

# 'The heart and soul of every team'

Tributes pour in as Paul O'Connell's Irish rugby career comes to a very painful end at the Rugby World Cup, reports **Colm Kinsella**

PAUL O'Connell undergoes surgery this Thursday for the 'significant hamstring injury' which has brought a premature end to his distinguished international rugby career.

It will only become clear once the surgery is completed when O'Connell will be able to resume playing. O'Connell, due to turn 36 on Tuesday next, was due to begin a two year stint with French Top 14 side Toulon after Ireland's involvement in the Rugby World Cup ends.

What is clear is that the Young Munster clubman is facing a couple of months on the sidelines.

O'Connell's former Munster team mate and coach, Anthony Foley said O'Connell was the 'heart and soul of every team' he played in from Ardscoil Ris right through to the Lions.

Foley said, "From Ardscoil Ris to Young Munster, then Munster, Ireland and the Lions, he's been the heart and soul of every team he's been involved in and to see him stretchered off on Sunday was not something any of us wanted to see."

"We had some great days

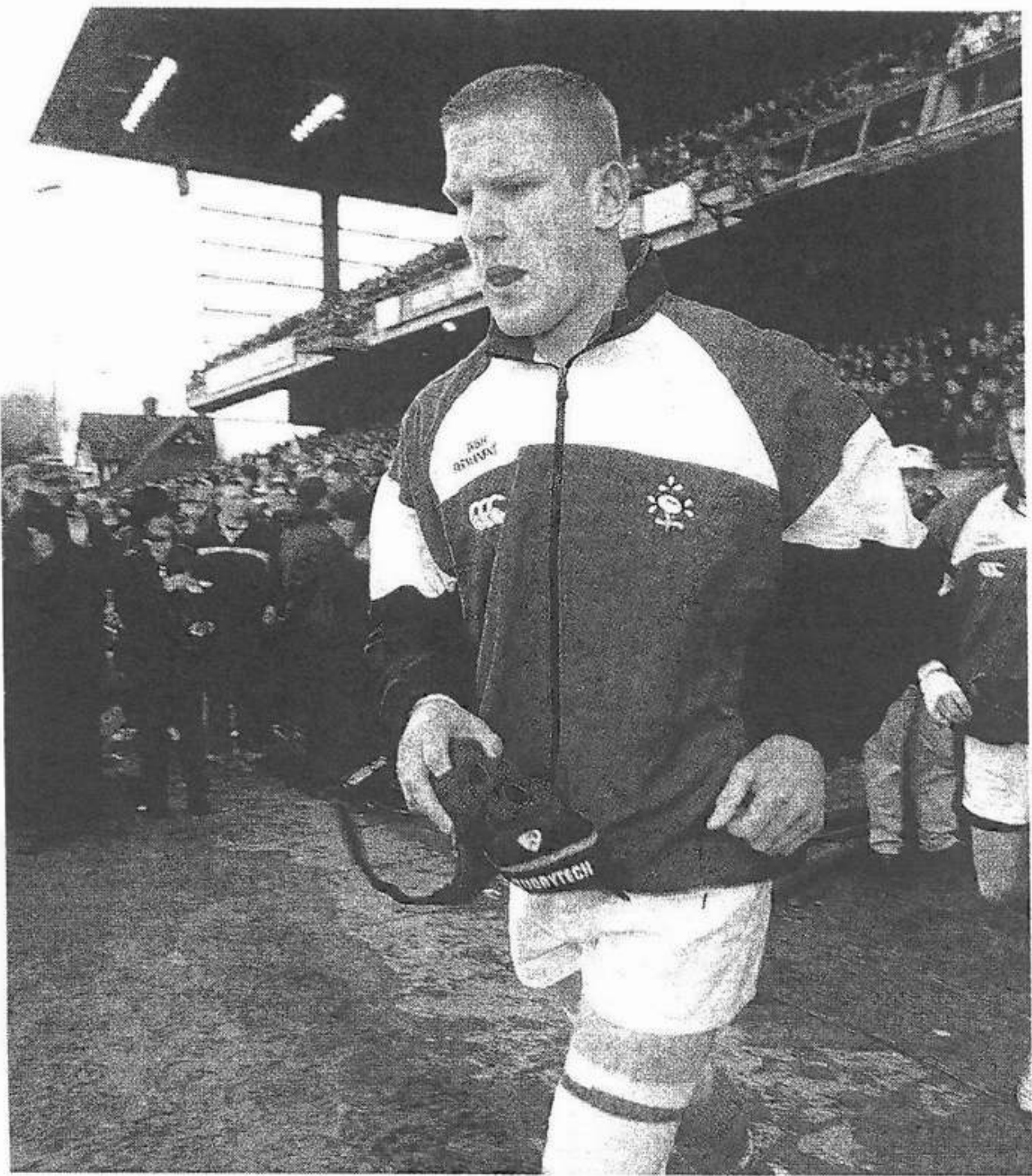
and bad days together. You always tend to highlight the good days but you really know a person's character when you have the bad days. His work through the heart-breaks on the way to the success of 2006, then 2008 and 2009 with Ireland and beyond was just immense and he will be a massive loss.

"It's hard to put into words or measure his contribution to Irish Rugby, other than saying it has been immense. It's just the influence he has, how he leads and how he pushes those around him to another level.

"It is sad. But in one respect, for him to go out in the manner he went with is probably fitting. He went out fighting for a ball on the ground and trying to get a turnover.

"He was carrying ball, he was doing everything. Ireland's lineout was functioning well and they were going after the French lineout as well at that stage. It set a tone for the game, for the boys to continue."

O'Connell's former Munster, Ireland and Lions team mate John Hayes also paid a special tribute to his fellow



Back in the day: Paul O'Connell on the occasion of his first Irish cap in 2002

Limerickman.

Hayes said of O'Connell "He goes beyond rugby, he has a place in Irish sport and even beyond that. Everyone in Irish sport knows him and everyone respects him.

"They've seen what's he's done over the last decade-and-a-half. He's driven standards and just wanted to take everyone on. Even if we're a small country, he saw no reason why we shouldn't beat everyone."

Ian McGeechan chose Paul O'Connell to lead the Lions on their 2009 tour of South Africa.

McGeechan said: "I likened him to Martin Johnson. The two of them were massive captains. Ireland were really blessed to have Paul and Brian O'Driscoll there for so long. You kept your feet on the ground, and you had someone who would lead by

example in the toughest environment. Whether it was a Munster jersey or an Ireland jersey or a Lions jersey, he always led from the front and by example. Off the field he was

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such a humble character, it was very easy to see the line he'd come from."

O'Connell played 108 times, including 99 starts for Ireland, captaining his country on 28 occasions, leading the side to victory 17 times. His eighth and final try came against England in last

month's World Cup warm-up game at Twickenham.

He retires as a three-time Six Nations winner (2009, 2014 and 2015) and also won a Grand Slam (2009) as well as four Triple Crowns (2004, 2006, 2007 and 2009).

O'Connell toured three times with the Lions, captaining the 2009 team in South Africa. He played at four Rugby World Cups (2003, 2007, 2011 and 2015). A natural-born leader, O'Connell skipped Ireland to Six Nations glory in 2014 and 2015.

Among the scores of tributes he received this week was one from his long-standing Munster and Ireland team mate Ronan O'Gara.

O'Gara tweeted: "My sadness is tinged with absolute pride having spent 16 years with one of Rugby's greatest competitors." #gentleman #Leader #10fakind