



# THE STYLE OF JEAN-PIERRE RIVES

BY KARL JOHNSTON

Were it not for the presence of the French, the International Championship - the annual domestic competition involving Ireland, England, France, Scotland, Wales - would be considerably poorer. Perhaps it may be going rather too far to say that France has revolutionized international rugby in this part of the world; all the same, French style, flair, skill and spirit of adventure has added an infinitely wider vision to the concept of how rugby should be played.

With little discernible difference between hulking forwards and dashing backs in terms of athleticism and talent, French teams are invariably lithe and agile, and often make their opponents look lumbering and leaden-footed. Creativity is the word that most readily comes to mind, emphasizing the French belief that William Webb Ellis was right, when at Rugby School, in 1823, he took the ball in his hands and ran with it, thus giving the game its first and distinctive hallmark.

The French are formidable international opponents, the only one of the Five Nations which can be seriously compared with New Zealand, Australia

or South Africa. But the story was not always so.

France was a late arrival to international rugby, and first played at this level on 1 January, 1906, New Zealand being the opposition, all of thirty-one years after Ireland had first taken the field. They lost their first twelve international matches, and success did not come until Scotland was defeated (16-15) at the Stade Colombes in Paris on 2 January, 1911. The first game between France and Ireland was played at Lansdowne Road on 20 March, 1909, when Ireland won (19-8), and it was not until 3 April, 1920, that a French victory was achieved with the 15-7 win in Dublin.

That was France's 32nd international match, and only its second success. More recently, as no rugby follower will need reminding, things have somewhat changed. The record against Ireland now stands: played 62, Ireland won 25, France won 32, draw 5. And to underline more emphatically the strength of French rugby in recent times, Ireland has not

won in Paris since 1972 (at the Stade Colombes), has never won at Parc des Princes, and has scored only one try against France in Paris in the last five visits since 1980.

These days, the French are feared and respected opponents. The international successes arguably would be even more frequent were it not for the occasional tendency to self-destruct against much lesser opponents. But this is also understandable, so high are the standards which they have set.

Down the years, France has produced many of the greatest players ever to have graced the world's international rugby playing fields. Their names are legion, for they are indeed many, and it is impossible to say which of them has made the most impact. But a strong case can be put forward in this regard for Jean-Pierre Rives, truly the renaissance rugby man - athlete, bon viveur, art collector and boulevardier. In a single, old-fashioned word - dashing.

It was the task of the present writer to interview Rives, who was on a business trip to Dublin some years ago. His English was adequate, if not fluent, but he was a happy and relaxed talker, willing to give of his time and to



The legendary Tom Clifford captained this Limerick selection against Auvergne.

SOUVENIR PROGRAMME

**Old Crescent**  
(Selected)

v

**Racing Club de France**

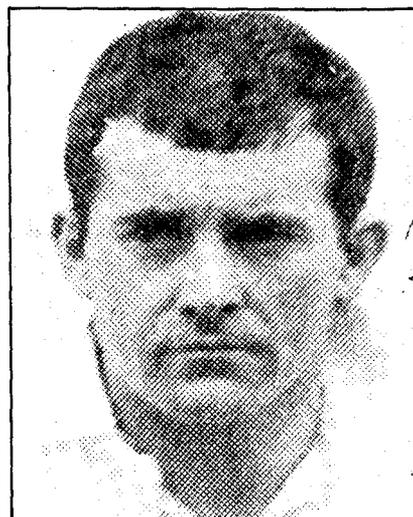
**Thomond Park**  
LIMERICK

**Sunday, 25th Sept., 1960**  
Kick Off 3.30

**R. I. F. U.**  
(MUNSTER BRANCH)

PRICE — — 6d.

*The programme of the Old Crescent Selection v Racing Club de France, 1960.*



*Brian O'Brien was the first Shannon player to win an international cap, when he was picked as a centre against France in Paris, on 27 January, 1968.*

non-IRFB opponents. He won his first cap against England at Twickenham on 1 February, 1975, when France won by 27-20, and would certainly have won many more caps except for troublesome injuries.

Having already led France against Romania, Ireland was Rives' first IRFB opponent, in a drawn match at Lansdowne Road on 20 January, 1979. France won eighteen matches under Rives' captaincy, with one draw. He captained France to its third Grand Slam ('Grand Chelem' en Française) in 1981, having also shared in the 1977 success, and might have repeated that achievement in 1984 (when France was by far the best team in the Championship), had not indiscipline against Scotland at Murrayfield cost France five penalty goals and ultimately the match.

But the story about Sarah Bernhardt is apposite. Many, many times, Rives himself proved that the willing spirit can move the weak and battered flesh to extraordinary feats; that flowing blond, shoulder-length hair and blood-splattered jersey made him easy to identify on the field of play. In the second match against Australia at Sydney in 1981, Rives played with a strapped-up shoulder which had been dislocated four times just two weeks earlier.

Peter Bills in his excellent biography *Jean-Pierre Rives - A Modern Corinthian* (Allen & Unwin, 1986) records the incident:

*We all knew his face well enough; and the blond hair, hanging soaked and dank on a wet rugby afternoon, had already been a rallying sight to the youth of rugby for some six years or more. And yet, it seemed, nothing could have prepared us for the appearance of this man now as he stood at the top of the pavilion steps contemplating the arena like the infantryman his killing ground. His body quivered with adrenalin, and*

concentrate on the conversation. The only trouble was that he seemed prepared to discuss any subject under the sun other than rugby; not because he was reticent or unwilling to co-operate but because there are more things in life than the game which he graced with such distinction.

For no particular reason, he told me a story about Sarah Bernhardt who, towards the close of her career, had lost the use of her legs. Yet, in one production, she played the part of a young woman, remaining throughout every scene on a chaise longue, a rug covering her useless limbs. The play called for her to move about the stage; and, said Rives, at the end of a mesmeric tour de force, everybody in the audience

would say that yes, she did move, so powerful was her performance. This was the triumph of will over pain and incapacity, and at the end of the tale, Rives had tears in his eyes. A year or two later, I heard Judi Dench recount the same story in her one-woman show at the Abbey Theatre, and it is no disrespect to her that I found Rives' version more moving.

Born in Toulouse on New Year's Eve, 1952, Jean-Pierre Rives is his country, most-capped flanker, with fifty-nine international matches in all. He captained France a record thirty times (out of a total of forty-seven appearances) against International Rugby Football Board countries, and also led France on four other occasions against



Jean-Pierre Rives:  
a modern Corinthian.

the muscles tightened. Jean-Pierre Rives, France's captain, understood what was at stake: he knew that a physical nightmare, an afternoon of unremitting agony, lay before him. Thus, even the slightest mental preparation that was calculated to block, at least partially, the worst of the physical torture from his mind was a valuable medicine for him that day.

Some said afterwards that this was a show of unnecessary bravado. But on that tour the French squad had been decimated with injuries and Rives, according to Peter Bills, believed that he owed it to his team to be there, as leader, no matter how painful or crippling his injury. Said Rives:

*It is the spirit - l'esprit. Somewhere, something happens. I don't know. Maybe I should not have played, but I don't regret my decision because it was good for the spirit. I was with all my friends in the team.*

Be that as it may, as a player Rives had everything. Anything but a big man - just an average 5 feet 10 inches and 13 stone - he was blessed with immense physical courage, but also possessed far more than that alone; he was a creative player, quick and fast, an excellent distributor, a most perceptive support player and a superb defender. Ever easy to pick out thanks to that flowing mane, he was forever to be found in the eye of the hurricane, the midst of the actions.

But always there was more to life than rugby. The photographs in Bills' book

reveal the other sides to this man - Rives the art collector, Rives with close personal friends quite unconnected with sport, Rives with a different team, one which produces a quarterly satirical magazine, Rives, the free-spirit, clowning about in London on the eve of his international debut.

His rugby memorabilia are locked away in an old trunk in his parents' house in Toulouse and no rugby pictures, trophies or programmes decorate the walls of his flat in Paris. When once asked, says Bills, about his apparent aversion to trophies, Rives replied:

*Because I am not an African hunter. I do not hunt trophies. I do not want to hear about that. I do not want my house or my parents' house to look like a rugby museum. So I give away most things to my friends; jerseys and things like that. That is better because I know they are happy with such things. Happier than me, that is for certain.*

But Jean-Pierre Rives has given sports followers all over the world far more than trophies. He has left us with memories, as only the truly great games player can; memories of that flowing hair, of the jersey which so often was the red badge of courage, memories of skill and sometimes near-genius. And above all, memories of a certain style. For it is style, above all, which is the hallmark of Jean-Pierre Rives and of French rugby in general.

Limerick forwards, Brendan Foley, Gerry McLoughlin and Colm Tucker (Shannon) and Pat Whelan (Garryowen), got a close-up of this style in internationals in Paris and Dublin. And at club level, teams from Limerick and France have exchanged visits over the decades, but it would take a book to adequately cover all these encounters. However, memories of a number of these games, and of the players who took part in them, stand out. In the mid-1950s, the legendary Tom Clifford captioned a strong Limerick selection against Auvergne at Thomond Park. On Sunday, 25 September, 1960, Racing Club de France of Paris visited Limerick to take on an Old Crescent selection. The Limerick side included three international forwards, the British and Irish Lion Bill Mulcahy (Bohemians), Gordon Wood (Garryowen) and the captain, Paddy Lane (Old Crescent), who was elected as a Member of the European Parliament, on 15 June of this year.

Brian O'Brien was the first Shannon player to achieve international honours, when he was picked as a centre against France in Paris on 27 January, 1968. In February last year, the Limerick club travelled to Paris to play Toulon, then the club champions of France. In one of the most memorable games between teams from the two countries, Shannon were 'pipped on the post' by a last minute penalty to lose 16-15. But there will be other games to help to even up the score at international and club level.

## RUGBY CLUB TOULONNAIS

Champion de France 1987

contre

## SHANNON RUGBY CLUB

Leader du Championnat d'Irlande

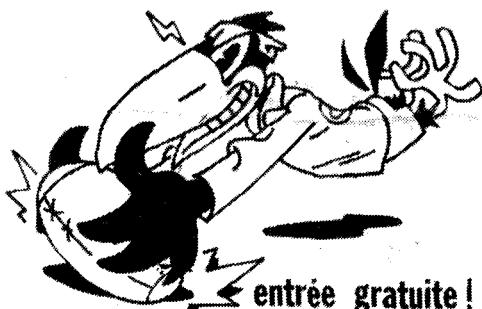
vainqueur de la Munster Senior Cup 1986 et 1987

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The Shannon v Toulon programme, Paris, 3 February, 1988.