



Munster's Red Army: the fans at Thomond Park are known as the best in the world

(LL)

End of an era at Thomond Park



The Claw: Peter Clohessy signs autographs

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By DAVID HURLEY

OVER 14,000 passionate rugby fans, including Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, will pack into Thomond Park this Saturday evening for the last ever Heineken Cup match to be played at the historic venue before the wrecking ball moves in.

This week, Limerick City Council formally granted planning permission for the redevelopment of the ground which will see its capacity more than double to 29,000.

Former Munster and Ireland star Cllr Gerry McLoughlin, was one of those who voted in favour of the project at a

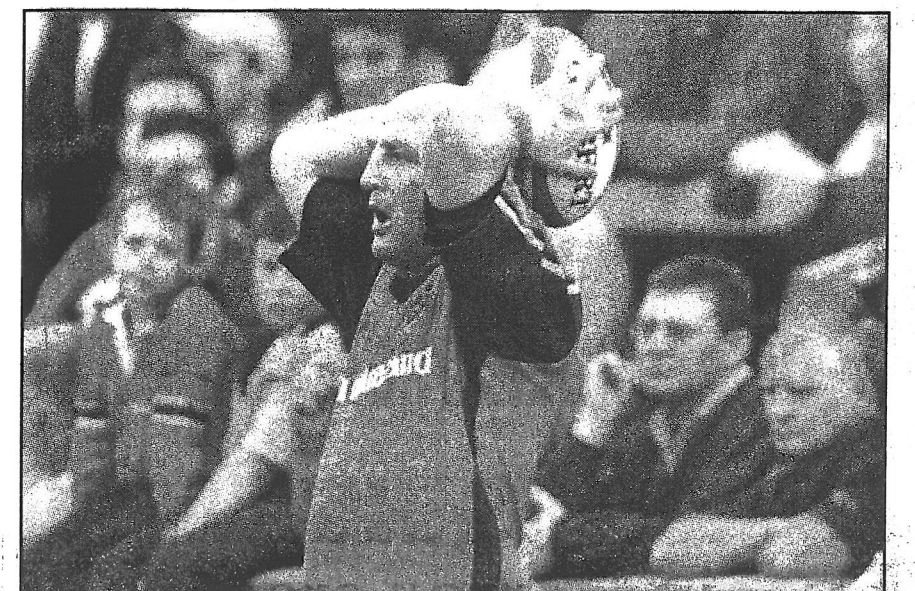
will openly admit the fear of being the first to lose at Thomond often drives them on.

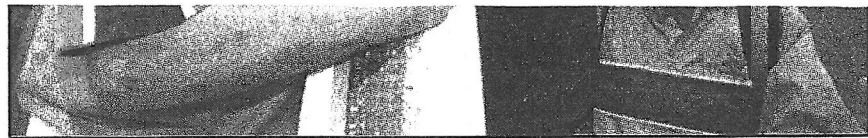
History will record that the first ever match to be played at Thomond Park featured Young Munster and Bohemian in November 1934. For the record Young Munster emerged victorious 8-0.

Although synonymous with rugby, Thomond Park has also hosted the occasional soccer match.

A number of European and FAI cup matches were played there in the 1960s, and in 1980 Limerick United played Tottenham Hotspur in a pre-season friendly.

Undoubtedly there will be an





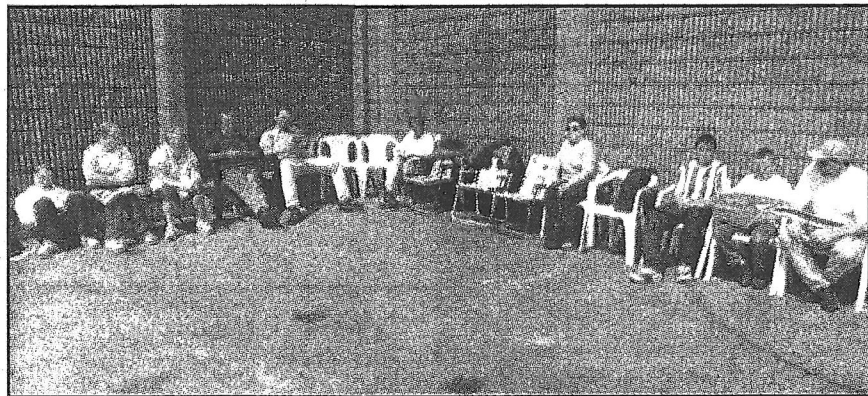
The Claw: Peter Clohessy signs autographs

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International fare: Gerry Longwell after the Ireland and Romania match in 2002

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Long wait: fans queue for a ticket for the 2002 European Cup final

planning permission for the redevelopment of the ground which will see its capacity more than double to 29,000.

Former Munster and Ireland star Cllr Gerry McLoughlin, was one of those who voted in favour of the project at a special meeting on Monday night.

"I am delighted the stadium is being kept in the city, it is an elevated site and the field is not going to be moved around so future generations will be playing on the same field. Every young person in Limerick wants to go to Thomond Park either to play there or to support Munster," he said.

There have been many special occasions at the spiritual home of Irish rugby down through the decades, most memorably the "miracle match" against Gloucester in 2003 and the 12-0 victory over the All Blacks on October 31, 1978.

That victory is enshrined in sporting folklore and it is claimed that 100,000 Limerick people attended the match.

Many of those who played that day were immediately catapulted into the realm of sporting heroes, where they remain to this very day.

Ahead of this weekend's clash with Guinness Premiership side the Leicester Tigers, Munster have never been beaten in the Heineken Cup at Thomond Park since its inception in 1995.

Incredibly, that unbeaten run extends to over 30 matches and many of the current players

A number of European and FAI cup matches were played there in the 1960s, and in 1980 Limerick United played Tottenham Hotspur in a pre-season friendly.

Undoubtedly, there will be an air of nostalgia this weekend as fans and players say farewell to the present Thomond Park.

But the weekend is also about ensuring that the current Heineken Cup champions secure a "home" quarter final as they try to retain the holy grail of European club rugby.

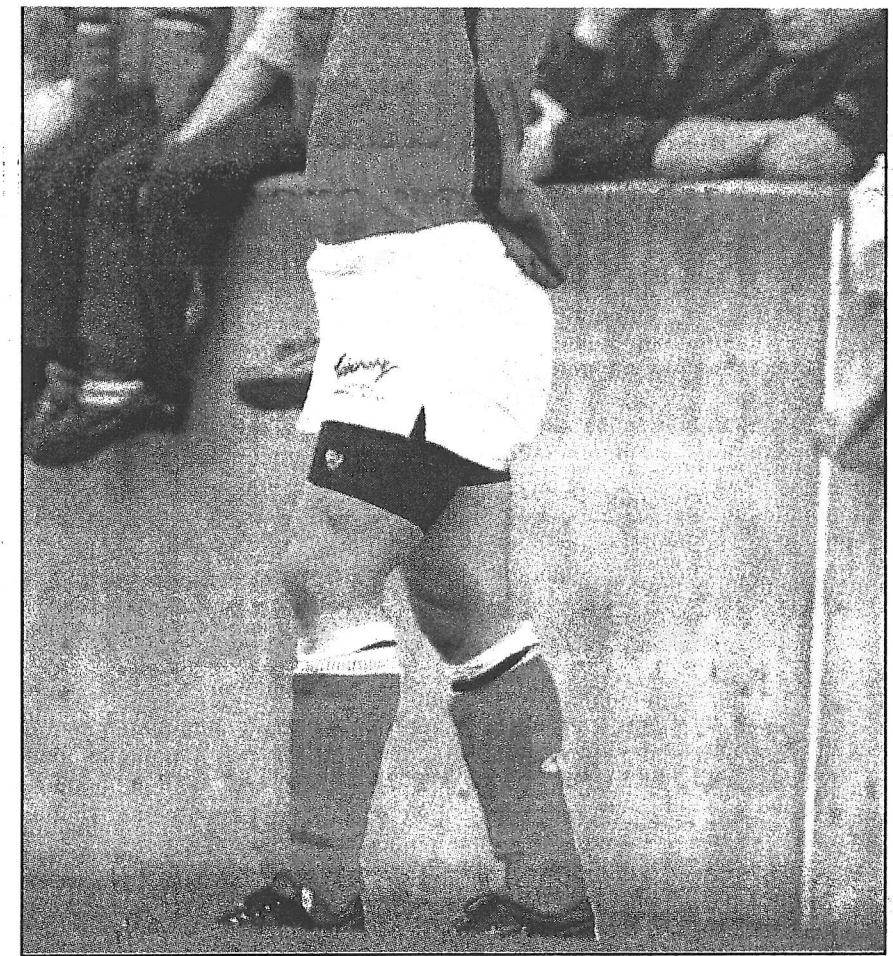
Landsdowne Road may have had its "last stand", but this weekend of celebration in Limerick is guaranteed to surpass anything that Dublin 4 had to offer on New Year's Eve.

Munster flags and giant replica jersey's have been proudly erected across the city and a weekend of activities have been specially organised which will culminate at 5.30pm on evening just before kick-off.

Before that there will be a rugby mural competition and street entertainment in Limerick city centre.

Munster fans are also being encouraged to take part in the Red Army Parade which will begin at Bedford Row at 3.30pm on Saturday.

"The historic march of fans from the city centre to Thomond Park will be a massive display of appreciation for the joy and entertainment that the old grounds have provided over the decades," said Mayor Joe Leddin.



Captain Fantastic: rugby legend Keith Wood in action

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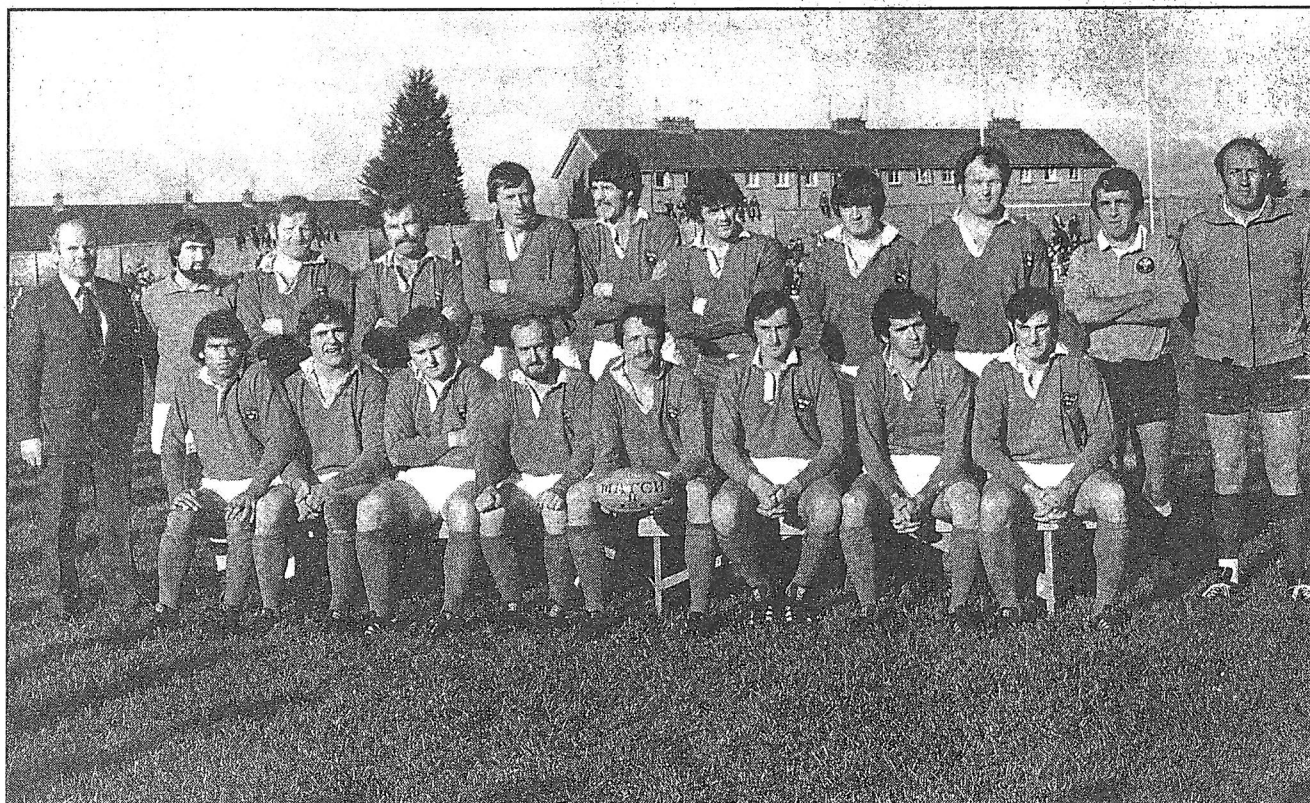
"I would appeal to as many people as possible to join the Munster Rugby Supporters Club parade on Saturday as a mark of support and appreciation for all the pleasure that the old Thomond Park has given fans," he said.

As the countdown for the final Pool 4 match reaches its peak, the scramble for tickets is also

intensifying.

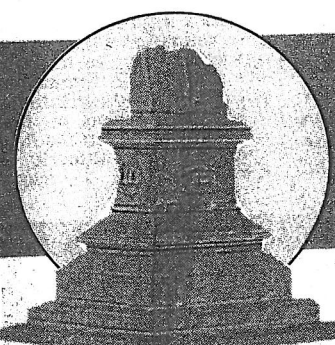
This Wednesday evening two terrace tickets for the crunch encounter were sold on ebay for over £Stg1000.

For those who don't get tickets, Saturday's match will be broadcast live on SkySports and there will also be live coverage with Len Dinneen on Limerick's Live 95FM.



Heroes: the Munster team who beat the All-Blacks on October 31, 1978, and, right, the New Zealanders perform the haka

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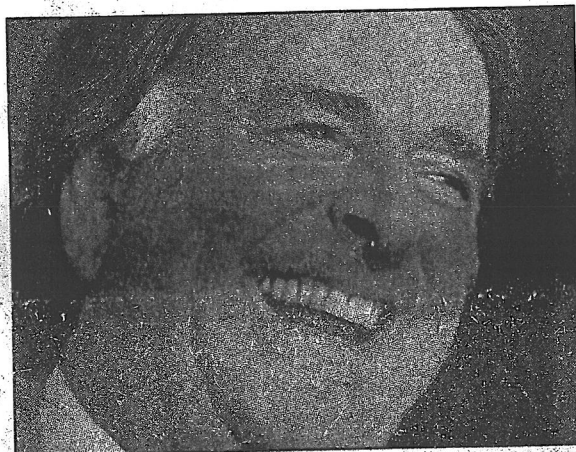
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SIR TERRY TO GET SPECIAL AWARD

By AINE FITZGERALD

THE all-conquering king of the airwaves, Terry Wogan, is set to make a much anticipated return to his native soil in two weeks time, when he will be honoured in Limerick city with a special Lifetime Achievement Award at the Limerick Person of the Year function.



Terry Wogan who will be honoured at the Limerick Person of the Year ceremony

Joining the veteran broadcaster at the lavish event, which will be held at the Clarion Hotel on Friday February 2, will be special guest, An Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. Sponsored by Southern Advertising, the Clarion Hotel and the Limerick Leader, the Limerick Per-

son of the Year ceremony 2006, recognises the exceptional contribution made by twelve individual nominees from various walks of life, to their local community. The winner of the Person of the Year, will not be known until

the night of the awards. Terry Wogan will receive a Special Lifetime Achievement Award which is given to an individual who has, in their own unique way, contributed significantly to the value of Limerick city

and county.

"This year we are very pleased to honour Terry Wogan, who has done so much to put Limerick on the world-wide map, and of course the twelve Person of the Month recipients who have, through their commitment and sacrifices, contributed greatly to the betterment of our city and county," said Brian Deegan, Managing Director, Limerick Leader.

Kay McGuinness, Southern Advertising who are co-sponsors said they were delighted Sir Terry was taking time from his busy schedule to come to Limerick to receive the award. "Last year, JP McManus was honoured for his philanthropic efforts in raising so much money for charities in Limerick. This year we recognise a man who has helped put Limerick on the world map,"

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Limerick legends: Property developer Pat Whelan at hooker in the foreground, with Cllr Gerry McLoughlin, right, and an airborne Brendan Foley, back, during the 1978 historic win against the All-Blacks.

The end of an era

A SPECIAL weekend of celebration is being planned across Limerick to mark the last ever Heineken Cup match at Thomond Park in its current form, writes David Hurley.

The final pool 4 match in this years Heineken Cup promises to be an epic affair as the current European Champions, Munster, take on the former champions, the Leicester Tigers.

At 5.35 on Saturday evening the historic stadium, which has played host to many special occasions down through the

years, will be packed to capacity.

Since it hosted its first ever match in November 1934, Thomond Park has been the undoubted spiritual home of Irish Rugby. Its unique atmosphere, where the only silence is when players are having a kick at goal, has made it one of the most well known grounds in world rugby.

Munster have never lost in the Heineken Cup at Thomond Park. Thomond Park, as it currently stands, will forever remain in the history books as the venue where the

mighty All Blacks were conquered on October 31 1978. Munster emerged victorious 12-0.

Giant flags and replica jersey's have been erected across Limerick City Centre ahead of this weekend's match and street entertainment has been organised in the build up to the game.

The main focus of the pre-match build up will be "The Red Army March" from Bedford Row to Thomond Park at 3.30.

•See P16 and Sport.

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