



Just Run of the Mill?

by Ian Whittaker



Before he came, he wrote to us a bright and newsy letter,
His plans, his past achievements, sounded a real go-getter.
Told us the reason why he'd join our team,
A frank and honest premise, that would mean,
If he were true to form and no bull-shitter,
Some members of our side would needs be fitter!

He told us of some friends, who'd made the boast,
Who'd told him of our cavalier approach,
Said if he should need a club in London town,
Grasshoppers was the very best around,
With forwards fierce, but fair, and with no frills
(he liked the sound of that did young John Mill),
And backs that knew their place, but had the pace
To run tries in at will, given the space!
And what's more, they told him of the banter,
He could expect to find none eleganter!
For if our play was feared both near and far
Our razor wit was famed in every bar.
And refs would choose to share our changing row
To hear Bavey's pre-match, stand-up comedy show!

He told us of his famous Christchurch club.
More than a century old and here's the rub
Twinned with 'The Club' itself. I mean Blackheath,
With such famous names could we compete?
And when he told us of team-mates he played with,
Jock Hobbs, Fergie McCormack, Wylie 'Griz',
We wondered if he truly knew our status,

And when he came, and with us played, how would he rate us?

But we would have to wait before we'd learn,
For he had planned a pre-season sojourn,
And our campaign would be well under way,
Before he'd condescend to come and play.
We marked the date down in our selection diary,
Ticked off the weeks until this flanker fiery
First became available to play.
"Let's not muck about, put him in straight away"
Said Welchie who was skipper in that season.
Hindsight shows that he was right, but caution countered reason.
And Dai Pring (skipper of that side) would have his way.
With one eye on his team's results, I'd say!
"We don't know what he's like yet, so I reckon
He'd better start his first game in the seconds."
But to let him think that we had not been mean
We picked him in our Ealing Sevens team.

Just as well for on return when Dai reported back
We heard that Welchie, all along, had been on the right track.
"He covered every blade of grass – Jesus, what a mover,
Only time we caught him up was when he'd fallen over!"
And when next day at Ealing I asked, if he'd played sevens in NZ
He gave me a look that seemed to say "Is this bloke off his head?"
"What do you mean?" he said to me, "It's just a game of Rugger".
In tones that told me not to be, such a silly bugger,
And he was right, of course you know, I only could agree
"Good answer, mate, that's all it is, I share your philosophy".

First impressions of him then, when we saw him standing there,
Short and stocky (normal sized to me) with masses of red hair,
Red curly hair and ruddy face, and curly beard beneath,
Shorts, flip-flops and a twinkling eye, a pipe clenched in his teeth,
His speech, a mumbled chuntering-on, you couldn't always tell
Exactly what it was he said, but he laughed a lot as well.
And when he took the field, that day, he really looked the part,
He set about those sevens teams, and really made them smart!

And then and there it all began, a long and happy union
He'd slotted in alongside us, a neat and seamless fusion.
He'd found his soul-mates there you see, a backrow short, not tall
Who weren't obsessed with height or weight, or winning lineout ball,
For if they took the ball from us, we'd simply maul it back,
And keep it through several phases while we'd mount our own attack.

He played next week at Nat West Bank; we beat them in the rain.
The following week at Abbey, it poured with rain again.
And we were short of men that day, no lineout locks at all,
With Bavey and Squasher pitched in there, we relied on scrummage ball.
Roskilly and Chapman were the props, both five-foot-eight, no more,
Taff Taylor was the hooker, and he's only five-foot-four.
"Don't try to win the ball", I said, "just knock it on instead,
"we'll get a scrum that way", I said, "and take it against the head."
And as we nicked the ball from them, just five yards from our line,

Our new flanker was amazed because it was the umpteenth time.
“you blokes know how to scrum, you know,” he said with honest awe,
**“AND TAFF’S THE BEST HOOKER I’VE PLAYED WITH,
OF THAT YOU CAN BE SURE!”**
“Don’t tell him though,” we answered back, “he’s a narcissistic little sod,
For if he hears, he’ll never stop, for your back he’ll make a rod!”

Whit and Ali scored the tries that day; Ken Norman kicked the goals,
But we fell foul of the referee, who played by different rules,
Four penalties, he gave to them, with none could we agree,
But then what else can you expect from a Berkshire referee!
A twelve-all draw we settled for, and later in the bar
We learned from them that this had been their hardest game by far.
The tries that they’d conceded were the first scored there that year
Our only consolation as we sipped our post-match beer.

John was now a fixture in our battling side,
And our season rattled onward on a roller-coaster ride.
Big Jim came back from Richmond to stiffen-up our pack,
And we went from strength-to-strength, and never once looked back.
We gave Ealing a trouncing, by thirty-one to nil
A bit of a shock it was for them when they first met John Mill,
“Their pack’s the same as last year!” their hearts sank when they saw,
Then lifted up a little bit, they’d not seen John before.
But then he ran them ragged; he stopped them in their tracks
Another diminutive warrior to terrorise their pack!
But then we had a hiccup; he was human after all,
A missed tackle on the blindside on Orleans’ scrum half, Doyle.
Meadonians we overcame, a very pleasing win.
Then Tiff’s Nigerian Prince Kojo took a belter on the chin.
“I say, you cad” he said to John, in shocked elocuted tones,
and Millsie gave him another cuff, that rattled his very bones!
He scored three tries at Centaurs; I can see the headline still,
Pretty good for the local press, just **“RUN OF THE MILL”**
And as the press had noticed him and his fame spread far and wide,
The County Club selectors made him captain of their side.

We went on tour to Rouen, we picked our strongest team,
But we had drunk too much red wine, you know what I mean!
John got a nasty shock from them; he came off second best,
When he tried to generate some much needed zest.
He ran right at their outside-half, declined to make the pass,
The Rouen ten just picked him up and dumped him on his arse!

A few went out to dinner and then ‘forgot’ to pay,
They left in such a hurry the door went by the way.
Then baseball bats came out and the shutters all came down,
The sirens of the riot squads were heard throughout the town.
Bavey and Hornie eating there, alarmed at all the rumpus,
Crept underneath the table, took off their Grasshopper jumpers.
But they were rounded-up, the damages to pay.
The ones who’d knocked the door down? Why, they’d got clean away!
And Millsie calmed he landlord down, he hadn’t found it funny,
While those now held for ransom, fumbled for their money.

On the way, while on the coach, we'd all played 'Chase the Ace',
It was the first time John had played; he'd not picked up the pace.
And as the game continued, back in the hotel,
Ali, Welch and Cook had got a tiger by the tail,
And every time they got the ace, John was left with it,
his patience wearing thinner, he liked it not one bit.
And as they all got nervous as John got angrier still,
Cookie stuck upon an ace! Wouldn't pass it to John Mill.
But Millsie smelt a rat, insisted it be changed,
They knew, right then, the game was up 'cause he became deranged.
Two then made a bolt for it, locked Welch out of the loo,
But once he'd beaten Welchie up, he came looking for them too,
"Came over the top just like King Kong, bloody fearsome ape"
They bolted for the outside door but still could not escape.
For Cookie was so nervous, he could not put key in door,
And so they both just acquiesced, they cringed upon the floor!

You can tell from all these stories, that John lives his life fast,
But on Saturdays, he would undertake to be home by 'half-past'.
Unless Josie was working late, then he was dangerous,
He'd lead us astray and keep us out, "what are you, man or mouse?"
Another trip to Abbey, it is a famous one,
Or infamous you might say, eventually it was for John.
Josie, she was working late, he'd hired a mini-bus,
We'd had a win, our tails were up, we didn't give a cuss!
We had come the long way home, more pubs on the old A4,
Big Jim acquired some trophies, at Langley he acquired one more.
A pub umbrella he purloined, it would be our downfall,
For Langley nick was next the pub, someone made the dreaded call.
They traced the bus to Millsie, and boy, gave him a fright,
Picked him up Tuesday evening and kept him in overnight.
He rang me up next morning, while I was still in bed,
"Bad news, Whittie!" "Why, can't you play?" "No, worse than that." He said,
"I got arrested yesterday, they traced me through the van,
We've got to go to Langley nick, and all put up our hands".
Cookie and I took the day off work, bought the pub a new umbrella,
The landlord dropped the charges, turned out a decent fella'.
"It's the big bloke I was after, the bearded one six-foot-three"
"Well it's the 'innocent' driver you got! I said. "Now can we please set him free!"

With such stories I could go on and on, he lived a furious pace,
The casualties scattered about, littered all over the place.
He was running when he joined us, he ran with us for a few years,
He faced the gendarmes, faced Langley police, had lots of laughs and some tears,
Running from Berks referees when he left us, and most probably running fast still,
Ran into our club, ran into our life, **BUT NEVER JUST RUN OF THE MILL!**

Ian Whittaker, 4th November, 2000

'Fortis in Animo'

