

Sidelines by Rosalyn Sullivan and Dave Windass

It's Tuesday.

Clive. Clive Sullivan, Sully, to you. My husband, to me. Clive is eating with a good appetite. But he's quiet. He cooked this. Bacon, egg and tomato. He took himself off to the kitchen, out of the way, preparing himself as much as he was the food.

Nerves have kicked in early. He's moody, like he always gets before a game. Games not 'til Saturday. But he's off tomorrow, down to London for the match at Wembley. The all Hull Challenge Cup. You know that already, because you'll be there too. All of Hull will be.

He's chewing slowly. Contemplatively. Feet planted on the floor. Elbows on the table. Staring off, somewhere. Somewhere into space. Somewhere else. He looks at me and, as I look back at him, he looks away. Just shrugs and gets back on with the business of chewing, slowly. I think he wants to say something. I should ask him what he wants to say. Or maybe I should just leave him to chew it over.

“What are you staring at?” says Clive.

He's trying to concentrate, he says. He's 37. He should know how to concentrate by now.

He's dreaming. Dreaming of a Winner's Medal. He's won the World Cup. Everything else. This is all he wants, to cap it all off.

Now, he's mopping up what's left of the egg.

I like to watch him eating. Reminds me of when he used to work in the factory. He'd get up at 7.30, go to work, get back home at five, gulp something down, and three nights a week he'd wipe his plate clean then head straight back out to train. I'd read the kids their bedtime story.

I knew what I was getting into. Before I married him I knew what rugby meant to him. It's his life. And I just fell into that. It can be quite lonely, at times. Though maybe he's missed out more than me, bringing up our two.

From the outside, maybe our life appears glamorous. Perfect. But when your husband comes in with a bag of mucky, sweaty training gear you have to get it in the wash. Very romantic.

He's moody. Scared, maybe. I'm scared too. Always am before a game. If it's an away game I sit by the side of the radio, always worried that he'll be hurt. He's pretty injury prone, and if he gets injured he'll have to take time off work. So there goes the winning bonus.

He's got his front teeth in. I look at them as he's finishing up his bacon. Think about his great big smile. He shines when he flashes that smile, lights up the room. I've only been in the dressing room once in all of his career. He went down in the game

and I knew it was bad, not just a knock or a torn muscle. Got in there, and he couldn't move his neck, couldn't feel anything. I could have cried. And he said, get my front false teeth out my pocket and pass them here, someone might want to take a photograph of me.

I said to him earlier, at Wembley, for heaven's sake, make sure you give someone on the bench your teeth so when you lift that trophy you can smile for the cameras.

He's all packed, all set. We double-checked his special pair of underpants was in the kit-bag. They're well-worn but he's never ran on the pitch without them. Everything has to be the same as normal.

He's finished eating now. I'll clear his plate. Tidy up. Leave him to his little ritual. I know not to step on his toes.

He puts his knife and fork down, smiles. I love him. I smile back. We don't need to talk. We know what's going on. Tomorrow, before he goes, we'll do what we always do, I'll say what I always say.

“Have a good game.”

It's Saturday. May the third. Big day. Like a dream.

Travelled down with the rest of the wives on Thursday. I love those girls, they're like family, they understand what this life is like.

We were all so excited. We'd all arranged to wear white skirts, white t-shirts with a Robin on and red jumpers. We all lined up alongside the bus and kicked our legs in the air, for the cameras, then off we went to London.

Yesterday, we met our lads down at Wembley. Saw the big bath in the dressing room. The royal box. And Clive. Still nervous. Still dreaming. Taking in this place he's always wanted to play at. I won't see him now, not just me and him, until after the game.

Us girls had a dinner laid on for us last night. We're all sat round a big table eating, drinking and laughing and a woman asks us who we are and why we're here. She had no clue about rugby league, Rovers or Airlie Birds. She told us she was a white witch. That got our attention.

“The team in red and white are going to win,” the white witch said.

She didn't know who was playing or what colours they played in. So maybe she knows something we don't.

I wonder what he's up to now? How nervous he is?

I have to share Clive, you know? With other people. He's their hero. If we go out, he'll never ignore anyone, he'll always have time for them, 'they pay my wages', he says. And there's women who push themselves forward, like they do. So I'll stand on their feet. You have to remind them, 'he's mine'. But the lads love it really, all that adulation. So what are we? We're not just appendages. Even if it can feel that way.

If we're ever out on our own, just the two of us, people come up to talk to him and he'll say to me 'I'll give you a tap and then you start talking'. Because as soon as I start putting my two-penneth in they don't want to know. Clive's a nice man, a gentleman, but you have to get rid of these people somehow, sometimes.

We're thrust in the spotlight too, us girls. I've even been asked for my autograph a couple of times. People don't always want to know my name, I'm just Mrs Sullivan. So I say, my name's Ros, remember that for next time. But they never do.

Grandstand came round to the house, earlier this week, Des Lynam to interview Clive. And me. And these camera people always think they're in Hollywood, don't they? I'd done a wash and hung it all out to dry before the film crew arrived. They saw the washing on the line and said, can we interview you as you unpeg the washing? And get the kids playing rugby in the background? Because that's how they think we live. And Des is really a lot shorter than he looks on telly. So we had to prop him up on cushions to make him look taller.

Still, not many women can go to watch their husband at Wembley, can they?

So what's he up to now? Ahead of Abide With Me and running out onto the pitch? He'll be doing the same as he always does. He'll have started baulking this morning, with nerves, and he'll have thrown up, a minute ago. And then he'll have had a sherry to settle his stomach.

I know how he feels. I had a panic attack at breakfast. I'm not sure I can face this. It means so much, to both of us.

Then there's what we've not spoken about. He won't. So we don't. He's not getting any younger, nobody is. There's not much rugby left in him, not many more injuries he can take. You can't go on forever, can you? We've not spoken about retirement, we've not made any plans but... but I don't think he'll ever leave rugby alone, he can't. I've even said it to him.

"You'd die without your rugby, you."

So even after this, if this is it, it won't be. He'll still be involved, even if it's coaching kids down the park.

He might do some after dinner speaking. I'll have to write it for him, because he won't know where to start. I'll just leave a few spaces for him to be funny. For him to flash that smile. He's pretty shy though, really, so we'll have to see how it goes. But if a Welshman from Splott can captain Great Britain and fly down the wing, a bit of speaking shouldn't be a problem.

There'll be more time for us, though, after all this. A lot more time.

So here we go. Him down there and me up here. Watching a dream come true. I didn't get to the World Cup, we couldn't afford it, so this is the biggest game I've ever seen him play.

He better win. He's a poor loser. He won't want to speak about it and we'll never be able to mention the game.

When he runs out there he'll take it all in. All of Hull around him. He loves the city, and the people, and they love him too, I think. But he loves the game more, so he'll have a look and then get down to the business of winning.

I'm looking around me. Anthony and Lisa are here, they'll remember their dad's big day forever, they'll always have this. Phil Hogan's wife over there, reading her book. She doesn't like rugby so it'll have to be a good game if she's ever going to look up. The rest of the girls, here to cheer their men on.

He's good. I know that, I've always known that. He's got speed, he can defend, he's got talent. He's packed a lot in so far. He's worked hard to be a winner. But none of us knows how this will turn out. That white witch might be right, though. And maybe we can get cod and chips to celebrate.

And here they come. There he is. Just make it through in one piece, Clive, one piece. No injuries.

I think he's looking over here now, looking at me. There's nothing I could say to him now even if he could hear me. He's definitely trying to catch my eye. I could weep.

Have a...

I think I might have something in my eye.

"Have a good game."

He will.

I can dream too, right? He'll pop his teeth back in after 80 minutes. He'll climb all those steps after the game, he'll lift the trophy.

He knows where we're sat so he'll find us, hold his medal up to show us. We won't have the words to let him know how we feel about him, about this, about us. That this is just us, on the pitch and from the sidelines, living our lives.