

## The Irish Team in Dakar

Monday 10th November, 3am, and Richard Elvin -- Pierre Di Pizzo -- John O'Grady & Fergal Hogan meet in Terenure for Breffney to drive us to the airport, clambering into the car with little care for the time of day or the long voyage ahead as the excitement of representing Ireland in Dakar filled the air.

Arriving at Dublin airport wearing our blue shirts specially made for the world championships and our green IPA jackets we checked in for the first part of the journey to Madrid, then made our way to have some breakfast as we needed to start taking our malaria pills, all quietly hoping that they will not have any side effects.

Landing in Madrid we had a 9 hour wait for our connecting flight so while Pierre and Richard looked after the bags in the airport John and Fergal went visiting Madrid, arriving back a few hours later for us all to check in. Even though John booked the tickets, the check-in desk asked Pierre for his credit card, why - we do not know and a fact he got many a reminder of.

On the plane we started making friends with the Monaco team and Pierre went up the aisle to see how many other countries he could find - stopping and asking all and sundry if they were playing petanque - rumour has it he even asked the captain to make an announcement for all boule players to put their hands up - just like being at school.

Arriving in Dakar we were hit with the HEAT -- mayhem at the airport and waiting for a single 12 seater bus to escort loads of countries to their hotels. Finally arriving at what we were hoping would be a nice air conditioned room our faces sank as we were introduced to what would be our living quarters for the next 8 days -- simply 2 adjoining huts with basic bathroom facilities and very basic air-conditioning.

Holding the 4 bottles of beer we had managed to get at reception from their little fridge we sat outside pondering what was next on the agenda if not sleep -- when 2 of the security patrol stopped and talked to us -- then with the blink of an eye Pierre started showing us a talent that had us in awe -- he had negotiated for someone to go and get us some bottles of beer. Fergal baulked at Africans running errands for us but soon adapted when he got a cool beer in his hand!

After a hot night's sleep interrupted by Richard forgetting to switch his 2.45 alarm off and duly waking all just as we had managed to fall asleep -- in the morning we woke to open the door to a blue sky and a blast of heat the like not seen in Ireland!

After breakfast Pierre, Richard and John wearing their designer shirts complete with IPA logo, escorted by 2 guides made their way out of the complex looking for a bank and sightseeing, hounded every few yards by someone trying to sell anything from coat hangers to "branded perfumes" -- phone cards to electric drill sets and taxis beeping every few seconds looking for customers. Bank found but, with the hole in the wall machine not being very receptive to our cards we made our way inside to be greeted by a security guard controlling the queue of..... 2. Money exchanged and on our way to the supermarket we took in many interesting sights -- stocked up with bottles upon bottles of water and a few extras a taxi was needed to get back to the

hotel -- decision time - do we get in the one with no bumpers and 18 dents or the other 2 waiting with fewer dents but broken windscreens. All piling into the back seats we found ourselves back at our huts in jig time.

We then made our way for lunch which was excellent - as was each of the meals throughout our stay - all buffet style, offering a choice of 5 or 6 salad starters followed by rice or potatoes and a veg with either meat or fish dish -- and fresh fruit and a dessert -- plus unlimited water/coke/fanta. The afternoon was spent meeting old friends and making new friends in between throwing some boules, the occasional beer and a dip in the pool to cool off.

The evening followed with plenty of socialising, with Xavier (Pierre as the Tahitians called him) introducing himself to every soul around, be they players, coaches, chef d'equipe, spectators, locals - even the gazelles (that were rife all over the complex) photos being taken in plenty. Tiredness setting in for some, numbers dwindled before Richard and Pierre made their way for their nightly midnight swim in the pool of our complex, where the gazelles would be waiting trying to offer us services under the watchful eye of the hotel security (or was he their pimp?).

Back in the room (unaccompanied) where the fan had been on all day and glad of the coolness we bedded down with Richard doing his nightly ritual - after-shave on legs and arms to stop the mosquitoes (or was it to hide other noisy odours from all and sundry?) -- then lying on the bed, packet of crisps on his belly he would nibble away for a few minutes and swigging coke before switching off the light, remembering to check the alarm was off.

Wednesday was here and after breakfast Pierre, Richard and John still proudly walking around in their blue Ireland shirts (travel/leisure) specially embroidered for the world championships had a friendly with the Russians and, boosted by their win, they started playing against the English, narrowly losing the first but winning the second before peeling off for lunch talking about a decider that never happened. People were commenting on how nice our shirts looked and stating how much we looked like a team.

Lunch over we had a dip in the pool to freshen up for the parade where we all turned up in our white shirts (parade/banquet) and green trousers for the first time looking top notch. After several speeches and hand shaking of all players the draw was made (Burkina Faso, Saint Martin, Ivory Coast, Mauritania, Bulgaria and Germany) the talk at the bar was about who was in your group before heading for dinner as the first round of the shooting was due to start at 7.30.

Pierre was our shooter as Fergal decided he was not feeling the best due to the dreaded travel bugs. Up stood Pierre feeling in great form with Richard looking after the setting up of the boule and we were off to a good start. First boule hit 3 points = then a close miss followed by the moment of the world championships for the Irish team == Pierre moving towards the umpire and asking in a meek humble voice "please sir can I talk to my partner" followed by 10 minutes of silence from him -- a story retold many times by many players from many countries as we all reckoned it was the only time he was lost for words - the rest is history!

Thursday morning saw Richard head off for the 8am International Congress -thankfully in a nice air-conditioned room -- being grateful for his fluent French as the translator was always a few minutes behind and missing half the sentences (if getting anything correct) -- main points: world championships every 2 years and limited to 48 teams with play now starting on Friday (1 day less competition) and to be run under Swiss system for the first round, with entry through the different continental championships in the alternate years (European for Ireland), also a noted rule change you are now allowed to fill ANY single hole before playing your shot and not being restricted to just the last hole made.

Wearing our khaki shirts (play) and green trousers we began with a bye then we started against Burkina Faso who as we learnt were the current African champions -- Pierre Fergal and John playing - to be sadly taken apart in 4 ends 13-0. No disaster as we could only get better and we did in the next game going down 13-8 to Mauritania (who had a memorable victory against the French in the last 16). Some say the result was influenced by their departing mid-way to pray to Allah! Then came Saint Martin where luck was not on our side and another loss 13-5. Our last game of the day was against Ivory Coast who beat us with some brilliant shooting 13-1. Play over for the day, we headed to the bar to drown our sorrows and cheer ourselves up. Beers drunk we made our way back to our African huts via the nightly dip in the pool.

Friday morning we started off against Bulgaria with a change of team due to Fergal feeling under the weather. After starting well we were clawed back by the Bulgarians who went ahead before we finally got our act together again to take our first victory 13-11. Next came the Germans, last years quarter finalists and group favourites. Starting with the same formation and playing our best boules we went ahead 10-0. The Germans then started to claw back on our lead when at 10-6 we had an opening and took our chance finishing on 2 immaculate points from Pierre to win 13-6 to cause a major upset and eliminating the Germans, that victory putting Ireland top of the home nations as the English, Welsh and Scottish managed 1 victory each, and Ireland finished a respectable 33rd in the main competition.

With joyous smiles we went off to lunch with high spirits and looking forward to the afternoon play in the Nations Cup. Fergal said he felt better so we reverted back to the original formation - sadly to lose badly to Norway with Richard coming in for John on the last end. Next was Hungary, a must win game if we were to proceed. Starting well we knew we were in with a good chance before luck turned against us (at 2-1 we had a bad kick and conceded 1 point when we had 3 on the ground and we eventually lost 2-13) thus ending Ireland's playing in the tournament. On handing in our last result Ireland was complemented on how well dressed we were by the FIPJP president (Claude Azema) and other people on the control table.

With no play on Friday evening many players gathered around the pool bar and talked about their exploits and misfortunes, more shirt exchanges were arranged, Irish shirts much requested. With Pierre's and Richard's all reserved, Pierre started dealing for John. Deals made with the French, Belgians, Tahitians, Moroccans to name but a few. Happy in the knowledge that we would all have some wonderful mementoes from different countries, we headed back for our nightly dip and off to sleep.

Reduced to the stands we started watching the masters at work -- Richard watching the Belgians, John the French, Pierre anyone he thought he could get a deal with to swap something! The last 16, which is played in 4 groups of 4 saw a shock result with Mauritania beating the current world champions but unable to repeat their feat when playing their barrage match after losing to the Belgians -- all other games went pretty much to form with a tense battle between Luxembourg and Switzerland for the last quarter-final spot.

16.30 Saturday afternoon saw the quarter finals with France B (World Champions) beating Armenia 13-6 (don't be surprised as all 3 Armenians are top players in France) ---- France A making quick work of Luxembourg 13-0 ----- Thailand winning 13-2 against Morocco --- but the game of the round and one of the best of the tournament was the Belgium v Madagascar game, Belgium racing away to a 11-0 lead only to be clawed back slowly by the Madagascans and with the crowd cheering away for both teams the Belgians finally won 13-10 after just over 2 and half hours of play. A game that John will long remember as sitting in front of him for the latter part of the game was none other than Philippe Quintais (Pierre has photo).

Breaking for dinner the place was a buzz with the excitement of the game just watched and talk was of the semi-finals of the shooting competition The first semi saw Pascal Milei (France) lose to Abdessamad el Mankari (Morocco) after going into a lead which he held 'til shooting for the jack. The second semi-final had the crowd on its feet with the local Senegal shooter François N-Daye against Salix Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso) and what a match with the Senegal shooter taking a 10 point lead in the opening round which he held 'til we came to the last round of shooting for the jack. The atmosphere was electric as talk of a possible world record was on. All he needed was to hit 3 jacks and when he hit the first at 6 metres the expectation became ever greater. Then at 7 metres another hit. The pressure was on. All he needed was another hit at 8m and as the boule was thrown towards that jack not a noise could be heard. Every soul praying for that boule to be shot true and when it landed perfectly, hitting that jack, the place erupted - a crescendo of noise not heard at any other time throughout the competition as every single person was on their feet applauding and cheering François N'Daye as he jumped so high he would have broken the pole vault record as well! But still he had another shot at 9m and, after 5 minutes of clearing the area from the celebrations he sadly missed his last shot in an attempt to make the total greater. Barely having time to settle his emotions he had to play the final in which he never really got going and sadly lost to the Moroccan who was nevertheless a worthy winner.

Waking Sunday morning John showed us his many bed partners of the night before as he had to move his bed due to an ant invasion streaming down from the ceiling. So on our way to see the semi-finals we stopped at reception for Pierre to ask for someone to fix the problem before our return later that day. The semi-finals saw France A v France B and Belgium against Thailand ---- the two French teams had a good battle with the game being pretty even until France B (world champions) pulled away from 8-7 to win 13-7. The other semi saw another tense battle, this time with the Belgians finding themselves 9-0 down after 3 ends partly due to the fact that their shooter Jean François Hemon had caught the dreaded tummy bug in the middle of the night which was all too clear in his play, so making their substitution they gradually clawed their way back. Again, with the crowd cheering for both teams, play was tense. At 11-7 the

Thais had 3 shots to hit a boule but missed after the Belgians had missed the jack. Then the Belgians 3 ends later had 3 shots to win the game, but although they did hit the boule twice it was only a small tickle. Finally, after nearly 3 hours of play the Thais won through 13-11 to make their second final.

Breaking for lunch with the place in a buzz, Pierre trading away with whatever he could lay his hands on, talk was of the final and all could only see a French win, which proved to be true as the final was one way traffic with the French team of Suchaud, Lacroix, Leboursicaud & Grandet coached by Quintais winning 13-0. At least we had our souvenirs with Suchaud and Leboursicaud exchanging shirts with the Irish team, not forgetting the individual photos taken with the winning team and Pierre giving Quintais his telephone number.

Arriving back at our huts we were shocked to see the ants still crawling all over the wall in the same place in their thousands, but equally more horrified to see they had moved into the adjoining hut as well. Pierre, our wheeler dealer extraordinaire (with better French than del boy) got the owner to come to see what was happening and, after blaming us for the ant invasion she offered us another set of huts which Pierre went to inspect. The owner's face apparently dropped to the ground when she opened the door to see an even bigger invasion of ants. Another set of huts was offered and they were ant free, with Pierre confirming that the extra night we had to pay was now offered to us free by the hotel due to the accusations made and the inconvenience caused. We definitely owed Pierre a Pastis!

Having moved huts we made our way for a cool swim before donning white shirts for the banquet, where we were yet again complemented on our attire and hassled for any we had left. After a sumptuous feast and exchanges done and prizes given we made our way back to the huts with treasured possessions in hand.

On the Morning of our departure, the Welsh Team negotiated a room to store our baggage for €38. We sent our Delboy into the arena however, and he came back to inform us that free luggage storage was available in the main hotel! Another Pastis owed to Pierre! (aka Xavier). After lunch we went out to get our Senegal souvenirs and presents. Walking past street vendors we had noticed items of interest, and were told we needed to bargain, offering not more than 1/3rd of the price they asked. John and Richard tried with little success and both watched in awe as the master of the barter Pierre set to work, dealing with one trader then another offering prices and getting deals that we would not have managed. Back with presents for loved ones in hand and a few francs still left we went to get some world championships t-shirts - bargaining from 6euro to 4 and thinking we had done well - only for Pierre to get them at 2! If only he could have bargained for points in the games we would have come back as world champions! No harm in dreaming!

Arriving at the airport for our long trek home and with many countries there for several flights we said more goodbyes to those not on our flight, filling in the embarkation cards before making our way through the 15 security checks with bottles of water and through to duty free where cigarettes were as low at 10 Euro for 200. Boarding the plane, we settled into our seats where Pierre decided to keep us amused with some antics ( see photos as words cannot explain ) He tried to exchange the last Irish badge for the stewardess' badge but in vain - he had finally found his match.

Landing at Madrid we had a 15 hour wait for the flight to Dublin. Fergal, braving tiredness, went visiting Madrid to do some shopping as he had left his jacket behind in Senegal while the rest of us tried to doze in the airport. Boarding the plane finally to Dublin we all fell asleep before the doors were closed, only waking to the bump of the plane landing in Dublin where Breffney was waiting to take us back to where we all met 8 days earlier.