

The Rugby Moment of 2009

Written by Will Carling

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OK, so what was that one rugby moment from 2009, 'THE' photo, the expression, the try, the tackle, the kick, the commentary or even the player that you will always remember from 2009?

And let's be honest, it has been quite a year, both good and bad, with Ireland's first Grand Slam for 60 odd years, the British and Irish Lions tour, South Africa's domination of the Tri-Nations alongside Leinster's amazing Heineken Cup success (which reminds me that the Irish have had far too good a year - bastards!!! :-)) and the Bulls emphatic victory in the Super 14 and to top it off Rugby Sevens is accepted into the Olympics. Some great highlights then and let's be honest some real low points, with Bloodgate, gouging, drug allegations and some pretty mediocre rugby dominated by kicking..

Ireland staggered and limped to the Grand Slam and what a great celebration it was, and even as an Englishman how good it was to see a player of O'Driscoll's class lift the trophy. They have been promising for so long and at last they achieved, just when I for one thought that they had gone over the hill (finger on the pulse again!!)

The Lions tour was immense with so many rugby pundits privately predicting a white-wash and a non-competitive Lions team. The players and coaches managed to create a passionate, creative and threatening team within a matter of a few weeks - something that has eluded a number of International coaching teams for nearly a year.....I for one thought the Test series was awesome, close, dramatic and brutal which is exactly as expected. The whingeing about the physicality of the Boks was way out of order - it is the way they play and it is what makes them a special opponent - so for me it added to the contest. It was a tragic end to the 2nd Test as a Lions supporter, but a great end for a Bok's supporter, but a proud last Test did bring a little relief back to the red shirts.

South Africa dominated the Tri-Nations in what was to be honest a pretty bland procession of games and someone needs to think long and hard about the interest in playing sides three or even four times a season.....it bored the tits off me, and I have quite a pair of tits I can tell you!

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The Heineken Cup was enthralling as ever and for me confirmed itself as the best club competition around. Leinster's run was historic, it encompassed 'Bloodgate', beating Munster or should I say stuffing Munster in the Semi-Finals and going on to a great and deserved victory. How bloody good was Rocky Elsom by the way, surely player of the Cup?

And rugby sevens is accepted into the Olympics - wow! What an impact that could have on rugby and it's growth if harnessed properly by the IRB. The likes of China, USA and Russia can suddenly divert funds into the sport, and let's be honest they have far more chance of being successful quickly in the sevens arena than the fifteen aside - look at Kenya. I can see in a matter of years that a young rugby player will have a serious decision to make as to whether to be a sevens player or a fifteen aside specialist, as both will have their own circuits, competitions and stars.

Those would go down as the main contenders for the highlights in my mind, but then there is quite some competition from the dark side!!

Bloodgate - sadly the realisation to many that in professional rugby there is cheating. The subsequent destruction of one man as a result is a bigger disgrace in my mind than the fact that he was cheating in the first place. The powers that be beat their chests and talked about cleaning up the game, and then when they realised how widespread it was and how long it had been going on and the multitude of names that were implicated, they not surprisingly lost their nerve, were completely spineless and chose to dump all the blame on Dean Richards and walk away under the pretense that he was the only culprit - utter bollocks!

Drugs - amazing to me, but then I am an old fart, that these were part of club culture in Bath. I for one do not believe that it is widespread in rugby and hopefully Matt Stevens will be one of very few found guilty of using recreational drugs.

So to gouging and foul play in general - how confusing is it? Burger and Dupuy are both found guilty of eye-gouging but the disparity in their respective sentences leaves you open mouthed! can someone tell me why there is no consistency?? Is it really down to the strength of the gin and tonics consumed before sentencing.....

So what will it be for me, what is 'THE' memory? Tom Williams leaving the field with 'blood'

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pouring from his mouth and a wink will be hard to erase, but after ploughing through all the memories I think it is a picture of Rob Kearney sitting against the posts at the end of the Lions 2nd Test. Exhausted and gutted at the ending, and yet the memory for me will be of not only his great form but that of O'Driscoll and Roberts, of the passion shown by Philips, the impact of Shaw and the resurgence of pride and belief in the Lions shirt after the debacle of 2005. For me that is the abiding memory of 2009, a great series, some great performances, a great win for the Boks and some awesome memories for us fans.....