

# Alternative

Wednesday  
March 18, 2009

# rugby brings many surprises

**T**HE FIFTH Rugby World Cup Sevens hosted recently by Dubai was certainly a festival of surprises. The spectators' unforgiving hard benches in the unforgiving open sun was one.

The parade taking place, without the combatants, on day one instead of day three as advertised was another.

A third, monumental surprise was the unceremonious dethronements of the champions (Fiji), the perennial favourites (New Zealand), the other big guns (England and South Africa) in the quarter-finals by presumed no-hopers Kenya, Wales, Samoa and Argentina, Ireland having previously taken out doughty Australia.

Then there were the sweet eventual cup-winning victory over Argentina by a deserving Wales and the gripping women's inaugural final where the Aussies overcame the All Blacks.

The women's World Cup competition was an innovation, which many welcomed but most found a tiresome interruption to the smooth progress of the men's. It meant matches had to be held simultaneously on two pitches which you had to yo-yo between and still end up missing crucial contests.

Moreover, apart from the final few games, the standard of the women's matches was mostly akin to primary schoolchildren's and great if you enjoy the delights of slow play, knock-ons and dropped catches, but at least you could follow what was going on more easily.

Predictably, curmudgeonly chauvinists far preferred the troupe of leggy cheerleaders with their black and orange outfits and silver pompoms. With the same verve and energy as the players, they danced and leapt and cartwheeled all over and alongside the main pitch whenever there was a brief respite in the rugby.

The day one parade was very well choreographed and entertaining: half a dozen gaily-bedecked camels haughtily strutting their stuff like catwalk models, bare-chested kung-fu tumblers performing impossible acrobatics, Arab drummers in traditional robes providing a thrilling beat, children in beautiful Graeco-Roman tunics dancing in perfect unison, the lovely cheerleaders, of course, and other black-clad children



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releasing clusters of coloured helium balloons and rocketing streamers.

Within the compound outside the stadium, franchisees in huts and marquees sold their coffee, pies, chips and beer and ice creams, having, of course, ensured that everyone at the entrance gates had first been frisked of all food and drink. You had to buy coupons to effect payment.

An amusing sign in the bars admonished you not to drink and drive, while advising that the only way to dispose of unused coupons was by taking the car to a particular alcohol outlet in the distant fellow-emirate of Ras al-Khaimah. A merchandising store sold multi-coloured, overpriced rugby shirts and hats emblazoned to commemorate the event, which were irresistible.

Back within the stadium, we were regularly exhorted to join in with what has become the de facto anthem of big Sevens tournaments everywhere, *Hey, Baby, will you be my Girl?*, which has as much relevance to rugby as *The Fields of Athenry*. But similarly, when belted out with gusto to the non-existent rafters, you cannot but feel uplifted.

Disappointingly, the Irish crowd was so small and scattered that *Athenry* was never heard, except from my own spindly throat.

But what was heard roaring round the stadium, especially once Wales had secured the mantle of world champions was Tom Jones's *Delilah*, that curious paean to violent domestic abuse ("I felt the knife in my hand and she laughed no more").

But as Wales gloried on noisily, in the distance you could faintly hear disappointed Fijian, New Zealand, South African, Australian and English accents with their plaintive wail: "Why, why, why, Delilah!"