

Third Report from Ireland

Thursday 13th and Friday the 14th of October.

I wake today still with the memories of last night in my mind. I now have a think about what has just occurred. To be an international and play on that ground is a truly unique experience. As one of the boys at Salt Hill explained most Irish people would give their left arm to play on that field.

Friday I spend exploring around Dublin and make time for Trinity College. As I walk through the arch and into the square I walk smack bang into my old sergeant who I worked with for a year. I can't believe it! He asks what I am doing in Ireland and I explain the trip about umpiring. Freaky how things like that happen. I have a look around Trinity college and into the library which has books over 600 years old.

I then move onto Dublin Castle and take the tour there. This was Britons viceroy for Ireland. Meaning whoever was designated to be looking after Ireland on behalf of the king or queen.

Some of the rooms are spectacular and the history that goes along with them is amazing.

We all pile onto the bus and get taken out to the Australian Ambassador's residence. It is about 50 minutes from the centre of Dublin. We arrive and are greeted by the staff and Bill Davies who is the ambassador. A really nice guy who gets all of the boys and my vote as he has put on some VB's for us! The residence is pretty awesome! U2's "The Edge" is a neighbour! Bono has a place just down by the water a bit further! A fantastic place. Tax dollars well spent! We get to have a great relax and talk with ambassador and the embassy staff.

Friday comes and Travis Ridgway with the broken leg has been moved into mine and Barneys room. I look after him for most of the day and then help him get to the airport later to get him home. Poor bloke. He came all this way and the game before Croke Park breaks his leg. The rest of Friday sees me relax and then head out later for dinner. A very quite night before a big last one!

Saturday the 15th of October.

I get a call at 9.55a.m from reception saying that the bus is leaving at 10.00a.m. Shit!!! I pack like a mad man and run for the bus. I'm actually one of the first ones there and then we get a new time of 10.30 to leave as everyone is still packing. Eventually we leave for Ashbourne. We approach the Marriott hotel and as we drive in we can see Australian flags on the road way. Fantastic! The Marriott is really nice and I bunk down with Barney again.

I have quick swim with a few of the boys and watch Liverpool v Man U. Pretty relaxing! Game time comes around and it is only a short ride to the ground. Again a magnificent ground with a ripping club rooms. I later find out that they put in especially for us a beer tap for 'fosters'! I am pretty excited for this one as it should be a good game. Dave is doing the game with me again and we break out the blue tops. There is a bit of rain about which is a bit disappointing. The players again march around behind a band before the national anthems are played. I toss the coin and there is a pretty big crowd in.

Just before I start I take a look around. This will be the last match I probably ever umpire in Ireland. I still smile. What an experience. I throw the ball up and we are on the way! Matthew Torney and Ryan Colbert are just brilliant. Torney is playing out of his skin and doing some pretty inspirational stuff.

We head in at half time and the organisers take myself and the other umpires down for a cup of tea. The welcome mat is laid out with a great cuppa and a nice selection of chocky bikkies! We are having a great old chat with each other and the sponsors when after about 17 minutes someone comes and tells us that they players are waiting for us! Woops! We head out rather quickly and I do recall saying that it was only a 10 minute break! Haha! I get a bit of stick from the Aussies in the crowd who accuse me of having a cuppa. I tell them they are spot on. Bruno later shows me a picture of myself running on looking very sheepish!

I quickly start the game and in the 3rd quarter Ashbourne pull back and get in the lead with an under!

It is pretty full on in the last and both teams want it. It is close and plenty of tension! Again Torney is brilliant and is Colbert. Cam Lee also good. I had to stop the clock for injury time and no one knows how much time is left. I have it on my watch. Asbourne have the ball down there end when I look at my watch. 7 seconds left. I hear Ando from the side lines. "Blow it Holmesy! Blow it". Still 7 seconds! I wait and then call time. The Vics are happy. Great for them to win a close one! All the players swap jumpers which is great.

I head into the rooms and sit down and relax. Wow. What an experience that was. I think back to the first game in Cork. I still can't quite believe that umpiring has brought me over to another country! What an opportunity. What an experience. Memories I have from this trip I will have forever! Friendships of people who I hope will come and visit in Australia.

I head into the after match and whoa! It is pumping! Great people. So friendly! I offer to swap my shirt with one from Asbourne and he agrees. We swap and it starts a swapping frenzy with everyone swapping. We drink, dance and chat the whole way into the night and then into the morning. My night ends with having a chat with Luke Beveridge (new assistant coach at Hawthorn) on the couch in the hotel foyer at about 5.30a.m. Fantastic bloke and he asks me a few questions about how the trip has gone and says that it has been a great trip. I agree it has. It has been brilliant. The reason it has is because of the VAFA competition. It is the values of the VAFA and the way the competition is run that transferred to this trip.

I want to say a massive thank you to Bruno and Michael for their efforts in putting this tour together. Thank you for giving an umpire the chance to do this. It means so much for our organisation. Also thanks to Brian and Tony for having the faith in selecting me. And finally thanks to the team for making me feel so welcome. Thanks to everyone for giving me one of the greatest experiences of my life.

Second Report from Ireland

Saturday the 8th of October,

It is a rather early departure from Cork as we all board the bus and head to Galway. A few of the boys are a bit worse for wear after the hospitality of Cork and Na Pasaigh. I have to say I am one of them. The bus ride takes a few hours and we are met in Galway with weather that is pretty solemn. It is grey sky and a constant drizzle/rain that doesn't let up for the three days we will be there. A few of the guys take the opportunity to head to the awesome gym and pool that the Salt Hill Hotel has to offer. I have a room now with Matty Eiferman from Banyule who is the runner and won his trip here. Matty is great company. There is a fair few Banyule boys over here as well as their supporters. A quick bite to eat with the boys where I get interrogated by Nick Sautner as to why he kicked 11 goals and only got 1 vote by the umps. My answer is that I wasn't umpiring that day.

Sunday the 9th of October

Game day 2. I head into town for a bit of a look around early and there is not too much open. Galway has a few pokey alley ways and it looks great. Just like what I have discovered of Ireland you only have to walk about 25 meters to find the next pub and Galway is no exception. The main thorough fair reminds me of Daigon alley from 'Harry Potter'. All of you parents out there would know what I mean as my 8 year old watches those films on replay!

I get back to the Hotel and Sholly tells me that I will most likely do this game on my own as the other umpire has pulled out. Super. The ground is a short trip away and the constant drizzle is really disappointing. We are playing on the back oval as the main ground is in use for a final. The main ground looks awesome and looks like it could hold about 10,000 people. Never the less Salt Hill are keen for a good game. Unfortunately their team is significantly weakened by the omission of several players from their county team that is playing next weekend and the manager is not letting them play. We later learn that there is now a mutiny in the club as many players really wanted to play.

Never the less I stride out on my own and the rain magically abates for the time we play. The Vic boys are too quick and too skilful from the start and easily pull away. The Vics are starting to get control of the round ball. Doing this on my own sees me running a fair bit more. It is a quick game and very few calls are made by me. The Irish boys struggle with the tacking and don't quite get the holding the ball rule. One guy in particular runs the length of the Flemington straight, gets tackled, holds onto the ball and gets snaky when I call him for holding the ball. The Vics run out easy winners. The after match is again very well enjoyed. Some might say I enjoyed it a little too much but I say when an Irish player buys you a beer it is very rude to refuse. So many thanks to the 14 Irish players that bought me a beer. Especially to Dave who got me a jersey from the game! One clubman from Salt Hill teaches us a song that is a classic. Jack Hellier takes it in and later leads this with all the boys. Very funny to see. I have to say that now things start to get a bit foggy and I make it out to town but quickly retire afterwards!

Monday the 10th of October

The rain, the drizzle, the bloody rain!!! Pretty much an indoor day today. I go back into Galway and take a bit of time to do some shopping and generally relax. A quick bit to eat at night and an early retirement. I have to say that the Viber app on the I-phone is coming in handy to make calls home. If you haven't got on board people then do so!

Tuesday the 11th of October

Game day 3. An early check out means that we have to get our bags out and then wait around until the bus for the game tonight. The tour has a fair few characters developing and I must say I am really getting to know the players in the C- division 4 sides. Even getting to know Bruno, Michael and Moosh better has been great. We board our bus to Port Leish where we will play a game at Ballyroan. It has been a long bus trip and the boys are a bit tired on the bus but when we arrive to our ground...wow. What a deck. In absolute pristine order. It is very picturesque and looks awesome. You can feel the players spirits lift. The Ballyroan boys are keen to put on a good show and in conjunction with a local charity they are trying to raise funds for mental health research. They have our style of footy jumpers made up and they look great.

I am umpiring with 'Martin' or 'Mars' and he is the one who is going out to umpire the test in Australia later in October. A ripping bloke. We get along great and we umpire in the green tops I have. The game starts under lights and straight away the boys are away to a great start. Biggsy and House and in everything and despite a few of the better players for Ballyroan trying to get their boys up the Vics are too strong and are really getting a hang of the game and control of the game. Unfortunately Travis Ridgeway gets his leg broken in a really bad tackle. I also have to bring out the red card for one of the Irish lads who got a bit too excited! Chissa then misses the penalty shot. The game was played in great spirit despite the red card and the Vics are pleased to have the win. We head to a local pub for the after match where the boys have a few quiet ones. I make an executive decision to contribute 100 Euros to the charity from the VAFAUA. They are ecstatic and very thankful. An hour's bus trip and we arrive in Dublin! Croke Park tomorrow! Excited is an understatement!

Wednesday the 12th of October

Croke Park Today! On a countdown until about 7.00 p.m.!!! Still being the first full day in Dublin I set out to have a look at a few things. I buy a ticket for the hop on/off bus that has the tour commentary. The first stop is the Guinness Store House and it is pretty impressive. Arthur Guinness signed a 9,000 year long lease for the site and to get free water. Not a bad investment! I go up to the sky high bar and pour my own Guinness! The view is pretty good as I quietly sip away my dark brown elixir! I then make my way to Kilmainham Jail. This place has a fair bit of history. Absolutely amazing. We get show exactly where the leaders of the 1916 uprising were executed. Even one leader who had gangrene in his leg that he was receiving medical treatment for so he could stand for his execution! In the end they tied his hands behind his back and shot him sitting down. Pretty amazing some of the things that go on here.

I get back to the apartments at around 4.00 and the bus leaves in half an hour. I'm glad I had the whole day exploring Dublin. You can really feel the excitement amongst the boys as to where we are going now. For those of you that don't know the history of this place and why it is such as special stadium politically, culturally and sporting wise then please do a bit of research here. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Croke_Park

The bus ride starts and I can feel my excitement level building. We approach the famous stadium and then clear security. We then get out and walk around to the dressing rooms. We then get to dump our bags and walk through the tunnel and out to the stadium. Wow, simply unbelievable. The stadium is massive. $\frac{3}{4}$ of the stadium is seating and at the northern end the stand changes to where British rode their tanks into the crowd and now there is hill 16. Standing room only. The rubble from the attack built over as a symbol of nationalism to never forget what occurred.

I take my time and soak it all up. The boys are pretty excited. Plenty of photographs happen including the team and touring party photos. I meet a few of the Irish boys and their coach Anthony Toehill. He is huge and a lovely bloke. Really takes the time to have a chat with me. The Irish have pretty much selected their side except there is a few places on offer left.

I meet Dave who is doing the game with me and Mars who I did the game with last night. I find out that Dave is doing the game on Saturday with me. I then learn that no umpire or referee gets paid. They only get to claim their travel costs and meal claims!!! Talk about for the love of the game!!! They are both hilarious and very much looking forward to their trips to Australia. They give me a blue referee shirt which I am ecstatic about! I then give both of them each one of our Association polo shirts. They both thank me greatly.

I then offer to swap on the quarter with both of them and they tell me no way. They say I will be doing the whole game. They will swap between them on the quarter. Their reasons being that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity for me and it is not to be missed. I thank them.

I then get to walk out with the boys on to the hallowed turf. The lights are on and it is amazing. I am excited beyond belief and just walking on air. I can't believe that umpiring has bought me all the way to one of the most famous sporting grounds in the world. The Vics run out and they are excited. The Irish boys get out and boy are they big!

Dave throws me the ball and tells me I can start! Awesome. Just before I start I look around. This is something that I just can't believe. Here. Croke Park. Ireland v Victoria. The Big V looks awesome. I blow my whistle and lock away memories that I will have with me till I die.

There is not too much to talk about the match as you can read that on the VAFA website. Needless to say the Irish were way to strong but our boys battled hard. I take plenty of photos and will get some up on the website asap!

I have a chat with Mars and Dave and they are laughing at me how much I am smiling. I thank them for the game and will catch up with them when they come to Melbourne. The VAFA will play the Irish team at Melbourne when we get home. So I get to umpire at Etihad! Yee haa!

I go and see the Vic boys and they are a little down but still pleased with how hard they battled. We head over to the hotel across the road and have an amazing feed with the Irish boys. I have a chat with a few of them. These are players who are all amateurs. They all have jobs. One guy has to travel three hours now to get home and then open his shoe store in the morning. Another guy is a painter. One a school teacher. They only get to claim their travel! Moosha, Sholly and Bruno all congratulate me on my performance so far. They are all really impressed.

I soak up what I have done tonight. I am now amongst a very select few of the world's population that has been a part of a game at this venue. Simply amazing!

I am not going to stop smiling for a month!

First Report from Ireland

Tuesday the 4th of October

I have been waiting for this day for a while now. I had been pretty focussed on the finals and when they finished I felt myself getting steadily excited as the departure date came closer. We meet at the airport and amongst the players and officials there is a strong sense of anticipation and excitement. I know most of the players from the games and from the training runs. Sholl tells us that the itinerary has changed a bit and that we will now be playing against the All Ireland Team that will take on the AFL and at Croke Park. I am pretty excited by that!. He also says that we are on the A380. Looking at that massive plane at Melbourne Airport is pretty impressive. A long flight ensues that takes us to Singapore to London and then a flight into a very drizzly Cork.

Wednesday the 5th of October

After touching down at Cork I clear the airport gates first and walk out to see 'Fitzzy' smiling. He made comment that it is usually the umpire who walks out first in the game and this is no different. After travelling for 30 odd hours I am pretty tired but still excited. We get to the Hotel and check in and I am in a room with a seasoned VAFA rep game official in Dr George Janko. After a quick run with Bevo, Ando, Barney and Feathers (one that found a bloody steep hill) we head up to the team we are going to play against ground for training. Na Pairsaigh (pronounced 'na-pear-she') is a club that is strong in Hurley and also Gaelic Football. It is the home club of Setanta O'Halpin and his brothers who are legends over here in Hurley and Gaelic Footy. I am given a tour of the club rooms by 'Liam' who is a ripping bloke and introduced to the coach Dermot. Dermie asks me to come up to their training tonight to speak to the players about the rules. After the Vics run around I get a feeling that what this game is going to come down to is the kicking. Our guys are going okay with the round ball but still they are not under pressure.

I go to Na Pairsaigh training and end up umpiring a scratch match where they are really keen to ask me about the tackling. They love it and want to do more of it. I end up being there for a long time answering everything about our game. They are a fantastic bunch of guys and all really friendly.

Thursday the 6th of October

A free day today and I take the time to go out to Blarney Castle. It is over 600 years old and a mighty impressive structure. I climb to the top and have to tell you got a little bit scared when I step out. It is a bloody windy day and let's just say there could have been a few more guard rails installed! I kiss the Blarney Stone and with that I am now apparently blessed with the skill of eloquence which means the ability to talk skilfully and persuasively. Some might say I didn't need too much more of that.

I then head into Cork to have a look around before getting back to the hotel and heading out with the players for a feed.

Friday the 7th of October

I wake today with a real sense of excitement. Not nervousness, just genuine excitement! I can't believe what I am going to do tonight. I head into Cork and go to the old city gaol which is pretty impressive and listen to how a lot of people in this prison were given a one way ticket to Australia very early on.

I get back to the hotel and go over the rules a few more times. I get up to the ground before the players to meet the other umpires. I was told previously that I will be umpiring with Michael Collins who has done two of the international rules tests with the AFL team. I get to meet him, the two linesmen Colin and Carey and the four goal umpires John, Kieran, Paul and David. All great guys. They explain to me that I am the 'referee' and that the linesmen are called the 'umpires'. I go over a few rules with Michael and we work out a system of control. It basically consists of you take that end I'll take this one!

Game time approaches and I am nearly bursting with energy! The Vics run on and it looks pretty impressive. The Na Pairsaigh boys are in yellow and black. The band leads the players around in a bit of a parade that was a bit strange! But still good to watch. The national anthems are played and I then call the players in for the toss. It is either 'Harps' or 'tails' the harp being on all Irish euro coins.

Then the players get settled and move out to their positions. There is a big crowd in of about 300 to 400 people. I get to start the match and hold the round ball above my head. Just as I do this I look around and soak it all up. Amazing. Simply amazing. Here I am in Ireland umpiring. I take stock about what umpiring has given me and I have the biggest smile on my face. The siren sounds and I throw up the ball. We are away!

I settle in straight away and the game goes remarkably quick. There are virtually no stoppages. A few free kicks early before Nick Sautner kicks and 'over' for three points. The whole Victorian team erupts in celebration and run to Nick to celebrate. What they don't realise is that after and over it is a kick out. I am yelling at them that it is a kick out but they don't take any notice and then helplessly watch as the ball sails over their heads and down to the other goal where Na Pairsaigh easily score and under with no defenders around! Priceless.

The game goes on and it is quick and fast. The Vics have heaps of shots on goal but fail to control the ball. Jack Hellier is very good and Julian Rowe also. At half time I participate in a referee/umpire challenge where we all take turn with kicks to hit the cross bar. Out of three goes I get close on one of them! The crowd cheers me on as I am the Aussie!

The second half comes and despite the vics attack on the ball they still can't make a full indent on the score board. The Vics go down but clearly had more of the ball. I finish the game as I started it, with a massive smile on my face. I still can't quite believe it. I walk off with the players and other officials with great memories of this night.

At the after match in some of the most impressive clubrooms I have seen there is a band on and it is in full swing. The beers are tasting rather good and everyone there is so friendly. The band invites a few 'guest swingers' to take the microphone and it has to be one of the funniest things seeing Michael Blood singing 'Sweet Caroline' and Luke Beveridge belting out some Hunters and Collectors! We are still going quite early into the morning and it is one of the best nights I have had out.

I now can't wait to get to Salt Hill for the next match!