

TALKING RUGBY

Ireland face impossible task in replacing Paulie

COLM KINSELLA

RUGBY CORRESPONDENT

sport@limerickleader.ie
cksportleader

THE 2000-2001 All-Ireland League season is one which I will always remember with fondness.

It was my first full season covering the AIL as a sports journalist and four Limerick clubs plied their trade in Division 1 of the League.

Garryowen, Old Crescent, Shannon and Young Munster all dined at the club game's top table.

As the regular season neared its end, Young Munster recorded four wins in five to make the semi-finals. Two men each bagged five tries to help Munsters' cause that season. Two men at very different stages of their rugby careers, centre Mike Mullins already an established Irish international and a then rampaging loose forward, Paul O'Connell.

Even back then it was obvious that this towering, yet raw lock was something special.

O'Connell may have been just 21 or 22 at the time, his senior rugby career still in its infancy, but the former Ardscoil Ris student was well able to take care of himself, even in the hostile, physically demanding surrounds of the All-Ireland League.

You couldn't but help be struck by his athleticism, dynamism and will-to-win. He was continually cajoling, inspiring his more street wise, experienced team mates. Unsurprisingly, O'Connell's exploits in the country's top AIL venues didn't go unnoticed by Munster.

Young Munster's dream of winning a second league title were ended by Cork Con in Temple Hill at the semi-final stage, but the Greenfield club's impressive run helped O'Connell earn a contract with the province.

O'Connell made his debut for Munster on 17 August 2001, in a Celtic League fixture against Edinburgh. He made his debut for Ireland against Wales in the 2002 Six Nations Championship, starting alongside Mick Galwey when scoring a try. On Sunday at the Millennium Stadium, he led Ireland out for the last time on his 108th appearance for his country. Quite a 15-year journey.

Meanwhile, close to home someone is going to have to replace the irreplaceable. That was the task many Munster rugby supporters believed the province's new second row Mark Chisholm was taking on when he joined Munster this autumn.

Chisholm's arrival came in the wake of Paul O'Connell's announcement that he was set to join French Top 14 side Toulon on a two-year contract following



Happy days: Paul O'Connell lifts the Six Nations trophy after the 2014 competition

the Rugby World Cup.

Thirty three-year-old Chisholm played for Super Rugby side Brumbies on 102 occasions, and on the international front he won 58 caps for Australia between 2004 and 2010, scoring six tries. In 2011 he made the move to Top 14 side Bayonne and made 89 appearances for the French outfit, captaining the side for three seasons. Not a half bad rugby CV in anyone's eyes.

This week, Queenslander Chisholm gave his first interview as a Munster player. As luck would have it Chisholm faced the media on the day it was announced that Paul O'Connell had played his last game for Ireland.

Chisholm admitted no one could fill O'Connell's shoes.

"I'm not looking to try to fill his (Paul O'Connell's) shoes, I don't think anybody could fill his shoes.

He's a legend of Irish rugby and of Munster rugby so what I am looking to do is to add my style of game to help the team either in an experience sort of way or add my sort of way that I play rugby with Munster.

"I wish him all the best of luck with his injury which is incredibly unfortunate for him at the World Cup and being the magnificent player that he is for Irish rugby.

"Heading towards Toulon, that team has a great team a lot of great blokes in there a lot of good Australians too."

From his experience of playing in France, he is in no doubt but that Toulon will wait for O'Connell to regain fitness, irrespective of how long it takes.

"I'm sure they will (wait) for such a class player like himself."

Munster 'A' lose to Leinster

MUNSTER 'A' suffered a narrow 22-17 defeat to Leinster 'A' in their interprovincial clash played at Donnybrook on Wednesday last.

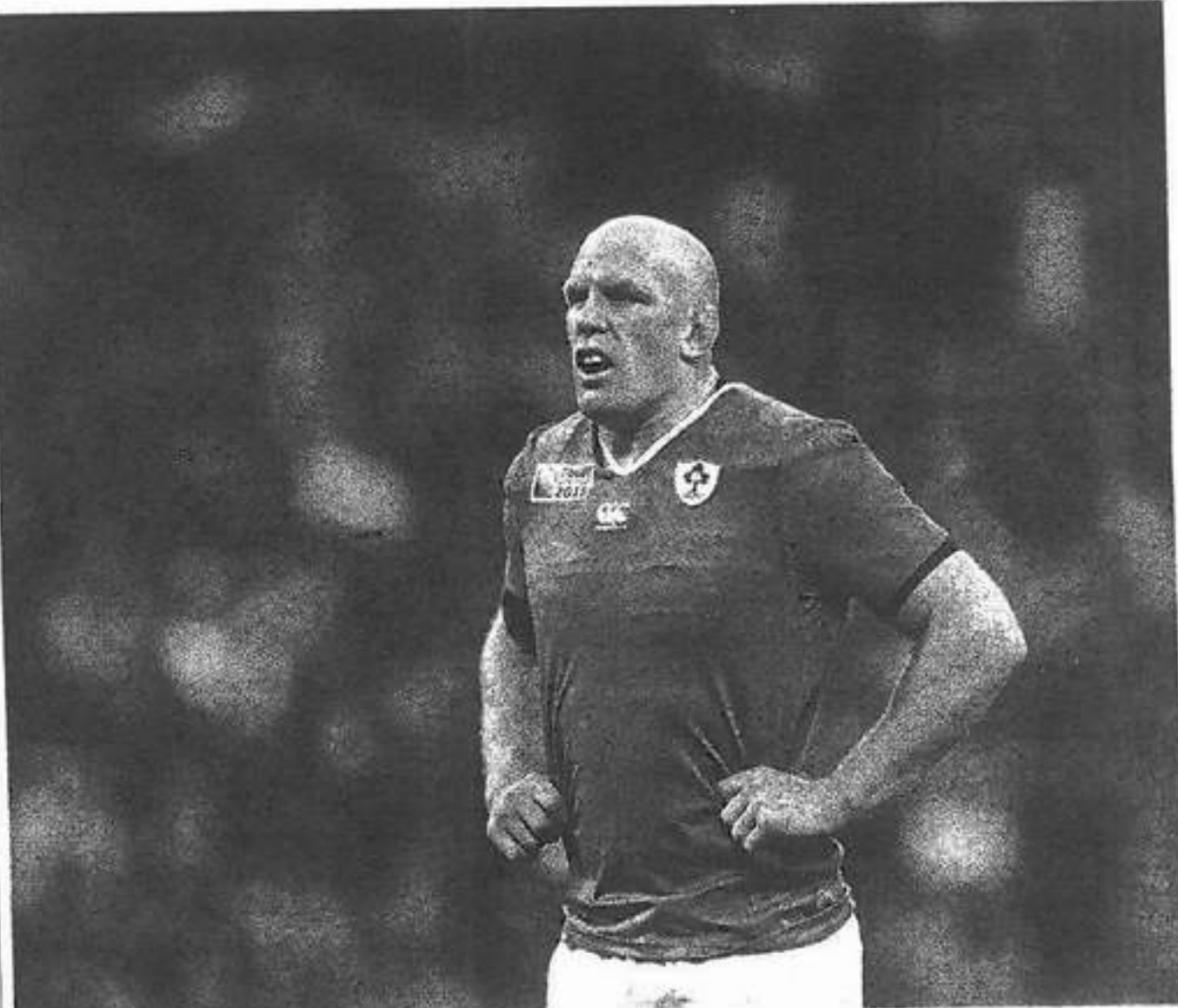
First half tries from the Leinster duo of Billy Dardis and Mick McGrath proved key as the home side repelled a youthful Munster A side's second half comeback.

Munster A had trailed 22-3 early in the second half in Dublin, with their only points coming courtesy of a Rory Scannell penalty goal. However, the visitors finished the game strongly

scoring tries from Stephen Fitzgerald and Shane Buckley.

SCORERS: Leinster 'A': Tries: Billy Dardis, Mick McGrath, Tom Denton; Cons: Tom Daly 2; Pen: Tom Daly. Munster 'A': Tries: Shane Buckley, Stephen Fitzgerald; Cons: Rory Scannell 2; Pen: Rory Scannell

MUNSTER 'A': Steven McMahon; Stephen Fitzgerald, Ned Hodson, Matt D'Arcy, Darren Sweetnam; Rory Scannell, Ryan Foley; Liam O'Connor; Niall Scannell (capt), John Ryan, Brian Hayes, Frank Bradshaw-Ryan, Ben Kilkenny, Jordan Coghlan, Shane Buckley. **Replacements used:** Conor Oliver for Bradshaw-Ryan, JP Phelan for O'Connor, Alex Wootton for McMahon, Kevin O'Byrne for Scannell, Sean O'Leary for Coghlan, John Poland for Foley, Tomas Quinlan for Wootton, Rory Burke for Phelan, Brendan Quinlan for Ryan, Kelvin Browne for Buckley.



Praise for Paul O'Connell has been coming from far and wide this week

How the rugby world reacted to O'Connell's career-ending injury

JOHN KEOGH

Email: john.keogh@limerickleader.ie
Twitter: @johnnybkeogh

There has been a phenomenal reaction from the rugby world to the Tuesday's news regarding Paul O'Connell's Irish career now being over after the injury he suffered against France.

We have selected some of the best comments about the former Munster, Irish and Lions captain.

RONAN O'GARA

"My sadness is tinged with absolute pride having spent 16 years with one of Rugby's greatest competitors #gentleman #Leader #1ofakind"

Former Munster and Irish player Ronan O'Gara pays tribute to a friend and a colleague.

BRIAN O'DRISCOLL

"This is so wrong on many levels. One of the greatest leaders & players of them all. Inspirational."

Former International teammate Brian O'Driscoll echoes the thoughts of every Irish fan with a poignant and clearly emotive tweet.

ALAN QUINLAN

"Nothing he said felt unattainable. He made you feel you could beat anybody."

Another former teammate in Quinlan emphasises the belief he gave others.

GORDAN DARCY

"Most leaders are made but some are born"

The former Leinster and Ireland great pays his tribute to O'Connell.

NIAMH BRIGGS

"You always want to finish on your own terms but sport can be cruel!! True leader & inspiration...hope he gets back to play in France #iconic"

Current Irish Women's rugby captain Niamh Briggs highlighted the cruelty that top level sport can bring.

MUNSTER RUGBY

"A trailblazer for @IrishRugby He gave

everything for green #ThanksPaulie"

Munster's official twitter account describes O'Connell as a trailblazer for his country.

MUNSTER RUGBY SUPPORTERS CLUB

"Paul O'Connell has played his last game for Ireland.. A leader, a legend and a gent. All we can say is #ThanksPaulie"

The MRSC sum up O'Connell in three words. Leader, legend, gent.

CONNACHT RUGBY

"For everything you've given for @IrishRugby, #thanksPaulie"

A simple but emotive message from Connacht.

ULSTER RUGBY

"Will go down as one of @IrishRugby's all time greats. Thanks @Paul_OConnell"

Ulster Rugby get it spot on in their description of O'Connell.

SERGIO PARISSÉ

"@Paul_OConnell was a privilege to play against you!! Really sad to hear of your retirement... best second row ever! #legend"

Italian captain Sergio Parisse shows that O'Connell was not just admired in Ireland.

BRYAN HABANA

"A true colossal and legend of the game. Much respect @Paul_O'Connell"

From one legend to another. South African winger Habana pays tribute.

BILLY VUNIPOLA

"Congratulations @Paul_OConnell on an incredible International career. Shame to see it end the way it did, but 108 caps and 13yrs is some feat"

England number eight Vunipola shows his admiration for O'Connell.

BERNARD JACKMAN

"Played Munster, got caught on the wrong side of a ruck. Getting a deserved shoeing & POC shouts" that's enough lads" All stopped! #ThanksPaulie"

Former Connacht and Leinster hooker and current Grenoble coach Bernard Jackman speaks about O'Connell's softer side.