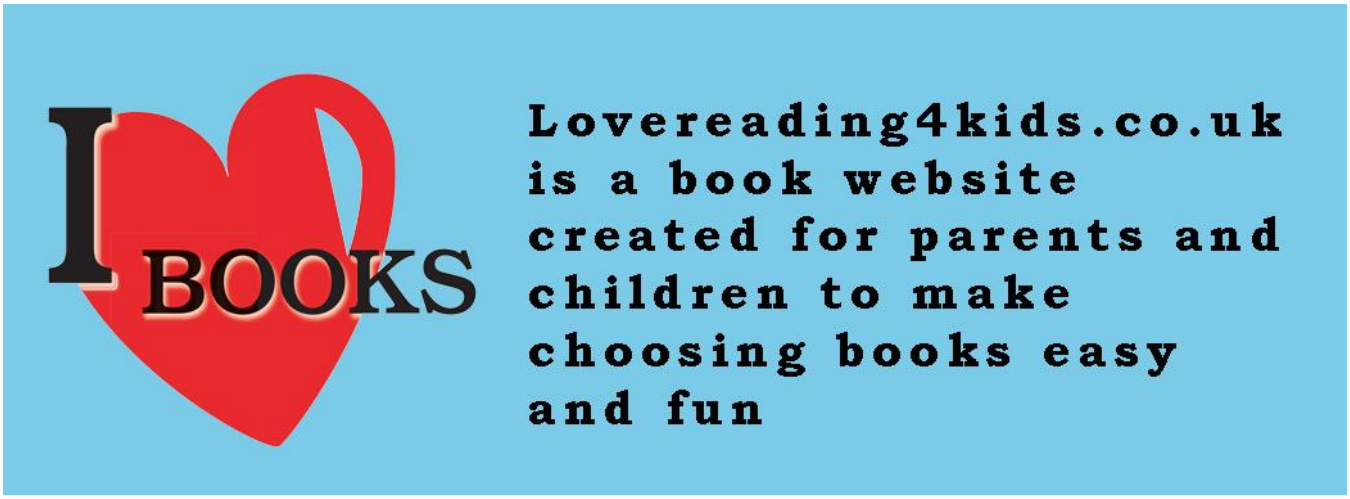


Opening extract from

Rugby Runner

Written by

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Extract taken from Rugby Runner by Gerard Siggins.

Chapter 1

Eoin hauled himself out of bed and checked the bruises on his legs. He was still hurting from the tough week he had just had, helping the Leinster team to win a European tournament in London.

It had been a great experience, though, meeting and playing rugby against boys from several countries, and getting a chance to test his developing skills – and play in another international stadium. He wondered what his pals Dylan and Rory had been up to since they got back, too, but he would see them soon enough.

He peeled back the corner of the curtain and watched as the rain bounced off the pathway outside. Today would be a day to pack the bags for his return to school – something he wasn't entirely thrilled about, but that was coming up fast.

'Eoin!' came the call from downstairs. 'I'm dropping over to Grandad in ten minutes – if you get dressed quickly you can come too,' said his dad.

Eoin always enjoyed visits to his grandad, whose house was on the other side of Ormondstown, the small town in Tipperary where he lived with his mum and dad.

'I'll be right there,' he called.

Dressing quickly, he popped into the kitchen where his mother was putting the finishing touches to a huge breakfast.

'Oh... thanks Mam,' winced Eoin. 'That's lovely, but I have to cut back on the breakfasts. You know... Leinster diet plan.'

'Oh, sorry, I keep forgetting. Sure it'll be time enough to start that when you're back in school.'

Carefully selecting the smallest rasher, Eoin slapped it onto a slice of brown toast and folded it in half.

'Have to dash, Mam, sorry,' he grinned as he followed his father out the door.

In the car, his dad asked him about the eating programme he was following.

'Yeah, I have to cut down on certain fats and sugars,' Eoin told him. 'They want me to keep a diary of everything I eat and drink, and to measure how much exercise I do. It's all very scientific now.'

'I suppose that's the end of your trips to the chipper with Dylan, then?'

Eoin laughed. 'Definitely. I must drop in to see how he's getting on after I visit Dixie.'

Dixie was Eoin's grandfather, a famous rugby player in his day who took great interest in the youngster's sporting activities.

'I see there's a piece in the *Ormondstown Oracle* about you,' Dixie smiled as they walked up the garden path towards him. 'They say you attempted the biggest goal ever at Twickenham by a youth player.'

Eoin grinned at the recent memory. 'Ah, well I got a lot of help from the wind. And sure I missed anyway!'

His giant kick in the closing stages of the final in London hit the crossbar, but another Leinster player had followed up and scored the winning try.

'They seem a bit sniffy that you weren't playing for Munster. I have a good mind to write them a letter explaining just why!' said Dixie.

Eoin was at school in Dublin, and it was there his skill was first noticed by the Leinster selectors. It had been hard at first to wear the blue shirt – especially against the red ones – but Eoin had got used to it and enjoyed helping win the trophy for his new province just as much as he would have with Munster.

'Ah, sure don't worry about writing that letter, Dixie,' laughed Eoin. 'I don't want to get any more slagging.'

The old man made them tea and they chatted about what was happening to the glorious treasure Eoin had rediscovered on his trip to London. Eoin's ability to see ghosts had helped him to put together two parts of a priceless golden egg, which he had decided to donate to the National Museum. Dixie was curious about the episode, but although Eoin and he were great friends, the youngster felt unable to tell him the full story – especially the bit about the ghosts! They carried on with the rest of the news around the town, before Eoin noticed the rain had stopped and the sun was shining outside.

'That looks nice now,' he told his dad. 'I might dash over to see what Dylan's up to. The packing can wait.'

'OK, but be home for lunch. And you need to give your mum some idea of what you're allowed eat!'

Eoin nodded and took his leave, jogging down the path and along the road back into town towards Dylan's house. His friend's sister, Caoimhe, was outside chatting with her friends.

'He's down the club,' she called out. 'There's some match on against Youngstown.'

Eoin slapped himself on the side of the head. He had forgotten that his local GAA club, Ormondstown Gaels, were having an end-of-summer series of games for the schoolboys and schoolgirls against their local rivals. And he had been asked to play!

Caoimhe lent him her mobile so he could ask his mum to dig out his GAA gear. He then rang his dad to ask him to drop it down to the Gaels.

Eoin hared off down to the GAA club where old Barney, the groundsman, was leaning over the gate.

'Ah, there you are young Madden,' he grinned. 'Sure they wouldn't start without you.'

Eoin collected a Gaels shirt and waited for his dad to arrive with his boots and shorts.

'You had a very exciting summer, didn't you?' smiled Barney. 'Off playing at Wembley I believe?'

'Not quite, Barney,' laughed Eoin, 'It was Twickenham. Same city though.'

'Ah, go on,' laughed Barney. 'Here's your father and grandfather now.'

Eoin thanked his dad for saving his embarrassment at being late and maybe even being dropped. The coach was relieved to see him arrive though, and accepted his apology.

'We'll have you at centre-forward Eoin, I believe you're a dab hand at kicking the ball from distance!' he joked.

Dylan high-fived Eoin and gave him some gentle banter over being late. His friend was still sporting the black eye that was the legacy of the injury he had received playing with Munster in the same competition in London.

The game went well for Ormondstown, and they were ten points up with a few seconds left when the ball went to Dylan, who was playing alongside Eoin on the half-forward line.

Eoin had shaken off his marker, and called for the pass, but Dylan seemed to be in a world of his own. He beat one man, and then, to everyone's astonishment, he tucked the ball under his arm and ran straight for the goal. As he reached the goalmouth – the goalkeeper had stepped aside in the face of this approaching marauder – he dived full length towards the line with the ball held out in front of him.

'A try for the Gaels!' he roared, before charging off the pitch towards the dressing room. Eoin ran after him.

'Dyl,' he called as they reached the clubhouse. 'Are you all right?'

Dylan stopped and grinned at Eoin. 'I'm grand thanks, just having a little bit of crack. Do you think he'll give me a black card?'

Eoin laughed. 'You're some messer, I thought that bang on the head you got in Twickenham was affecting you again.'

Chapter 2

The ref was so perplexed that he announced that he had already blown for full time, and there was plenty of laughter as the teams met up for cans of fizzy orange and bags of crisps in the clubhouse. Eoin joined the queue for the treats but after he had collected them he remembered the list of do's and don'ts in the Leinster Junior Academy players' handbook. And how fizzy drinks came top of the 'don'ts' list.

He asked the barman for a pint of water and joined his friends outside.

'That was some move, Dylan,' laughed Dixie. 'You reminded me of the story of how rugby was invented. They were playing soccer at a school in England many years ago when some lad picked up the ball and ran with it into the goal.'

'Really? And what was the school called?' asked Eoin.

'Eh, Rugby School!' said his grandad. 'The town was called Rugby. That's where they got the name.'

'So if I've invented a new game they'll call it Ormondstown?' asked Dylan.

'I suppose so,' chuckled Dixie, 'but that didn't look like much of an invention to me.'

'I could work on it...' said Dylan, already thinking of some innovations that would make his new sport more exciting.

'Well, we better head back and start working on the bag-packing first,' said Eoin's dad. 'We'll pick you up around eleven if that's OK, Dylan?'

'Sound, Mr Madden,' said Dylan. 'I'll be ready.'

As they arrived home, Eoin realised that he had hardly eaten all day, and raced into the kitchen from where some enticing smells were coming.

'What's that, Mam?' he asked.

'Well, I was caught out by that breakfast going to waste, so I dug out the diet chapter in that Leinster guide. That won't be enough for a growing lad, but I found a recipe for chicken and broccoli that seems easy enough. I hope you like it.'

Eoin smiled, delighted that his mum was going to help him with the programme, but he then realised he wasn't that keen on broccoli. He held his nose as he forced it into his mouth. This Leinster squad thing was going to be tricky.

After lunch, he sorted out what he thought he would need for the term ahead. His mum had ironed all his shirts and organised his socks and packed the suitcase full of clothes and essentials for boarding school life.

Eoin picked a couple of books from his shelf that he thought would be good distractions from studying for the state exams. He knew he had a big year ahead but some light reading would take his mind off study and help him sleep. He also lifted down a history of rugby that his grandad had bought him in the shop at Twickenham. As he riffled through the book he came across photographs of his old friend Dave Gallaher, and his new one, Prince Obolensky. He smiled at the memories that flooded back before carefully putting the book back on the shelf.

Next morning, with the cases packed and his two sets of rugby gear stuffed into his Castlerock College and Leinster Junior Academy holdalls, Eoin and his father loaded up the car.

'Is Grandad coming for the ride?' asked Eoin.

'I don't think so, Eoin,' replied his dad. 'He hasn't been great lately and he told me he thought the trip might be too long.'

'I hope he'll be all right for whatever final I manage to reach this year?' Eoin laughed.

'Maybe the Junior Cup again?' asked his dad.

'I suppose so,' he replied. 'We'll be under pressure to defend it, for sure.'

Mr Madden drove them around to Dylan's house, where Dylan was waiting with his cases on the pavement outside. They loaded them into the car and said goodbye to his mum and sister.

'Remember what the doctor said, Dyl,' said his mother as they pulled away. 'No rugby for two months.'

'Really?' asked Eoin.

'Ah, that's only the doctor being over-careful. I'll be grand.'

'You need to be over-careful with a head injury, Dylan,' said Mr Madden. 'Have a chat with the school doctor and ask him to keep an eye on it.'

Dylan said he would, and the journey passed quickly as they relived their exciting summer playing at Twickenham and made plans for the year ahead.

'Were Leinster on to you?' asked Dylan. 'The Munster coach gave me a ring yesterday and wants me to keep in touch and tell him how I'm getting on.'

'Yeah, they gave me this diary to fill in everything I eat and how much running and walking I do,' replied Eoin. 'I have this gadget that counts every step I take.'

'I wonder will we get a few games over the winter, or will we get another trip next summer?'

'Yeah, I hope we have another chance to whip you lot again. Wouldn't it be great to have an interpro tournament and we could catch up with the Ulster and Connacht lads too?'