the June day they played New Zealand in Wellington, I felt completely at sea, sitting at home in County Galway, almost aching for involvement in a game being played at the far end of the planet.

I did go to America for a while, two personal friends inviting me across to give clinics at Brown University in Rhode Island and Notre Dame. They put the word around and, suddenly, a ten-day visit had swollen to five weeks. Eventually, I had to turn down invitations to Utah, Dallas and Philadelphia.

And I loved that simple energy of being back on a training pitch with players. It kind of reasserted my love for the game and an absolute desire to get back on the horse.

When the chance then arose to be Eagles coach, I jumped at it. It's a different world to Ireland, no question. Budgets are tight, logistics hugely difficult. But I wasn't new to US Rugby. I'd served a large part of my coaching apprenticeship in America and I always loved the energy there, the hunger for information.

The standard may not be what I became accustomed to with Ireland, but the work ethic certainly is. You have to respect what these people do. I had the coaches in for a staff meeting on Easter Sunday and it went on for ten hours because we simply had to get everything covered in a single day. I'd forgotten how big the country is. I went on a road trip to have a look at our summer facilities and it took me four full days to see three venues.

A lot of the US players have put their careers on hold to play for the Eagles. And that's a dangerous thing to do in the current economic climate. Yet they do it unquestioningly. Some of these guys are desperate to get America to the next World Cup despite the fact they themselves will probably be gone by the time it comes round.

It strikes me that America hasn't changed since I was last here. Ireland has. I was home in April and the general sense of morbidity and depression over the ailing economy was overwhelming. The blame game was in full flow. In America, they were looking for answers. In Ireland, culprits.

I could recognise that because, to some extent, I'd been through it. When things went wrong for Ireland at the 2007 World Cup, someone had to be brought to book. There had to be someone's head on a stake. There was this sense of 'How dare you perform so poorly on the big stage!'

I understood the argument about people spending good money to follow the team to France. Their disappointment was massive and sincere. But no one was more