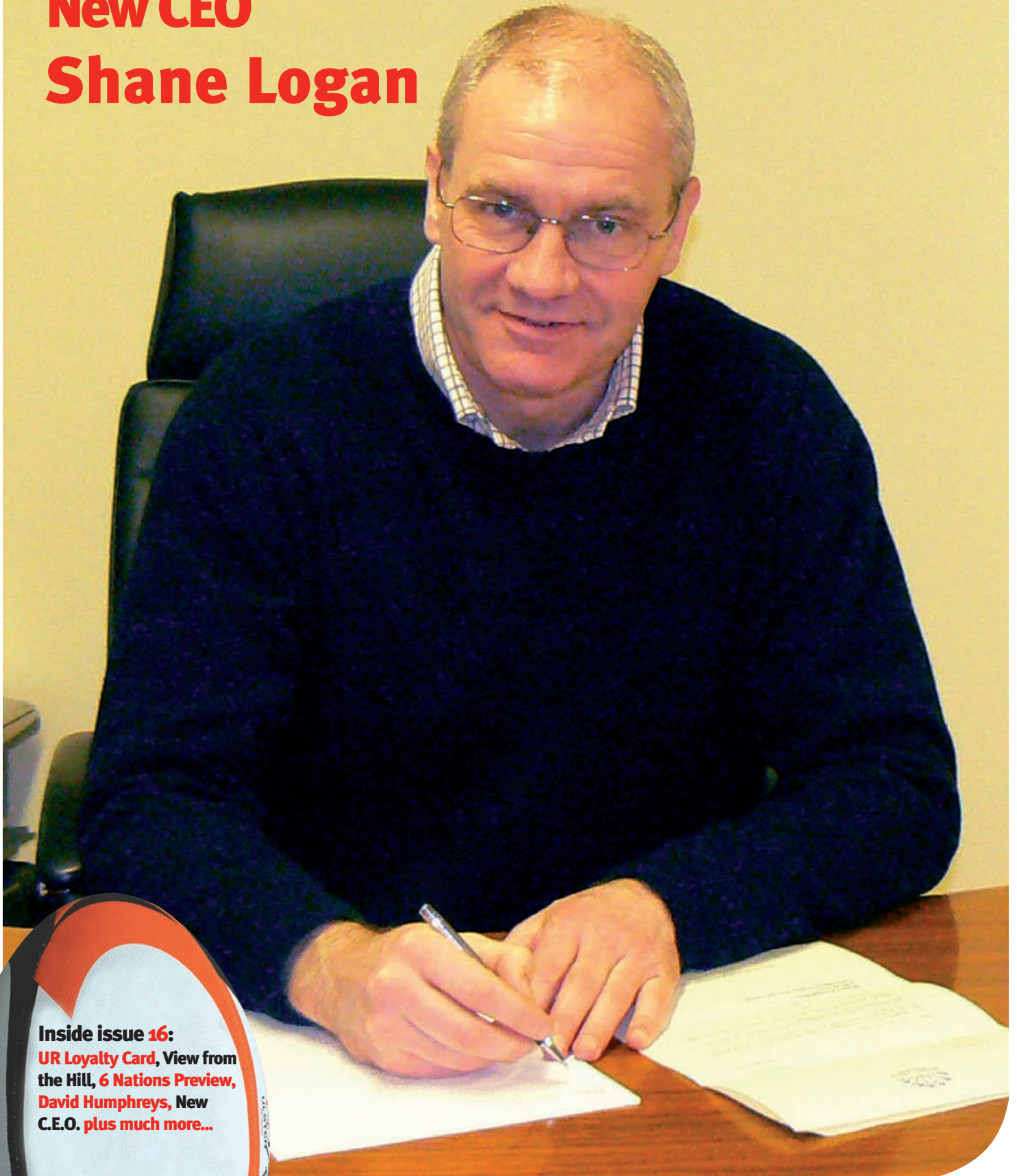


STAND UP

THE ULSTER RUGBY SUPPORTERS CLUB NEWSLETTER MARCH '10



New CEO Shane Logan



Inside issue 16:
**UR Loyalty Card, View from
the Hill, 6 Nations Preview,
David Humphreys, New
C.E.O. plus much more...**

The Chairman *Welcome...* speaks



It was with great pleasure that I learned earlier this month of the confirmation that two Italian teams will compete in the Magners League next season. In my view this is an exciting development at a time when professionalism in rugby union is still in relatively early stages of development. I was disappointed to learn of Scottish reticence, particularly as one who spent many years living in Edinburgh and who understands the grass routes passion for the game both there and in the Scottish borders. But times move on and history demonstrates that those who fail to take new opportunities will be left behind. No doubt the Italians will have both good and bad days on the pitch but the long term must be for the overall benefit of European Rugby. I congratulate both Treviso and Aironi on their admission to Celtic Rugby – I look forward to welcoming them to Ravenhill next season and I know that I am one of many who are looking forward to making the return trips to Italy.

Earlier this month I had the privilege of meeting Shane Logan, our new CEO. This opportunity was very welcome and the first step in which I hope will prove to be a strengthening of our working relationship with Ulster Rugby. The first and very tangible evidence of this has been the provision, (at no cost to URSC), of a small, self contained marquee for match nights, solely for our use. The lack of this facility in the past has long been a frustration to members and fans alike, and we now look forward to using our permanent presence in the ground for the benefit of all members attending all Ulster and Ravens matches at Ravenhill from here on.

Iain Campbell, Chairman.

Player of the Month



The URSC Player of the Month for December 2009, (sponsored by Crystal Clear Glass Engravers) has been named as **ANDREW TRIMBLE**.

Also, the Player of the Month for January/February (combined award) is...also **ANDREW TRIMBLE!**

Yep, you guessed it...Andrew has been away on international duty with the Ireland squad so we haven't managed to present yet we'll bring you a photo (or two) of the presentation(s) just as soon as we manage to get one...or two!

Ulster Rugby Loyalty Card Special Offer for URSC Members

The Ulster Rugby Loyalty Card, launched in December 2009, gives supporters extra value when shown at the time of purchase in participating outlets and unlike many schemes, you don't have to earn points to save - you can start saving money as soon as you receive your card.



Members of the Ulster Rugby Supporters Club have the opportunity to purchase the card for just £15 instead of £20 and within a couple of weeks you'll be able to take advantage of some great discounts from outlets including Specsavers, Dominos Pizza and Hastings Hotels as well as many more.

Why should you purchase a Loyalty Card?

We're always on the look-out for new ways to raise money for Ulster Rugby, rather than just increasing season ticket or match ticket prices year on year, and the new Ulster Rugby Loyalty Card is one such initiative.

Like most professional clubs, our biggest costs relate to the recruitment and retention of players and the provision of training facilities in order to ensure that we can put a top team out on the pitch each week, and one which is capable of getting results - proceeds from the sales of the Ulster Rugby Loyalty Card will be channeled directly into these areas. By purchasing the card, you're not only investing in Ulster Rugby's future, but you'll save yourself money by using the card to obtain discounts on a wide range of products and services.

You can download the application form from the website by visiting www.ulsterrugby.com/loyaltycard or you can pick up an application form from the Ravenhill Ticket Office, open Mon-Fri 9am to 5pm.

New outlets which accept the card are being added all the time but a full list of those signed up to date and their offerings is now available to download from www.ulsterrugby.com/loyaltycard

View from the hill

Fans Feedback to Ulster Rugby: As mentioned in our last issue we are now meeting regularly with Ulster Rugby to raise issues of concern to the fans. These include egress from the terrace at the end of matches, stewarding, and the condition of the ladies toilets. We can now report on recent feedback.

Arrangements for exiting the new terrace: We highlighted the time to exit the terrace. This is an issue that UR are aware of, and is being monitored. Currently fans can exit the terrace from the Mount Merrion end, as previously, and also from the far end of the terrace, round the back of the old corporate boxes, into the Aquinas car park or the back gate at Ravenhill Park Gardens.

Terrace issues – general: We asked why the area in front of the terrace is supposed to be kept clear. This is due to concerns for health and safety and the need for uninterrupted access to/from the terrace. This is why fans are prevented from standing against the railings. UR do not allow the use of stools for small children on the terrace, again on health and safety grounds.

Family area on the terrace: We suggested this would be appreciated by parents with small children, and help overcome the problem of the restrictions above. We are advised there are no plans for this during 09/10 season, but it will be considered further.

Stewarding: We raised concerns regarding the approach to stewarding, particularly on the terrace, and our expectation that one key element is to advise/assist fans on their way to the terrace, as opposed to an emphasis on crowd control. UR advise that they strive to ensure that there are regular stewards on the terrace in particular, who can be a familiar face to supporters there. However stewards are there to do a job, and health and safety issues are paramount. We are assured that stewards are briefed that the nature of the crowd at Ravenhill is different to crowds at other sporting events. Our recent feedback suggests that this approach is working, with some camaraderie developing between regular fans and their respective stewards, all adding to the Ravenhill experience.

Ladies Toilets: This issue has been raised on a number of occasions. UR are aware of the problems and are monitoring the condition of these toilets on an ongoing basis. All toilets are in correct working order at the beginning of each match. However, with 10,000 plus attendance on occasions, this puts a strain on arrangements. We pointed out that this does not seem to be a problem at the RDS or Thomond Park. UR will look again at measures to alleviate the difficulties.

New Stand: We noted that fans using the corporate boxes are denied access to the members bar, despite occasions when it is well below capacity. We are told that this is again compliance with capacity limits and health and safety. Seats for the new stand have been for sale on a match by match basis. This is going well, with the Stade Francais and Edinburgh games in particular, seeing a very large take up of seats.

Lower level hospitality/catering: UR hope to have further information shortly.

Match Programme: We suggested a number of ways to boost sales. The idea of a prize/lucky programme is one UR favour and consideration is being given to how best to implement this. UR would certainly like to trial this before the end of the season.

Club Shop: This is most likely dependent on the next phase of redevelopment.

TV in the marquee bar: The marquee bar is a temporary structure, and removed at the end of each season. Logistically it would be quite difficult to put a TV into the bar. However, UR felt that if there was a major demand for it, they could investigate further.

Away ticketing: Take up of Bath tickets was excellent, - 770 - the most UR have sold for an away Heineken match since London Irish. UR received one complaint on how poor some of the seats were. This appears to have been related to the third and last batch ordered, due to the large demand (more take up for stand tickets than terrace), and limited availability.

If there are any of these issues that you would like to discuss with the Committee, or others that you would like to bring to their attention, please contact us at any of the addresses on the back page of Stand Up.

Other URSC Matters

URSC International Tickets: We were once again allocated 40 stand tickets for each of the Six Nations home internationals at Croke Park. Uptake for the Italy game was extremely poor, despite emailing all members for whom we have addresses. This problem was not unique to URSC and in the end we decided to discount our tickets by approx 30%, resulting in all but one being sold. We are grateful to Capita Symonds, who agreed to take a number of Italy tickets at face value, so reducing the loss to the club. Demand for the other matches did pick up significantly and at the time of writing all tickets for Wales and Scotland have been allocated, either by ballot, or on a first come, first served basis by email invitation to our members. We realise that the price of International tickets has been a significant deterrent; however we are keen to maintain our allocation, mindful of the significant reduction in availability as Ireland returns to the Aviva Stadium, (Lansdowne Road to you and me), next season. The winners of the prize tickets for the Six Nations Championship games are: Italy: Kenny McRitchie, Edinburgh. Wales: Mervyn Nolan, Newtownabbey. Scotland: Jim Galbraith, Drumaghee, Derry. We offer congratulations to all and trust that their match day experiences are memorable ones.

Membership: As our season enters the final couple of months we can report that membership numbers stand at 544, down from 815 the previous year. No doubt the difficult season both on and off the field has played a significant role, however we are hopeful that a number of initiatives currently under consideration with Ulster Rugby will result in a significant increase in membership next season.

URSC Player of the Month: The winner of the £20 voucher drawn from those who nominated the successful candidate is Robin Mack, Maze.

Kukri: We have been extended the courtesy of previewing the new Ulster kit for season 2010 – 11, by Terry Jackson, Mr Kukri in Ulster. During what turned into a very informative exchange the possibility of membership discounts for internet shopping and the provision of limited edition Kukri merchandise was discussed. Watch this space for more developments.

ADVANCE
NOTICES

Annual General Meeting:
Wednesday 21 April at 19:30, members only
Followed by an opportunity to hear from
our guest speaker, Shane Logan, CEO,
Ulster Rugby, at 20:00
Venue: Newforge Country Club

**Annual URSC BBQ
(& Heineken Cup Final):**
Saturday 22 May, 4.00pm.
Venue: Newforge Country Club
Heineken Cup Final on large screen TV,
K.O. 6.00pm.



Meet the new C.E.O. –

SHANE LOGAN
talks about his
hopes for Ulster
and the supporters!



Shane Logan, welcome to Ulster Rugby – You've now been officially in charge for a couple of weeks and have your first match under your belt. How have you been settling in?

Very well, thank-you. In any new job it's incredibly busy – it's busy trying to understand the issues, meet the people, to get the best views on board to put together a plan to move us forward, and it will be like that for the next 3-6 months but everyone's been very positive and very helpful.

At that first match (v Dragons), you did the Grand Tour of Ravenhill – how was the experience, and did you learn anything new?

It's important for me to understand things from the supporters' perspective. It was important for me to get round and talk to people in all parts of the ground, so I went into one of the new boxes, the prom, the terrace, the new stand, and I had a chat with the disabled supporters because it's important to understand why people come, what they want improved, the opportunities for improvement, are the service levels okay, as we need to be improving on ALL fronts if we're going to do a good job.

Will you be "stewarding" at future games, or will you be confining yourself to the Committee Box in future?

I'll do whatever it takes. It is important for me to understand people's views, good and bad.

During the recruitment process, it was reported that there were several high quality candidates for the post. Clearly you managed to convince the powers that be that you were the right man for the job – can you tell the fans something about yourself and your experience that impressed the panel enough that they chose you over the others?

You'd need to ask the panel how I impressed them, but I can tell you what I said. A potted history of my experience: I'm 46, from Bangor and rugby is in my DNA. I started playing rugby in P6 under Harry Williams – he was my first coach. I was brought up in rugby by my father – he was a former President and Captain of Bangor. My brother's a former President of Bangor. I played at school, and after leaving school, in different places I was working around the world. I was brought up on the steps of Ravenhill. I think there were about 10 or 12 years I never missed a home Ulster match. So rugby's in the blood, I have a passion about it and love it. My rugby career though wasn't spectacular although it wasn't bad. From the business point of view, I have experience in different sectors and in different countries at CEO level. Various I have been running a Coke territory in central Russia (just inside Siberia); I have run a BP territory and I have run my own business. I was a General Manager in Harland & Wolff (one of three) with up to about 700 people working for me, and latterly I ran a charity.

You have spoken about turning Ulster into the best team in the world, about dominating European rugby. Fine sentiments – that's where we want to be, but that's what every CEO wants and works towards for their club – what are you bringing to the job that will make that achievable?

I think it's all the companies that I have worked for, and in particular Coke, where that was an absolute mantra and a way of being. It's not just about having a vision or intent, but you've got to break down that intent into do-able bits. So what we have to do is divide the game into three – have a 3-5-year plan, an annual plan that's going to take us towards that. In the professional game we need to ensure that we have the best players, the best coaches and the best supporter facilities. In the domestic game we need to ensure that we have a thriving and vibrant base, and on the commercial side we need to ensure that we are adopting best practice to grow the offering to the supporters, to grow the numbers and the offering to the sponsors. There are very clear benchmarks out there – be it Leinster, Munster, Leicester and some of the French sides

and now the Super 15 sides, so we need to identify where those are at and make the plan broken down by a year, by 3 years, by 5 years and by 10 years that will allow us to overtake. An aspiration without clear plan, clear structure, clear accountability on deliverability on all of that, is merely an aspiration.

I take it from that, that you intend to be here for the long term, then?

I hope so. My average time in CEO positions is about 5 years, and this is going to take at least that; it may take considerably longer. Providing we are moving forward at a good pace, in the right direction, I will be happy.

As far as the URSC is concerned, you made contact with our Chairman Iain Campbell very early on – how important do you think the fans are to Ulster?

It was on day one I phoned him and we met in my first week. It was important to me to understand the views of the supporters. They are an absolutely vital ingredient in what we are trying to do.

So how do you see any relationship developing between UR and the Supporters' Club?

We have to be as one; we have to have a joint plan; we have to have a plan that works for all parties including supporters. If we're going to be the best in the world, we have to have the best supporters in the world, and grow that. We have to have a support which is alive, which is on fire, which sings the best, creates the best atmosphere, supports the team in the best way – which is respectful of the opposition, which does the things a good Ulster crowd should be doing – that's not booing at kicks or anything like that. We need a support that is thoroughly enjoyable, fully engaged and part of the whole Ulster set-up.

URSC has made representations for some time to have a focal point within the ground where we can meet with members and other supporters on match days. For your first match after taking up the reins, you arranged for the mini marquee to be set up as a focal point for URSC – is this a taste of things to come?

We have to have a joint plan, we have to have a view of where we want to be together in 3-5 years and again break it down by year. We have to do more together. With the best clubs, and perhaps you could take Munster as an example, the team is absolutely integral to the supporters and the supporters are integral to the team. We can't have segregation, we can't be stood off from each other; where there are difficulties, we have to come at those together. Without the supporters, there isn't a team, and without a team there aren't supporters.

Taking your own example of Munster then, being a member of their supporters club brings certain benefits that you just can't get anywhere else. At the moment, being a member of URSC has much less to compare by way of benefits – do you see the relationship growing in such a way that Ulster may offer benefits through the Supporters' Club that aren't available by any other means?

It would be naive of me to say that it's going to be A, B or C at this point, but I think we need to work together to identify those things to see what would be effective.

Many people see Ulster as being in a unique situation, with a unique identity – does this help you in building the corporate and commercial support you need to finance the professional game, or is it too limiting, and do you need to look beyond the nine counties for commercial opportunities?

If you look at the nine counties that comprise Ulster there is a population of nearly 2 million people. There are very good, strong local and multinational businesses and we are a very attractive proposition to both. I couldn't go for one

over the other, but I think it is important that we never lose our Ulster identity – that's the cause, that's the passion, but if we exclude or put a wall around the 9 counties and say nothing else is welcome, we are being too narrow. There will be times when we need to bring in expertise, it may be for nutrition, it may be psychological, it may be management or players – we need to have an open mind and get the best of what's out there. We need to do things in a way that is true to ourselves and will gel with Ulster people, and not grate against.

Are you aware of the expectations of the Ulster fans, whether they be realistic or perhaps at times unrealistic?

I would hope they are very unrealistic – I would hope they want what I want which is to be the best. Have you set yourself goals yet, and if so, what are they?

How will the supporters gauge the success or otherwise of your tenure as CEO?

Not yet. I have made a very bold statement that we are aiming to be the best. I need to understand more clearly how that's going to be broken down by year, by 3 years by 5 years and to agree that with all relevant stakeholders including supporters. I want to say, "where do you guys want to be in a year, in three years? What will satisfy you?" I will bring you into the plan, but there's also the IRFU and the clubs. I will make haste slowly – what I don't want to do is get off on the wrong foot, or make false moves. If there are things that can be done quickly and easily, like setting up the marquee for yourselves, that's a no-brainer, we do those things but in terms of the detail of the plan, that will take me a few months.

Ulster Rugby has already completed the first stage of redeveloping Ravenhill and there are fairly detailed plans on phases 2, 3 & 4. Are we still committed to these plans, or will you be reviewing these plans in terms of scope and/or timescale? Indeed do you see Ulster's (professional or otherwise) long-term future at Ravenhill?

Yes! The plans have been submitted. The approach with DCAL (Department of Culture, Arts & Leisure) is predicated on 3 separate stadia (rugby, football & GAA). We want to have the other three sides of Ravenhill finished to at least the same standard as the 1st side as quickly as possible. We need this to work for the local residents too – we need to embrace the views of the residents – whether that's trafficking, noise, whatever it is, we need to work with them to find a mutually workable solution, and I intend to do that. I'm not saying it will be quick or easy, but we need to talk to people and engage with them to find a way through.

Have you been talking to Sammy Wilson, Nelson McCausland or others in government about securing a share of the budget that was set aside for the National Stadium project (Maze)?

Absolutely. Part of my job is to lobby and to influence these things. One of the reasons I was employed in the job is that in my previous job I did that a lot. I spent a lot of time up at Stormont, and I've had good results. I have had contact already through a number of letters and I have meetings scheduled to discuss these things in March.

Is this a good time to be coming in as CEO, with a couple of guaranteed away trips to Italy every season now confirmed?

We are very keen on the Italians being in. In terms of experience, it's another two fixtures which is good for the players with a different style of rugby. It's good for gates and it creates more interest from a sponsorship point of view as it opens up another market of 60 million in Italy and it attracts more broadcasting interest and money, which can only be good.

Shane Logan, thank you, and all the very best to you as you embark on your new job!

He used to pull the strings for Ulster on the pitch – now he pulls them behind the scenes. **David Humphreys** talks to Stand Up about what that entails

Brian McLaughlin looks after the team training and selection – everything else is yours – what exactly does that entail?

The way we described it right at the start was that Brian's responsibility was on-field; coaching, training and ultimately preparing the players for matches. My job is to ensure that off-field everything surrounding team operations runs smoothly. That involves working within the agreed budgets, responsibility for player recruitment and retention, working with the IRFU and with the committees and the structures in Ulster Rugby allowing Brian to concentrate on winning matches! There are also issues surrounding Tournament Regulations and player eligibility that we have to be continually aware of alongside working with the local clubs to get all of our players game time.

Without going into specifics or individuals, what are the main considerations when embarking on contract negotiations?

Every year it gets earlier and earlier. It used to be that after Christmas you just sat down and signed your squad up. Nowadays because there are so many agents, because there are so many clubs looking at a pool of players that's getting smaller, it has to start earlier. Around November, during the Autumn International series, the management team will have identified some of the areas where we want to strengthen for next season. The first part is of course to think about which players we want to retain, then what areas do we need to recruit to strengthen our squad. We are very ambitious - Shane Logan has spoken about his goals – Ulster's current management team are the same, we want to be qualifying from our group in Europe and challenging at the top of the Magners League. We think this year our squad is stronger and next season we think it will be stronger again. Once we identify what positions we need to recruit, I contact a number of Agents who represent players from right across the world and see who is available. In the past Ulster conducted all negotiations through the player's agent – sometimes we didn't get a chance to speak to the player directly and neither did they get the opportunity to come and look around Belfast. This year we've tried to do things differently; once we identified who we feel could add to our squad, we have either gone to meet them or ideally we have brought them across to Ulster, shown them around Ravenhill, around Newforge and around the University (Jordanstown) – shown them what Ulster's about. Brian and I both believe it's very important to meet the individual players and

to see what they offer. When you're trying to build a team or a squad, you've got to recruit people who will add value both on and off the pitch and players whose personalities fit in with what we're trying to do here. Probably, unlike other years, there have been lots of rumours about who's been here, who's been seen around and I think it's caused a lot of interest because it hasn't been done before! Finally, and most importantly, can we afford him!

What budgetary considerations and from who?

The budget, especially in the current economic climate, has become a massive factor in who any club can sign. The top players can still demand top salaries because in the build up to the RWC 2011 very few International players are available - fewer players are interested in moving from the Southern hemisphere because they want the opportunity to represent their country in the World Cup. At Provincial level, the IRFU control the type and number of contracts we have in any particular season and there are three different types of contract; (1) the foreign player who is not Irish-qualified; (2) the international contract and (3) the provincial contract. The IRFU make a significant financial contribution to all the Provincial squads and costs have varied for us over the past number of seasons but it is the Provincial CEO who sets the final player contracting budget.

Who decides on signing targets?

As I mentioned above, the management take a view on the areas in the squad that need to be strengthened and while we may all have different views on different players we try to reach a consensus on the approach we should take. If the player turns out to be a good signing, I'm happy to take the credit but if not Brian can take the blame!!



What are the implications of the Non Irish Qualified (NIQ) quota? Can you apply for or expect exemptions?

We are allowed 5 NIQ players. We also have dispensation for one "project" player (Robbie Diack who can become IQ). That is part of long-term planning where the IRFU look at positions they think they need strengthening over the next few seasons. The number of NIQ is set in stone and is non-negotiable which is difficult for Ulster because in the Republic, players move freely between Provinces but not North; they rarely leave Munster or Leinster mainly because they get a massive tax break whenever they retire. As we struggle to attract players to move to Ulster we rely very, very much on local players, on our Academy players and I believe that Ulster will be strongest when we are represented by those players. In all our planning, we are looking at Ulster players throughout our team, but we would like to attract some of the southern players north just to give us more depth and more quality, but the success and production line that is our Academy will ultimately determine how successful Ulster is in future.

Is there a solution to having so many players out of contract every year, or does the short contract period of most players make this inevitable?

Rugby is still very much in its infancy as a professional sport. Our contracts are generally on a two-year cycle, so obviously then every year, half your squad comes out of contract. What we've tried to do this year is offer some 3-year contracts to try to change that. The ideal scenario would be to move to a soccer situation with players on a rolling contract so that players you really want, you don't let them get into the last year of their contract. The current situation isn't ideal and it is something we continue to talk about.

By and large, rugby players have tended to honour contracts. If you go down the soccer route as you propose, is there a danger that more players will try to get out of those contracts or teams try to poach from one another and transfer fees will creep in?

The French clubs have already paid transfer fees for the players they have brought from the southern hemisphere and the UK over the past 18 months or so. My view is that as the sport becomes more and more professional, the more money that is in the game, the loyalty that players may have had in the past for playing for local clubs will be lost forever. Players will move where the money is. This isn't criticism in any way, shape or form. As a professional player, you have a very short career and what you are trying to do, ultimately is make a lot of money. Earning potential will determine where you will go and how long you stay in one place. It does make it difficult, but we have to ensure that Ulster can match the wages being offered elsewhere, and with Shane [Logan] coming in, there is a big challenge for the commercial side of all professional teams as to keep pace with the way salaries have moved forward.

It has been reported recently that BJ Botha has been making noises about being released from his contract early to go back to South Africa to improve his chances of a World Cup slot in their team. It is entirely understandable, and it has also been reported that he was released early from his contract to come to Ulster in the first place. Is his early release something that Ulster would consider?

It's not as simple as saying that he was released early by the Sharks. I fully understand Brendon's enthusiasm for playing at the World Cup – I think we all do, but the World Cup doesn't take place until October 2011. As far as we are concerned, Brendon is under a 3 year contract to Ulster and he made that decision when he came across here. Brendon has been an absolutely magnificent signing for us – the influence and impact he has had has been huge. We are trying to build a squad to win a European Cup next year, and we very much see Brendon as being an integral and leading part of that. We will certainly try to ensure that by whatever he does here, he will have the opportunity to go back and play in the World Cup as well.

Do you take any part on the training field? Particularly with regard to the out-halves or kickers?

Anyone who knows me knows that I do not see myself as a coach. It's not something I've ever aspired to do although I still enjoy going out to watch training. I can be a "sympathetic ear" for some of the players to come in to talk to once in a while, so that's my role, but nothing on the pitch.

What expectations, if any, do you have of the new CEO coming in? How does he differ from Mike Reid, and what does he bring to the table?

It's important to recognise the contribution Michael Reid has made to Ulster rugby for over 10 years, taking it from an amateur sport to a professional sport – to what is the prime professional sport in Northern Ireland and Ulster. Shane is coming in at a time when there are huge challenges facing the professional game, there are huge challenges facing Ulster. He is very aware of those challenges and strongly believes from a commercial and PR point of view that Ulster Rugby can be driven forward. In many ways all the areas are inter-linked: if we can develop a team that is winning on the pitch, the rest of the job is easier, but at the same time, to be able to deliver that team on the pitch that can win, we need the money to buy the players, so we need the commercial side working as well..

How difficult is it (has it been) to attract sponsorship to the Ulster brand? How has the economic situation affected this, and how much does the team performance help/hinder?

There's no doubt people want to watch a winning team, but we have been very fortunate over the past number of years that we have a very loyal group of sponsors. We've also been fortunate that our average crowds are up this season which proves my point above. If you can produce a team that is competitive and wins matches, people will want to come along and watch. At the same time,

there is no doubt that moving forward, costs have to be cut – we've had to look at a number of areas across the whole organisation where we will have to make cuts in order to be able to produce a team on the pitch. Until we get the team right on the pitch, it's hard to get everything else to fall into line.

What is your view on how those on international contracts are controlled?

The national contracts have been there over the last number of years for players who have been in the national squad. We all recognise in the IRFU structure that the Ireland team is the most important. The success of the Ireland team generates the money that comes down to us, down to the clubs, down to the grassroots, and we fully accept that. We appreciate that to maximise the performance of the national team, the players involved need looked after so that they are fit to play when Ireland are playing. At the same time, I'm very much of the view that from my own experience of being involved with Ireland through the 90's when we weren't winning too many games, Munster, Leinster and Ulster weren't winning too many games either. I believe that a huge amount of the success of the National team has been built around the success of the provincial sides and them winning week-in, week-out against English, French, Welsh and Scottish clubs, and then when we play them in international scene, the psyche is different from when I was first playing. It's an important balance we need to get right. Declan Kidney with his background in the club scene is also very aware of it, that when you have the provinces playing well, you have the international team playing well. There is a huge opportunity to do well at the 2011 World Cup and we recognise the implications that would have for rugby throughout Ireland, but at the same time, we're keen for Ulster to be successful.

Stephen Ferris seems to have been on the receiving end from opponents a number of times recently. Was it wrong place at the wrong time, or is he particularly targeted? Does he get under opponents skin more than other players?

Stephen is a world-class player and every team knows that if you stop him playing, you're going a long way to stopping the team as well, so obviously he is going to come in for a fair bit of attention by the opposition. I don't think the recent things have been personal though, and he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Any comment on the severity of punishments handed out in rugby recently?

Rugby is a wonderful game to play but, particularly at the top level, it is a very physical game. There are risks involved in playing it, and there certain things that

are acceptable – tackle hard but within the laws of the game; there are others that are unacceptable. I think that over the past number of weeks and months, that line has been crossed on a number of occasions; more often than anyone involved in rugby would like, and because of that, the punishments have been heavy. I think that the only way we will eradicate the problem is by putting these incredibly stringent penalties in place, something I am very much in support of.

Do you think there has been an increase in the number of these offences, (possibly because with professionalism, there is more at stake to the players) or are we simply getting better at detecting them with the increased number of cameras, at least at the top end of the game?

Foul play even in the past 5-10 years has become almost non-existent. It used to be that if you lay on the wrong side of a ruck, especially as an out-half, every single forward would enjoy trying to stamp on you. Nowadays that is gone, but any single act of foul play, with so many cameras at the matches, will be picked up. As a result and because of the higher profile of the sport of rugby union throughout the media, they come much more into the public domain. I believe the game is now a lot safer, it's a much better spectacle than it used to be and that progression must continue.

Have you finalised your squad for next season? Are we still looking to make signings for next year? Anything you can tell us on the scrum-half position?

At this stage, we're very happy how recruitment has gone. We believe we have significantly strengthened the Ulster squad, in particular the pack with Johann Muller and Xavier Rush, and we'll be a lot more competitive in both the ERC and Magners League.. With it being a World Cup year next year some of our players will be rested under the IRFU's player management programme resulting in us recruiting very specifically in certain positions. There are a couple of positions in the backs where we are looking to recruit, and that is an ongoing process. What we won't do is go out and buy a player just because we have to fill a position. We know what we want, we know what sort of player we're looking for, but if we don't get it, we believe we have players here who are capable of doing a job.

The concern of some fans, I believe is that we will have a pack capable of competing with anyone, but if we can't get the ball away, that doesn't help.

Without naming names, over the past 6-12 months, there have been a number of very close selection calls in the positions



that people are perhaps concerned about. We are looking at other options, but if we don't secure those, we are comfortable and confident that we have players who can make Ulster a real force next season.

How well has the Academy been performing? Are you satisfied it is working? Can it be better?

Every organisation and every part of an organisation can always be improved. If you speak to any member of staff in the Academy, they are always looking to improve, comparing themselves to and looking at what's being done worldwide to ensure that we aren't lagging behind. If you look at the people we have involved in our Academy structure, Gary Longwell, Jonny Bell, Niall Malone, - these are guys who have played rugby at the top level, in the professional game, they understand what's expected and they know what they're looking for in our young players. With the strength and conditioning coaches Kevin Geary and Chris Shields, we believe we have a very good management team out of the Academy that will continue to bring players through to the professional game.. It's not exaggerating to say that the long-term success of Ulster Rugby is totally dependent upon the Academy system and on the schools system below that, bringing through players who are capable of competing at the top level. I think some people are concerned that we are undermining Schools rugby – that is the last thing we would want to do because we know that Schools rugby is absolutely central to what's going to happen here in the future and we need them to continue to bring through the quality of players that they have for the past 100 years.

Finally, David– are you still quicker than David Irwin?

Always was! What age is he? He must be nearly 60 and he still reckons he could be playing professional rugby!

Competition Winners

The winners of the prizes in the Christmas edition of Stand Up were;
Mizuna rugby boots courtesy of In Sport, Newtownards
- John Barr
Round of virtual golf courtesy of CitiGolf, Belfast
- Dave Mackey

As reported in that Christmas Stand Up, the winner of the Asic trainers courtesy of In Sport in the previous edition was Stephen Todd, and we've also now got a photo of that presentation.

URSC thanks both these sponsors and would encourage our members to support them if they can. **We would also remind members that they can claim 15% off ALL goods at In Sport, - just for being a member of URSC.**



John Barr picks up his goodies from In Sport. As yet we don't have anything from Dave Mackey, but we trust he and his guests enjoyed their round of virtual golf



Stephen collected his trainers from Alex Pickett, proprietor of In Sport.



Ulster Fans around the world

After the debacle that was Brussels for the Stade match, could we have brought you a photo from anywhere else?



Ulster fans invade the pitch at Kilturo Rugby Club in Brussels the weekend before Christmas.

Well okay, maybe we could here's another one of the globetrotting eejit behind the Christmas tree taking the Michael just a couple of weeks earlier in Lanzarote.

Marathon (Mad)Man

Stand Up Designer

Conor Diver is in training to run his first Marathon in Belfast on Monday 3rd May 2010. And if that's not enough, it's on his 37th Birthday too! He tells us training is hard, but going well.



Conor's nominated Charity is the NI Children's Hospice and would appreciate any donations from Ulster Fans. **Just log onto:**
www/justgiving.com/conordiver
 For those who can make it, look out for number **1370** on the day. (personalised number of course).

Carlsberg don't do Ulster Rugby Supporters' Club nights, but if they did, we would have seen

Ireland win consecutive SIX NATIONS GRAND SLAMS

Those who have attended previous Six Nations and Autumn International Preview nights should have known in advance that, once our panel of “experts” had unanimously predicted another Grand Slam, it was never going to happen. Of course just because previous panels had invariably got their predictions wrong, didn't mean that this year's players and coaches wouldn't do better, and we could but hope.

Around 60 members and guests gathered at Newforge a few days before the first round of matches to listen to and question the Ulster panel of; new kid on the block Jamie Smith, Ian “Dizzy” Whitten, Robbie “the binman” Diack, Clinton “the kangaroo” Schifcofske, “Mr Commitment” Neil Doak, and Brendon Botha, the referee's new friend. Jeremy Davidson was delayed due to the illness of his young son and missed the early proceedings, but all who attended appreciated his contribution in the circumstances later in the evening.

In one way this preview evening was quite different from previous ones in that for ALMOST the entire evening, we did restrict debate and discussion to international matters (previous ones have tended to start off discussing Ireland, and then quickly moved to domestic Ulster matters). This was largely due to our excellent master of ceremonies Jonathan Bill, who (just about) kept us on topic.

So, to the deliberations and how the competition would go – after a brief discussion on the upcoming Wolfhounds match at Ravenhill the night prior to the competition proper, the panel individually offered not only their prediction, but also

discussed how the matches would be played. Summarised these came down to:

Italy (Home) – Apart from the expected “win”, should Ireland be pushing for a high points total against potentially the weakest team in the competition, in the expectation that the likes of France would score heavily against them later in the tournament? The feeling was that Declan Kidney would settle for a win and keep his powder dry for the “big one” the following week in Paris.

France (Away) – It was agreed that this was probably a title decider, even in round 2, and would be Ireland's toughest match. The confidence of the players built from the provinces all doing well against French opposition in the ERC would be high and everyone agreed that if Ireland played to their potential, we would just about scrape by (obviously history will record that it wasn't to be). There was some debate of the “Ferris factor”, but BJ was quick to point out that internationals are quite different to club rugby, and expected no repercussions from the Ulster/Stade shenanigans.

England (Away) – This one wasn't so much about whether Ireland would win at Twickenham, but more whether Martin

Johnston would still be coach of England when it was over. The feeling was that England can't really afford to sack a coach and bring in new one just one year before RWC and that his cult status would see him prevail.

Wales (Home) – Prior to the Autumn Internationals, Bryn Cunningham had suggested that the Welsh and Lee Byrne in particular, were possibly mentally suspect? This panel wouldn't be drawn on the subject, but at this moment a Buzz went around the room with the arrival of Jeremy who was more forthright and stated that the Welsh could be bullied – get stuck in and Ireland can beat them. Let them play and they'll punish you.

Scotland (Home) – So having won the preceding matches (!!!!), would Ireland stumble at the last? Would Paterson punish Ireland the way he had punished Ulster? – **NO!** Assuming the other matches had already gone to plan by then, Ireland at home to an underachieving Scotland would not be able to prevent a second consecutive Grand slam – **well it was nice theory while it lasted.**

There was of course then a little discussion on one or two matters pertaining to Ulster, before supper was served and the panel relaxed a little and pandered to the individual requests for autographs etc from the members, and the traditional draw for autographed paraphernalia. Our thanks as ever go to the Newforge staff for looking after us royally



Some of the gathered "faithful"



Dizzy & Jamie introduce Ulster's next scrum-half



Ballot winners with the Ulster panel

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