

Fitzgerald steps into a new era

From David Walsh at Lansdowne Road

A NEW era began for Irish rugby at Lansdowne Road yesterday when Ciaran Fitzgerald took charge of his first senior national squad training session. 21 players were named in the squad and 22 actually showed up. Already, one gets a feeling about things to come.

Whatever way one looks at it, Fitzgerald was the reason for the superfluity. Claran or Des? The prop had not been named in the original squad of 21 as he is currently on holidays but he was there yesterday and took a full part in the day's activities.

It may be that with Jimmy McCoy and Gary Halpin in the squad, Des did not want to be absent. Prop forwards are not noted for giving people head-starts. The battle for the No 3 Irish jersey will be one of the most fiercely fought.

Although 22 attended yesterday's session, John Sexton did not take part in the afternoon work-out. The Leinster wing is nursing an injury and watched from the sideline.

For the new coach it was a satisfactory first day at the office. He spent the morning

speaking with the players: "We encouraged them to talk to us," said Fitzgerald. "There's a lot of experience in the side and we wanted to draw on that."

Did the coach and players discuss the disappointments of recent seasons? "No, there was nothing to be gained from that. We talked about things in general."

The squad trained for eighty minutes on the back pitch at Lansdowne Road in the afternoon, much of the time being devoted to rucking and mauling drill - what coaches call a physical session. But it was also clear that Fitzgerald is not prepared to allow squad get-togethers become (degenerate into) fitness sessions.

Through the afternoon's spin, Fitzgerald's style as coach was much in evidence. Authority without bluster, conviction without overstatement. A group of four players drive into maul but lack the aggression sought by the coach. He wishes to reprimand:

"It's only a practice but we've got to get into the mentality of driving. When you see that ball, you drive hard." Phillip Matthews elaborated and everybody continued listening. Nice, easy communication - an en-



New Irish coach Ciaran Fitzgerald makes a point as Donal Lenihan, Brian Smith, Noel Mannion and Pat O'Hara listen.

Fitzgerald has gone to some lengths to explain that the job he has undertaken is far from easy. Expectations, he insists, should not be unreasonably high and he knows that, sometimes, good coaches are not enough. Against that there is

the certainty that from the basement there is only one way out. Up.

The new coach will have been pleased by the attitude of his players to yesterday's training spin but he will harbour reservations about the physical conditions of some. Matthews and Michael Kiernan, to mention two, did not give the impression of

having overtrained this summer.

But, against that, there was evidence that the props did not put their feet up for long. Halpin and Poppellwell show all the signs of men who spent the summer pumping iron - they walk as much with their shoulders as on their legs. Both will be pushing for places this

season.

Irish manager Ken Reid and fitness advisors Colin Boreham and Eddie O'Sullivan attended yesterday's session. John Moloney, the former Irish scrum-half, assisted Fitzgerald during the afternoon training. Fitzgerald and Moloney have worked together on Irish U 21 and 25 sides.

Fitzgerald's first test as Irish coach comes on October 27 when the team plays Argentina at Lansdowne Road. The Argentinians will be in Ireland on a three match tour - they will also play Ireland B and the Irish Students. The Irish squad next assembles on the weekend of September 22 and 23.

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His next stop was Scotland, where he represented Edinburgh Wanderers after he was released from the club. After that, he was returned to Ireland, finishing his career with the club.

During those years, he was twenty international caps, played interprovincially for Munster and Leinster, represented the All-Ireland team, toured South Africa with the 1948 Lions.

Later he turned his attention to coaching and had a highly successful period in charge of Leinster before accepting the call to take charge of the national team in 1963, a position he held for three years during which Ireland won the Triple Crown, toured Japan and took part in the

Today he gets his first piece for the *Sanitar Independent* on Susan Fitzgerald, a close friend who volunteered for him the pitch and now follows in Mick Doyle's footsteps as coach to the Irish team.

Man for all seasons



Slatt's commitment, passion, indefatigability and power and exhilaration of some of his team talks. Charan Fitzgerald was in that mould — two totally different players and characters but each with an irreducible conviction, even a sense of mission about them. Ray McLaughlin has always accused me, Maitland, of being a visionary — well Slatt and Fitz were true missionaries in that truly.

Ciaran's rewards — two Triple Crowns — were the more tangible, but Slart's contribution in Australia and South Africa with Ireland was brilliant.

I got to know Carran intimately since 1983 and he is the most incredible person I have ever been involved with in any walk of life. Without him anything that we achieved as a team would not have been possible — certainly not a Triple Crown in 1985.

Sure I had my vision, and a lot else besides, but Fats made it all happen.

The response of the players to him — the old pro like Philly Orr, Donald Lumsden, Mick Kerman, Trevor Ringland and Hego and all the young bloods — Brendan Mullin, Phil Matthews, Jimmy McCoy, Nigel Carr and the others — was heartening to see and to be part of.

He has a clear, analytical method of thought, a cool, logical and practical brain, allied to a will of steel and a heart that is *all green*. He is a complete Irishman — a brave, delightful honourable man who will give to this new group of Irish players and aspirants the most complete support, encouragement and maintenance that they will ever get.

Luckily Donal Lemhan and himself are good friends and regard each other highly; his support of Donal when he replaced him as captain in 1987 was superb, exemplary and totally consistent.

I know that Fritze will more than adequately fulfil all the requirements of the coaching job and will no doubt, before he finishes, rewrite the job specification.

This practical, pragmatic approach has already impressed the rugby journalistic fraternity. The realism in his first weekend session of long discussion in private and in the warmth, with full activity on the pitch, has received favourable comment, and the emphasis on ball retention has impacted on the seasoned observers.

I expect a lot of Fitzie and Donald Leithan. I know that Irish rugby is in good hands. I applauded the IRFU

for the welcome changes in the format of selecting their selectors. The performances of the provinces to date and the beginning of the National League augur well for a good start to the season.

Bull I feel in my bones and I detect a stirring in my pulse and a tightening in my throat and I know once again, that for Irish rugby the best is yet to come.

yet to come! And I can hardly wait.

The first coach (or manager) has a much simpler job. In all circumstances he is required to take the 22 or so best players available, select the best team, with his fellow selectors, and prepare it for each game as well as he can in the time allowed.

Merit selection of a team does not infer *average* teams — this takes time to build and does require enormous resources, planning, patience, good coaching and a lot of money. It is a team selection between coaches, captains and players in all aspects of the team's evolution and development. A true sporting "marriage" of minds and bodies.

The Irish coach (or manager) has quite a singular job — in its simplest terms he is required to take the 22 or so best players available, select the best team with his fellow selectors, and prepare it for each game as well as he can in the time allowed.

Merely selection of a team does not infer *taqwa* team — this takes time to build and does require enormous foresight, planning, patience, goodwill and hard work. It requires cohesive action between coach, captain

and players in all aspects of the team's evolution and development. A true sporting "marriage" of minds and bodies.

THE basic parameters that a good coach requires to address are as follows:

A high level of personal vehicle ambition and motivation, the ability to listen and learn, the ability to motivate others simply and in groups, the ability to set and define realistic, attainable goals, enormous patience and understanding, subtle sensitive communication skills, objectivity and ability to constructively criticize and provide regular progressive self-assessment among the players.

He needs the strength of character to make and take tough decisions. Add to that a fairly thick skin, good neck muscles, a sense of fair play and most definitely a healthy sense of

He would need a good team manager, organizer or Mr. Fix-it to keep all the member time-consumers

He is lucky indeed if he has a contact with somewhat similar attributes.

His wife, girlfriend and children must realise that they will occupy a good place in the hierarchy of his priorities for considerable periods of time especially during the lead up to his next venture.

I was involved as a spoiler and inter-round commentator with Jim McEwan during the 1982 international season and I marvelled at the way Claran organised, enjoyed and

placed after two matches by Harry Atkinson, who was playing brilliantly well at the time I might add.

I know that *Ensign* will move them out of the barracks and sell as good friends and regard each other highly; his support of Doest when he replaced him as captain in 1997 was superb, exemplary and totally consistent.

His work mates will have to do up now and again as well. He will also need to allow all day Monday and much of Tuesday to unweaving some of the news-stories he has collected or a new angle to a story. There is a lot of work to do. The sports journalists looking for the public, believe it or not, like to know that goes on in Irish rugby, contrary to some opinions floating around Dublin 4.

I first met him at a post-Comanche-Leinster interpro dinner back in 1979 or so. As a player he was fearless, tough, abrasive, cocky, skilful with the ball in his hands or at his feet. He was an excellent hooker, a good lineout thrower (contrary to the view of some 1983 Lions lineout

I will always recall one set scrum, Ireland's put-in, three yards from the Irish goal line with Scotland pressing hard. Before going down in the scrum Fitts coolly and calmly, as the occasion demanded, took his time to orchestrate the correct defensive/offensive attitudes amid the back of the scrum while at the same time trying to

We spoke to the Connacht players on their own, told them of the new recruits and asked them to make their own choice. In September 1984 Michael O'Leary, a young forward from the Midlands region of England and Scotland, was chosen. He was a good player but the heart was torn out of him when Claran was dissolved. In September 1984 Michael O'Leary and I travelled to watch Connacht play an early season match in the States. We had just taken over the job of managing and coaching of the Connacht team.

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**More attributes than
any coach I've met**

jumpers who were eclipsed by Gary Whetton and Andy Haden and blamed Pizze's throwing-in, aided and abetted by the usual identifiable Fleet Street mouthpiece, his pack leadership was inspiring and he never, ever gave up.

either his pack about him and face
awaited Scottish onslaught. I was
most impressed — that simple ac-
knowledges wonders of Fate for me.

He gradually got to know and trust us and us him. Every next tomorrow I met him with my respect for and total love for him. I have always been in his room since I have always been in his room.

I expect a lot of Fizzie and Donald Lenthin. I know that Irish rugby is in good hands. I applaud the IRFU for the welcome changes in the format of selecting their selectors. The performances of the provinces to date and the beginning of a national league answer well for a