

Santiago Phelan, rugby player and coach

By John Kennedy



Santiago Phelan (b.1974)
(*Prensa Unión Argentina de Rugby*)

Phelan, Santiago [*Tati*] (1974-), former Argentine rugby player and the present coach of the national team, was born on 31 March 1974 in San Isidro, Greater Buenos Aires. San Isidro is an area synonymous with Argentine rugby and home to two of the most prominent rugby clubs in the country, Club Atlético San Isidro (CASI) and San Isidro Club (SIC). The Irish link stems from Phelan's paternal grandfather, Miguel (Michael) who was born Waterford city (*Prematch*: n/d).

Phelan began playing rugby as a child with CASI, the most successful club in Argentina, and progressed to the senior team, eventually becoming its skipper. He retired from club rugby at the young age of twenty-nine. Among the honours Phelan achieved with CASI was a National Club winner's medal in 1995, a National Sevens Club winner's medal in 1998, and Argentine Champions medals in 1998, 1999 and 2000. The one honour that eluded him was the Unión de Rugby de Buenos Aires (URBA) Championship, which CASI won against arch-rivals SIC in 2005 after a twenty-year gap.

Phelan began his international career in Argentina's Sevens squad in 1994 and was called up by the Pumas in 1997, making his international debut in Montevideo against Uruguay in the same year. Playing the position of flanker, he was a mainstay of the Puma forwards from the late 1990s until 2003 and was known for his fearless tackling. He played in two World Cups, Wales in 1999 and Australia in 2003. One of his most memorable achievements was the famous game in 1999 when Argentina beat Ireland 28-24 in Lens, France and achieved a place in the quarter finals of the World Cup for the first time. He was also called up by the Barbarians in May 2003 in a side coached by Philippe Sella.

Plagued by a recurrent shoulder injury, Phelan announced that the 2003 World Cup would be his farewell to international rugby. In recognition of his contribution to the Pumas, the coach, Marcelo Loffreda, appointed him skipper for their final world cup game against Romania in Sydney, ending his career with a 50-3 victory. This was not his first experience of the captaincy. Earlier in 2003, he had had the honour of captaining the Pumas against the Springboks in a one series test in South Africa. He also captained the Pumas in 1992 and 1993, and the Puma Under-21s in 1995.

Unlike some of his contemporaries, such as Gonzalo Longo who played for rival club SIC, Phelan did not follow the professional trail to clubs in France or England. In an interview with the magazine *Prematch*, he said that he had never been interested in playing abroad and that he wanted his children to experience the same environment and lifestyle that he had grown up in (*Prematch*: n/d). [1] In the professional era he stood out as being one of the few international captains who adhered steadfastly to the principles of amateurism, which in many ways captured the essence and tradition of rugby (Busicó 2003).

Since his retirement from club and international rugby, Phelan has built up a

successful coaching career at his beloved CASI. His coaching philosophy is based on player empowerment rather than any rigid game plan (IRB 2007). He has also embarked on coaching at an international level along with José Orengo. Phelan coached the Argentine 'A' team in the IRB Nations Cup in Romania in 2007 where they came second. It had been suggested by many commentators, including the Puma star of the 2007 World Cup, Mario Ledesma, writing in the Argentine daily *La Nación*, that Tati could be a suitable successor to Pumas coach Marcelo Loffreda (Balinotti 2007). As an affirmation of his coaching talents and popularity among the players, the Unión Argentina de Rugby (UAR) appointed him the

new full-time coach of the Pumas on 13 March 2008, on a four-year contract.

Aside from Rodolfo 'Michingo' O'Reilly, a former CASI player and Pumas coach, Phelan has been one of the few Argentines of discernable Irish ancestry who has played such a prominent role with the Pumas in recent times. With his appointment as the new Pumas coach, he is destined to make a significant contribution to Argentine rugby well in to the future.

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