

Grand Slam

Saturday March 21st, Millennium Park, Cardiff. Ireland two points ahead with less than five minutes to go. I am standing in front of the TV, counting the seconds, my newspaper in my hands. A penalty for Wales! Oh no! It can't be. Is this Friday 13th? I throw my newspaper across the floor, cover my eyes with my hands... and listen. But when the commentator says it might be short, I quickly look again and see the ball falling straight down as if attracted by a magnet and landing in front of the posts. Green flags were waved frantically, a green sea of bodies rise from their seats.

"Oh what a beautiful evening... Oh what a beautiful day"

And now, today, Sunday! Here we are in our thousands, the green army, trooping into Dawson Street to give our Grand Slam heroes an ecstatic 'céad míle fáilte'. A helicopter circles overhead like some kind of giant bumble bee dropping showers of multi-coloured ticker-tape which dances in the air like a host of butterflies before falling on the fantastic followers.

No jibes from Warren Gatland in today's Sunday papers. He was probably crying into his computer while the Welsh side were gracious in defeat, quite a number of them staying on the pitch to celebrate with the Irish. The one thing that really saddened me yesterday was seeing Stephen Jones, the man who had failed to deliver the crucial penalty, walking across the pitch alone and dejected with not a Welshman in sight to console him. Instead, it was Ronan O'Gara who went and exchanged shirts with him saying to him more than likely that it was a very tough penalty kick. Which it most certainly was.

Strangers became friends here today. The woman beside me shouted excitedly: " Oh look, look! There's Paul O'Connell on the stage, For me," she said, "he's always man of the match. I love to see him in the line-out lifted high into the air, his arms outstretched like antlers. In Limerick we call him the Great Red Hart." A man nearby smiling broadly gave his view, "I've been a manual labourer all my life," he says, "but never have I put in as hard a day's work as each and every one of this team has done in eighty minutes."

How will we ever get back to normal, I wondered. Next month, the Minister for Finance will give us a slam of a completely different kind. If we had been beaten by a whisker in Wales, we would surely collapse under the weight of all the new cuts and taxes. But no! We have our own Grand Slam to banish depression and keep our spirits high. And can we do it? Yes we can!