

Rugby Legends Tackle Big Issues Head On

Rugby legend Andy Irvine tackled every question thrown his way this week at a Perth gathering to celebrate one of Scotland's most prestigious black tie dinner fundraisers being lured to the Fair City. The former Scotland full-back, who is rated among the all-time greats of the game, joined former teammate Alan Lawson at the Royal George Hotel to share their memories of playing days with an audience drawn from the local business community. But Irvine, who will manage next year's British Lions tour, also handled hot topics with consummate ease, rather than producing the sort of side-step which hallmarked his days in a Scotland and Lions shirt.

The Bill McLaren Foundation Voice of Rugby Dinner at Perth Concert Hall on October 27 will raise money for the legendary commentator's charity and also boost Perthshire Rugby Football Club, which has been fostering an award-winning youth policy and has also lured four foreign stars for the new season.

Lawson and Irvine both stressed that grassroots club rugby continued to have a vital role in the sport in Scotland and it was important there was no "them and us attitude." One of the greats of the oval ball game, Irvine recalled that he had actually played football as a primary school youngster at a state school in Edinburgh, before being introduced to rugby at Heriots. "I got into rugby by accident. I played soccer until I was 13 and my deputy in the Edinburgh schools team was Graeme Souness, but he was four years younger than me!" laughed Irvine, who admitted he had been Hearts daft growing up in the capital.

He recounted a tale of celebrating a try in his schooldays only to be sent from the field for the indiscretion. "I went to give the scorer a hug in football style and found myself sent off! That lives with me to this day. There have been discussions about the code of behaviour but I think that's what separates rugby from soccer and I hope it continues because rugby is the best team sport in the world." The professional era was posing major challenges for Scotland, which boasts the same number of rugby players as Yorkshire. That made the recent win over Australia Down Under the equivalent of Raith Rovers defeating Manchester United on the football field.

"We punch away above our weight in international rugby and we have to be smart with the resources we have got," he declared. But Irvine advocated government cash being pumped into the sport, flagging-up the backing it receives in other nations, observing: "Something like £3 or £4 million would make a massive difference to rugby in Scotland." He feared that long-term Scotland was in danger of slipping down the world rankings. But on the plus side the professional clubs now had their house in order after a period when the numbers simply didn't add up. He recalled the now defunct Borders side banking £85,000 from a season's gate receipts, paying one star man £100,000-plus, with 34 other players on the books along with four coaches. The last Lions tour featured just two Scots in the initial squad and Irvine cautioned that Six Nations performances next season will have a huge bearing on the composition of the next touring party. "I would hope to see four or five Scots in the squad and the Six Nations will be the yardstick."

Irvine and Lawson regaled their audience with light-hearted tales of characters and incidents on and off the field from a bygone era. And he confessed he'd like to see Murrayfield reserved for internationals to protect the once pristine surface. "Ideally we would transfer a stadium like McDiarmid Park to Edinburgh for club games. That would be perfect," he said.



Pictured: Allan Lawson, Andy Ritchie, Gordon Wilson and Andy Irvine

COUP FOR PERTH

The Bill McLaren Foundation Voice of Rugby Dinner at Perth Concert Hall on Saturday, October 27 is being supported by local businesses Carbon Financial Partners and Campbell Dallas. Ambitious plans for an event which has been held in Edinburgh in recent years were unveiled at the Royal George Hotel this week, with the hotel and the Famous Grouse supporting the high profile launch. Gordon Wilson, of Carbon, and Andrew Ritchie of Campbell Dallas revealed that rugby legend Jim Renwick and would be one of the speakers and rugby television presenter Jill Douglas had agreed to m/c the event in Perth. Tables are already being snapped-up for the 300-capacity autumn event.

Mr Wilson said: "It is a huge coup for Perth to be hosting the Bill McLaren Foundation Dinner. Proceeds will support the work of the foundation and also Perthshire Rugby Football Club. Bill McLaren is a legend of sport and the Foundation was created to support the tremendous work he did when he was with us."

For further information on the dinner contact alison.whyte@carbonfinancial.co.uk or call 01738 443111.