

## A Hooligan's Game Consumed by Gentlemen?

The consumption journey I'll be documenting is the Leinster vs Ulster Champions Cup Round of Sixteen clash, which I attended in the Aviva Stadium on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2023.

I'll scrutinise the difference in fan (consumer) behaviour I witnessed in this exercise compared to that in the footballing landscape. The fan is central to live sports (McCarrick et al., 2021). As I illustrate, there's certainly a more outgoing form of support in 'The Beautiful Game' found in the form of 'Ultras' (GOAL, 2021). I'll use my insights to advise those involved in the rugby sector on whether they should strive for this or to improve the current model making my experience even more enjoyable.

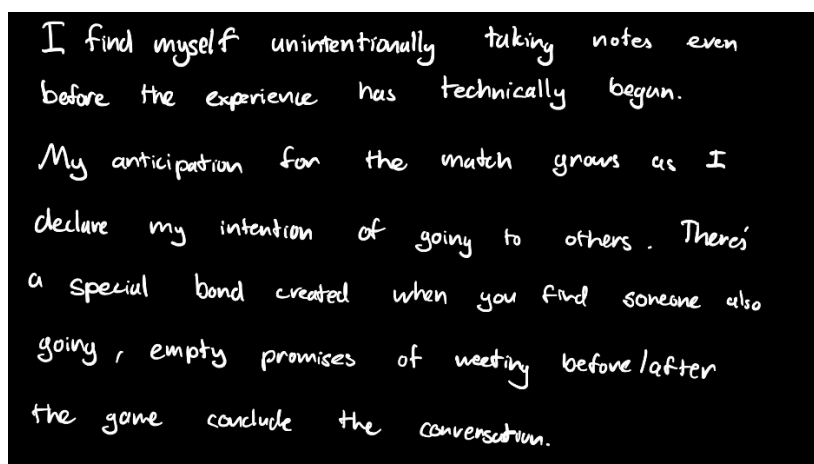
It's important to outline the biases I was subject to. I'm a casual Leinster Rugby supporter. I watch their games when they're on, never going out of my way to. I attended the match with a friend who's a more dedicated, yet not devoted, supporter. I walked into the Aviva with an objective view of analysing the consumer experience I was embarking on. However, as the contagious cheer of the crowd grew louder and the game went on, my vision undeniably tainted blue.

It's also worth noting I'm a devoted Chelsea Football Club fan. I watch every game and regularly consume Chelsea products in online and offline spaces. I draw comparisons to the Irish Rugby scene and the English Football landscape throughout and it's important to acknowledge I'm much well versed in the latter.

People are central to a live event, both fans and players alike. I break down my experience into three stages: pre-consumption, consumption and post-consumption. In each stage my interactions with others shaped my experience.

### *Pre-consumption:*

I begin with the build-up to the event below.



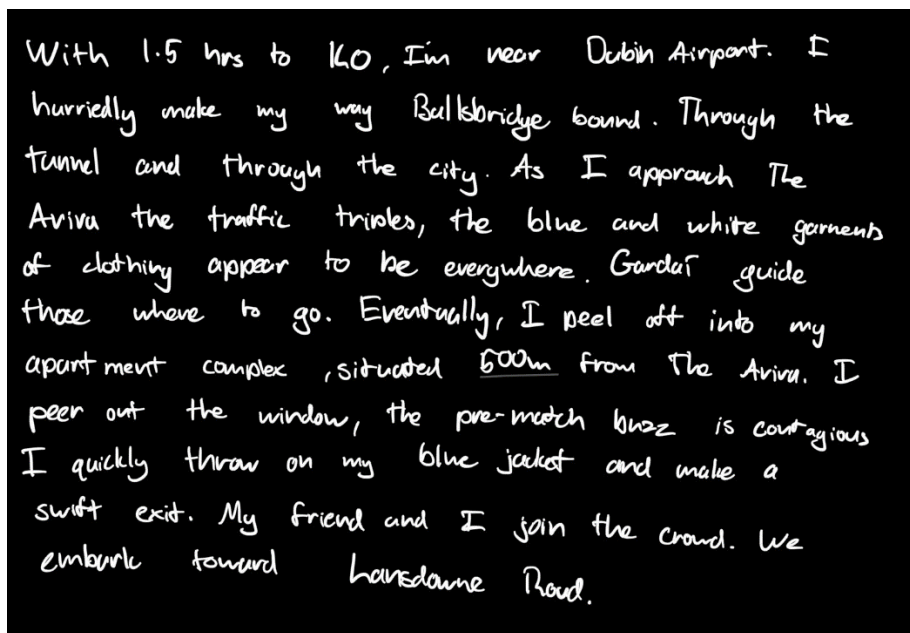
I find myself unintentionally taking notes even before the experience has technically begun.

My anticipation for the match grows as I declare my intention of going to others. There's a special bond created when you find someone also going, empty promises of meeting before/after the game conclude the conversation.

Figure 1

I may have been under the Badder-Meinhold 'Frequency Illusion' (Nikolopoulou, 2022), however I felt myself repeating this roll-call like ritual constantly in the lead-up to the game. As noted, it was during this stage I felt my anticipation grow. Anyone who's played a team-based sport acknowledges the great sense of belonging one acquires in doing so. I felt a somewhat similar sensation whenever I disclosed my intention of attending the game. Paraphrasing McCracken (p.73, 1986), I felt myself engaging in the construction and the constitution of the Leinster Rugby culture.

The pre-match experience itself climaxed in the hours leading up to the game as below illustrates.



With 1.5 hrs to KO, I'm near Dublin Airport. I hurriedly make my way Ballsbridge bound. Through the tunnel and through the city. As I approach The Aviva the traffic triples, the blue and white garments of clothing appear to be everywhere. Gardaí guide those where to go. Eventually, I peel off into my apartment complex, situated 500m from The Aviva. I peer out the window, the pre-match buzz is contagious. I quickly throw on my blue jacket and make a swift exit. My friend and I join the crowd. We embark toward Lansdowne Road.

Figure 2

The event felt out-of-the-ordinary already. I was playing a match of my own near Dublin Airport. Its conclusion saw people scampering off, everyone concerned about the traffic resulting from the rugby (evidenced in Figure 3). The number of Gardaí and supporters fashioning colour co-ordinated clothing near the Aviva verified that today was simply not like any other day. This demonstrates the importance of people, not just the consumers of said event, in the build-up of a live event. Without them, the consumption journey wouldn't have started so soon.



Figure 3

*The consumption experience:*

We headed toward the stadium, the consumption experience in full swing. Below recounts this stage.

We became submerged in the blue sea of supporters  
The rain was pelting down. Everyone rushed for shelter.  
We looked for the appropriate entrance, following  
the crowd up the stairs. Eventually we tumbled through  
the turnstile. Having not had lunch, I reluctantly  
joined the line for food. The poor weather and  
disbelief at prices would possibly be in agreement  
this afternoon. After getting fed, I made my way to  
my seat

Figure 4

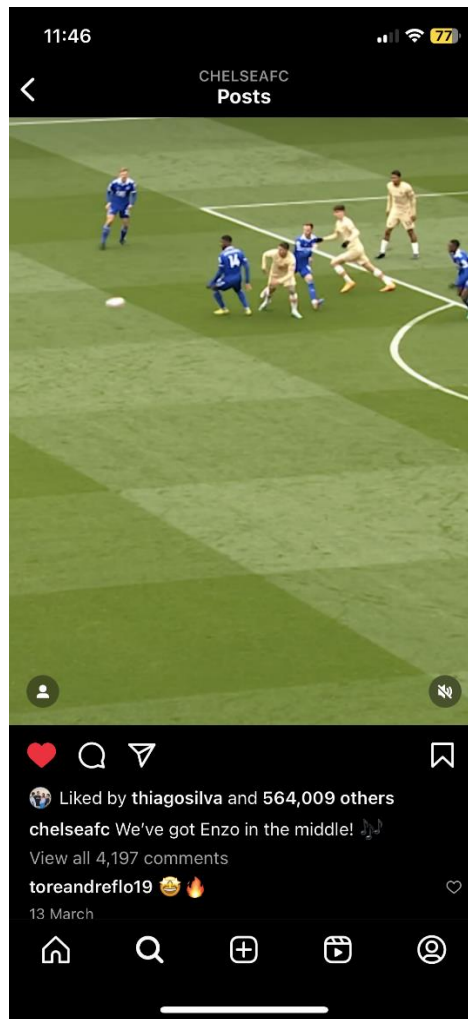


*Figure 5*

It's here in my journey where I noticed the atmosphere ignite my other senses. The food counter was near the entrance to the ground and the enticing smell of curry chips left me with no choice but to purchase them. I remark how I found both sets of fans complaining about the prices in the line, unfortunately left with no alternatives.

I attempted to observe the pre-match rituals that might be associated with the Leinster Rugby subculture. I realised I had perhaps missed an important stage of the experience: the preparation of atmosphere in private places (Hill et al., 2021). Had I the chance, I believe I would've witnessed this in one of the numerous pubs in Ballsbridge. I remember walking down main street in the area during the Ireland-England Six Nations clash. The atmosphere was electric, 'Fields of Athenry' were sung in one slurred harmony. Judging by the current state of a lot of consumers, their private preparation in such a place had certainly been practiced. Had I the opportunity, I believe attending one of these pubs would've offered great insight into Leinster subculture.

I was also concerned I hadn't made use of 'online resources (that) enable consumers to rehearse aural symbols at home, long before events begin' (p.127, Hill et al., 2021). I draw comparison to my Chelsea experience here in Figure 6.



*Figure 6*

The above post's a great example of Chelsea leaning on their fans to enhance the engagement. The caption is referring to a chant the fans have assigned to midfielder Enzo Fernández. Understanding this reference offers a sense of identity. By engaging in such a communal activity, one feels as if 'they're consuming the right stuff in the right ways' rendering them socially validated (p.195, Larsen & Patterson, 2018). It leads a supporter to rehearse the aforementioned aural symbols, building anticipation to a match. Upon reflection, I should've investigated the online Leinster scene to perhaps enhance my overall consumer experience. In saying that, it becomes easier to agree with the conclusion that social media is of great importance to the sports marketing landscape (Nisar et al., 2018).

Regardless, we climbed the stairs to enter the seating area:



We presented our tickets to the steward who pointed us towards our destination. Walking out into the open air for the 1st time always offers a magnificent buzz. The glorious green of the pending battlefield captures the eye, jovial taunts between rival fans can be heard. The air feels electric, you can physically feel the atmosphere building. There's nothing quite like it.

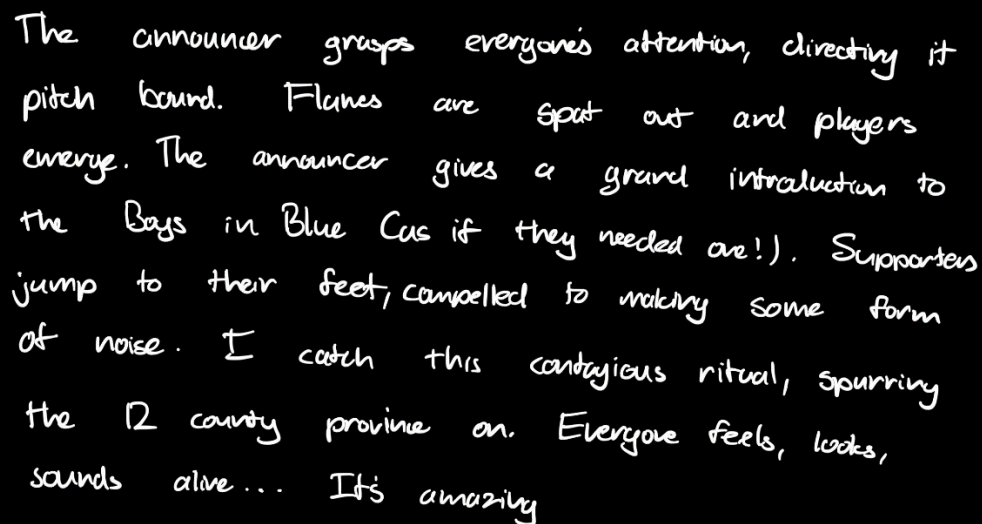
Figure 7

I note how this experience is nothing short of extraordinary; it's rare I get the same sense of euphoria elsewhere. My eyes broaden and a shiver is sent down my spine. However, I don't believe we've reached a state of collective effervescence quite yet. This experience of physically walking out is more of a singular, not collective, step in the journey (Hill et al., 2021).



Figure 8

I barely had time to sit down before the players walked out:

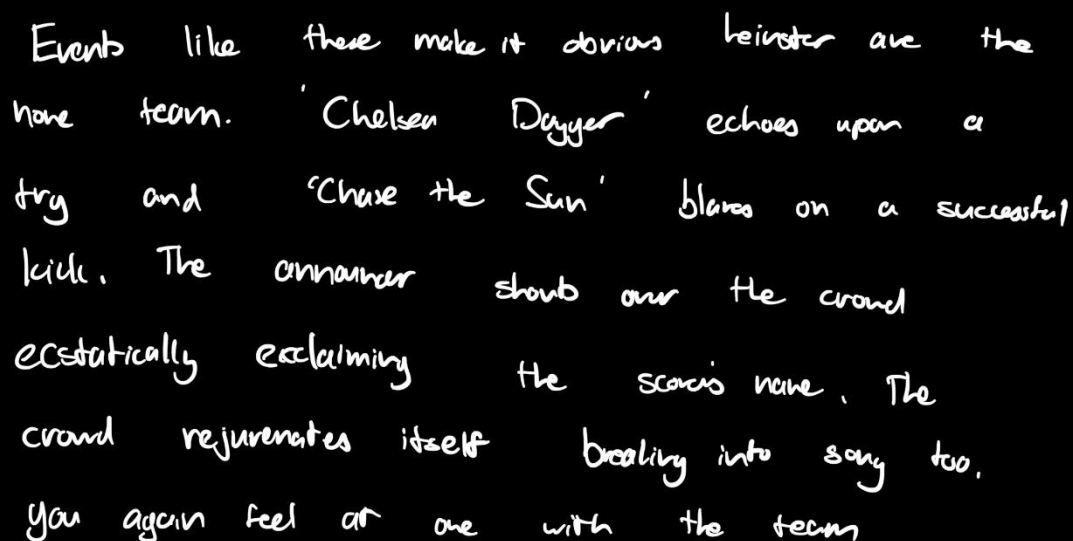


The announcer grasps everyone's attention, directing it pitch bound. Flares are spat out and players emerge. The announcer gives a grand introduction to the Boys in Blue (as if they needed one!). Supporters jump to their feet, compelled to making some form of noise. I catch this contagious ritual, spurring the 12 county province on. Everyone feels, looks, sounds alive... It's amazing

Figure 9

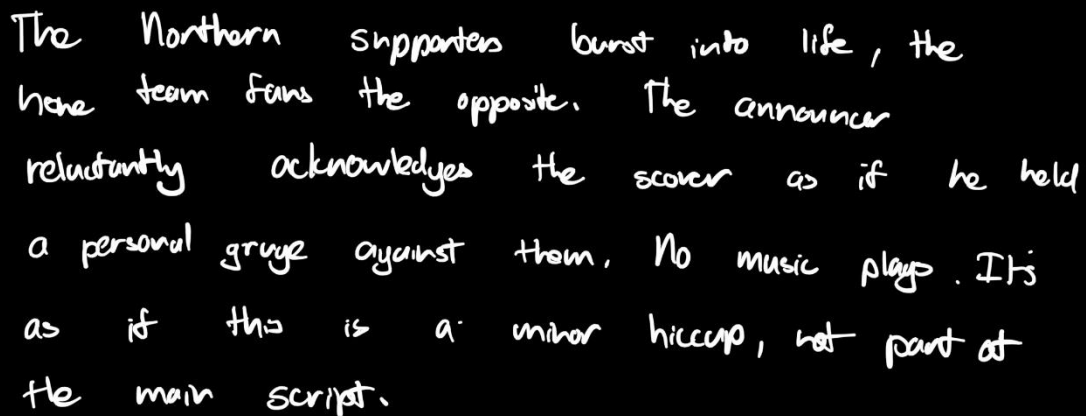
The sensation alluded to in Figure 7 has been increased exponentially. The whole ground had now directed their focus pitch-bound. It was synchronised, it was magnificent, it was collective effervescence. The sea of blue flags in the opposite stand was vast, the sound of support was deafening. I was so caught up in the excitement I burned my tongue in the process of finishing my chips. The fact I only noticed upon sitting down again spoke levels to how the Aviva successfully indulged the consumer in the occasion.

The match itself was fantastic. I wish to analyse the seating position as I believe it had a big effect on the event as a whole. I document below how it affected the climatic events throughout the game.



Events like these make it obvious Leicester are the home team. 'Chelsea Dagger' echoes upon a try and 'Chase the Sun' blares on a successful kick. The announcer shouts over the crowd ecstatically exclaiming the scorer's name. The crowd rejuvenates itself breaking into song too. You again feel at one with the team

Figure 10

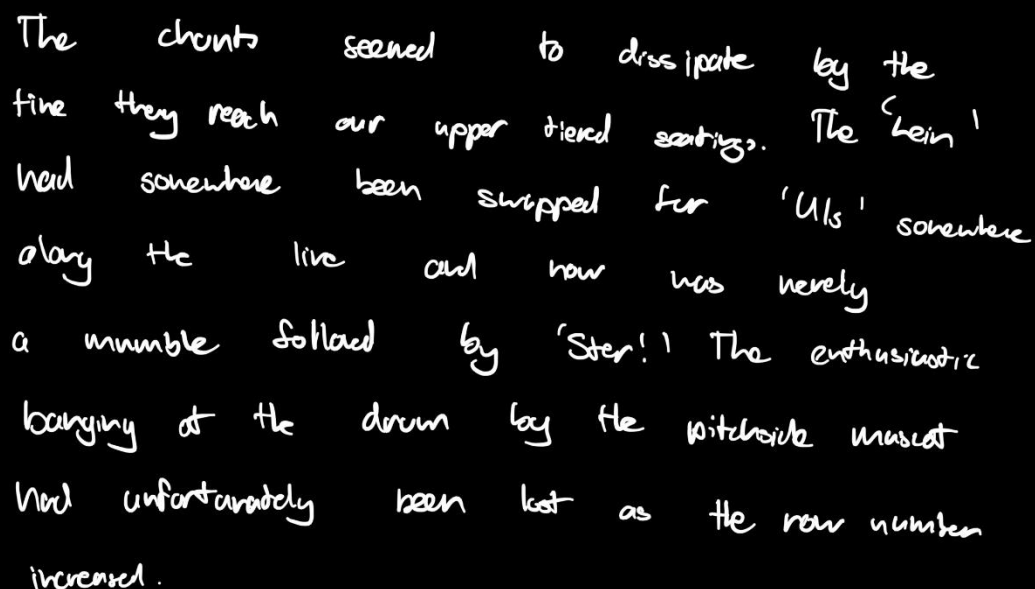


The Northern supporters burst into life, the home team fans the opposite. The announcer reluctantly acknowledges the scorer as if he held a personal grudge against them. No music plays. It's as if this is a minor hiccup, not part of the main script.

Figure 11

I'll first discuss the difference in atmosphere between a Leinster score (penalty, try or conversion) (Figure 10) and an Ulster one (Figure 11). As above, it's stark. The crowd erupts upon the former and subsides after the latter. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to fully immerse myself in the experience.

This was because of my surroundings. I was located in a pocket of Ulster supporters. I was surprised that this was the case. In all football games I'd attended the crowd was segregated into home and away fans (Ward, 2017). As a Leinster supporter I didn't enjoy it. It felt wrong celebrating upon a Leinster score and the misery of conceding was exaggerated with the surrounding jubilation. The organisers need to do better when creating an attachment to the ground here. (Hill et al., 2021)



The chants seemed to dissipate by the time they reach our upper tiered seating. The 'Lein' I heard somewhere been swapped for 'Uls' somewhere along the line and now was merely a mumble followed by 'Ster!' The enthusiastic banging at the drum by the pitchside mascot had unfortunately been lost as the row number increased.

Figure 12

I've disclosed my affinity to football. Chanting is central in the sport (Fishwick, 2019). Netnographic research highlights the practice isn't as common in the rugby landscape; searching YouTube for both



Chelsea and Leinster chants verifies this. The limited chants that did occur, never fully persuaded me to join in. In contrast, at my most recent visit to Stamford Bridge, I exited the ground with no voice left!

I recognise the number of biases I've already acknowledged. I'm a better versed Chelsea supporter than I am Leinster fan and there's a greater number of, and value placed on, club-themed anthems in football. However, I knew the chants I heard being sang in the tiers below but didn't feel compelled to get involved.

This wasn't because of my physical location; I was also near the back wall at the aforementioned Chelsea game. It instead was because of those seated around me. I struggled to find my voice in the infamous 'Leinster! Leinster!' song, those surrounding had remixed it to suit their province. I felt the discomfort shared by the Liverpoolian in the 2021 Hill et al paper (p.132): as rival supporters we obviously weren't on the same page. To improve this, one could argue for fan segregation. However, I'm not convinced that this'd be the best course of action. I'll illustrate this later.



*Figure 13*

#### *Post-Consumption:*

Excluding that minor displeasure, I loved the event. The full-time whistle rendered Leinster 30-15 victors. I recorded this process below.

Leinster kicked the ball into touch to  
 render the score final. Applause ringed out throughout  
 I witness an event that's never occurred to me  
 before. The Ulster fan sat in front of  
 me, who we had been teasing throughout,  
 outstretched his hand. We shook and he wished  
 us the best of luck in the next round. I  
 was taken aback by this gesture. I had  
 never witnessed such class from an opposing fan.

Figure 14



Figure 15

An Ulster fan shaking my hand amazed me. Coming from a sport infamous for lack of respect, I found this a class act from a temporary enemy. A TOFFS survey (2020) demonstrates the disparity in fan behaviour between the two sports. After the game at Stamford Bridge the surrounding area felt a lot more hostile after Chelsea had lost. This is why I'd be apprehensive to recommend the segregation of rugby fans. Although it may benefit the above small problems, I worry it might dilute the mutual admiration between opposing supporters.

I've suggestions based on other outlined observations. For one, I alluded to a rare moment of common focus between fans in the pre-match stage. This was in the disbelief of food prices. There's room here for the Aviva, or any sporting stadium, to capitalise.

Refreshment prices are notoriously expensive at these events, commonly causing outrage (Kenmare, 2022). I propose reducing prices to enhance consumer satisfaction. Surprising the consumer when they're in this rare state of harmony would benefit The Aviva. It'd enhance place loyalty (Hill et al., 2021) and entice even rival fans to make a return. This positive reputation will also encourage others into trying a consumer experience here if they haven't before.

Another recommendation I'd make is in relation to social media management. Social media is deemed necessary in the modern-day sporting landscape (Hussain et al., 2021). I shared how Chelsea's Instagram was able to grasp my attention with a chant lyric. I understand this exact practice isn't possible, due to the aforementioned lack of chanting in rugby. When I eventually managed to observe Leinster's Instagram, I noticed there's still space to create more engagement.

Leinster promote fan rituals upon a score with the playing of music. I was unaware of these rituals beforehand and there's no place to educate oneself about them. Leinster should share fan footage of the crowd singing along to these songs in a game. I felt passionate doing so at the game and I'd return to the Aviva for the chance to do so again. I know this desire would be further developed if I came across footage of others doing so online. Thus, I propose sharing videos of fans enjoying these match rituals. This would enhance the excitement felt in the pre-consumption stage, improving the experience.

Rugby matches have been conned as an excuse for a drinking session (Strugis, 2022). I thoroughly enjoyed my time at the Aviva despite not engaging with that aspect. At the time, I recall thinking that this was restraining me from becoming part of the rugby subculture. Upon review, I realise it wasn't. I believe the shortcomings I initially felt sitting isolated actually exposed me to the actual subculture which is one of respect. It's less subtle than that of football, but it's more welcoming. I believe I subconsciously engaged in this practice myself. I respected those around me by not exclaiming my affiliation with the Blues when we had run the score up comfortably. I conclude: rugby isn't just a hooligan's sport *played* by gentlemen. It appears to be consumed by them too.

**Total word count: 1999 words, excluding appendix, bibliography and words within figures (field notes) and including title.**

### **Appendix:**

Figure 1: Field notes taken before the day of consumption

Figure 2: Field notes taken roughly an hour to two hours before the experience begins

Figure 3: Picture taken demonstrating traffic on Serpentine Avenue roughly 45 minutes before kick off

Figure 4: Field notes taken before sitting down in the Aviva

Figure 5: Picture taken just before entrance to the Aviva

Figure 6: Screenshot of Chelsea Instagram post (Source: <https://www.instagram.com/chelseafc/?hl=en>)

Figure 7: Field notes taken emerging into seating area of stadium

Figure 8: Picture taken just before player's begin to enter field of play

Figure 9: Field notes taken as players emerge

Figure 10: Field notes taken on Leinster score

Figure 11: Field notes taken on Ulster score

Figure 12: Field notes taken documenting chanting in the arena

Figure 13: Picture taken in second half moments before a Leinster try

Figure 14: Field notes documenting the full-time whistle

Figure 15: Picture taken leaving the ground post-consumption experience

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