

## Ní bheidh a leithéid ann arís

Irish rugby's greatest ever player, and one of the greatest to have ever played the game of rugby football could not have wished for a more sensational end to his time in the green jersey.

But after 133 test appearances for his country, along with eight in the red of the Lions, the curtain has finally fallen on Brian O'Driscoll's illustrious test career.

And to end it as a Six Nations winner for the second time (it should have been more than two, let's face it) in Paris, where his Championship career began in such sensational style 14 years ago, was as fantastical a conclusion as one could wish for.

O'Driscoll was within 10 metres of a try that would have taken the roof off the Stade De France had he crossed the whitewash, in a move triggered by Rob Kearney, executed by the superb Andrew Trimble and finished by Jonny Sexton.

And at the death, he was one of several Irishmen who crashed into the French attack with earth-shuddering hits, the type that leaves a rugby player's body sore for days afterwards.

That O'Driscoll, along with his midfield partner Gordon D'Arcy, captain Paul O'Connell and, for me, the grossly unheralded Rory Best, emptied themselves once again for the cause last Saturday, sets them apart at present in Irish rugby.

Best, the most capped Ulsterman in history, has seen his steady hand at dart time rewarded by leading the best front row in the Championship and co-ordinating the best set piece: take a bow, forwards coach John Plumtree.

O'Connell, though not the all-conquering man mountain of 2005-2009, is still an outstanding player and leader; Joe Schmidt's naming him captain one of several masterstrokes which the Kiwi deserves credit for.

And what of D'Arcy, arguably Ireland's Player of the Championship and for me, the Irish player of the season at both club and test level, who has produced as many 9/10 displays this season alone as in any other he has played.

The Wexford man, whose Roger Casement-like beard experienced its own Waterloo on Saturday night, has provided O'Driscoll with a superb foil at inside centre for the past decade. To imagine one without the other on a rugby paddock is difficult to envisage such has been the longevity and efficacy of their magnificent partnership.

Players like Brian O'Driscoll, on the grounds of quality and longevity, are astonishingly rare. The great Mike Gibson, perhaps the finest midfielder we'd produced until O'Driscoll arrived in 1999, also played in the green for 15 years.

During that time, Gibson won 64 caps, but remember that was during the amateur era so we're not exactly comparing like with like when it comes to drawing any sort of meaningful comparison.

Gibson's name, 35 years after his last appearance for Ireland, still carries weight, resonance and respect, like Ring, Giles, Spillane, Macken, Kelly and Treacy in other codes.

And for as long as men and women pick up an oval ball, run with it and attempt to do wondrous things with it, Brian O'Driscoll's name shall forever be revered, honoured and, in this nation's collective consciousness, universally admired. What a player. And what a man.



Brian O'Driscoll departs the test rugby arena as a champion. How fitting an accolade.