

Graham Jones is reaching out to offenders with his prison rugby programme

PETER O'REILLY



On seeing the assortment of adolescents gathered outside St Patrick's Institution for young offenders, the initial thought is: Belvedere haven't sent their strongest team. Gangly limbs, croaking voices, random sportswear. Of the eight transition year students, three admit that they're not playing any organised sport at the moment. Yet here they are, to play rugby against 18 and 19-year-olds who've been convicted of violent crimes against society.

At least we can be sure that these boys are brave, and curious, and committed to the social justice programme so central to a fee-paying school in Dublin's inner city. They are not skipping class. About 40 boys had volunteered to take part. Parents filled out consent forms — though one concerned mother had demanded a guarantee that her boy wouldn't be stabbed before she would sign.

The boys and their teacher, Mr Colohan, are greeted warmly by Graham Jones, whose unlikely idea it was to set up a rugby programme in St Pat's — known as the 'Baby Joy' because of its proximity to Mountjoy Prison. Graham is a reassuring presence, a born communicator with a kind, bearded face but also the physical solidity of a former back-rower. After a nod from the prison officer, he takes us through security.

The Institution's main buildings are part of a Victorian prison complex. As far back as 1985, the Whitaker Committee's Report of Inquiry into the Penal System condemned it as "an environment that would contribute to further delinquency... rather than any rehabilitative function." In 2008, the prison chaplains' annual report characterised St Pat's as 'a monument to the failure of the state'.

We are due in B wing, which houses prisoners from Dublin between the ages of 18 and 21, mostly in tiny single cells for 17 hours a day, though some have to double up when capacity is exceeded. Those 'on protection' on the third storey are locked up for 23 hours of every day.

The cells are quiet because most of their inhabitants are in the canteen. No accidental timing, this. Last year, the first time Graham brought a team through here, the inmates banged on bars and shouted at the visitors about the fate that awaited them.

Through more security doors, the yard is all tarmac, brick, iron and coils of barbed wire, sealed off by a net, 15 feet high, to prevent illicit deliveries. Beyond the far wall is a Dickensian red-brick chimney, as if for cinematic effect. But what grabs immediate attention is the opposition, who

already occupy the centre of the yard.

They look intimidating, with tight haircuts, long shorts and sleeveless vests, all the better to show off the weight-lifting they've been doing in the prison gym (regular gym attendance is what has earned them selection for today's game). They already have a ball and are passing and kicking it at each other, darting and barking. The Belvo boys shuffle uncertainly while Graham lays out some cones.

Earlier, he had pleaded that the story would not be about him. But without him, there would be no story. He may not be first middle-class south-side

lawyer to chuck it all in for a life helping those less fortunate than he, but he is surely the first to use rugby as an agent of hope.

Now in his mid-30s, he is from classic rugby stock — educated in High School, Rathgar, and at UCD, where he qualified in Business and Legal Studies and won his rugby colours. For seven years, he led a double life of sorts, working in conveyance law in the IFSC during the week, then helping the underprivileged of Dublin 8 through a Saturday club, and setting up a rugby club, the Liberty Saints, in 2006/07.

He had always had an interest in social justice, one he

shared with his wife Louise. They had got engaged during one of several outreach programmes he did in Romania. With the collapse of the property market, he sensed an opportunity.

"I worked seven years as a solicitor and there were quite a lot of times when I felt frustrated with never being fully satisfied with how I was spending the majority of my time," he says. "When conveyancing started to crumble, there was a reason to stop and think, 'Why am I doing this?' We had to make some very tough decisions, and I couldn't have done this without Louise's backing. People say I'm very

brave to do what I do but I don't consider myself brave at all. It's a calling."

Together with a friend, Salla Heron, he set up the Solas Project, to tackle early school leaving and youth crime, using after-school intervention programmes and sport. With three full-time staff, two part-time and about 70 volunteers, they rely on trust funds, government grants and donations. But at present there is no funding for the prison and probation programme, beyond some welcome assistance from the St Stephen's Green Trust.

But how rugby? "The two anchors in my own life are family and rugby," he says. "So

many of the skills I have now I learnt through rugby, whether it be teamwork, hard work, keeping your mouth shut, discipline, that whole idea of 'When the going gets tough, the tough get going', pulling together with people. My first love was soccer but I just know that rugby lends itself to teaching certain life skills.

"I see those life skills missing in a lot of young people and because of that they'll end up in very serious and sad circumstances. I can coach rugby and I'm quite good at it. At the same time I've a great heart to reach out to people on the margins of society. I wanted to put those two things together."

He admits it can be difficult to explain the concept of controlled aggression to kids hardened by violence. Seconds before the start of one game involving the Liberty Saints, the referee took him aside to tell him one of his Saints had a wheel-brace up his sleeve.

But Graham backs his ability to communicate and connect. On arrival at his first training session in St Pat's, 12 months ago, half of his 'players' had their backs to him, sullen and uncooperative. "You'll last 10 seconds with this lot," said the assistant governor. Forty-five minutes later, they went back to their cells lathered in sweat. Last Tuesday, what struck

you about the Pat's lads was their raw energy but also their athletic ability. For the warm-up game, teams are mixed as a gesture towards integration. But for the game proper, it is Belvo v Pat's in a game of tag rugby — pink tags against yellow. "We're good at ripping tags from stealing mobile phones," jokes one of the inmates.

Graham needs a quick wit to handle all the back-chat but never raises his voice. He takes quick breaks to explain the benefit of a flat defensive line, no matter how slow-moving it may be. There are tumbles on the tarmac, grazed knees, but any violence is accidental. Conor, the tallest of the Belvedere boys, gets a bloody lip as an opponent swings at the ball with his foot. A prison officer suggests a stitch in Temple Street Hospital but Conor says no, he's fine. His dad is a doctor. He just wants to get on with the game.

Final whistle. 7-6 to Pat's. "Of course we f*****g won! And we're a f*****g institution!" Jones gets the teams to shake hands, then asks the Belvedere boys for their assessment. All positive. "Ah, youse are just saying that to be nice."

Camaraderie might be too strong a word but there has been a connection. On the way back through B Wing, the hosts show their visitors the inside of a cell — maybe 8ft by 5ft, with a single tiny window and a poster of The Godfather on the wall. Back on the corridor, they point upwards through the steel mesh, mocking, at an inmate 'on protection'. "There he is. The granny-basher."

There is tea, sandwiches and Coke in the gym, some chit-chat, but no hanging around. After handshakes, we are through security and back out on the street. The visitors enjoyed their time inside, and ask about the re-match. The teams might be different, says Graham. One of the Pat's team is due out next Friday.

And what happens then? Graham offers himself as a support, someone to keep in touch with, give advice, help. He reckons 50% will take him up on the offer. He just wishes he had more men to act as mentors.

"The only reason I'm doing this is that there's a problem with young men getting caught up in crime and victims suffering as a result," he says. "It's repetitive, the same people caught up in the system, and we need to find a solution. There is a great potential in relations being built up with young men while in prison for them then to be supported on the outside, by their choice, not mine."

"An example? One of the young men I hooked up with a year ago got out during the summer and started his work experience in a coffee shop. He can't understand that someone is giving this opportunity because it hasn't happened for him before but he's moving forward slowly. And there he was yesterday, scrubbing pots in the kitchen with this massive smile on his face. I was blown away by that."

A Blackrock College team is due to play in B Wing next Wednesday. More information on the Solas project is available at www.solasproject.ie

Ulster rugby salutes memory of Nevin Spence

Sporting community unites to remember a well-loved rising star, writes Peter O'Reilly

ON FRIDAY, the Ulster players came together at Newforge for their first training session since the death of Nevin Spence. This has been an impossibly difficult week for them. The bodies of supremely fit, powerful young men are conditioned to expect activity and so optional games of football had been available at their training base on the outskirts of Belfast. Mentally and spiritually, there must be an emptiness that will remain for some time.

After the press conference given by Shane Logan and David Humphreys at Ravenhill seven days ago, public utterances by players and

management have been kept to a minimum, with a midweek statement from captain Johann Muller representing the feelings of the squad in its entirety.

Muller spoke eloquently of the grief and the loss felt by the entire Ulster rugby family. He acknowledged that Spence is also a loss to Irish rugby, given his talent, his competitive nature and especially given his chosen position.

Of the various centres emerging as contenders for an area of the international team that has been sealed off for the past decade, Spence was the closest to Brian O'Driscoll in terms of aggression and speed.

The finer points needed tuning but at 22, he had time, or so we thought. It came as no surprise to learn that the Ireland captain was an admirer.

The erosion of the 'A' team Six Nations and Ireland's recent withdrawal from the Churchill Cup, means that opportunities have been sparse for those youngsters looking to bridge the gap between Ireland Under-20 and the senior national team. This season, again, there is just one fixture scheduled, against the England Saxons. In three appearances for the Wolfhounds, as Ireland's 'A' team is called, Spence showed the appetite and the ability for international competition.

"I was a big fan of Nevin," says Anthony Foley, one of the Wolfhounds coaches. "A couple of seasons ago, he went off at half-time in Netherdale and it had a lot to do with our losing to the Scots. The

following week against the Saxons, he was up against Manu Tuilagi and he put on a masterclass, making outside breaks and absolutely solid in defence. He was a fella you'd look forward to working with. "He was alongside Eoin

“**PEOPLE TALK OF HIS ABILITY BUT HE WAS AN EXCEPTIONALLY NICE PERSON**”

O'Malley in the centre — they weren't the biggest pair but jeez, their hearts were big. They mightn't have been the leading lights at their provinces but they were an exciting pairing when we worked with them. Nevin was a character.

"All of the boys in the squad looked forward to him being around and it must be ridiculously tough for the Ulster boys now."

O'Malley says it felt strange to have so much respect for someone of a similar age, who was also a competitor. The best centre partnerships are built on trust, especially in defence. Even before they joined up in training for the first time, O'Malley knew from having watched and played against the Ulsterman that he would be a dependable partner.

"We only played three games together over the space of two seasons," says O'Malley.

"He was hard and he was tough and he was honest — those were his massive strong points and what made him a very likable character. He's someone I'd huge respect for, the way he played and threw himself into things. He wasn't afraid of much and he'd do anything to win a game. In rugby, if people like that make mistakes no one really cares because everyone knows they're trying their heart out. It's a pretty likable quality in a rugby player."

"Everyone has been talking about his rugby ability but he was also an exceptionally nice person — one of the more humble characters you'd come across, especially for someone who was only 22 and was on the way to achieving a lot." So many young sportsmen have been taken in recent years — Gaelic footballers Cormac McAnallen and Brian Og Maguire, cricketers Ben



Special talent: Ulster's Nevin Spence was well regarded

Holloake and Tom Maynard. Spence's death perhaps stretches our powers of comprehension the furthest given the tragedy of the family also losing Noel, Nevin's father, and Graham, his older brother, in such horrific circumstances.

The rugby community is lending what support it can. For the time being, neighbours and members of Ballynahinch

RFC are helping to run the family farm on Drumlough Road, near Hillsborough, which has 200 head of cattle. A minute's silence has been held before matches in Ireland and the UK this weekend, followed by renditions of 'Stand up for the Ulstermen'.

A memorial service will be held in Ravenhill this afternoon at 3pm. All will be united in grief and disbelief.



Tough talking: Graham Jones, who runs Solas Project in Dublin, gives 18- and 19-year-olds at St Patrick's Institution a pep talk ahead of a rugby match against Belvedere



THE REFORM GAME

Former England captain Lawrence Dallaglio is also using rugby to help young people. His charitable foundation in the UK works with the Rugby for Change initiative to divert troubled teenagers away from gang and criminal activity by introducing them to the game

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