



Paddy on the  
Hardwood A JOURNEY  
IN IRISH HOOPS

RUS BRADBURD

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## PROLOGUE

An easy job. That's what I was looking for.

So in August of 2002, I accepted a job in the Republic of Ireland coaching a professional basketball team.

How I wound up there—after fourteen years of coaching major-college basketball in the States—and what unfolded in the town of Tralee is less a story than a tale. In fact, it's less a tale than a ballad; a ballad without discernible meter, which might make it what the Irish call a “slow air.”

Ideally, this slow air would be sung for you, in a respectfully quiet pub with thick stone walls and an open turf fire. The blunt wooden tables would be covered with pints of Guinness, their white heads blossoming like fresh-cut flowers. By the end of my song you'd know all about my time in Ireland. The glasses of stout would be dry, save for streaks of foam clinging to the sides.

Sadly, I can hardly sing, even after drinking. And living in Ireland wasn't really slow moving like an air. Perhaps I should shoulder my fiddle instead and play a tune that would tell my tale. I'm a far better fiddler since my time in Tralee. You would come to understand my year through a wordless fiddle tune, a wandering jig with a bouncy 6/8 rhythm. It would be in both a major and minor key, draped in the simultaneous sorrow and joy essential to Irish traditional music. Quirky and mysterious, the tune might lodge in a dark corner of your head long after our evening—and my story—was over.

Then the pub owner would bolt the front door and take down a bottle of Irish whiskey. We'd all lean forward on our stubby stools, elbows on the tables, and try to recall or invent the tune's name. The odd appellations of fiddle tunes are a constant source of mystery, and therefore entertainment, to musicians in Ireland. Someone might suggest for mine the title “How Far From the Course You've Strayed, My Lad.” A bearded man would stand, wobble in his shoes, pound the table, and declare it “Irishmen Can't Jump.” That would

break something open in the psyche of the loyal pub dwellers, and suggestions for the tune's name would flow freely, each subsequently shouted down or drowned in laughter: "What Makes A Man Happy?", "The Winding Road to Oblivion." Soon enough, we'd all forget about the tune for the time being, and the remaining townsmen would sit perched and connected, shoulder to shoulder and knee to knee, having heartfelt talks about everything on God's green Irish earth, until the bottle of whiskey was empty.

Instead of a song to sing or to fiddle, what I have is a journal of my year coaching professional basketball in Ireland. Each section is the title of a traditional Irish tune. Maybe my story will linger in your ear and resonate long after the last note is played, the way it has in mine. You'll have to supply your own drink.

PART ONE

HERE WE GO



“This man is the new coach of the Tralee Tigers, like,” Junior Collins announced inside the phone shop. I forced a smile for Junior’s benefit.

I’d known Junior, the Tralee Tigers’ team manager, for less than a minute when he decided that the first thing I needed in Ireland was a cell phone. A “mobile,” he called it. For a guy in his forties, Junior had an unusually large gut that threatened to burst his black Tralee Tigers jacket, a garment that cried out for laundering. His hair was a mess, although it was only an inch and a half long, as if he’d slept on it funny. He added the word *like* to nearly everything he said, not an uncommon Irish tic.

The fellow behind the phone shop counter had a pierced lip. A chunky girl with a navel that shouldn’t have been exposed leaned against the wall behind him. They looked blandly at me—the new coach—then back at Junior.

“He’s just off the plane from America, like,” said Junior, nodding at me.

More silence. Finally the pierced fellow said, “What’s the *Tigers*?”

The belly button girl looked at us hopefully. “A football team. Right?”

“Basketball,” Junior said. A small line of customers was forming behind us.

“You’re not so smart,” the pierced one said to the girl. Then back to us: “I didn’t know Tralee had a basketball team.”

Right off the plane, and already I was letting the team down in some unexplainable manner—if only I were a better coach, these two wouldn’t be ignorant of the Tralee Tigers, and in fact would be season ticket–holding fans. It was my first indication that coaching basketball in Ireland carried the same cachet as teaching the tin whistle in downtown Detroit.

“*Professional* basketball,” Junior insisted a bit aggressively. I thought he

might offer to fight the pierced guy. “With an American coach and everything.” Junior placed his hand on my back for support and added, “All he needs is a mobile and a good night’s rest.”

Ireland was hopelessly hooked on cell phones, worse than in the States, Junior admitted when we left. He called cell phones “a disease,” although he smiled when he said it. On this late August morning, we’d passed through a dozen small towns and villages on the eighty miles from Shannon Airport to Tralee. Men huddled on street corners, each looking at his cell phone, plugging in important numbers, or maybe checking messages. In one village, three teenage girls strode in unison alongside a crumbling stone wall, each talking on her own phone. Getting me a mobile had to be done before I unpacked or saw where I’d be living for the next seven months.

Anyway, I had my first mobile. Junior even showed me how to set it so it would wiggle instead of ring. “Now it’s time we got you a *fry*, like,” he said.

Junior and I left my suitcases, computer, and fiddle in the trunk and went for breakfast, where we met up with John Folan. Junior said Folan would be the Tigers assistant coach again.

The Full Irish Breakfast, a fry, was awaiting us: two eggs (fried), rashers (ham, fried), sausages (fried), chips (french fries, fried), black and white pudding (blood sausages, fried). And toast (toasted).

You would have thought we were mobile phone salesmen instead of basketball folks. After we had talked about phones for five minutes, Folan said, “There’s more phone shops in Tralee than fish and chip shops.”

To which Junior answered, “Although there are still plenty more pubs than phone shops. There are forty-five pubs in Tralee, like. Forty-five!” The fact that there were just twenty thousand people living in Tralee made this even more remarkable. We had a new topic.

Folan, without using a pencil, noted that this meant one pub for every 444 people. I thought it was a good sign. My assistant coach had a head for statistics. That could come in handy on the bench in a tight game.

When my new colleagues paused to chew their breakfasts, I brought up basketball and the state of the current Tralee Tigers team, going over our roster on a napkin. They argued about nearly every player, but they did agree on this: Tralee had a good team in place, with the potential to win a lot of games.