

SCOTLAND'S BULLDOG SPIRIT

Andy Mitchell

There were two winners when Ireland first met Scotland in 1877. On the pitch, it was no contest as the Scots ran in eight tries without reply. Off it, the Irish won hands down.

Visiting captain 'Bulldog' Irvine ruefully recalled his hangover after a night of lavish hospitality: 'If Ireland was raw at the game that day, Scotland was certainly boiled next morning.' The boat back from Belfast to Glasgow must have witnessed a few green faces, although the players recovered in time to beat England a couple of weeks later.

Robert William Irvine, known by all as 'The Bulldog' for his forceful play, was a dominant figure in the opening decade of Scottish international rugby. The minister's son from Blair Atholl was the only man to play in all of the first ten contests against England as well as three against Ireland. He started young, and was just approaching his eighteenth birthday when he was selected in Scotland's pack for the first international in 1871, having learned the game at Madras College in St Andrews and Edinburgh Academy. By then, he was a medical student at Edinburgh University, although his footballing loyalty remained with the Accies, where he became club captain.

Powerfully built, which accounts for him winning the university's hammer throwing contest, he also found time for intellectual pursuits and was a 'college chum' of Robert Louis Stevenson. In a letter he wrote to *The Scotsman* many years later, he explained that Stevenson was friends with the student athletes even though he was 'a delicate, slim and marvellously incapable man to enter into the physically active side of University life'. Rather than being shunned for this lack of athleticism, however, the sickly youth gained their respect 'by pure pluck and enthusiasm, not by proficiency in any sport'.

In eight of his internationals Irvine captained his country, including that game at Ormeau Road in Belfast, and when he wrote the first definitive history of Scotland's early matches, he summed up the rout: 'Ireland showed much good material, but it was raw. Much good Hibernian breath was expended in shouting which would have done more good to the distressed country if spent in shoving. "Oireland, Oireland, get behind yourselves," a despairing son of Erin was heard to cry, as the Scotch forwards were wedging through the Irish with the ball before them, and the Irish did not seem to know where it was, and were not coming round.' Modestly, he did not mention that he scored a try in the match, his only score for his country.

His brother Duncan played alongside him three times (his cousin Thomas was also honoured by Scotland) and his international career only came to an end in 1880, when he returned

to Perthshire to go into general practice as a doctor. He started as an assistant to his uncle, Dr W Stewart Irvine, who is commemorated in Pitlochry's Irvine Memorial Hospital.

'The Bulldog' duly became 'Dr Bob', establishing himself at the heart of the local community by retaining a strong focus on sport. Apart from the occasional rugby game for Perth, he was an ardent supporter and patron of soccer club Vale of Atholl, a regular entrant to the Scottish Cup (they even beat Arbroath in 1894). He was secretary of the town's annual highland games, insisting that every competitor wore the kilt, sat on the committee of Pitlochry Curling Club, and he persuaded Tom Morris to come over from St Andrews to lay out a small golf course by the River Tummel. Rugby, however, remained his main claim to fame and Irvine was reckoned as an authority on the game, contributing a regular column entitled *Rugby Football and How to Excel in It* to the *Boy's Own Paper*, in which he gave this classic advice to aspiring players: 'Avoid the pastry cook's as you would the plague and shun tobacco as you would poison.' These articles were then published in one of the first handbooks on football, with CW Alcock writing the section on association football.

He married (without children) and lived at Rosehill, now a B&B, but his health failed him and after a short illness he died in 1897, the day before his 44th birthday. Irvine was such a respected figure that a public subscription paid for a massive granite cross in his memory at Pitlochry cemetery. If you scrape away the moss you can read the effusive inscription: *In admiration of his rare professional skill, his great mental gifts, his eloquence, and his wide and varied knowledge. In recognition of his distinction as a manly exponent of our national athletic recreations, and in loving testimony to his kindness of heart and his ever ready and helpful sympathy with the poor of the district.*

Sadly, little else survives of Irvine apart from his writings. His international cap was for many years on display in the Edinburgh Academical clubhouse at Raeburn Place but was stolen, along with other relics, during the Second World War while the ground was requisitioned. 'The Bulldog' remains a Scottish rugby legend and Irvine's record of ten consecutive caps against England has stood the test of time, beaten just once (by Sandy Carmichael) in 140 years of internationals.

The post-match drinking contests, however, while still part of the Ireland v Scotland tradition, are now firmly in the domain of the supporters.

Illustrations



RW Irvine portrait



Memorial cross for RW Irvine in Pitlochry cemetery, raised by public subscription after his death.



Edinburgh Academicals 1878, including nine Scotland internationals*.

Back: GWL McLeod*, CE Wood, JP Bannerman, NJ Finlay*, LJ Aitken, ER Smith*, TW Tod, P Russel. *Middle:* WE Maclagan*, **RW Irvine***, JHS Graham* (captain), DR Irvine*, PW Smeaton*. *Front:* GQ Paterson*, J Younger.