

## **Friendly Winners - Back To The Future**

Saturday 21st April 2018 - visit to Wales by an Irish Youth Rugby Team

The whistle had blown, and the match was over. It paid off. Our war dance had worked. David, Derek, Ger, Pat and Joe were dancing, and Mumbles were in tears. Ausmann was hoisted and carried to victory and Ezekiel was made man of the match. The winner's goalie Oumar was on his knees trying to take in what had happened. Local media gathered and photos taken. Garryowen made history. Gareth, Alad and Dylan on the opposing team were shattered. Comprehending everything seemed impossible and the pain of the loss was traumatic for this proud Welsh team. A score of 35: 7 was incomprehensible. The players were aged between 12 and 14 years old.

Parents of the winning team were overwhelmed and their visits to Swansea playing three of the best local teams had been a tremendous success. They won all their matches over a five-day weekend. Everyone couldn't wait to get home.

Earlier that day on the Mumbles pitch Garryowen had introduced their Oo Aaka Tari combative arrangement prior to the match being played. It was a test moment. The importance of winning the match against Mumbles was critical. Practice of this war dance had been carried out on Mount Pleasant earlier that day at their place of residence, that was located around a rustic farm location raised high over Swansea. It was an absolute perfect spot. No one could hear the chants only nearby grazing animals.

On the Mumbles pitch there was an unsuspected surprised silence before commencement of the match, and the Garryowen team had positioned themselves choreographically as they had been trained to do. Each player placed both their feet firmly on the ground stooping their backs and stretching their arms, displaying their hands and asserting their body force, like a tiger lifting its body to a frightening prey, their faces distorted unrecognizable, thrusting their tongues out and wriggling, their eyes grotesque and bulging. The chanting commenced with strange deep vowel words that resonated everywhere around them and caught the attention of the opposing team off-guard as they froze in a frail silence. The rhythm drumming from the guests' lungs pulsated vibrations outwards that had never before happened on the pitch and touched all the spectators too in waves of octaves. At the conclusion, everyone took to their field positions. Frozen silence remained for some moments among the distracted hosting team that seemed an eternity for some. Penetrating eyes analyzing the surrounding spectators glanced from the parents of the chanters as though this was theirs to do as part of their skills to prey. Celebrations after the match continued in the bus as they took their journey home to Limerick. On the sea crossing songs were sung and stories told. Word got out in the local clubs in Limerick what had happened and eventually it reached the echelons of the rugby fraternity in Dublin. Tongues were wagging. Expectations were growing. A likely change of

practice had been thrown into try. Dreams of being in Thomond Park were in the minds of the players.

The families of Ausman, Ezekiel and Oumar originally arrived in Ireland from Senegal prior to their births. Their parents' local language was French and Wolof. Their fathers were from the same fishing tribes along the estuary, and they grew up in poverty. They had arrived in Limerick after having taken a dangerous journey overland to Morocco and onwards via France. Each had met their partners from Mali, Mauritania and Benin while in Ireland and awaiting settlement. English was their new language. Within the city all families remained in contact and met occasionally. All their families grew in numbers and their offspring attended local schools. Among the parents Wolof remained their lingua franca. Their tribal senses and persuasions prevailed. The children spoke English as locals do and their nuances were alike and they understood some Wolof. Nothing could tell them apart from their neighbors. Ausman, Ezekiel and Oumar attended different schools in the city and all of them joined their favorite rugby club Garryowen. Every Sunday morning, they all met with their fathers eager to watch and encourage their participation. Some siblings joined them and watched eager to learn more. Sometimes neighbors would join them and often envy them at how well they played.

When a young boy from age six Oumar had watched many matches on TV when New Zealand played and had been particularly interested in the rituals they displayed prior to commencement. Something familiar surprised him and he sought the attention of his father. At first his father Cherif had no expectations because he was summoned. He listened to the replay recordings and asked his son what it was called. The Haaka, responded Oumar. Aaka, cried the father, it should be. 'What do you mean?' This is the Aaka said Cherif. This is our war cry in our tribe, and we have many stories about these. We would 'Oo Aaka Tari', before a hunt or prior to a battle with a neighboring tribe. 'Oo Aaka Tari', Oo Aaka Tari' he repeated recalling those moments in his village in his homeland. How do they have this? He spoke. Oumar had no response.

Oumar attended a Gaelscoil (learning through Gaelic) and had always wondered why he had found a close familiarity with this tongue. His curiosity became a duty in calling to be solved. He was clever and took notes and made comparisons of words in Wolof and Gaelic. His efforts had paid off one year later. Now his idea was to claim the war cry and make it part of the team he played for. By the time he was twelve and had achieved a rightful place among his teammates and the coach he requested that they consider adapting and embracing this ritual to be their own. He had devised a chant and with the assistance of his elder musical sister Chorafi, had choreographed a field pattern for his team players. The team coach agreed with the players that they would test try this on their trip to Swansea only if they had won their first two matches. Silence was golden, they were told. No one was to speak a word.

The Sunday after their return from Wales during training the coach was beaming, and all the team players were in top form and Oumar was praised for his efforts and the success that he had brought to his club. History was made and recorded.

To be continued.....