



The Running Prop

by Ian Whittaker



They knew a thing or two, those judo blokes.
They'd met a strong young chap, a mighty oak
And he'd been such a handful down their gym,
That they had sought more exercise for him.
Brought him along to Grasshoppers in Richmond Park,
"Put on that famous shirt - you look the part!"
And look the part he did, as you all know.
Tall, broad and fierce of eye and not all show,
With bullet head and bristling beard beneath,
And in those days still had all his own teeth!

From Doris we learned that, though a full-grown man,
Big Jim swapped comics with his son - he was a fan.
And all fell into place - we knew he looked familiar!

There was some character we knew looked similar,
We'd seen him in the Dandy, sure enough,
Eating cow pies and feats of strength and all that stuff.
No wonder he was such a comic fan.
He was the very spit of Desperate Dan!

And when he took the field and began to play
We knew we'd got a "diamond" straight away -
A diamond of the roughest sort of cut,
For us it was the very best of luck -
For if he looked the spit of Desperate Dan,
He played, as you'd expect of such a man,
For such a man as this, so fierce and mean,
Would be well prized in any rugby team!

And when the first team soon required a lock,
Jim Keohane said, "look no further than this rock.
He doesn't know much yet about the game,
But he's mightily effective all the same,
Runs up-field with several hanging on,
But they can't stop him - he's just like King Kong!
And in the maul, if once he gets the ball,
No one else can get at it, at all,
For with just one finger hanging on,
Others bust a gut, both hands upon,
But cannot prize the ball out from his grasp.
They end up shattered, sitting on their arse!"

And as a teammate deep inside the maul,
Assisting as he grapples for the ball,
You're very wary of persuading him to part...
With that precious object of his heart,
For if once passed to you the ball you lose,
You know you'll be in for much abuse!
And as for backs? Then woe betide them
If they mess up what he provides them!

Big Jim was soon a fixture in our side,
Other locks came and went, Jim was the pride,
His, the first name on team-sheet every week,
The place alongside him not for the meek!
Ian Duncan, Cameron-Webb and young Geoff Rhodes,
All big and tall and strong as you'd suppose.
Then, on return NZ for several years,

Wally and Jim at lock they had no peers,
Until Wally's injuries caught up as he got older
And alongside Jim came "Mummy's Little Soldier"
Or Mike Clements when both, fierce-bearded oafs
Were described by opponents as wooly mammoths!
Sometimes "The Beast," Roy Barrett, Kerry Duffy,
Alongside all of these Jim was the toughie,
Young Brent Anderson, giant Kiwi "Tin Tin,"
"Come in the scrum, my boy, I'm Uncle Jim!"

Now Jimmy K had likened him to King Kong,
These words came back to haunt us later on.
We went to Paris, our second town-winning jaunt,
Hosted by Boulogne-Billancourt.
An official trip on coach, then boat on Seine
With food and drink laid on - free, in the main.
And we had lost our lad, he had been missed.
The judo team passed him back, very pissed,
And though they had delivered him safe and sound,
In drink he's not the quietest bloke around!

And we settled down for the return coach ride,
The points of interest pointed out by our guide,
Jim noticed what a pretty girl she were,
And decided to introduce himself to her.
Tongue-tied at first and like in the film, when King Kong sees Fay Wray,
Then finds his tongue, remarks upon and tried some French parlez.
"K'now-jo oogie-moogie avec moi?
K'now-jo couchez-couchez moi ce soir?"

And so we dragged him off and kept him calm,
Three men to each leg, two on each arm.
And, once we'd got him safely pinioned down,
Taff Taylor (who for bravery's not renowned)
Pulled Jim's jumper up and over his face,
Told him that his behaviour was a disgrace.
Took his rolled-up programme and with words unkind
Rained blows on Jim's head from the seat behind.

"Naughty, naughty, naughty Jim," he said
Just like when Mr. Punch hits Judy on the head,
But Jim, with claustrophobia setting in,
Became unsettled as Taff smacked his chin,
And then he flipped and he became deranged.

You've seen the film when King Kong breaks the chains?
And as he burst his bonds with blood-curdling cry,
Strong men about the coach began to fly.
And we knew for sure the game was up for us
When we saw "Squasher" sail across the bus!
And Taff? He scarpered, didn't linger long,
Not when faced with an enraged King Kong!

Though most efficient when he played at lock,
We tried him in the front row as well, at prop.
And he soon got the hang of it,
As he was young and strong and very fit.
And when he left for the New Zealand shore,
He stayed at prop at Shirley, and what's more,
Became a celebrity within that team,
He even got onto the TV screen!

They'd never seen a prop who'd run as much
And still do the dirty work, the graft and such.
The "Running Prop" became a famous man,
As famous as a "pommie" player can.
And Billy Bush (a test front row) with whom he had locked horns?
"I didn't rate him all that much," said Jim, with scorn!

And when from New Zealand back to us he came,
We found him much the same - he hadn't changed.
Still brave and mean and fierce, and tough and tall,
Though more reluctant now to drop on ball!
Those nasty blokes down under had been unkind,
And fearful Kiwi shoeings sprang to mind!

And even late in his career
There were no forwards far or near
Could get the better of him inside
Or roll a maul up our short-side.
And when we went to play the Wasps
They found this out to their own cost.
They'd run into a man made of the right stuff
And in the bar, couldn't praise him enough.
"Jesus, where'd you get the Vince Cannon lookalike?
Plays like him, too, but with more might.
We had to keep the game out wide,
He was the best forward on either side!"

And when his lineout days were past,
And his running style no longer fast,
Still needed in the side, in the first team,
A forward fierce, and tough and mean,
To grapple in the midst of a maul,
To ensure we'd won fair share of ball.
To make his awesome presence felt hugely
To work his famous "oogie-moogie"
Though no longer galloping round the park,
Still master of the darkest art.
Still required to prop the Grasshopper scrum,
The "Running Prop" became a walking one!

Ian Whittaker – 5th January, 2001

'Fortis in Animo'