

**OLLSCOIL na hÉIREANN
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND**

TEXT OF THE INTRODUCTORY ADDRESS DELIVERED BY:

MS LINDA O'SHEA FARREN on 2 December 2013 in the Royal College of Physicians in Ireland, on the occasion of the conferring of the Degree of Doctor of Arts *honoris causa*, on **BRIAN O'DRISCOLL**

'I have been nervous about starting this. Is anybody really interested in my life and what I get up to?' These are the opening lines of Brian O'Driscoll's book *A Year in the Centre*. And they sum Brian up. Honesty; humility.

The only son of Frank and Geraldine O'Driscoll, Brian is a native of Clontarf, where he grew up with his sisters Susan and Julie. After primary school at Belgrove and Willow Park, Brian was educated at Blackrock College and University College Dublin. His father, Frank, also played centre for Ireland and, alongside a busy GP practice with Brian's mother, he manages Brian's glittering career.

The second most-capped and eighth-highest try scorer in rugby union history, who has led Ireland more times than any other player, Brian O'Driscoll is universally lauded as one of the greatest rugby players ever. His physicality, mentality, passion and sheer bottle, both in defence and attack, make him a threat all over the pitch and one of the most feared players in the game.



Known affectionately as BOD, he has variously been described as *'Ireland's talismanic skipper', the 'green giant', 'Waltzing O'Driscoll', 'the Lions legend.'* I could go on ... With 128 caps for Ireland, more than two-thirds of them as captain, and a record-holding 46 Irish tries to his name, he is the stuff of legend; a genius on the pitch. But Brian is reluctant to take credit himself, no matter how many sidesteps he executes, passes he intercepts or tries he nails behind the posts.

After a stint in Gaelic football, Brian took up rugby. He impressed at Ireland Schoolboys, Under-19 and Under-21 levels, including victory at the IRB Under-19s World Championship in 1998.

But it was while playing for UCD that Brian was moved from fly-half to centre, and his career as the highest scoring centre of all time took off from there. Registered at University College Dublin RFC, we are proud to claim him as our own throughout the NUI.

Brian burst onto the international stage in 1999, claiming his first full cap at age 20, shortly before his debut for Leinster's senior team. He scored his first International try later that year against the USA at the 1999 Rugby World Cup. A hat-trick of tries in the Green Jersey against France in the 2000 Six Nations, Ireland's first win in Paris in 28 years, put Brian in the frame for his first Lions tour in 2001.

Captaining Ireland from 2004 up until the 2013 Six Nations, he led Ireland to the Triple Crown in 2004 and, in 2005, he led the British & Irish Lions to New Zealand. As is well dissected over a pint by many an alicadoo in rugby clubs the world over, Brian's Lions tour in 2005 was ended abruptly, only minutes into the first test, by a spear tackle from All Blacks Tana Umaga and Keven Mealamu after the ball had been cleared out of a ruck. This could have ended his career, but I suspect Brian aligns

his approach to rugby with American Philosopher Alfred Montapert's distilled wisdom: *'Expect problems and eat them for breakfast.'*

Brian's career rose meteorically, being named Player of the Tournament in the 2006, 2007 and 2009 RBS Six Nations Championships. He also led Ireland to two further Triple Crowns in 2006 and 2007, making it three in the first four years of his Ireland captaincy. But the jewel in the crown was leading Ireland in 2009 to its second Grand Slam, 61 years after the first Irish clean sweep in 1948. Brian's sheer grit brings a George Bernard Shaw gem to mind: *'People who say it cannot be done should not interrupt those who are doing it.'*

Having captained Leinster for three seasons from 2005 to 2008, alongside his Ireland captaincy, 2009 saw Leinster win their first of three Heineken Cups. As a Munster woman, I'll leave a respectful pause here in memory of the Semi-Final in Croke Park that preceded that 2009 victory. The Rock Boys were out in force, among the 82,206-strong throng that day, to support their Man of the Match. And rightly so. In January 2010, Brian was voted *World Rugby Player of the Decade (2000-2009)* and, in July that year, he married actress and writer Amy Huberman. Brian says he *'technically stalked'* Amy after first spotting her on television in 2006; we have a lot to thank the Late Late Show for. Brian's and Amy's lives took a welcome turn this year with the arrival of Little Miss Sadie just hours before Ireland's Six Nations clash with England on 10th February.

In the top three highest Lions-capped players in its 125-year history, with four tours to his name, Brian was controversially dropped from the 2013 series decider. The dignity with which he handled what became known as BODgate was exemplary and the Lions won the series, adding a victorious Lions test series to Brian's already dazzling CV.

In an interview with The Belfast Telegraph in September this year, Brian said: '*A big one this year is to get selected for the All-Blacks in November.*' And he was selected. His last throw of the All Blacks dice saw Ireland fighting to the end and you couldn't help but think the team wanted it for Brian, above all.

Brian O'Driscoll is not being conferred with the highest honour that this university can bestow because he has a stash of silverware to his name – and I'm not referring to Newbridge.

The man behind the rugby player is being honoured today for the leadership and character he has shown, both on and off the pitch. It is never about Brian. It's always about his family, his country, his rugby colleagues, the supporters and, last but not least, charity.

Going back to 2005 and Brian's own book *A Year in the Centre*, this was dedicated to the memory of Teddy McShane. Teddy was the two-year old toddler of Leinster's team doctor who drowned tragically in a neighbour's garden. And the charities that benefitted from the significant proceeds of Brian's recent testimonial were two children's charities – Temple Street Children's Hospital and the ISPCC.

Putting Leinster's Heineken Cup semi-final preparation ahead of the royal wedding of Prince William and Catherine Middleton is a typical example of Brian's dedication to his colleagues and supporters.

Paul O'Connell's ode to Brian in an interview with Gerry Thornley sums up Brian's commitment: '*It is very rare that your best player, your go-to player, the one that you want to get you out of trouble with a bit of magic, is also the first guy you would have in the trenches beside you.*'

Gerry added that Brian is ‘*not just a rugby player now, he's something more*’ and suggested that Ireland retire the No. 13 jersey with Brian, essentially because *ni bheidh a leithead ann aris*.

In an Irish Times interview last weekend, talking about Brian’s reach in countries where they don’t even play rugby, All Blacks head coach Steve Hansen said: ‘*People have heard of [Brian] but may not have heard of Ireland, so if you can do that, you’ve done the job that your country needs you to do.*’

Not yet 35 years old, the iconic status Brian O’Driscoll has gained says it all. On so many occasions, he has held the hopes of this nation, north and south, in his hands and he has tread softly on our dreams. He has always answered Ireland’s call, and stayed with us all the way. He is a sterling ambassador for everything that’s good about sport, and about Ireland.

From caps to captaincies, there is only one person about whom it can be said ‘*Alone He Stands*’. In BOD we trust.

Brian Gerard O’Driscoll, you make us proud to be Irish, as we confer our highest honour on you today.

PRAEHONORABILIS CANCELLARIE, TOTAQUE UNIVERSITAS:

Praesento vobis, hunc meum filium quem scio tam moribus quam doctrina habilem et idoneum esse qui admittatur, honoris causa, ad gradum Doctoratus in Artibus, idque tibi fide mea testor ac spondeo totique Academiae.