

Wood in revelatory form on visit to city

By DONAL O'REGAN

INSPIRATION and revelation were the order of the day this Monday when rugby star Keith Wood returned to his alma mater in Limerick City, bringing the Six Nations Trophy with him.

Students at St Munchin's College could be forgiven for disbelief when they heard Wood recall that he almost had to be bullied into playing the sport that has made him a household name.

He just wasn't that good at rugby. But, as he told the students, his lack of identifiable skill on the rugby field stemmed as much from a shortage of confidence as a deficit of talent.

"There were 120 first years when I started school, and I was the third smallest. I played scrum-half, and I'd say I was the worst scrum-half of all time," said that man who became the game's all-time greatest hookers.

Wracked by self-doubt and convinced he was too small, he gave up when he was 14. He turned his attention to hurling instead.

"It improved my hand-eye co-ordination. It's much easier to catch a rugby ball than a sliotar," the former Garryowen man said.

He was 16 before he was "almost bullied" back onto the rugby field, this time for a senior cup game that the school team lost. However, it was a different Keith Wood to that of two years earlier.

"By that time, I was bigger, more confident, able to express myself more and within another two and a half years, I was involved with the Ireland squad," said Mr

Wood, offering obvious encouragement to students short in stature or low in self-confidence.

He said it was down to confidence and self-belief, and he urged students to puff out their chests and strut their stuff a little.

Looking back on his international debut Australia, Mr Wood recalled the advice given to him by another St Munchin's old boy, former Irish captain, Philip Danaher.

"He told me that if I got a chance in the dressing room before the match, I should put on the jersey and take a look in a mirror. On the day, I was kind of embarrassed, so I put the jersey on over my tracksuit.

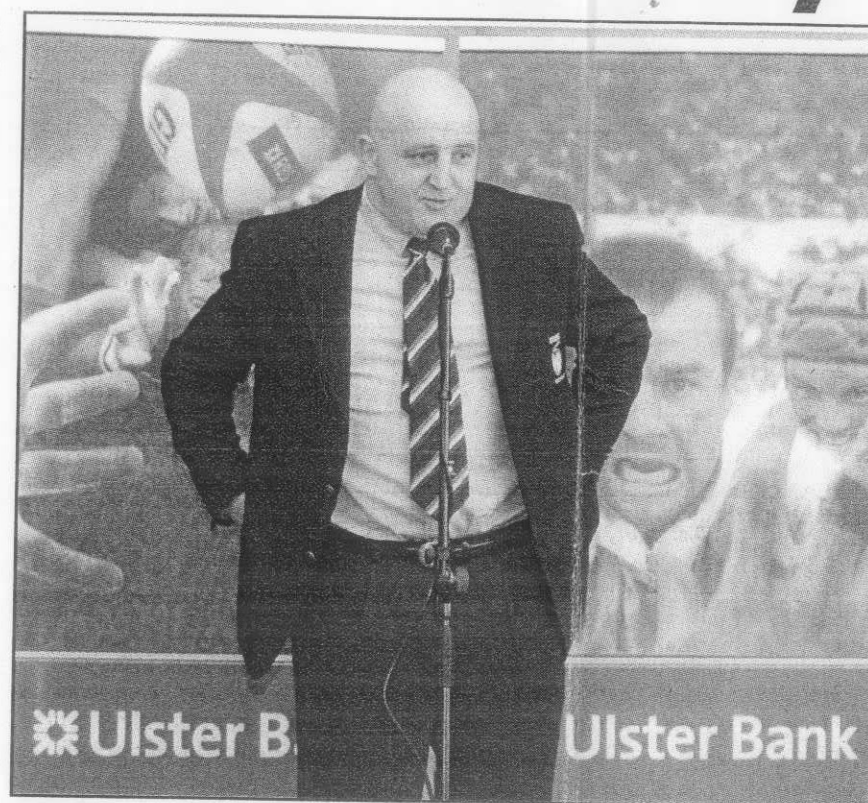
"I was very emotional, almost crying, but I knew if I could look myself in the eye while wearing the jersey then I knew I'd make myself and my family proud," Mr Wood said.

Looking back on his career, he spoke to the students about such highlights as the infamous 1997 British and Irish Lions tour of South Africa—"a brilliant and momentous time"—and the defeat of England in Lansdowne Road.

He advised aspiring rugby players not to rush, and not to do too much too soon: "You don't need to get big too quickly—don't go ballistic on weights."

It was often the young guys who do not stand out initially that make it, he said; sometimes those who show huge potential and real talent in school, somehow fail to get onto the next level.

Above all, it was vital to play to win. People tell you to play just to take part, but, he said, that's a lie: "That may not be popular, but the nature of sport is win-



Keith Wood at St Munchin's College: 'the nature of sport is winning as much as you can'

ning as much as you can."

Mr Wood also praised the education that he had received in St Munchin's: "It's a different education system to the UK; we have a broader level of knowledge. There are things I remember from here, I don't know how, that have helped me to hold decent conversations. I had some hard times as everybody else did but I enjoyed it and I came out of it reasonably well."

The Six Nations begins this Saturday when Ireland take on Italy and Mr Wood is optimistic about Ireland's prospects in the tournament.

"After Munster's fantastic win over Sale and Leinster's performance against Bath, if we can keep our important players on the field, you never know," he said.



Inspiration: rugby hero Keith Wood shows the Six Nations Trophy to St Munchin's students Ger Burke, Westbury; Conor McNamara, Corbally (LL)

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