

Adam Redmond

adam.redmond@dailymail.ie



WORLD OF CLUB RUGBY

Follow us on twitter @IDM_Club Rugby

DECLAN KIDNEY wasn't the first coach to bring a European crown back to southern shores and he owes his thanks to Fred Casey, who realised that Peter Stringer and Ronan O'Gara were the blueprint for success.

Back in 1990 the IRFU dispatched Cork Constitution's prolific Under 12s side to Rochela-Moliere in France to represent Ireland at the European Championships and, with Stringer and O'Gara at the helm, Casey's youngsters returned with the goods.

That was over 20 years ago and since then the pair have won 200 Ireland caps between them, along with Grand Slam and Heineken Cup trinkets, but, as Casey enters his 47th season of coaching, Stringer and O'Gara remain just two of the 16 Irish internationals (including four Lions) that have undertaken his guidance at his Cork Con academy.

Casey was responsible for first pairing the two players together, but he knew there was something special about them.

'I knew Peter Stringer would make a scrum-half and Ronan had the brain that he could read the game,' explained the former No 9, 'and you wanted somebody that could read the game at out-half. They were two fellas that lived, ate and drank rugby and I doubt if they ever missed a training session.'

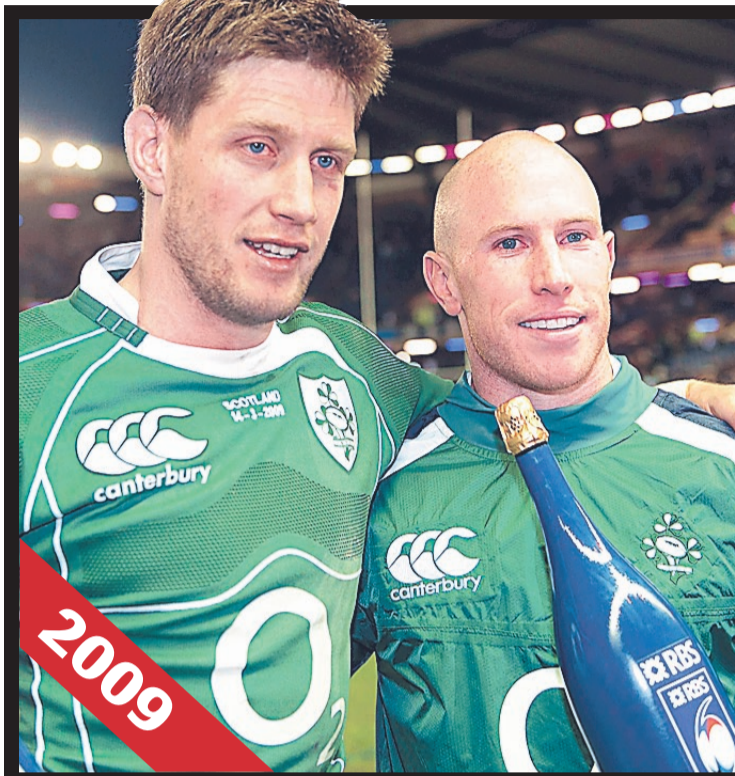
Even at that tender age, Casey could see that the duo were certain to reach the highest level. It's an attitude he has seen in the Wallaces, David and Paul, Ralph Keyes and Frankie Sheahan. He sees it, too, in Duncan Williams, the current gunslinger for Con's seniors.

With quick hands and a taste for the twisted steel of contact, Williams has made an impression for Munster this term. He's a sure-fire future Test cap, if, as Casey points out, he could stay clear of injuries which have dogged his young career.

'He goes into places where he shouldn't, in the middle of rucks and that, but he's another fella who is fanatical about the game,' said Casey.

Where many other coaches go through the ranks with their players, Casey takes on a new bunch every year, staying at the U12 grade. It's nine months of 'teaching' that, in many cases, lasts a lifetime thanks to the simple curriculum developed by the 63-year-old.

'I tell them if they can run, pass, tackle and have a brain then they'll do grand,' he says before doling a precious nugget of advice to any aspiring young coach. 'One thing is not giving out: you praise the individual and criticise the team.'



2009



1990

Flashback: Casey spotted O'Gara and Stringer in their youth (above), and nurtured their talent

Ticket of the week

DIVISION 1A (KO 2.30)

Blackrock v Young Munster

How much is it? €10.
What's the ground like? Stradbroke is a modest setting but the facilities are still some of the best in the league. Terracing runs down one side of the pitch where there is a covered stand, the clubhouse pavilion faces one end and bay windows provide a perfect view of the action.

Are programmes available? Yes, including team-sheets.
Any chance of a bite to eat? The Rock Café is open before, during and after the match and as well as a full bar menu, supporters can avail of a 12-inch pizza and a bottle of beer for just €10. Club members get a discount on drinks at the bar so it definitely pays to cosy up to a fee-paying friend.

Who's on show? Last year Rock boasted a lethal back-line, but with all seven signing pro deals with Leinster and Premiership clubs, the only familiar faces remaining are out half Darragh Fitzpatrick and winger David Rowan. In the pack, Alex Dunlop, Paul Graham and Paul Ryan provide the grunt with Leo Cullen's brother Des in reserve.

Mike Prendergast brings a largely home-grown selection to Dublin that includes out-half Alan Kingsley and Neville Melbourne's veteran leadership in the forwards which includes former Munster academy hooker, and captain, Ger Slattery.

What's at stake? Blackrock are trying to cement their position in next year's reconfigured Division 1A (of 10 teams) and they have struggled with the changeover in both playing and coaching personnel this season. By contrast, Young Munster appear to be peaking at the right time, evidenced by their toppling of high-flying Old Belvedere and champions Cork Con in recent weeks.

What's the prediction? Rock sneaked out of Limerick with a one-point victory before Christmas. Expect Munsters to repay the favour.

A duo in green, thanks to Fred

Because if you're criticising the individual, he might get his back up and pack it in. To make them enjoy it is the main thing, because you get them to try things and you don't mind if they make mistakes because nobody makes mistakes intentionally.'

It also helps when Casey's boys can get words of wisdom from the very best. Naturally Stringer and

O'Gara appear at summer camps to take a coaching session or two, but that doesn't mean that every star who turns up at Temple Hill has worn a Con shirt in the past.

'The All Blacks were over [in the late 1970s] and there was a cheese and wine party for them up in Con,' Casey recalled. 'Bruce Robertson was reckoned at the time to be the best centre the All Blacks had and

I said "I must look around and see if I can get one of them to come up [and take training]". I found out that he was a teacher, so I said he'd definitely be interested. I arranged it with their manager and he was there for about four or five hours — I thought he was never going to give up.'

A 15-man game remains at the heart of his rugby philosophy — 'you want the whole team playing rather than the few' — and Casey prides himself on helping his players to enjoy the game while he's famed for his tours which have seen Con's U12s visit France, Wales, England, Italy and even Greece. Playing for 'Freddie's team' is the first goal of every hopeful youngster at Con who wishes for a green-shirted future.

Tomorrow night Cork Con will do their modest best to repay the debt owed to Casey by club, province and country by inducting him into their hall of fame. When the line is formed to thank this exceptional volunteer, it will be long and illustrious.



Mentor to the stars: Casey is dedicated to the youth game

'Enjoying the game is the main thing'

Between the posts

Lansdowne get away from it all, veteran O'Reilly set to give senior ranks a shot, and Cork Con need home help

COACH'S CALL

AFTER five attempts this season, Lansdowne finally scored a victory away from Aviva Stadium and head coach Willie Clancy believes it was only a matter of time before their luck turned. 'It was a relief alright,' he said. 'The pitches away have been top-class and the way we travel and train have been the same, we've just been very unlucky.' Clancy's men are now in third spot in Division 1B, holding a play-off spot for promotion but the coach has put a ban on the 'P word'. 'I said to the lads we're not even going to talk about promotion, just enjoy training, enjoy playing games and if we do that, the table will look after itself.'



Playing on? Ian O'Reilly with his son Jamie

PLAYER'S POINT

AT 38 years of age, Ian O'Reilly is contemplating one last season with Boyne after they finally punched their ticket into the senior ranks. Despite juggling a hectic job and a young family with three children, the back-row is hopeful he will get to taste Ulster Bank League action for the first time. 'That's the big question,' he said. 'I never put any expectations on next

year, but if things work out and I'm good enough to play and I'm fit then I'll give it a go because having put so much time in, it would be a pity not to take the opportunity. 'But if we attract more players then guys could be 15/20 years younger than me with more time to commit. 'So if it happens it'll be great and if it doesn't then at least the last few years have been fantastic.'

... AND FINALLY

AS PART of next season's revamped Ulster Bank League, the IRFU will also implement new rules that could leave a club like Cork Constitution crying foul. Clubs will only be allowed to field two fully-contracted players in Division 1 games and given that Con's home-grown talents are beginning to clog up the Munster roster, the Cork club could be punished for producing

players for their province. Against Ulster in October, Munster started five players with under-age roots at Con while another three sat on the bench. This column has voiced its opinion in the past that clubs should not be allowed to lean on professionals against amateurs, but a middle ground must be agreed to keep clubs like Con pumping fresh talent into the Irish system.