

RUGBY

COLM TUCKER

RUGBY and bravery go hand in hand, and so students of the game placed little emphasis in Colm Tucker's decision to play a Munster Cup semi-final against Old Crescent last March only ONE MONTH after he had undergone an operation for appendicitis. Shannon mentors had misgivings, but as their brilliant wing-forward was adamant that he should play, they had little option but to let him.

How glad they were! Not only did Tucker come through the game with no repercussions, but Shannon won their way through to a second successive Munster Cup decider against old rivals, Garryowen. And with Tucker and his fellow-Shannon forwards "rolling along" to great effect, he picked up his second medal after an absorbing match.

Bright future

That medal was but one of numerous honours that came thick and fast to Colm over the past few years. At time of writing, he was still being toasted for his part in Munster's great victory over the All Blacks — and was very much a front-runner for a wing-forward spot on the Irish team. His place in the national squad to tour Australia next May seems assured.

Colm Tucker first came to rugby notice at St. Munchins College and also in the under-age teams of the Richmond and St. Marys clubs. He won medals in the various grades, and was eagerly snapped up by Shannon when he "came of age" for senior football in the early '70s. He was a member of the Munster side against the All Blacks in 1974, when we didn't do too well, but he was learning all the time.

Incentive Shannon needed

Colm reckons that the 29-0 trouncing by Garryowen in the Munster Senior Cup Final, at Thomond Park, in 1974, **was the spur that gave Shannon the incentive to win their**



Surrounded by Shannon supporters, Colm Tucker (centre), flanked by team-colleagues, Denis O'Sullivan and Noel Ryan, celebrates after winning the Munster Senior Cup Final in 1978.



two finals on-the-trot in 1977/'78. "In 1974", says Colm, "we were a very young and raw team and Garryowen had all their stars playing well. Liam Hall and Johnny Moroney were great half-backs and in Mervyn O'Connor and Tom Carroll, they had top-class Munster Cup Campaigners. That defeat, though, hardened us and the likes of Brendan Foley, Gerry McLoughlin, Eddie Price and myself were determined that it would never happen again".

"That cup-final, and the game against Ian Kirkpatrick's All-Blacks, really taught me what competitive rugby was all about", says Colm. Shannon, too, responded to the challenge; where once they had been easy push-overs in the Munster Cup, they now became a team to be feared. Their forwards gained new aggression in the tight and their backs became a solid defensive unit. Gradually, the coaching of Brian O'Brien was paying dividends and, for his part, Colm Tucker took on the image of a forward to be reckoned with.

His club performances with Shannon were as good as they were consistent. Long range penalty kicks often came

to their rescue, too. And he was nothing less than brilliant when Shannon won the Munster Cup in 1977, his back-row partnership with Eddie Price and Johnny Barry being especially fruitful in the final against Garryowen.

Cup-Final victory

Shannon were very much the underdogs that afternoon against a very talented Garryowen side. As events were to prove, however, Garryowen had a weak pack and they were made to pay for this deficiency by the Shannon eight and Tucker, Price and Barry in particular. Not only were Garryowen up front but their backs were unhappy dealing with the wet ball and swirling wind.

Tony Ward, the brilliant Garryowen out-half, was given an inconsistent service and was hustled off his usual impeccable game by the bustling Shannonmen. Tucker appeared to be everywhere and indeed this performance must have enhanced his representative career enormously. Eventually, Shannon won with two penalty goals kicked by Terry Fitzgerald to one for Garryowen by Tony Ward.

The Shannon followers went wild. As one official put it . . . "winning the Munster Cup is one thing, beating Garryowen in the final is another".

Irish International Panel

That performance made Colm a regular member of the Munster team, a situation further confirmed by Shannon's Cup win of '78. Furthermore, he was added to the Irish International panel, and though overlooked for the match against the All Blacks, made his first full International appearance against France at Lansdowne Road, on January 20th. With luck, he could go on to run up a string of full 'caps' for Ireland.

Two performances above all stand out in Colm's mind. The first was in last year's cup final when Shannon were this time confronted by a much better Garryowen pack, a pack indeed that at least held them in the tight and line-out

over the eighty minutes. But it was the same story in the loose as Tucker and company got out among the Garryowen backs, three of them Internationals, and rattled them off their game. Remember, of course, that Tucker was now only six weeks after his appendicitis operation and was dangerously short of match practice.

But he played with tremendous courage and determination as Shannon won a great match by 16 pts. to 10. Terry Fitzgerald's place kicking was again magnificent, but it was the manner in which the Garryowen backs were harassed and tackled which made all the difference.

All-Blacks beaten

Tucker's cup of joy was full to overflowing but another great honour was to come his way on October 31st., 1978, when he was a member of the Munster team to hammer the All Blacks 12-0 at Thomond Park.

Tucker and his Munster colleagues went into this match with reputations a little tarnished following poor displays on an early season tour of London and a feeble performance in the Munster trial. All the time, however, they were getting fitter and better and more determined and when the big day came, the Munstermen were hungry for success.

Great things ahead

None was more so than flanker Colm Tucker, who threw his 14½ stone, 6 ft. 1 inch frame into the battle from the first whistle and never relented until it was all over. Tony Ward kicked a conversion of a great try by Tucker's wing-forward colleague, Christy Cantillon, and also dropped two goals. The New Zealanders had no answer, thanks to the mighty tackling of Tucker, Cantillon, Seamus Dennison, Larry Moloney and the rest. At the end of the day, Munster were famous winners . . . and many of her players were destined for great things. Surely Colm Tucker is one of them.



Colm Tucker in typical hard grafting pose for Shannon.