

ROY KEANE: STILL UNDEFEATED

By Justin Kavanagh

Keane: The Autobiography by Roy Keane with Eamon Dunphy.

From the streets of Cork to the great arenas of World Soccer, Roy Keane has defined himself as a fighter who never backs down.

Roy Keane could'a been a contenda.

The Manchester United captain may occasionally allow himself to dream of the road not taken—a life in which boxing, his first passion, prevailed.

In this parallel universe, the undisputed Super Middleweight Champion of the World is undoubtedly a Corkman. His fierce will to win would allow no other script.

Keane (walking around weight: 170 lbs) has always needed to pit himself against the best, and remained relentless in pursuit of the next challenge, the next title.

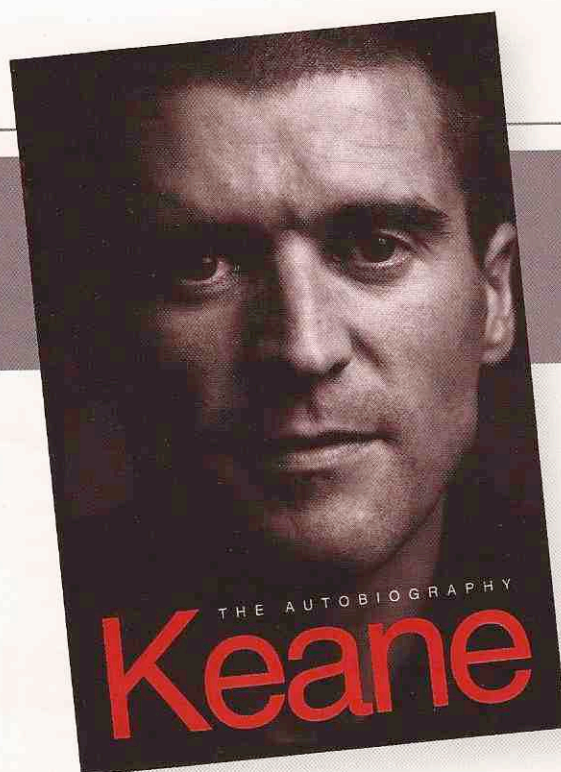
In real life, Roy Keane's dominance of English soccer is undisputed, with seven League titles, four F.A. Cup medals and a Champions League honor to his name. His legend as captain of Manchester United and Irish hero-in-exile is assured.

When asked to describe Keane, most players speak of "presence." On the field, and in the dressing room, he has the effect of heightening expectations, steeling the collective will, setting the agenda. Nobody wants to let Roy down.

There is no greater measure of Keane's presence than the effect of his absence. In 1998, the captain's cruciate ligament injury was acknowledged as the cause of United's failure to win silverware.

And when the club's finest hour arrived in 1999, Keane was absent again, suspended for the Champions League triumph. For 85 minutes, United were outplayed and out-thought by Bayern Munich. Without Keane, they lacked the drive that had got them to Barcelona, to the verge of their famous treble. It took the luck of the gods (and heroic tenacity) to prevail.

Similarly, when Ireland kicked off their



2002 World Cup in Niigata, the man whose relentless ambition had got them there was missing. This time the absence was self-imposed, for the sake of his sanity. But after reaching the final 16 of probably the poorest World Cup Finals ever, the great Irish question remains: How far would Roy have led them?

In many ways, Keane's absence from these two career-defining moments has been the price paid for his single-mindedness and unequivocal pursuit of perfection in a sport where peer pressure prevails. In a sanitized, commercialized, and globalized game Keane is the element of unpredictability and danger that keeps life interesting.

Keane: The Autobiography is unique in being more critical of its subject than most "unauthorized" biographies. Remarkably revealing of faults and neuroses, Keane is an open book. It is also the best insider's view of the game since Keane's ghostwriter, Eamon Dunphy, wrote the classic diary, *Only a Game?* in 1974.

Roy Keane is the antichrist of soccer's PR set. Having reached the top, the millionaire captain of Manchester United launched a searing attack on the new corporate "supporter" at Old Trafford. He questioned the passion of those who did not cheer, and contrasted the "hard core" away fans, priced out of home games, with the new breed who have "had a few drinks and their prawn sandwiches

and don't realize what is going on out on the pitch."

Keane was articulating what many had long felt about United: The club was selling its soul for profit. But such is his standing that no effort was made to silence him—least of all from his manager, who undoubtedly backed his captain's views.

Talk to Keane for five minutes and the phrase "to be honest" will surface repeatedly. It's Corkspeak, but it's telling.

Later, when United's 2002 European campaign ended in Munich, the captain declared that, to be honest, United were not good enough. The team, himself included, was rotten with complacency, bloated with wealth, and needed to be broken up. In February of this year, he railed against the ancient culture of the game and the slack attitude of young United players in training. He warned they would be found out when it matters.

Keane has never pulled his punches. Legend has it, that he entered the United locker room after his £3.75M move from Nottingham Forest, aware of the ill will held against him by former foes. "Right lads," he stated, "I don't like you and you don't like me, so let's just get on with it."

In his first Manchester derby Keane made a trademark late run to get on the end of a Denis Irwin cross and score the winner. While most young players would have talked up the goal, gloried in the moment, and ingratiated themselves with new teammates and fans, Keane's post-match comment was devastating in its simplicity. "To be honest, I couldn't miss really," he stated, and walked away.

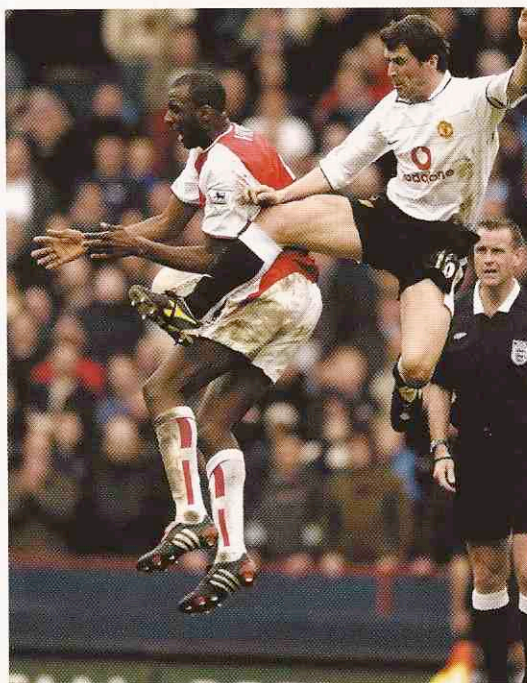
Keane's arrival in English football at Forest had been a culture shock. He despised the "moaning" of the privileged prima donnas in the dressing room. He raged at players' failure to perform in reserve games against lowly opposition. He scorned the herd mentality of blaming bad results on everyone but oneself. Having escaped a life on welfare back in Mayfield, County Cork, the prevailing sense of entitlement and lack of responsibility disgusted him, "My first weeks as a professional player confirmed what I'd always known: The world was full of bluffers, con-men, and whingers... guys content to wear the

badge of professionalism without meeting the standards required to justify that status."

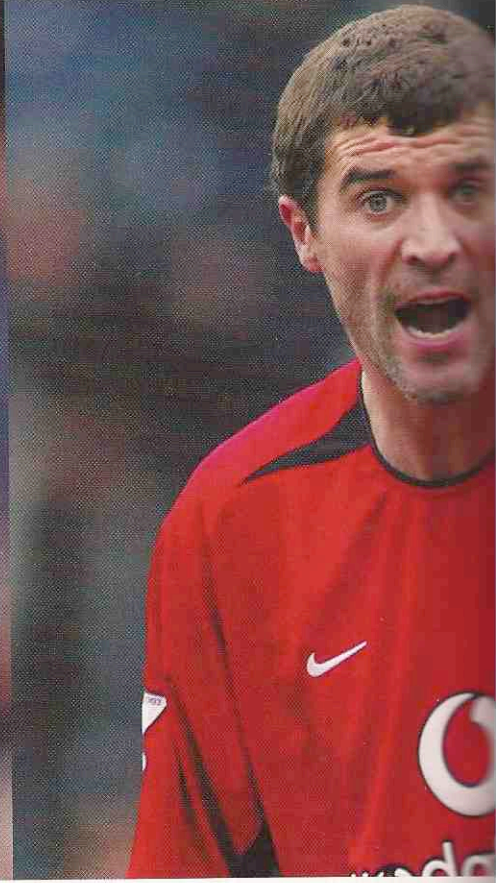
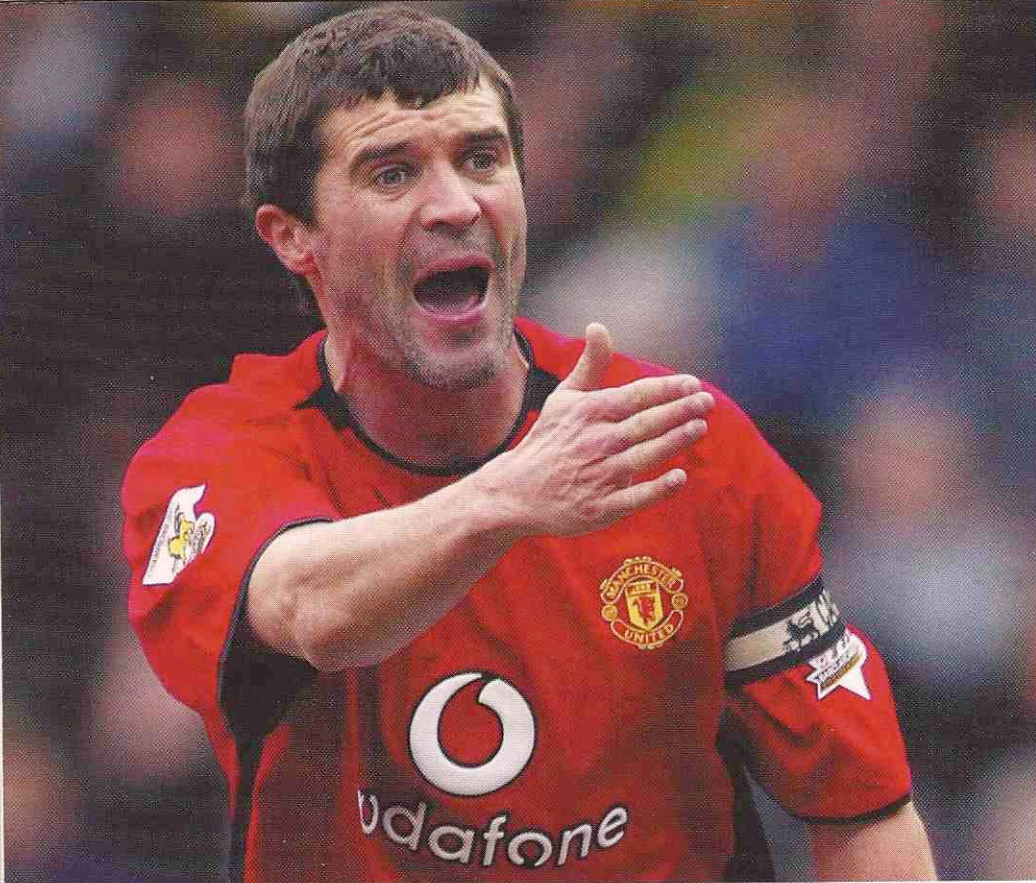
Keane vowed to be different. He suffered the pain of Cup Final defeat, and then relegation, but always gave 100 percent. But when new manager, Frank Clark, paid tribute to Keane's professionalism despite his imminent departure to Manchester United, the player admitted that self-preservation was the main motive.

Years later, when battling a career-threatening injury, Keane's reflections about the nature of the game at the highest level are equally clear-sighted. "It wasn't just the wages that were inflated... bloated egos were as much a source of danger. Seen from a windowless gym on a winter afternoon, the game looked like a bad movie, full of spivs, bluffers, bullshitters, hangers-on, media whores, and bad actors. If you played your hand correctly, you could be a big man without achieving anything." Later, Keane describes a United teammate who shakes with fear as he stands for the UEFA anthem before the Champions League semi-final with Leverkusen.

Such failure to rise to the occasion is alien to Roy Keane. He is the eternal outsider, thriving in adversity. In his own words, Keane is "Irish by birth, Cork by the grace of God." Known as the Rebel County, Cork is



"It's a bond of respect. We are winners."



Directing, demanding, dictating. Roy Keane makes his presence felt.

the Texas of Ireland: Part of the country, but apart. Cork people are different, scornful of conceit or pretense. Yet Keane boasts that “a superiority complex is the mark of a sound Corkman.”

These traits would serve him well on two of his finest days: The afternoon he was “discovered” in Dublin, and the famous night in Turin when he led United to the Champions League Final.

The young Roy Keane was playing for a small local team (the Cobh Ramblers) when they traveled to Dublin in 1990 for a cup replay against the Belvedere Boys. The day was a disaster. The bus was late. Traffic was heavy. Nerves were fraught. And Cobh were slaughtered 4-0.

Keane was furious, and played “like a man possessed—by that strange compound of anger, frustration and personal pride.” He refused to be beaten, battling for every ball long after teammates’ heads had dropped. It would not be the last time that Keane would rage against Irish inefficiency and lack of ambition.

Among the spectators in Fairview Park was Noel McCabe (Nottingham Forest’s Irish scout), checking out the Cobh goalkeeper. Keane’s talent, energy, and indefatigable spirit earned him a ticket to the promised land of

English soccer that day. As McCabe later told it, what impressed him most about Keane was his voracious hunger to succeed. “He would have swam to England to become a professional,” said the scout.

Keane’s greatest performance was in Turin, in 1999, as United chased the treble. Two goals down to Juventus in the first ten minutes, the aggregate score of 1-3 left their cause all but hopeless. The comeback started with a glancing Keane header from a corner. The captain acknowledged this merely with a clenched fist and that glare at his teammates. In this supreme moment of defiance and intent, Keane’s belief lit the fuse.

This was a Juventus team packed with world-class Stars like Del Piero, Zidane and Davids; but Keane considered himself the equal of any of them. By the second half, they had “gone.” Goals from Yorke and Cole gave United their first ever victory in Italy and secured the passage to Barcelona.

Keane dominated the Juve midfield despite playing the second half knowing he would miss the final: A booking before half-time meant automatic suspension due to a Card earlier in the competition. Yet Keane’s account portrays a man consumed by the moment. “I was so much into this battle that the consequences of the Card barely regis-



tered... victory here and now, became an end in itself." Sir Alex Ferguson would later write that Keane's was "the most emphatic display of selflessness I have ever seen on a football field."

Although Keane would later view missing the final as a "tragedy," he has no time for self-pity. Typically, his assessment of the semi-final includes disgust at his earlier lack of professionalism. Rather than glory in his greatest night, Keane the perfectionist berates himself for the initial booking—for dissent—against Inter Milan.

Roy Keane protects his privacy, but he has paid the price. "Who do you think you are?" is the question most often asked by those who seek to impose. Fights have often followed, and he is not one to back down. The irony is that Keane has always known who he is. Small talk and glad-handing are just not his forte.

Rather than celebrate with legions of admirers, Keane seeks out family and old friends for a meal and a drink, "an antidote, badly needed, to the celebrity bullshit of everyday existence that can eat away at your own soul." Like emigrants everywhere, they talk of old times and have a sing-song. Then they laugh at the newspaper image of "Psycho Roy the Dark Loner."

Keane's normalcy and reputation as a family man are among the reasons he has retained his popularity in his homeland, despite the World Cup fiasco.

The seeds of his bitter dispute with Republic of Ireland manager Mick McCarthy were sown on an end-of-season trip to America for what Keane calls a "Mickey Mouse" tournament in the Jack Charlton era. Like every Ireland trip, it was an excuse to party. Keane and Steve Staunton found a good bar in Boston and overslept on the morning of departure, as Jack Charlton fumed on the bus. When the pair finally appeared, they got an earful. "You've kept us all waiting, you two," bellowed the manager. The young Keane looked him in the eye and shot back, "I didn't ask you to wait." Such defiance of the "legendary" Big Jack stunned all present, and McCarthy, as captain, informed Keane that he was well out of order.

Keane describes Charlton as an extremely limited football mind, who played on his legendary status to bully players. When Keane is told he will never play for Ireland again if he chooses club over country, he calls the manager's bluff. He is well aware that other players like Ronnie Whelan and Liam Brady who had expressed an opinion had been forced to walk the international plank.

Dublin's biggest shopping mall ground to a halt as the news was announced over the P.A. system. Irish people spoke about the events in the Far East as if someone had died.

Several of his Irish teammates have since accused him of living on "Planet Roy." The incredible intensity he brings to his work was evident on the night of the semi-final in Turin. The United players walking through their hotel lobby to their bus were quietly focused on the task ahead, stopping politely to sign an autograph, or acknowledge well-wishers. When Keane descended, though, he marched through the crowd staring straight ahead, as if in a trance. Nobody asked Roy Keane for his autograph.

Keane goes to war for a living—and has the body to prove it. In his own words, he is "a very old 32." Doctors have even counseled him to quit the game or risk needing a hip replacement when he retires. He suffers chronic back pain. His shinbone has been exposed. He has suffered a ruptured cruciate ligament and endured the lengthy rehabilitation which sports psychologists compare to a grieving process.

Such an injury is like a prison sentence to a sportsman. And as every con knows, you can serve time or make time serve you. If Keane's boyhood hero, Mike Tyson, came out of prison with a new religion and a classics reading list—but the same old bad habits—Keane used his time away from the limelight more purposefully.

Unlike Tyson, Keane has no self-pity and was embarrassed to be paid without performing. After the long grind of rehab, he returned having recreated his persona, and reinvented his game. He was lean and sculpted from the forge of the gym. His skull was shaven. He had identified his own weaknesses and was "less tolerant" of himself, cutting back on his drinking and improving his diet. That dark, fearsome glare of competitiveness still burned and the veins still bulged in his head when decisions went against him. But he had learned to modify his box-to-box running game, and he now let the ball do the work. His tackling was as daunting as ever.

Keane's appetite for alcohol has had a negative effect on his career, as has his legendary temper. These had combined fatefully

to cause the injury. A late-night fight and tabloid headlines predetermined a poor performance against Leeds. Angry with himself, Keane lunged at Alf Haaland and snapped his knee. The Norwegian stood over the crippled Corkman, urging him to stop faking.



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Three years later, the extent of Keane's thirst for revenge was frighteningly clear, as he stood scowling over a prostrate Haaland, victim of his dreadfully high tackle. Keane was famously suspended for admitting to premeditated revenge in his book.

Along with several of his United teammates, the United captain has recently taken up yoga! However, he was also recently sent off against Porto for angrily stamping on goalkeeper Vitor Baia.

Keane's great footballing brain permeates his autobiography. His ability to read the tempo of a game, to dictate the pace, and determine the ebb and flow of a match are traits which will surely be the foundations of a successful career in coaching when his playing days end. He knows how to create "atmosphere" and passion in his head on the training ground; and he certainly knows how to instill emotion in others. He also possesses a shrewd ability to judge the chemistry of the dressing room. He has recently attended a coaching course at Warwick University, and is working his way through the UEFA coaching badges, but he has already learned much from two of the game's greatest mentors.

Keane relates how, unlike Jack Charlton, "Brian Clough dealt in facts, specific incidents..." He recalls Clough's instinctual reading of the source of a goal—a mistake made, or a ball won in an earlier passage of play which changed the pattern and created the opening. Keane understands that most of football happens in your head, off the ball, off camera. He works with "complete determination," which is "obvious," and "absolute concentration" which is "invisible," he explains.

Keane analyzes the game and thinks like a coach already. He can feel when opponents have "gone," mentally lost the battle, as Bayern Munich did so uncharacteristically in Barcelona. As the champagne flowed afterwards, Keane kept his thoughts to himself. But his thoughts are probably the most honest assessment of that famous night: "We were dead lucky against a team that bottled it."

Remarkably, Keane does not dwell on the treble, but rather seethes at his teammates' reaction to it, which halted their progression. His ability to articulate and influence the hidden agendas and determining factors of the game mark him as a manager-in-the-making. It was the captain's influence, according to insiders, which stopped Nicky Butt from signing for Birmingham in January. Keane's standing in the game and his contempt for the distractions of fame and the millionaire lifestyle make him the likeliest managerial material among English soccer's current nouveau riche generation.

And of course, Keane acknowledges fully his fortune in allying himself with Alex Ferguson, a shrewd manager whose fierce ambition he now represents on the pitch. Keane is the embodiment of the Govan boss's ethos of hard work, drive, and defiance. But if his captain now personifies all that Sir Alex has built at Old Trafford, both are wise enough to know that time will quickly erase the empire.

Ferguson has bought several young players in the last year, and while Ronaldo and Saha may have grabbed the headlines, it is another Corkman who might step into the void that Keane will leave behind. Liam Miller, due to sign in July from Glasgow Celtic, could find himself serving a holding midfielder's apprenticeship with the master, similar to Keane's under Bryan Robson.

The United captain is currently coaching the United u-15s twice a week. If Keane becomes United manager one day, he will be lucky indeed to find a comparable warrior-general to carry his passionate intensity onto the battlefield. To embody his spirit, as he has Ferguson's.

Nicky Butt and Liam Miller are the only current contenders for Keane's undisputed title. For now, the ring-worn body is still able; the spirit, of course, will always be willing.

Roy Keane is still fighting out of the Red corner—still ready to rumble, still undefeated. ⚽

Keane: The Autobiography by Roy Keane and Eamon Dunphy and Only a game? by Eamon Dunphy are available by order at www.amazon.co.uk or at www.sportspages.co.uk