

I AM A RUGBY REFEREE

By George Clancy

My experiences as a rugby referee have taken me all over the world. I have been lucky enough to visit the Pacific Islands of Fiji and Tonga, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Argentina, Uruguay, Russia, Hong Kong, Japan and Dubai. Closer to home, I have been to many cities in France, Italy, England, Scotland and Wales. On many of such trips, I sometimes wonder if I'm the first person from Grange to visit those places or to have those wonderful experiences. I always remain grateful to rugby for providing me with great travel opportunities and memories for life.

So how did I first get involved in refereeing? Well, I am a keen sportsman and take an interest in most sports. My first love is hurling, and my earliest memories are of playing in Leo Carmody's field beside my grandmother's house with the likes of my cousin Tony Clancy, Francis and John O'Dwyer and Michael Bourke. Soon I was playing underage games with Bruff GAA Club, but I was also introduced to rugby in Kilballyowen, where we played Community Games mini-rugby. I still like to support mini-rugby, and I try to referee the Munster Finals held at the University of Limerick every July.

We enjoyed hurling and rugby success at underage levels with Bruff, and by then I was receiving excellent rugby coaching at St Munchin's College, Limerick, from the likes of Murray Kidd (*who went on to coach Ireland*) and Andy Leslie (*former New Zealand captain*). When I graduated from secondary school, I continued to play hurling as my primary sport, and I captained the UL Freshers team that contained the likes of Rory McCarthy (*who won an All-Ireland for Wexford in 1996*) and Tom Hickey (*captain of the Kilkenny- Leinster champions in 1998*). A career highlight, though, was winning the South U-21 hurling championship with Bruff in 1997, a team that had strong Grange representation with Francis O'Dwyer, Ray Hourigan, Ian Hogan and Conor Ryan on the team.

During all this time I was also playing with the Bruff Rugby team and, in 1998, we captured our biggest trophy to that point – the Munster Junior Clubs Challenge Cup. Bruff RFC has always had a great community spirit, and it was nice to win that medal when Finbar Hogan (future brother in law!) and I occupied both wing

positions. Soon after that I ceased playing rugby and concentrated solely on GAA. I wasn't making my place on the rugby team, and I had picked up a few knee injuries. Bruff Club reached the senior hurling county quarter final around that time, and the Gaelic football team was enjoying some success. So, GAA activities coupled with my studies took up most of my time.

My father, Seoirse, had been a rugby referee for a brief period in the 1980s, and he encouraged me to 'give it a go'. I kept putting him off, but he was persistent, and I eventually relented and joined the local Referees Association in Limerick City.

Soon I was refereeing at a level that I'd never played at. GAA was still definitely my number one pursuit. However, a chink was exposed when a fixture clash occurred. I was to referee my first Munster Junior League game (*rugby*) on the same day as Bruff footballers were due to play a county semi-final in the Gaelic Grounds. After much deliberation, and for the first time, I chose rugby. The county semi-final was drawn and the manager, Paddy Wallace, dropped me for the replay. While I was naturally disappointed, this was the right thing to do and the decision sent a strong message to the rest of the group about the commitment required to win a county championship. In fairness to Paddy, he proved to be an excellent manager, guiding the Bruff footballers to fantastic success down through the years.

One of my earliest adult appointments was to referee a junior rugby match in Annacotty. The home side lost and afterwards their manager, Mick McLoughlin, put his arm around me to give me some sincere and friendly advice. "You know what you should do now", he said – "Give it up!" He felt that my performance was so poor that I had no future as a referee, perhaps I should have listened to him!

By 2003, I was on the national panel of fifty referees and after one season I was fast-tracked into the professional game. I refereed Borders (Scotland) v Dragons (Wales) in the Celtic League. I received a massive break in January 2005 in the European Cup. I was selected as touch judge for the Bourgoin v Bath match – the referee took ill, and I was asked to step in as his replacement, at short notice. You can imagine how big a deal that was for me. I'd been to most of Munster's games over the previous few years, including the losses in the European Cup finals of 2000 and 2002, and there I was refereeing in the same competition. The match went well, and I refereed over fifty games in that tournament every year since then – which puts me in the top five referees for appearances in the competition.

Around that time (2005), I had to make the toughest decision I've ever had to make – retire from hurling, which I did. It is my favourite sport, and I loved playing it. Bruff had reached the quarterfinals of the intermediate county championship that season. However, the risk of injury was too great for me, and my contract with the IRFU specified that I could not partake in "dangerous" sports. I still attend as many of Bruff's games as I can, and a really important accolade



George Clancy and his wife, Evelyn, in Clermont, France after refereeing a European Cup Quarter-Final.

for me was when Bruff GAA Club honoured me with life membership.

By now, refereeing was really taking off for me. I was appointed to referee Scotland U-19 v France U-19, and in 2005 I was sent to Durban, South Africa, for the U-19 Rugby World Cup. That three-week trip was amazing as I became immersed in the culture of the country, and I witnessed some fantastic scenery. The following year, I went to France for the U-21 Rugby World Cup. The next step, naturally, was to try to break into the international game. That break came in 2006 when I refereed Uruguay v The USA in a World Cup qualifier in

Montevideo. However, the IRFU does not consider this game as a full international as a “Tier 1” nation must be involved. The step-up came in 2008 when I refereed South Africa v Italy in Cape Town.

I was trying to establish myself at the top level when, in June 2009, I was sent to New Zealand for three games. The first match was New Zealand v France at the “House of Pain” in Dunedin. I remember wondering before the game if I was ready for the challenge. *The dressing room can be a lonely place just before you run out onto the pitch when you realise that it is time to deliver and help is nowhere to be found.* It was a great game, and France won 22-27 (the last time New Zealand were beaten at home). I’d refereed well, and the feeling of satisfaction lasted for days. My wife, Evelyn, accompanied me on the trip – we rented a car and explored New Zealand. As a referee, your only duties really are to turn up on a nominated day and referee the match. You can utilise the time in between as you like, and as I have a Master’s Degree in International Relations, I’m always interested in visiting new places and being exposed to different cultures.

The following year (2010), I refereed for the second time in the Six Nations Championship – Wales v Scotland. Scotland were massive underdogs but led 24-14 with four minutes to go. I’ll never forget what happened next as Wales scored 17 points to win the game and the Millennium Stadium crowd, which was very close to the pitch, went into a frenzy of excitement. It is difficult to ‘come down’ after games like that. All kinds of adrenalin are running through the body, even hours after the game. This makes it especially difficult to sleep, more so when you have a late kick-off time (like 21:00 hours, regularly in France).

One of the perks of the role is that you can visit relations and the first time I met Evelyn’s Australian cousins was in Sydney in 2010. They showed us around

that amazing city, and as we were leaving to come home, I wondered when I'd see them again. Within a week of returning, I received a phone call from my boss in Dublin who informed me that the referee for Australia v South Africa had sustained an injury and asked if I would be able to go to Brisbane to referee the game! So, I was back down visiting Evelyn's relations a couple of weeks after wondering if I'd see them again. This match went very well, setting me up then for a crack at making the Rugby World Cup panel of referees for 2011.

But first, I had to negotiate the Six Nations Championship of 2011. I refereed two good games in that championship: Scotland v Wales (again) and England v France, which is the biggest game in the tournament. You normally travel the day before the game, and there may be meetings with the coaches and captains to clarify interpretations of various laws. The host Union normally organises an informal dinner the night before the game, which is a good opportunity to catch up with



George Clancy laying down the law to England and France in a Six Nations clash.

other match officials that you might not have seen for a while. The day of the game is quiet, a time for mental preparation and meeting with the assistant referees and television match official (TMO) to finalise plans for the contest ahead. Then there is a police escort to the stadium, where you pass the thousands of people out socialising ahead of the game. In France, there are two police outriders on motorbikes who literally kick cars out of the way, and our car whizzes along the road. It can be hair-raising, and once or twice I've thought of Princess Diana's fate in the same city.

Nobody does pomp and ceremony like the English and Twickenham is considered HQ. It is a super stadium, and I have many happy memories of being there. You often get introduced to Royalty, and while I would not get carried away with that kind of thing, I do understand that not many people get to have this experience. After the game, there is a formal meal (in a suit and tie) with both teams in attendance. Both Presidents of the Rugby Unions speak as do both captains. Referees are normally presented with a tie or the touch-flags or some other memento of the occasion. Once you leave the ground, it is a time to relax fully, and after the mental and physical effort I enjoy a beer or two to unwind.

I get a great thrill when a game goes well, and I know that it has been a tough, tough challenge, but I've refereed competently, effectively and fairly. I was lucky enough to referee England v The All Blacks in December 2012 when the home team won 38-14. The result was a major upset but my performance was very good, and I knew afterwards that I made a positive contribution to the game without influencing the result. Straight away, you instinctively know you have been part of something special, and it becomes an "I was there" event in your mind. Of course, there are other days, in the minority, when it doesn't go as well, or there was a controversial incident during the match. This can be very depressing, and it is something that can keep me awake at night and dominate my thoughts during the day. I guess this shows that I care a lot about how my performance can affect players and their livelihoods as well as enjoyment by the fans. But time is a healer and referees have to be resilient, learn from mistakes and move on, ever stronger. That is my philosophy as a referee.

I recognise that no performance is perfect, so it is best to be honest with yourself and try to learn for the next day. A performance reviewer will also look at the game, and the whole process is completed online, so all other referees can see the report too. The review can be a humbling experience, but we are all in the same boat, and you can't be too sensitive to constructive criticism or it becomes harder to learn. Although there can be some critical comments in the papers and indeed social media, I tend to avoid all that and concentrate on what is being said by people whose opinions I trust. I guess I don't need that negativity in my life, which is only a distraction and won't help me become a better referee.

I received the best phonecall of my life when I was in Bruff watching the senior hurlers play Ballybrown in the county league. Paddy O'Brien, Head of World Referees, was on the line to tell me that I had been selected to referee at Rugby World Cup 2011 in New Zealand. Only ten referees were selected, so this was a fantastic honour. In addition, I was to referee the opening game of the tournament. He also said that I'd been appointed to referee South Africa v New Zealand in the Rugby Championship. That, for me, is the biggest fixture in world rugby. These are two countries where rugby is the national sport, and there is a huge rivalry involved. The game was played at Nelson Mandela Bay Stadium, with a great atmosphere, as many South Africans actually support the All Blacks when they play the Springboks. There was a degree of controversy about one incident when the television match official told me that there had been a forward pass in the lead-up to a New Zealand try. At the time, this information was outside of protocols but, clearly, a legitimate try had not been scored, and I disallowed it. Much of the controversy was diffused by Graham Henry, All-Blacks Coach, who also felt that a try should not have been awarded. The protocols have since changed to allow referees to check for forward passes.

The opening game of Rugby World Cup 2011 is a career highlight. It wasn't until I looked out my apartment balcony in Auckland and saw the 250,000 people that had congregated at the harbour to celebrate our game that I realised the significance of the occasion. The colour and energy down below was amazing, with jerseys of all colours mingling happily. I was in the bowels of the stadium with the teams during the Opening Ceremony, but I've looked back on TV footage at it, and it was special. A treat for me was to have my wife and my father at the game and for them to experience the occasion with me. I had to use a very old whistle (from 1905) to start the game – a tradition dating back to the first World Cup in 1987– and so, I got the tournament underway. The hosts, New Zealand, beat Tonga comfortably, but I was proud of my own performance, which set the standard for the match officials at the competition. After the game, the Prime Minister of New Zealand came to the changing room to congratulate the match officials on behalf of the people. He was relieved that everything had gone to plan as the reputation of the country was at stake.

I was very busy for the first month of the tournament; I refereed four games and was an assistant referee for five more. I was all over the country, to the very south at Invercargill where John Hayes played local rugby, and to Waitangi, where we were able to go jet-skiing with dolphins in the most beautiful scenery imaginable. I enjoyed the rest of the tournament, especially as Ireland were going well. I was an assistant referee for two of the quarter-finals and the third/fourth place playoff. New Zealand is a fantastic country, and I made many friends while I was there.

I've noticed that the game has become more physical and faster, even since I began refereeing professional rugby. The 'hits' seem to be getting bigger, and I wouldn't like to be on the receiving end of an accidental collision with one of the players. I weigh about 75kg – many of the forwards nowadays are about 125kg! So I have to be very fit to get around the park – you have to be on the spot to give credibility to decisions. The IRFU has organised a personal fitness trainer for me, and I meet him at the University of Limerick Sports Arena about twice a week. We focus on core exercises and endurance work. World Rugby regularly tests our fitness by measuring how quickly we can run a 40-metre sprint (about 5.5 seconds) and also an "Intermittent Yo-yo test". Here we have to run out and back to a 20-metre line before a beep sounds. The length of time between the beeps gets progressively shorter, so you have to run faster to keep up. The test ends when you are totally exhausted and can't run anymore. It's tough! But I must admit that I love the grind of training and keeping fit. I am a diabetic, so eating and exercising properly helps control my condition and keeps me healthy.

My lifestyle can be very busy, and it takes a lot of sacrifices from the people around me to support me in my endeavours. A typical week would require me to

work in the office (*civil service employment*) from Monday to Thursday, training at 7.00 am on Tuesday and Thursday, before going to work. In preparation for my next game, I'll look at the last few games that the teams played and make a few notes. Normally, I would do this on the Wednesday prior to a weekend game. Having packed my bags on Thursday night, I drive to Shannon or Dublin airport on Friday to catch a plane to somewhere in Europe. I'm well used to most airports at this stage, and I have 'Frequent Flyer' status with many airlines so I can relax and use a Business Lounge before departure. On arrival, I'd have to rent a car to drive to a venue – for example along the M4 from London to Cardiff. I stay at a familiar hotel and eat and hydrate properly before my game.

Having refereed a game on Saturday, I try to relax with a good night's sleep. As I've mentioned earlier, even though tired, it can be difficult to sleep after a game. Usually, I return to the airport the following morning. I tend to review my game performance on my laptop during the plane journey home, and then upload my review into the online system so that my performance reviewer can see my self-assessment and comment as he deems appropriate. This routine could be repeated for five or six weeks in succession without a week off.

When my schedule permits, I like to relax by playing at Ballyneety Golf Club and, of course, I follow the Limerick hurlers as much as I can. Hurling is still my first love, and even now I enjoy a 'puck around' in the field. That helps to keep me grounded in my local community. I've always appreciated the support that I get from everyone in the parish and I like to think that I am representing the locality in a positive way on a world stage.

Right now, I am preparing for my second Rugby World Cup. I'm very proud to have maintained my position as one of the top referees in the world for two World Cup cycles – this shows a level of consistent performance over a long period. It is great to be involved in European competition also. I've refereed two Challenge Cup Finals, and I've recently refereed a semi-final of the European Cup in St Etienne between Clermont and Saracens, where the atmosphere in the stadium was probably the best I've experienced.

So naturally, I'd hope to continue refereeing for as long as I am deemed competent and suitable. Already, I have been on an incredible journey, and I still enjoy the challenge as much as the day I started!

Editorial Note

As we prepare to hand *Grange Book* over to the printer, Rugby World Cup 2015 is in full flight. Pool stages have determined the eight nations to contest the Quarter-Finals. Ireland were magnificent in the crunch game against France and emerged victorious, topping Pool D by some margin and earning a Quarter-Final 'winner-takes-all' against Argentina.

It is gratifying to note that the Irish Team and top-flight International Referee, George Clancy, have acquitted themselves with distinction to this point.

Ireland won their opening games against Canada and Romania very comfortably. While not at their best against Italy, they won the encounter, but they followed up by mercilessly and magnificently putting France to the sword.

George, officiating in his second World Cup, has refereed three games to date, Samoa v USA, Italy v Canada and Namibia v Georgia – Samoa, Italy and Georgia being the victors. George was an Assistant Referee for three Pool games.

In George's first two games, the TV commentator for RTÉ introduced the referee as *The Tax Collector from Limerick* and in the second game, played at Elland Road, the Leeds United Soccer Stadium, the commentator remarked that Seoirse, George's father, a long-time and fanatical Leeds soccer supporter, was "present in the stadium". Seoirse, undoubtedly, soaked up the atmosphere and must have been more than pleased with his son's refereeing of the battle.

For a TV spectator, George's opening game seemed a dour and very physical contest, perhaps most notable for an inordinate number of rule infringements, keeping George and his whistle extremely busy throughout the encounter. George was well on top of his brief in what seemed a difficult game to referee. He was a competent referee and assistant referee in all of his games.

George has certainly justified his selection and his reputation as a top flight international referee on a world stage has been enhanced. He continues to be a great Ambassador for Grange and Ireland and we are enormously proud of him.

Of course, RWC 2015 has reached the 'business' end and the whole of Ireland will follow the fortunes of the Irish Team and the performances of George Clancy over the coming weeks. We will cheer them both with great expectation. Well done George Clancy! Come On Ireland!

Late footnote: Ireland lost their Quarter Final. George was an Assistant Referee in a Q/F and has been named as Assistant Referee in a Semi-Final.

[Back to Top](#) ↑

