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PLUS EUROPEAN CHAMPIONS CUP QUARTER-FINAL PREVIEWS

APRIL 2020

RUGBY WORLD[®]

SIX NATIONS



NEW-LOOK FRANCE
In-depth analysis of
the resurgent Bleus

WHAT SCARES LEWIS LUDLAM?

MAKING OF JOSH VAN DER FLIER

PROP STAR ZANDER FAGERSON

AARON WAINWRIGHT'S RISE

BENCH PRESS

Does rugby need
fewer replacements?

STEVE OJOMOH

"I thought I was in a
Jason Bourne movie"

INSIDE Sarah Beckett // Grégory Alldritt
Jamie Heaslip // Stirling County // Luca
Bigi // Mark Bennett // Giada Franco

**TOO MUCH
TOO SOON?**

The perils of being
thrown into elite rugby



=

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WHAT YOU SHOULD BE TALKING ABOUT THIS MONTH...

“Who will win the Six Nations?”

GRAND SLAMS are on the cards in all three Six Nations championships, but can those teams finish the job?

In the Women's Six Nations, it's a resounding yes. England are overwhelming favourites to secure back-to-back Slams having beaten France – their chief rivals – 19-13 on the first weekend. In their subsequent matches against Scotland and Ireland they have scored 80 points without reply, hence the expectation that they will seal another clean sweep with wins over Wales and Italy.

The fact it's such a cakewalk for England after seeing off France highlights not only the poor scheduling of having the decisive fixture first up but the lack of competitiveness in the entire event. The best thing about sport is its uncertainty; the women's championship has sadly become too predictable and vast improvements are needed.

The same cannot be said of the men's tournament. France top the table with three wins from three and are on track for their first Slam since 2010, the new faces and coaches making a quicker

Overcoming hurdles
Leanne Riley during England's 27-0 win against Ireland



PICPA

impact than many expected (although Stuart Barnes called it in *Rugby World!*).

They need to win in Scotland and beat Ireland in Paris to complete the job. It's eminently doable, albeit that France have looked susceptible in the final quarter of matches. Should they slip up, England or Ireland could snatch the title. A game as dramatic as France-Ireland in 2018 would be a fitting climax.

In the U20 Six Nations, Ireland are ruling the roost for the second year running, with a maximum 15 points from their first three games. Their attacking brand is likely to prove too much for Italy in round four, then it's a tough trip to France to round things off.

Three countries all looking to finish with five in the 'W' column. We can't wait to watch it all play out. **RW**



MARTIN HAAG THIS MONTH

“Clubs in the Championship are serious about playing in the Premiership and should be allowed to chase that dream. We shouldn't stifle competition” P31

HAVE YOUR SAY

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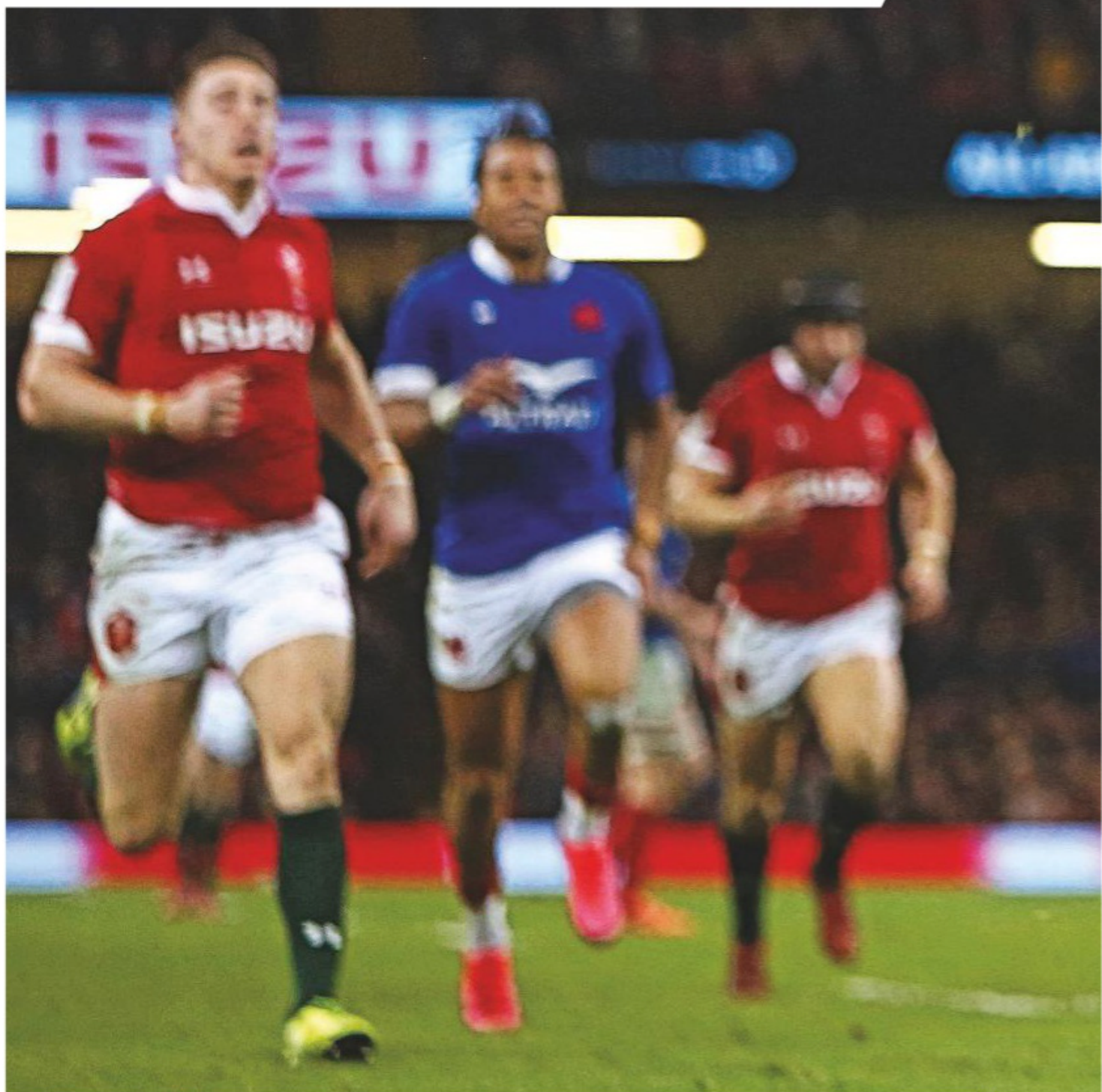
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DON'T MISS THIS MONTH

Should rugby radically change the way it uses substitutions? Columnist Stephen Jones gives his side of the argument on P60

COVER IMAGES & PICS Getty Images & Imphio



LETTER TO READERS

Leading the way
France fly-half Romain
Ntamack is still only 20

“Appreciate the new stars of the Six Nations”



AS THE Six Nations finale grips us, how good is it to see a new cast of talents shining through? Yet at a time when we fear for the funding of Championship clubs and some believe Premiership sides offer the best avenue for kids to make it to the top, it's important to acknowledge the challenges that face any young players when they first make that climb.

In fact, anywhere in the world, no two journeys to the summit are identical. Our special report on the challenges facing young pros highlights the complexities (P64), but stars like Grégory Alldritt (P42), Aaron Wainwright (P38) and Sarah Beckett (P52) show us a few different routes available too. In Scotland many are waiting to see if the Super6 (P72) offers a new avenue into the elite game.

And when you get there, what a show it can be. So as we wrap up the exciting

Six Nations this month, let's show our appreciation for the next generation of stars... And enjoy this latest issue!

Alan Dymock, Features Editor
Email: alan.dymock@ti-media.com
Twitter: @AlanDymock

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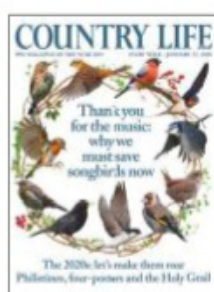
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YOUR RUGBY CALENDAR

The key dates for your diary in March

9th

It's six months before the 2020 Restart Alpine Challenge gets underway in Chamonix, France, but registration is open. If you want to take part in the three-day trek through the Alps to raise money for the RPA's charity, see therpa.co.uk/events for details.



5th

What a CV for Rory Best (left) and you can read his thoughts on all of that in his autobiography, published by Hodder & Stoughton – it's out this Thursday (£20).

His Test career spanned 14 years and 124 caps. He played in four World Cups and on two Lions tours. He was involved in two Grand Slams and twice led Ireland to wins over New Zealand.

MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN
24	25	26	27	28	29	1
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31st NEW ISSUE OUT	1	2	3	4	5

7th

There's always an edge to England v Wales fixtures (below) and this year spectators heading to Twickenham for the men's match can enjoy double the action by going to the Stoop en route for the women's fixture. Or watch the games unfold from your sofa on Sky Sports and the BBC.



PICS Getty Images & Inpho

13th

The night before Wales and Scotland battle it out for the Doddie Weir Cup (above) at the Principality Stadium, there's a fund-raising dinner at Cardiff Arms Park for the My Name's Doddie Foundation. It's £850 for a table of ten – see myname5doddie.co.uk



28th

Harlequins (left) have eight players in England's Six Nations squad and Loughborough six, so there'll be plenty of international quality on show when they meet at the Stoop in the Premier 15s. Tickets are £10 – see tickets.quins.co.uk

THE DIRECTORY

Here's your comprehensive fixtures guide for the climax of the Six Nations and beyond

FRI 28 FEB

Gallagher Premiership

Gloucester v Sale (7.45pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Guinness Pro14

Edinburgh v Cardiff Blues (7.35)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Leinster v Glasgow (7.35pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Super Rugby

Highlanders v Rebels (6.05am)

Waratahs v Lions (8.15am)

TV Both live on Sky Sports

Greene King IPA Championship

Coventry v Ealing Trailfinders

Hartpury v Amptill

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Garryowen v Young Munster

FOSROC Super 6

Stirling County v Boroughmuir

WEEKEND 29 FEB-1 MAR

World Sevens Series

(Men, Los Angeles)

SAT 29 FEB

Gallagher Premiership

Harlequins v Exeter (3pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Leicester v Worcester (3pm)

Northampton v Saracens (3pm)

Guinness Pro14

Zebre v Ospreys (1pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Benetton v Ulster (3pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Munster v Scarlets (5pm)

TV Live Premier Sports/eir/TG4

Dragons v Cheetahs (5.15pm)

TV Live Premier Sports/eir/S4C

Super Rugby

Hurricanes v Sunwolves (3.45am)

Reds v Sharks (8.15am)

Stormers v Blues (1.05pm)

Bulls v Jaguares (3.15pm)

TV All live on Sky Sports

Top 14

Agen v Clermont Auvergne

Bayonne v Toulouse

Brive v Lyon

Pau v Montpellier

Racing 92 v La Rochelle

Greene King IPA Championship

Bedford v Doncaster

Jersey v Newcastle

Indigo Group Premiership

Cardiff v Bridgend

Carmarthen Quins v Ebbw Vale

Llandovery v Merthyr

Llanelli v Aberavon

Pontypridd v Newport

Swansea v RGC 1404

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Dublin University v Cork Con

Lansdowne v Ballynahinch

UCC v Terenure College

UCD v Clontarf

FOSROC Super 6

Watsonians v Southern Knights

Tennent's Premiership

Currie v Jed-Forest

Edinburgh Accies v Selkirk

GHA v Musselburgh

Hawick v Aberdeen Grammar

Marr v Glasgow Hawks

SUN 1 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

London Irish v Wasps (2.30pm)

Bath v Bristol (3pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Guinness Pro14

Southern Kings v Connacht (1pm)

TV Live in Premier Sports/eir

Top 14

Bordeaux-Bègles v Castres

Toulon v Stade Français

Greene King IPA Championship

Cornish Pirates v Nottingham

Yorkshire Carnegie v Lon Scottish

FOSROC Super 6

Heriot's v Ayrshire Bulls

FRI 6 MAR

U20 Six Nations

Ireland v Italy

(7.15pm, Irish Independent Park)

England v Wales (7.45, Kingsholm)

TV Live on Sky Sports

Scotland v France (8, Netherdale)

Gallagher Premiership

Worcester v Northampton (7.45)

TV Live on BT Sport

Sale v London Irish (8pm)

Guinness Pro14

Dragons v Benetton (7.35pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Super Rugby

Crusaders v Reds (6.05am)

Waratahs v Chiefs (8.15am)

TV Both live on Sky Sports

WEEKEND 7-8 MAR

World Sevens Series

(Men, Vancouver)

SAT 7 MAR

Guinness Six Nations

Ireland v Italy

(2.15pm, Aviva Stadium)

TV Live on ITV/Virgin One

England v Wales

(4.45pm, Twickenham)

TV Live ITV/S4C/Virgin One

Women's Six Nations

England v Wales

(12.05pm, Twickenham Stoop)

TV Live on Sky Sports

Scotland v France

(7.45pm, Scotstoun)

TV Live on BBC Alba

Gallagher Premiership

Saracens v Leicester (1pm)

Exeter v Bath (2.30pm)

Wasps v Gloucester (2.30pm)

Super Rugby

Hurricanes v Blues (6.05am)

Rebels v Lions (8.15am)

Sharks v Jaguares (1.05pm)

Bulls v Highlanders (3.15pm)

TV All live on Sky Sports

Indigo Group Premiership

Aberavon v Cardiff

Bridgend v Carmarthen Quins

Ebbw Vale v RGC 1404

Llandovery v Swansea

Merthyr v Pontypridd

Tennent's Premiership

Aberdeen Grammar v Marr

Edinburgh Accs v Glasgow Hawks

Jed-Forest v Hawick

Musselburgh v Currie

Selkirk v GHA

SUN 8 MAR

Guinness Six Nations

Scotland v France

(3pm, BT Murrayfield)

TV Live on BBC/Virgin One

Women's Six Nations

Ireland v Italy

(1pm, Energia Park)

TV Live on RTÉ

Gallagher Premiership

Bristol v Harlequins (1pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby

Sunwolves v Brumbies (3.15am)

TV Live on Sky Sports

FRI 13 MAR

U20 Six Nations

Wales v Scotland (7.35, Parc Eirias)

France v Ireland

(8pm, Stade Aime Giral)

Super Rugby

Chiefs v Hurricanes (6.05am)

TV Live on Sky Sports

Greene King IPA Championship

Newcastle v Bedford

Indigo Group Premiership

Cardiff v RGC 1404

Newport v Llanelli

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Dublin University v Lansdowne

SAT 14 MAR

Guinness Six Nations

Wales v Scotland

(2.15pm, Principality Stadium)

TV Live on BBC/S4C/Virgin One

Italy v England

(4.45pm, Stadio Olimpico)

TV Live on ITV/Virgin One

France v Ireland

(8pm, Stade de France)

TV Live on BBC/Virgin One

Super Rugby

Sunwolves v Crusaders (3.45am)

Blues v Lions (6.05am)

Reds v Bulls (8.15am)

Sharks v Stormers (1.05pm)

Jaguares v Highlanders (11pm)

TV All live on Sky Sports

Greene King IPA Championship

Amptill v Cornish Pirates

Doncaster v Coventry

Ealing v Yorkshire Carnegie

London Scottish v Hartpury

Nottingham v Jersey

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Ballynahinch v Garryowen

Clontarf v UCC

Cork Con v Terenure College

Young Munster v UCD

Tennent's Premiership

Edinburgh Accies v Currie

Marr v Hawick

SUN 15 MAR

Women's Six Nations

Wales v Scotland

(1.10pm, Cardiff Arms Park)

TV Live on BBC Wales

France v Ireland

(1.30pm, Le Stadium, Lille)

TV Live on RTÉ

Italy v England

(1.30pm, Stadio Plebiscito)

TV Live on Sky Sports

U20 Six Nations

Italy v England

(4.30pm, Payanini Rugby Center)

Premiership Rugby Cup Final

Sale v Harlequins (3pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby

Brumbies v Waratahs (5.05am)

TV Live on Sky Sports

FRI 20 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

Bristol v Saracens (7.45pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Guinness Pro14

Connacht v Scarlets (7.35pm)

TV Live Premier Sports/S4C/TG4

Ulster v Dragons (7.35pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Super Rugby

Crusaders v Hurricanes (6.05am)



14th

CELTIC CONTEST

Super Saturday kicks off with Wales v Scotland and Lions team-mates Alun Wyn Jones v Stuart Hogg – watch it live on the BBC



28th

EARN SPURS

London rivals Saracens and Harlequins will do battle on new territory at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium

Rebels v Sunwolves (8.15am)

TV Both live on Sky Sports

Indigo Group Premiership

Cardiff v Newport

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Terenure College v Clontarf

SAT 21 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

Bath v London Irish (3pm)

Exeter v Leicester (3pm)

Northampton v Wasps (3pm)

Worcester v Gloucester (3pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Guinness Pro14

Southern Kings v Edinburgh (1pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Cardiff Blues v Zebre (3pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Cheetahs v Leinster (3pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Ospreys v Glasgow (5.15pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Benetton v Munster (5.15pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Super Rugby

Highlanders v Lions (3.45am)

Blues v Brumbies (6.35am)

Waratahs v Bulls (8.45am)

Sharks v Chiefs (1.05pm)

Jaguars v Stormers (11pm)

TV All live on Sky Sports

Top 14

Agen v Pau

Castres v Bayonne

Clermont v Toulon

La Rochelle v Bordeaux-Bègles

Montpellier v Racing 92

Stade Français v Brive

Toulouse v Lyon

Tyrrells Premier 15s

Bristol v Harlequins (noon)

Saracens v Waterloo (1.30pm)

DMP Sharks v Richmond (5pm)

Loughborough v Wasps (5pm)

Worcester v Glos-Hartpury (5.30)

Greene King IPA Championship

Bedford v Nottingham

Coventry v Newcastle

Ealing Trailfinders v Doncaster

Jersey v Amptill

Indigo Group Premiership

Carmarthen Quins v Aberavon

Llanelli v Merthyr

Pontypridd v Llandoverly

RGC 1404 v Bridgend

Swansea v Ebbw Vale

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Garryowen v Dublin University

Lansdowne v Cork Constitution

UCC v Young Munster

UCD v Ballynahinch

SUN 22 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

Harlequins v Sale (3pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Greene King IPA Championship

Cornish Pirates v London Scottish

Yorkshire Carnegie v Hartpury

THU 26 MAR

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Dublin University v UCD

FRI 27 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

Leicester v Bath (7.45pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Guinness Pro14

Southern Kings v Leinster (5.15)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Glasgow v Ulster (7.35pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Munster v Benetton (7.35pm)

TV Live Premier Sports/eir/TG4

Super Rugby

Hurricanes v Bulls (6.05am)

Reds v Brumbies (8.15pm)

TV Both live on Sky Sports

Greene King IPA Championship

Hartpury v Cornish Pirates

Nottingham v Coventry

SAT 28 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

London Irish v Northampton (3)

Saracens v Harlequins

(3pm, Tottenham Stadium)

TV Live on BT Sport

Wasps v Worcester (3pm)

Gloucester v Bristol (5.30pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Guinness Pro14

Scarlets v Dragons (3pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Cheetahs v Edinburgh (3pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Cardiff Blues v Ospreys (5.15pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports

Zebre v Connacht (5.15pm)

TV Live on Premier Sports/eir

Super Rugby

Highlanders v Crusaders (6.05)

Waratahs v Sunwolves (8.15am)

Lions v Chiefs (1.05pm)

Stormers v Rebels (3.15pm)

TV All live on Sky Sports

Top 14

Bayonne v Racing 92

Bordeaux-Bègles v Montpellier

Brive v La Rochelle

Lyon v Clermont Auvergne

Stade Français v Castres

Toulon v Pau

Toulouse v Agen

Tyrrells Premier 15s

Worcester v DMP Sharks (2pm)

Glos-Hartpury v Saracens (2.30)

Harlequins v Loughborough (3)

Richmond v Bristol (5pm)

Wasps v Waterloo (5.15pm)

Greene King IPA Championship

Amptill v Bedford

Doncaster v Yorkshire Carnegie

London Scottish v Jersey

Newcastle v Ealing Trailfinders

Indigo Group Premiership

Bridgend v Ebbw Vale

Llandoverly v Llanelli

Pontypridd v Swansea

Energia All-Ireland League 1A

Ballynahinch v UCC

Cork Constitution v Clontarf

Lansdowne v Garryowen

Young Munster v Terenure Coll

SUN 29 MAR

Gallagher Premiership

Sale v Exeter (3pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

FRI 3 APR

Challenge Cup Quarter-final

Toulon v Scarlets (8pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby

Crusaders v Blues (7.05am)

TV Live on Sky Sports

SAT 4 APR

Champions Cup Quarter-finals

Clermont v Racing 92 (3.15pm)

Exeter v Northampton (3.15pm)

Leinster v Saracens (5.45pm)

TV All live on BT Sport

Challenge Cup Quarter-finals

Leicester v Castres (12.45pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Bordeaux v Edinburgh (8.15pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby

Chiefs v Bulls (4.45am)

Brumbies v Hurricanes (9.15am)

Stormers v Waratahs (2.05pm)

Lions v Sharks (4.15pm)

Jaguars v Rebels (midnight)

TV Live on Sky Sports

Tyrrells Premier 15s

Bristol v Worcester (noon)

Waterloo v Harlequins (2pm)

DMP Sharks v Glos-Hartpury (5)

Loughborough v Richmond (5pm)

Saracens v Wasps (tbc)

Greene King IPA Championship

Bedford v London Scottish

Coventry v Amptill

Doncaster v Newcastle

Ealing Trailfinders v Nottingham

Jersey v Hartpury

Indigo Group Premiership

Cardiff v Llandoverly

Carmarthen Quins v Merthyr

Ebbw Vale v Aberavon

Llanelli v Pontypridd

RGC 1404 v Newport

Swansea v Bridgend

SUN 5 APR

Champions Cup Quarter-final

Toulouse v Ulster (3.15pm)

TV Live on BT/Channel 4/Virgin

Challenge Cup Quarter-final

Bristol v Dragons (12.45pm)

TV Live on BT Sport

Super Rugby

Sunwolves v Reds (6.15am)

TV Live on Sky Sports

Greene King IPA Championship

Yorkshire Carnegie v Corn Pirates

● All kick-offs UK & Ireland.
Fixtures subject to change;
check before travelling. RW

DOWNTIME WITH... JAMIE HEASLIP

“I prefer a small slice of a big pie to a big slice of a small pie”

The former Leinster and Ireland No 8 on start-ups, cigarette smoke and boa constrictors

Interview **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

HOW ARE you finding doing commentary with the BBC? I’ve enjoyed it. I much prefer it to ‘punditry’ – you say what you see.

With punditry you need a beginning, middle and an end, and you have to have an opinion. It has challenged me to remain a student of the game. In real time you have to say what’s going on, so that it’s interesting and gives insight.

So I’ve recently sat down with Stuart Lancaster – I met him two weeks ago for dinner – and talked with Joe Schmidt.

What’s the worst job you’ve ever had? One of my first jobs was collecting glasses at a local nightclub when I was 15. It was before the smoking ban came in, so you would come home stinking of cigarettes. I’m laughing about it now because we’ve got a couple of pubs, so it’s kind of come full circle.

Funniest thing you’ve seen on a pitch?

Probably listening to Nigel Owens with one of his one-liners. Sometimes rugby players take themselves too seriously.

How about funniest team-mate? Paul O’Donohue or Fergus McFadden. They are like a jack-in-the-box. They’re both from Leinster but on an international level it would be Andy Powell.

There’s very few clean pranks I can tell you about. What’s that old saying? What goes on tour stays on tour.

Got any phobias? For the life of me I can’t understand why anyone would put a boa constrictor around their neck. It’s designed to strangle you! Why do it?

Any guilty pleasures? *Love Island* is a guilty pleasure, though I’ve not been into it this season. And I suppose

I’m more into my daughter’s cartoons than I thought I would be. At the moment it’s *PAW Patrol*.

What winds you up? People not being loyal. And people saying things on social media they’d never say to your face.

Who would be your dream dinner party guests? I’d have the Scottish comedian Billy Connolly. He’s someone I’ve loved my entire life. It could be a rugby player, but I’d say Connolly, Muhammad Ali and

I’d like to talk to Nikola Tesla (inventor/electrical engineer).

Which team-mate would you like to be and why? I

don’t think I’d be any other forward because the further forward you go, the larger they get. But with the backs, the further back you get, the vainer they are too! So I’ve not played with him but

FACT FILE

Age 36 (15 Dec 1983)

Born Tiberias, Israel

Position No 8

Club Leinster

Ireland caps 95 (13T)

Lions caps Five

Twitter @jamieheaslip

**WHAT’S
ON YOUR
PHONE**



**Last person
you called**

Simon Shaw, to talk about the England game



**Last person
you texted**

Louise Gwilliam, a BBC 5 Live producer



**Last picture
you took**

Of my daughter eating toast



**Favourite
social media**

Instagram because I like the pictures



Tip of the cap
Heaslip at the Aviva



Sergio Parisse is pretty cool. He speaks Italian, French, English and I think Spanish. He's a pretty good-looking fella, he's still playing despite being my age and he's just a slick f*****!

What's the silliest purchase you've made? Plenty of things! In my twenties I got all these gadgets I shouldn't have. I was really into *T3* magazine for years.

“I’m more into my daughter’s cartoons than I thought I’d be. At the moment it’s *PAW Patrol*”

If you could have one superpower, what would it be? I would be Wolverine. It's the not aging and also the healing. His whole thing is that he's continually rejuvenating – it's why he could have the adamantium skeleton. Not being able to go through a metal detector is first-world problems. And they (the X-Men) had a private jet anyway.

Any hidden talents? Not really but I'd say I'm a good person with dogs.

Who would you like to be stuck in a lift with and why? I'd like to be with

someone like that guy from *The Office*, David Brent. That'd be time well spent.

What about work away from rugby?

I have invested in a couple of firms, one of which was sold to Google. I actually worked for Google for 13 months. Right now I spend most of my time working with (FinTech company) Flender – but it depends on the day of the week.

So have you always been into tech?

I am very into it. I've invested in a few, like Kitman Labs. I like companies that come in and ask “why?” when things can be done differently. What can we do better? I like working with disruptors.

I was one of the first on social media, because I like breaking the chain of traditional media and going straight to the consumer. I've been on it for a long time. I remember being criticised for that and now everyone is on it.

So what kind of investor are you? I'm definitely more of an angel investor. I don't follow the money in. I prefer to have a small slice of a big pie than a big slice of a small pie. 



Last song you played

It was the *Buena Vista Social Club* album



Last app downloaded

Calendly, for arranging meetings



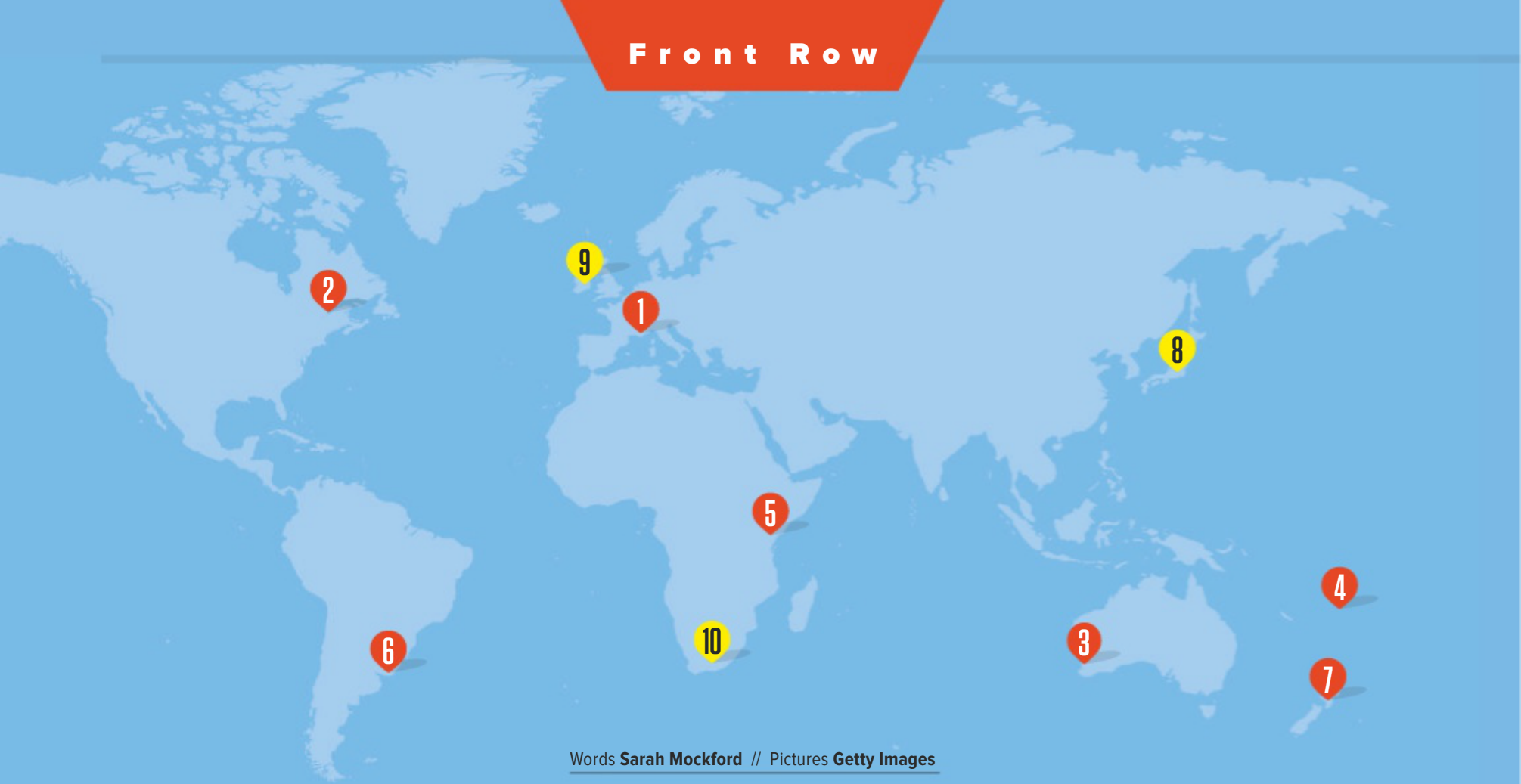
Guilty pleasure app

I've not got one – probably checking emails



Favourite WhatsApp group

Scaic, which is all my mates from Naas



Words **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images**

AROUND THE WORLD IN TEN STORIES

A round-up of news from all points of the globe

1

France

Former England captain Lewis Moody is embarking on a Mega-Tri challenge in France. The fund-raiser

takes place from 2-5 May and involves kayaking the Lake of Sainte-Croix, trekking the Martel Trail and a 100km bike ride around Verdon Gorge (below).

The aim is to raise more than £50,000 for the Lewis Moody Foundation, which helps fund research into brain tumours and support the families of those diagnosed with life-threatening illnesses.

To donate to the charity or for more info, see thelewismoodfoundation.org



2

Canada

Before the Americas Rugby Championship kicks off in August,

Canada will play two matches in July: French Barbarians (Montreal, 4 July) and Italy (Halifax, 11 July).

Canada lost all three of their matches at last year's World Cup and coach Kingsley Jones said: "These fixtures are an opportunity for players coming up through the U20s and Pacific Pride, as well as those who may have missed out on the World Cup, to come into the fold and gain crucial experience against some top competition."

3

Australia

This year's Australia v South Africa fixture in the Rugby Championship will be played at Optus

Stadium in Perth on 29 August. The Western Australia venue will also host a Bledisloe Cup Test next year.

It was in Perth that the Wallabies thrashed New Zealand 47-26 in 2019 in front of a record crowd – 61,000-plus – for a sporting event at Optus Stadium (below). Now they will play Tests in the city for the next two years.

Rugby Australia CEO Raelene Castle said: "Rugby fans in Western Australia have much to look forward to. It doesn't get bigger than a clash with the world champions and the Bledisloe Cup."



4

Fiji

Vern Cotter is the new Fiji coach and will take over at the end of Montpellier's Top 14 campaign, with his first Test in charge likely to be against Tonga on 4 July.

The former Scotland coach replaces John McKee and has been tasked with improving the country's performances

ahead of RWC 2023. Cotter says: "I'm looking forward to the opportunity to work with the talent within the national teams and enhance the competitiveness of Fiji on the world stage."

Ex-Fiji captain Simon Raiwalui, the Australia forwards coach at RWC 2019, has been appointed as Fiji's new general manager of high performance.



5

Kenya

Kenya will host the U20 Barthés Trophy – the only junior tournament in Africa – for the next three years. In 2020 it takes place from 19-26 April in Nairobi, and involves Ivory Coast, Kenya, Madagascar, Namibia, Senegal, Tunisia, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

6

Uruguay

The first U20 Americas Rugby Championship will take place at Estadio Charrua in Montevideo on 10-18 June and features Argentina, Canada, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and USA. The opening match between Canada and USA will also act as a play-off to secure qualification for the U20 World Trophy.

7

New Zealand

New Zealand Rugby has launched a video series to challenge gender stereotypes. *Being Men* features rugby players Sir John Kirwan, Nehe Milner-Skudder, Ardie Savea and Anton Lienert-Brown, as well as Kiwi men from other walks of life, talking about mental health.

All Blacks centre Lienert-Brown (right) talks about his own struggles in the films, saying: "I hid my anxiety because I was embarrassed. I thought if I told someone they would think I wasn't normal."

You can watch the videos at headfirst.co.nz/being-men



LAST STOPS

8

Japan

Kotaro Matsushima (above), who scored five tries at the 2019 World Cup, will join Clermont Auvergne in the summer. The Japan wing says: "I want to compete at a high level, for a strong club where I'm needed."

9

Ireland

Sir Bill Beaumont is seeking re-election as World Rugby chairman at May's Council meeting in Dublin. He is standing with FFR president Bernard Laporte (above with Beaumont) as his candidate for vice-chairman.

10

South Africa

Jacques Nienaber (above) has been confirmed as the new Springboks head coach. During their World Cup triumph, the 47-year-old was an assistant to Rassie Erasmus, who is now South Africa's director of rugby.



Get groundings right

Our former elite referee clears up the rulings on some Six Nations touchdowns

T **HERE ARE** a few examples from the Six Nations of why 'grounding' the ball can be tricky. It sounds easy but we must clarify the phrase.

Law 21 describes the in-goal area and what can and cannot take place there.

At its most basic, the ball is grounded in-goal by holding it and touching the ground with it; or pressing it down with a hand or hands, arm or arms, or the front of the player's body from waist to neck.

There are two situations you must correctly ground the ball – scoring a try or touching it down in your own in-goal.

Look at round two. In the Ireland-Wales game, Hadleigh Parkes bursts through and appears to score. The ref appears to allow the try, only for Irish protests and possibly a word from the TMO to cause a rethink. Upon review, it's clear Parkes momentarily loses the ball, there is clear separation with the hand before applying any downward pressure. No try, knock-on, defensive scrum.

In the Calcutta Cup, George Ford puts a grubber into the Scottish 22 where the ball bobbles forever. Stuart Hogg turns to shepherd it and ground it for a 22 drop-out, but just as the ball reaches

the goal-line it sits up. As he attempts to take it over and ground it, he loses it but crucially, because he's facing backwards, the ball isn't knocked on but knocked back. He falls on it, presses down with his torso, satisfying the law (pressure from the waist to neck) before Farrell touches it. Five-metre attacking scrum.

One final point about the grounding. It doesn't have to be on the goal-line or even in-goal. The base of the goal post is good enough – in attack or defence. Even with post protectors, if they were two metres thick and you ground it against the post, that's good enough! **RW**

Dropped ball
Hadleigh Parkes
against Ireland



LONDON IRISH and Leicester shared the title on **Premiership U18 Academy Finals Day**, the teams playing out a 22-22 nail-biter at Sixways.

But according to Corin Palmer, the RFU's head of elite performance and player development, few of those on show will become full-time pros.

"For those who aren't successful, which is the majority, we have strict criteria and plans in place to ensure they remain involved in the game and

SCHOOLS ROUND UP

have proper exit interviews for them," he said. "We manage parents, stakeholders and players themselves, and if necessary their schools, to ensure they aren't spat out of the system."

Wooden Spoon has supported two projects in Worcestershire schools. A £40,000 donation from the charity's regional committee will help fund a sensory room for Dines Green Academy and a running track for St Bartholomew's Primary School, in Stourport.

JARGON BUSTER

Obstruction

When a team-mate blocks off the running line of an opposition defender, so that their own ball-carrier can run unimpeded.



PICS Getty Images & Imphio

PAUL GRAYSON

The former Northampton and England fly-half who scored 400 Test points



“We have to get backchat out of the game. It’s not a good look”

THE SIX Nations is France’s to lose. They finish in Paris and you’d expect them to be there with a 100% record. France are confident and happy and have changed as a team. It’s down to the coaches, Galthié, Edwards, Ibañez, and to a group of juniors who have won world titles and are now making an impact in senior rugby.

In Antoine Dupont and Romain Ntamack, they have half-backs you can see still playing for France in ten years’ time. For me they’re the championship’s standout players.

Against England, Dupont did all the things that everyone tells you aren’t in the game for a scrum-half anymore. He broke from the base, he broke down the blind side, he conducted, he cajoled. He plays within a framework but with the freedom of youth. He’s a hell of a player.

France also have a pack that’s going to grow. Grégory Alldritt is the glue in the back row, he’s genuinely dynamic.

Is this the start of a special France side? I hope so. We’ve waited long enough.

Talking to Dimitri Yachvili, France weren’t bothered about the Japanese World Cup; all their eyes are on 2023.

They’re ahead of the curve in terms of results and development and the things you’d associate, stereotypically, with France in recent years, such as chaotic selections and a fan base that turns on their own team. Their rugby public is very much with this group and it gives them massive strength. And time to develop.



Chirping away
Dan Biggar has a moan against France

Ireland’s Grand Slam hopes vanished without trace at Twickenham. England won their first four lineouts off the top – perfect ball to launch the bulldozer in midfield. That set the tone. I thought Ireland had gone there on a mission but they were out-fought and out-thought.

Should Johnny Sexton be captain? It’s hard to look past him as a senior player.

Form and fitness is an entirely different matter. He and Conor Murray both have credit in the bank. Of the two, Murray is the one most out of form.

Sexton’s hardly played. He was poor against England but it doesn’t take long for players of his quality to recover form.

He and Owen Farrell had a lot to say to Jaco Peyper and across the board everyone’s talking to the referee. Those two and Wales’ Dan Biggar are very demonstrative. For me, if you’ve waving your arms at the ref, as Biggar was doing against France, you are out of order.

We’ve seen with the high-tackle protocols that high tackles have gone out of the game just about. You send a

guy off in a World Cup ‘knockout’ game (England v Argentina) and everyone changes their behaviours.

So if somebody questions a decision – bang, send them back ten metres. That’s what that rule is for. Back ten, next time it’s a yellow card, if it happens again have a red. You’d soon see players taking others away, ‘Come on, suck it up’. We have to get backchat out of the game. It’s not a good look.

Eddie Jones has attracted criticism for his selections but ultimately if your team wins, it’s not a bad selection, is it?

Courtney Lawes can play international rugby as a six, no issues. If Eddie thinks long-term that Tom Curry’s best position is eight, that’s up to him as a coach. After round one, we were looking at the mistakes Curry made and thinking why on earth would you pick him there? He’s been comfortable since but it wasn’t a proper game in Scotland, and against Ireland he didn’t have anything to deal with. Jonathan Joseph was comfortable on the wing but was never tested.

Some of Eddie’s squad selections put him under pressure. He’s probably only got 28 players who he thinks are ready for international rugby; guys like Jacob Umaga and Alex Moon aren’t ready yet.

Finally, a word on Italy, hanging on to a tournament in which they’ve lost 25 on the trot. My solution? Two Five Nations leagues with promotion and relegation between the two. For any team going down, it might only be a year out. **RW**

↑ RISING STARS

Interviews **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images**



1 MARCUS STREET



Age 21 (6 February 1999) Born Exeter Position Prop Club Exeter Chiefs Country England

When did you first start playing? Around U12s at Cullompton. I mainly did it to lose weight. I wasn't the biggest fan for the

first year, but I really enjoyed the last game of the season and carried on with it after that. I also started playing for my school, Queen Elizabeth's in CREDITON.

Have you always been a front-row? I've played a bit at No 8 and sometimes the school threw me into the centres – but

I've generally always been a front-row. I love it there – scrums are the best thing.

What are your strengths?

I enjoy all the contact parts – scrummaging, set-piece, breakdowns. Tackling didn't used to be my strongest point but I've done a lot of work on that, got better and think I've turned it into a strength of mine.

You've progressed quickly – are you a fast learner?

I think so. I ask a lot of questions! When I fully understand something, I'm then able to do it the best I can – that's probably why I ask a lot of questions.

I've got a good amount of experience but there's always more to learn. Scrummaging is the hardest thing to get right and it's hard to practise. You can do passing on your own but scrummaging you need eight versus eight.

What age-grade honours do you have? I played for England U18 and U20.

I was the right age for the U18s but played U20s a year or two early, which helped me at U18s because it gave me confidence. The experience just helps.

It's the same at Chiefs and learning from mentors at the club like Greg Holmes, Alec Hepburn and Ben Moon.

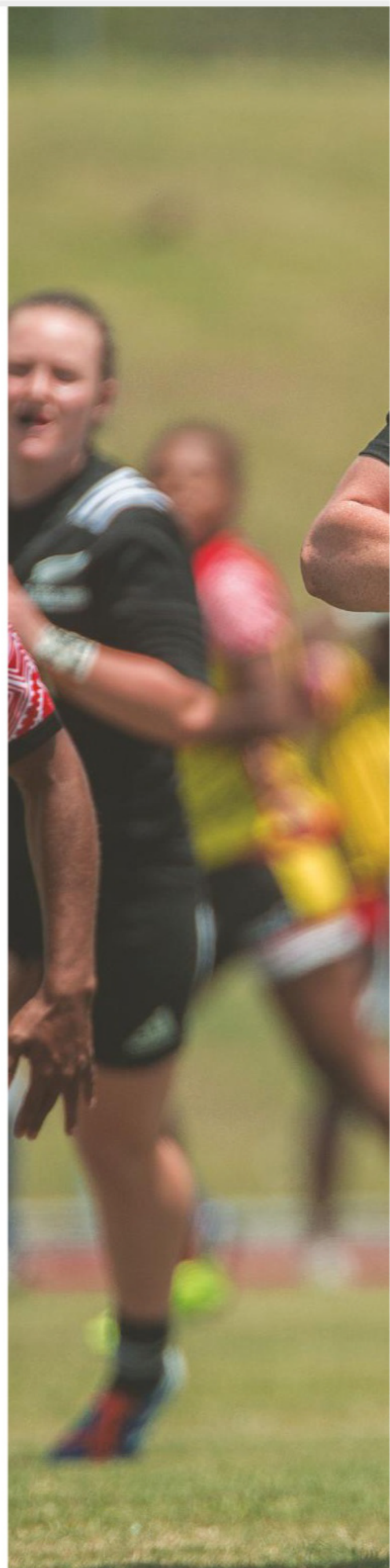
The best advice you've received? At Exeter College we spoke about the 'no talent' battle, how you might not be the most skilled player but if you work harder than other people it's going to show.

What are your goals? This season has been good and the Chiefs have given me opportunities. I've ruptured ligaments in my toe, so I don't know how much more I'll play this season. My biggest goal is to push for a Premiership or European start.

How do you switch off from rugby? I enjoy coaching, although that's still rugby! I've started working with Exeter Uni and have been doing bits with Crediton U14-15. I'd love to go into coaching.

RW VERDICT

Street's talent was obvious from an early age, making Exeter's set-up in his early teens and playing for England U20 at 18. He's already amassed over 30 appearances for the Chiefs and – post-injury – his rise is set to continue.





2 GRACE BROOKER



Age 20 (20 Jun 1999) Born Oxford, NZ Position
Centre/full-back Club Canterbury Country NZ

Are you from a rugby family? I started at four years old at my local club, Oxford. All my family were involved – my older brother, my sister, my dad playing, my mum coaching. As soon as I put my boots on and ran onto the field I loved it. I told my grandma at four years old that I'd be an All Black! My family have always been right behind me.

Did you play any other sports? Pretty much every sport under the sun! I was always outside because I grew up on a farm. Netball was my other main sport but nothing ever trumped rugby.

What positions have you played? I grew up as a flanker but I started women's rugby aged 14 and was very scrawny, so they put me out on the wing. Now it's outside-centre or full-back. I loved always being involved as a seven but I won't go back; I really enjoy the backs.

Who was your childhood rugby hero? Weirdly, Gareth Edwards. I never played half-back but my dad showed me a try he scored (for the Barbarians) and gave me a book about him and I was hooked.

Who's been the biggest influence on your career? Probably my dad, David. He's my biggest supporter and harshest critic. He's helped me get to where I am.

What was it like making your Black Ferns debut last year? It was honestly a dream come true. I can barely explain how much it meant to me. My mum, dad and brother came up to Auckland. My sister was watching from Poland – my cousins live-streamed it for her!

Your goals now? To keep developing, to keep gaining knowledge of the game and to hopefully play more for the Black

Ferns. The World Cup is definitely a goal but I'm taking it one year at a time.

What do you do away from rugby? I'm studying to be a PE teacher at Canterbury University. Hopefully I can go down the teaching and farming route after rugby.

I also do a bit of surfing and play golf. I'm not very good but it's quite relaxing.

RW VERDICT

Brooker is highly rated by the New Zealand management team, captaining the Development XV and making her Test debut last year. She's part of the Black Ferns contracted squad and should be involved in the 2021 World Cup.

Take the points or kick to the corner?

TIM HAYWARD **ALAN PEAREY**

DO YOU remember England losing to the All Blacks by one point in November 2018 after choosing to kick a penalty to the corner rather than at the posts? I do.

Games can be won and lost by the finest of margins, so why is rugby apparently not applying the same philosophy of maximising marginal gains that we hear so much about in other sports? These days sports at the highest level seek to optimise every aspect, to nudge every variable in their favour. We now see nutritionists and psychologists, tight-fitting shirts and GPS trackers. So why aren't the statisticians in rugby advising players on such a crucial issue which can so clearly make the difference between winning and losing?

Over the past three years Owen Farrell's success rate with the boot has been 78% – an average of 2.3 points per penalty kick. The probability of a kick to the corner leading to a converted try would have to be greater than one in three to be seen as a better option statistically.

Not long ago, Ken Quarrie, chief scientist for NZ Rugby, took a look at Super Rugby. He calculated that teams opting for a lineout within 15m of the opposition try-line were scoring only 27% of the time – not matching the 'one in three' target.

So what more evidence do you need? It's a no-brainer! There has to be an overwhelming and astonishingly good reason not to go for goal from a penalty.

England rugby
supporter

Rugby World
writer

RUGBY IS a game of guts, emotion and instinct, not cold calculation. Scientists can do their maths but what about the context and momentum of a game?

Consider a team under the cosh against Exeter or Leinster. Seeing them kick to the corner must fill them with dread as they contemplate the physical and psychological pressure set to follow in defending their line.

The Chiefs won't necessarily score directly from a lineout maul but use it as a bridgehead to launch phase after phase of forward drives in the 22. Often they don't even bother with the lineout but merely tap and run a penalty. Ask a team whether they'd rather face that or see the opposition kick for goal and most would leap at the chance to take the three-point hit and get back upfield to try to exert pressure of their own.

It's not just that. Kicking to the corner whips up the

crowd, generating noise and a buzz that gets players' adrenalin pumping. Michael Leitch fed off that when deciding not to kick at goal against South Africa at RWC 2015 and his reward was the greatest upset in sports history.

In the same event, Chris Robshaw's decision to go for the corner against Wales didn't pay off, but he was staying true to principles. Be honest, England fans, you wanted to beat Wales that day, not just draw against them. People are essentially greedy and Robshaw went for broke. Rugby is all the richer for such boldness.



Attacking mindset
Exeter's Joe Simmonds
kicks to the corner

**WHAT DO
YOU THINK?**

Send your views to
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EALING TRAILFINDERS & BRUNEL UNIVERSITY RUGBY SPORTS SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAMME



5

5 AGE GRADE
INTERNATIONALS

TOP
10

UK UNIVERSITIES FOR
BOOSTING GRADUATE
SALARIES

2

2 SCHOLARS
HAVE MADE FIRST
TEAM DEBUTS

18

18 PROFESSIONAL
STAFF SUPPORTING
PROGRAMME



"WE WANT PLAYERS TO COME THROUGH THIS SYSTEM, LEAVE UNIVERSITY WITH A DEGREE AND A PROFESSIONAL CONTRACT AT EALING TRAILFINDERS." – **DIRECTOR OF RUGBY, BEN WARD**

WHAT GOES ON TOUR...

[Goes in Rugby World]

A **S PART** of the research for a big feature on the global migration of players, I headed to Perpignan with the Pacific Rugby Players Welfare group (PRPW), writes *RW's Alan Dymock*.

I flew over for the trip with Dan Leo, Mike Umaga and Junior Paramore – all well-known figures in the game and the perfect people to introduce me to members of their community.

They were set to do a mini-tour of France to meet groups of players, hear out some concerns, make them aware of what PRPW could offer and socialise together. The idea was for me to meet some of these players based in France, to listen to their stories and take any advice they had. To top it all off, there was going to be a big feed, with a pig cooked in the traditional Samoan way.

Leo had played for Perpignan and knew the area well. So after our flight, the lock directed us to a hire car and we loaded our bags into the boot before squeezing some ample frames into the vehicle. The conversation was on its way as we pulled out of the car park and headed for the city.

It wasn't until we had been on the road for a few minutes that another car appeared directly in front of us. We were on the wrong side of the road, speeding towards a head-on collision...

Leo rapidly pulled us into the correct lane. It was then that it dawned on me – with 79 Samoa caps, 18 World Cup appearances and umpteen elite club games between the three others in the car, if anything terrible did happen, I was getting absolutely no mention in the news...

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Words **Alan Pearey** // Photos **Getty Images, PA & Andrew Sydenham**

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO... SUFFER A STROKE

Every day is a blessing for former Bath and England star Steve Ojomoh

HOW DO you cope with a catastrophe, an event that might easily have taken your life? After Michael Lynagh suffered a stroke in 2012, he found discussing it therapeutic, even writing a book about it. Steve Ojomoh, the former Bath and England No 8, prefers to block it out.

"I package it up, put it in a box, whoosh," he says. "Just like I did with my mum's funeral. Some day it catches up. I haven't been able to go in and dissect

it." He has a copy of Lynagh's book on his shelf but has never read it.

I've come to one of the two children's nurseries he owns, Little Willows in Bath, expressly to ask about the stroke he had in October 2018. If he's reluctant to do the interview, he conceals it well. His account is detailed and starts with a sleepless night worrying about a business lunch with his nursery manager that he expected to be stressful.

"In the meeting we were discussing pay increase for staff. As we were

talking there was a noise in my head, like the release of a gas. And then the headaches started within five minutes. Bad headaches. It must have been bad for me to hand the car keys to her."

As planned, they drove to look at a property in Trowbridge, then Ojomoh went to pick up his daughter, Ava, from school. He took her to a friend's house where she played and he lay on the sofa with his pounding headache. "It was boom, boom, I just couldn't shake it. But at no stage did I think it was serious.



Child's play

Steve Ojomoh at his children's nursery in Bath

“Driving home I took a wrong turning two or three times – this is a journey I do every day. We got home, it was 8, 9 o’clock, I had a hot shower because I was trying to find anything to ease the pain. I put ice cubes on my head to see if that would work.”

He says he has a phobia of doctors’ surgeries but knew by 3am that he needed professional help. “My wife (Lisa) was away and I thought if I go to A&E now, how will Ava get to school? So I waited until the morning. My son (Max) had just started driving so at 6 o’clock I crawled up the stairs and said, ‘You’ve got to take me to hospital.’”

His blood pressure was sky-high and from A&E in Bath he was rushed, drowsy, to Bristol’s Southmead Hospital. “The next thing I know is I’m being pinched and they’re asking me all sorts of questions, what’s your name? What’s your age? I was disorientated. I thought I was in a Jason Bourne movie. My wife tells a very good story about that.”

Later, Lisa appears and when he asks her to recount it, she becomes emotional and walks away. Then she returns and explains how her husband began ripping out all these tubes in front of a tiny nurse who was powerless to stop him. Ojomoh can chuckle about it now but it was no laughing matter at the time.

He continues: “When they said I’d had a stroke, my first thought was, ‘That’s what old people get’. It didn’t make sense.” He was 48.

Things are clearer now. He’s learnt that black Africans – he is Nigeria-born – have a propensity for higher blood pressure, that his mother suffered from hypertension and had a stroke a few years before she died in May 2018. He knows he was overindulging, and letting work get on top of him.

“A combination of things led to the stroke. On the exercise front, that had stopped compared to what I used to do, but I was still eating a lot of carbs. So that’s one thing.

“But you look at the run-up to October 2018; I had just buried my mother. An African funeral is like no other, a huge expense, dealing with



Relaxed
Life is more balanced now



Test stage
His England debut against Ireland in 1994

that, being her only son the responsibility falls on me. I did all that and continued with life without having grieved. All that built up without me knowing it.

“Life was helter-skelter. When you’ve got that pressure cooker, everything’s cumulative. Over the years business had a stress, the funeral, the lifestyle, coming to work, going home, drinking.”

Today he goes to the gym once in a while and does his daily 10,000 steps. He takes tablets for his blood pressure, eats sensibly and drinks only “now and again”. Work-wise, he keeps a handle on the admin and finance but delegates more responsibility. “I try to step back and avoid stress.”

Perhaps there is more caution and abstinence in his life but there is also more

balance. He loves following the career of Max, part of Bath’s senior academy and an England U20 centre. Before each match, Ojomoh texts him three things to work on and they review them afterwards, though “one thing I’m proud about is that he’s able to self-analyse”.

He’s amused by the modern mindset. He went to Grenoble to watch Max help beat France at the start of the U20 Six Nations. “After the game I texted him; you’re 20, you’ve just beaten the double world champions in their own backyard, let’s paint the town red! I texted him at 11 o’clock and he said they’re all back in the hotel in bed. Amazing! I wasn’t a great trainer, thankfully he’s not got that aspect of my weakness. He loves training.”

We chat about the curious omission of Alex Dombrandt from England’s squad and about how a shortage of full-time

childcare services, when Max was a baby, led Ojomoh to open Little Willows in 2010, followed by another nursery in Corsham in 2017.

It was a bumpy road but it worked out in the end, so much so that it’s only 2pm and he’s off shopping with Lisa to buy stuff for Ava’s 12th birthday. Sure beats being stuck at a desk.

“I went from being here five or six days a week to two half-days all of last year whilst recovering. So I spent a lot of time by myself and with that you reflect a lot.

“The word grateful comes to mind. I look at each day as a blessing.” **FW**

DID YOU KNOW?

Steve Ojomoh was part of the great Bath side of the 1990s and won 12 England caps. His fondest memory was his second cap, an 18-14 win in Paris. “That feeling of elation will stay with me. I played well against seasoned campaigners like Abdel Benazzi and Philippe Benetton and celebrated in some of the best clubs on the Champs-Élysées. Ian Botham was there!”



Future star? Son Max is flourishing at Bath

“Everything is cumulative. Over the years business had a stress, the funeral, lifestyle, drinking”

THE RUGBY RANT

Deciding pools for the next World Cup so early winds up reader Adam McKenzie



THE DRAW for the 2023 World Cup takes place after this year's November Tests. Not since RWC 2003 has the draw been conducted closer in time to the actual tournament it's for. And there seems to be no reasonable thought behind this.

We're back to a 30-plus month wait between the draw in December and kick-off in the autumn of 2023, and no doubt we'll be told it's down to planning and preparation – something no other worldwide sports organisation manages to struggle with over a shorter period.

World Rugby would like us to believe that arranging a few hotels in France is comparable to trekking through the Andes without a compass, even though UEFA managed to do it for a 24-team, four-week European Championship in the same country (France) back in 2016.

On the subject of planning and preparation,

after the typhoon debacle in Japan, is there any faith these

extra months are actually being utilised correctly? Or will crunch decisions be made 24 hours out, much like they were when Hagibis struck in 2019?

More importantly, it's a complete hypocrisy on the importance of player welfare that's trotted out by the global governing body on a regular basis.

Teams are unable to 'rest and recover' in the year following a World Cup, in a season that's already condensed because of the sport's showpiece. A titanic battle to make it into the top-four



Years in the making
Kids celebrate France's successful World Cup bid

PICS Getty Images

“It's something no other worldwide sports organisation manages to struggle with”

seeding bracket is now on, starting with the current Six Nations. Everyone is keen to avoid the 'Pool of Death', something akin to the one that scuppered England back in 2015.

Would Wales have planned a Test series in New Zealand this summer if they had known? Will England pick up enough World Ranking points by only playing Japan in July? What hope for the poor Tier Two teams who are having to make do playing against franchises and A teams this summer?

Japan put their victory over Ireland a few months back down to the fact they had over two years to plan for it. On the other hand, Ireland spent those two years focusing on

becoming number one in the world, not considering the Brave Blossoms until they'd dealt with Scotland in their World Cup opener. But do we really want the romance of rugby to be stifled by allowing so much time for analysis?

And finally, does anyone actually need three years to snap up tickets? **RW**

HAVE YOUR SAY

What gets your goat? Let us know on Facebook or tweet @Rugbyworldmag

SHORT PASS

LIONS WARM-UP

British & Irish Lions coach Warren Gatland has revealed that in 2021 the side plan to play a warm-up game in the UK before going to South Africa. They are in talks with the

Barbarians, Japan and New Zealand Maori.

INCOMING QUIN

Harlequins have signed South African prop Wilco Louw (right) for next season.

PUT BACK

The Hong Kong and Singapore



legs of the HSBC World Sevens Series are postponed until October due to the coronavirus outbreak.

NEW CHIEF

Scottish No 9 Sam Hidalgo-Clyne will join Exeter next season, replacing the departing Nic White. He joins Chiefs from Lyon.

DEAL OVER

Insurance giant Allianz will end its sponsorship of Saracens' team and stadium at the end of this season.

END OF AN ERA

Wasps DoR Dai Young has left the club after an nine-year stint that included a Premiership final. Lee Blackett is interim head coach.

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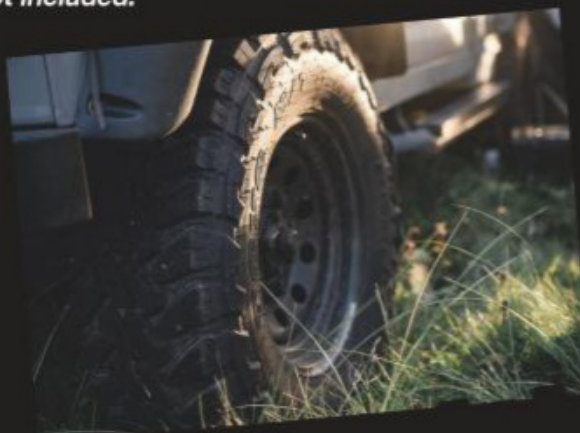
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TOYO TYRES

INSIDE THE MIND OF...

LUCA BIGI

Interview **Alan Pearey** // Picture **Inpho**

Italy's hooker and captain talks pasta, paradise and Sergio Parisse

"I didn't play rugby until 14. Before then I played football. Some schoolmates played rugby and took me to **Reggio** (club). I played a bit of loosehead in my youth."

"I'm not from a rugby family. My dad, Giuseppe, was a cyclist. He has a footwear business, selling **men's shoes**, and the first job I ever had was serving customers in the shoe shops in Reggio where I live."

"My favourite meal? As an Italian that's a big question! I'm from Emilia, the principal region of Italy for **quality food**. Maybe cappelletti, which is like a tortellini. Or tortelli with herbs. Our region is famous for that."

"The best place I've been to is **Fiji**, on a summer tour. It's paradise. I don't have much time to take holidays but when I do I like to relax, so I love the sea, the mountains. In the summer when I think of holidays I think of Pacific islands."

"The lineout is crucial for a hooker. In last year's Six Nations, Leonardo (Ghiraldini) and I both had 95% throw success. It's important to get the **basics** right."

"I played for **Richmond** in my late teens, 2010-11. A team-mate in Reggio knew an Italian guy there, which led to me having a trial and spending seven months at the club. It was an amazing experience. I was living in Kew Gardens, playing league matches in National Two and working for Richmond as a groundsman."

"Being named **Italy captain** was my best moment in rugby. That and playing in the World Cup. It's a privilege to lead my country and to follow extraordinary athletes like Parisse, Ghiraldini, Castrogiovanni, Geldenhuys and Troncon."

"It's been incredible to play with **Sergio Parisse**. I was a water boy when Italy played in Reggio against Pacific Islanders (2008), when Sergio was captain. He's an icon of rugby and deserves to finish his wonderful career in front of our fans."

"The best present I've ever had is **my son, Eduardo**. He's two. I'm engaged to Martina and she was the first person I told after I discovered I was Italy captain."

"We all play to win. But we (Italy) want to play without pressure and have fun. It is a new generation, new young players, a **new philosophy** of playing. We are focused on ourselves and want to be the best that we can be."

"I was in Georgia with Emerging Italy and there was so much rain that the river overflowed and **flooded the zoo**. Somehow the lock of the zoo opened and there were animals – a bear, a lion – in the street. It was on TV in the morning, they said don't leave the hotel! It was a big problem."

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**“He’s a real
guiding light.
Brok pushes the
whole group in the
right direction”**



Brok Harris

The South African front-rower is the rock of the Dragons scrum – and boss of the BBQ

Words **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images & Inpho**

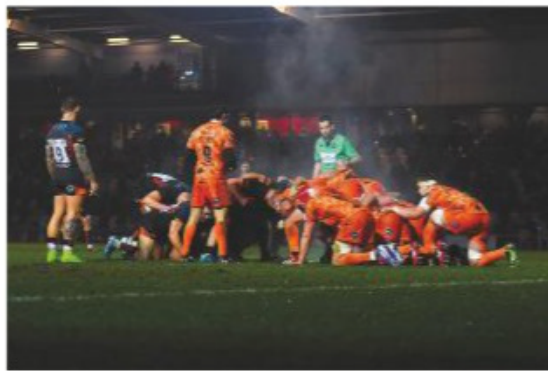
MORE THAN 13,000km stretch between Brok Harris's birthplace of Roodepoort in South Africa and Newport, where he now plays his rugby with the Dragons. His journey from tighthead to loosehead has been much shorter in distance but far more significant in terms of his career.

Harris arrived at Rodney Parade in 2014 as a tighthead but in more recent seasons has been wearing the No 1 shirt, with the region's scrummaging a noticeable strength this term. Such has been the 35-year-old's form that he has signed a contract extension at an age when many players have retired.

Dragons forwards coach Ceri Jones – a former prop himself – recognises the challenges of moving to the other side of the scrum and thinks Harris has shown the same commitment to the switch as he does to all elements of his game.

"Brok has always been a very mobile prop, has always had a high tackle count and huge work-rate, so it naturally fitted for us (for him to move to loosehead) and him being willing to do it was huge," says Jones. "There are a huge amount of differences – you're using every other body part really and teaching yourself a whole new skill-set.

"Brok is a proper prop, a proper professional rugby player. He knows what it is to be in the game and with the



developmental side he'll help people through and make other people better.

"He can't do enough. He's coaching the U16s. If I stay at the end of a session to work with the young props, he helps. I lead scrum clinics around the region and he assists me with that. He has a huge amount to give back to the game and is always willing to give his time."

Jones uses a recent tough fitness session to illustrate Harris's work ethic. "He was the first one sprinting over and that personifies what Brok is, a true pro," says Jones. "We're quite a young group and he's a real guiding light. He pushes the whole group in the right direction."

Back-row Lewis Evans emphasises how big a role Harris plays in the squad when saying: "All the boys love him. He's the ultimate professional, is very driven and for the younger guys coming through he's a good role model.

"He's an inspiration for me as well. I'm 32 and I don't know how much longer I've got left, but to see him go out training and

how he looks after himself, he's been very good. He's definitely the most respected man in the squad."

The fact Harris is in his mid-30s is not affecting his game time. In the Welsh derbies at the turn of the year, he played three full 80 minutes in a row – unusual for a modern front-rower – and in his previous four Guinness Pro14 matches he came off in only the last six minutes.

"It shows how well he's doing that we don't want to take him off and he shows no signs of tiring," says Jones. "To be able to play 80 minutes three or four weeks on the bounce and keep up such a high standard is incredible.

"Last season in our first eight games, he had 100% tackle completion and 100% tackle dominance. He's a consistent performer at the highest level, year after year. I've nothing but admiration for him."

The Dragons don't only appreciate his rugby ability; he's famed for his barbecue skills too – or braai to use the South African term. He has high standards and wasn't impressed with Evans's offerings the first time he organised a social.

"I went to the butcher and got hotdogs, burgers and the things you'd usually have on a barbecue," recalls Evans. "He looked at me disgusted and said, 'This isn't braai'. Since then he gets the pork, lamb, steaks, boerewors... If you want a real braai, you can learn a lot from him. He's the man in charge when we have barbecues – he's excellent."

Scrum or braai, Harris is the main man for the Dragons. **RW**

FACT FILE

Age 35 (22 Feb 1985)

Born Roodepoort, SA

Region Dragons

Position Prop

Height 6ft 1in

Weight 19st

Twitter @brokharris

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Get ready for next month's European Challenge Cup quarter-finals with RW's previews...



HIS YEAR'S line-up for the European Challenge Cup knockouts features several teams who would usually expect to compete for honours in the elite event, including two former European champions...

TOULON v SCARLETS

Fri 3 April, 8pm, Stade Félix Mayol

These familiar foes have not only met twice already this term but another six times at various stages in the European Cup since 2010. Three-time European champions Toulon have led the way in the Challenge Cup and are the only team to win all six pool games.

Scarlets have been competitive on their last two visits to Stade Félix Mayol, but ultimately suffered one-point losses. If they marry their flair with a clinical edge they should push Toulon all the way.



Break man
Bristol's Luke Morahan



High-speed chase
Toulon's Baptiste Serin races Steff Evans of Scarlets

who won 15 more lineouts than any other player in the pool phase (37).

fewest of all the quarter-finalists and they won't win in France without tries.

BRISTOL v DRAGONS

Sun 5 April, 12.45pm, Ashton Gate

This is almost a flashback to the amateur days when Welsh teams would regularly play those from the West Country.

Bristol will be hoping the weather this Sunday lunchtime is conducive to their attacking style given Luke Morahan (13) and Mat Protheroe (12) have the most clean breaks in the competition so far.

Dragons have shown marked improvements under Dean Ryan, too, particularly at the scrum where young and old – Leon Brown and Brok Harris – have combined to great effect.

● *Champions Cup Previews: P55-59.*

BORDEAUX-BÈGLES v EDINBURGH

Sat 4 April, 8.15, Stade Chaban-Delmas

Another tie featuring teams from the same pool – Bordeaux drew 16-16 in Edinburgh but won comfortably at home.

The French side are flying high in the Top 14 and scored the most tries of the Challenge Cup pool stages (28), while also conceding the joint fewest (six).

Edinburgh need to get more ball to Duhan van der Merwe – most defenders beaten (28) and most metres made (469) – because their try tally of 16 is the

WHERE
ARE THEY
NOW?

BRUCE DOUGLAS

Age 40 (10 Feb 1980) Position Prop Teams Harlequins, Borders, Scarlets, Montpellier, Worcester, Bristol, Dragons & Scotland

"I PLAYED my first pro game in 1998 and my last in 2014. I retired at 34 due to a sorry case of 'old' age.

"For the last couple of years of my playing career I was based in Bristol and did work experience with an executive search company. When I retired, I dedicated four days a week to a global recruitment business and one day to being Newport Gwent Dragons scrum coach to merge the two paths.

"I met quite a few people in corporate finance and private equity, and spotted an opportunity to start my own business within the sector. I completed a Masters in organisational psychology and in April 2017 launched Confidas People.

"I see similarities in the mindset between private equity and professional sport as there is an urgency to improve.

"I miss my days on the field but this has been a very exciting time of my life."



PICS Getty Images, Inpho & PA

MARTIN HAAG

The ex-England lock and Nottingham coach now on the Cornish Pirates board



“How does cutting Championship funding sit with RFU values?”

THE Championship is a great competition that people aspire to be in. It's a great springboard for young players, coaches and referees who want to challenge themselves and want to get better.

You always have to look at what you're doing, whether it's worthwhile and things are improving, but how does cutting funding to the Championship sit with the RFU's core values? It's been well documented that the way it was done and the timing of it was pretty bad.

Those Championship teams may have recruited people on the funding they expected and now have to adjust their plans. If I take my time at Nottingham, the cut in finances is something like ten players. You're talking about making people redundant – players and staff – so there's a human element to this.

Clubs could go part-time and what does that mean for the competition? Do we want the second-highest competition in this country to be part-time?

In terms of the development of young players, if they're not playing in the Championship, where are they playing? When I was involved with England U20, we had players who had played less than five or six games a season. How do we give young players better opportunities?

The Premiership's A league is not the answer; some clubs struggle and have to find students to make up a team. Young players need somewhere to play, learn and develop, and the Championship



gives them that opportunity. It's wrong for the RFU to believe the Championship hasn't helped players come through the system. Many players have come from the Championship and gone on to play in the Premiership, or have played as dual-registered players. Perhaps there should be a compensation scheme for players who come through the Championship – it's one way of funding the league.

Championship clubs have been developing infrastructure and working in the community game – the cuts will have a knock-on effect on that too. And there's no word on funding in a couple of years' time. There's a lot of uncertainty because there are a lot of unanswered questions as to the future of the Championship.

Growing the game is one of the RFU's primary responsibilities and this decision doesn't do that. I'd like to see the RFU sit down and collaborate – that's the key for me. The RFU, Premiership Rugby, RPA, Championship clubs... We're all working independently so why not come together and work to create a vibrant product.

Championship clubs have benefactors similar to the Premiership because the top two divisions don't make any money apart from one or two teams. That's a problem for the top level.

There is a funding gap and if they don't find the answers it will significantly affect the Championship in the long term. Competitions like the Mitre 10 Cup in New Zealand and ProD2 in France work well, so why can't the Championship

be like that? Maybe this is a good opportunity for Championship clubs to explore new ways of doing things, to look at different models and enhance what is a great product, to see how they can control their own competition.

I don't think 'breakaway' is the right word, but this could be a turning point and the clubs could look at selling their own TV rights and finding sponsors.

There's no engagement about who is getting relegated in the Premiership now because we already know Saracens are going down. It's almost like ring-fencing. There are teams in the Premiership who have yo-yoed considerably and they should look at themselves. How can they get better? Ring-fencing isn't the answer.

I want to see promotion and relegation. There has to be a system for that – it could be a play-off between top and bottom. We shouldn't stifle competition. There are clubs in the Championship who are very serious about playing in the Premiership and they should be allowed to chase that dream. **RW**

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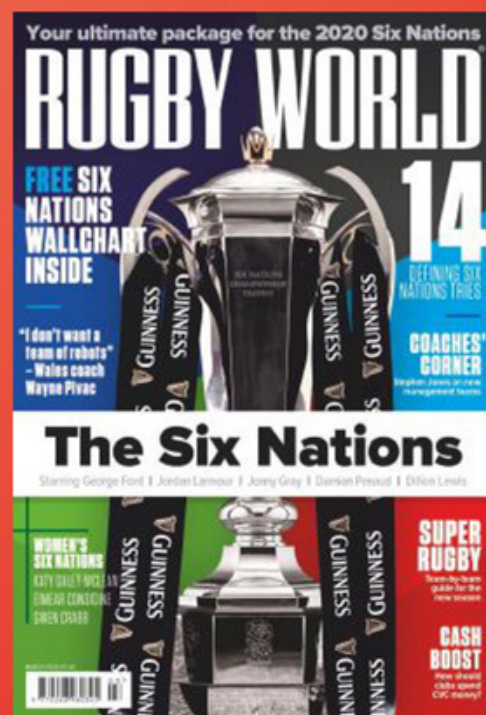
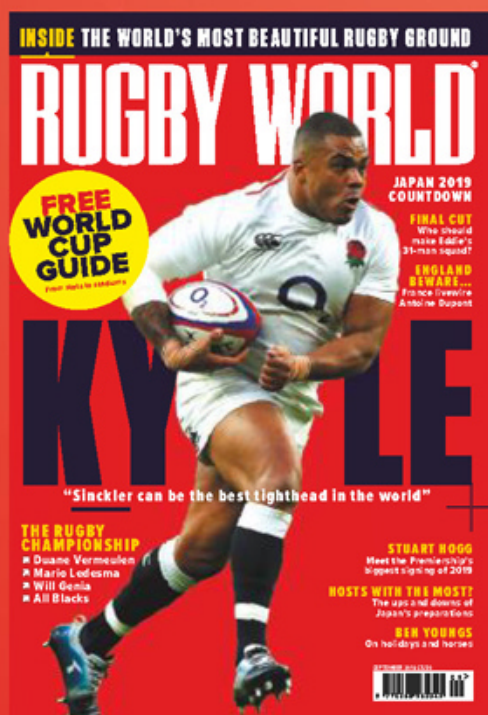


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Words Sarah Mockford // Main Picture Steve Bardens/Getty Images

I felt like the Fresh Prince going to a posh school

From private education to preparation, *Bargain Hunt* to Bolognese, England flanker **Lewis Ludlam** covers myriad topics with *Rugby World*

EARS, PHOBIAS... whatever you call them, we all have something we're scared of. Heights, spiders and flying would be three common ones. The most surprising answer *Rugby World* has ever received from years of asking about players' phobias was from former England Women's wing Kay Wilson, whose response was baked beans. That was until we interviewed Lewis Ludlam.

Look at his performances on the pitch, whether wearing the green of Northampton Saints or the white of England, and you wouldn't think there was much that could unnerve the powerful 24-year-old. He's the one rushing into contact, with or without the ball, and scavenging at breakdowns. However, put a plate of spaghetti

Bolognese in front of Ludlam and he'll be edging away rather than tucking in.

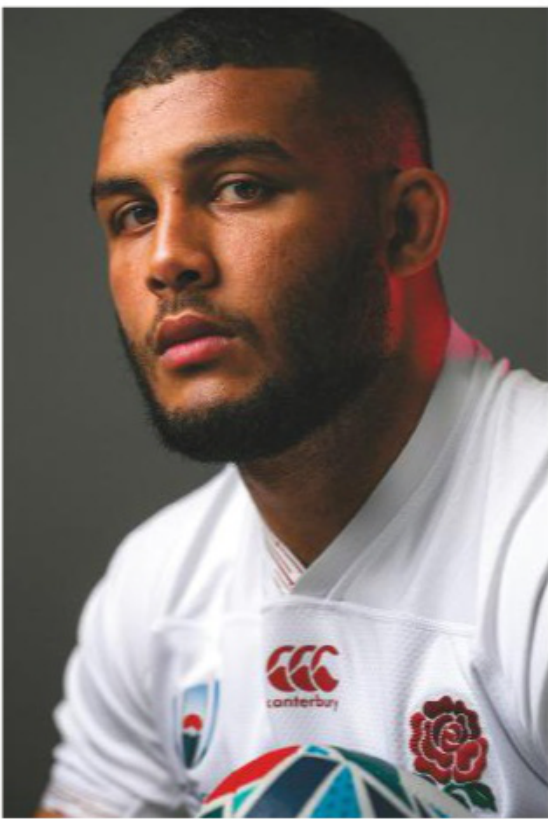
He finds it hard to articulate why he's not a fan of the Italian dish, particularly as he'll eat spaghetti with a cream sauce and loves lasagne. Put the meat sauce and the spaghetti together, though, and it's a big 'no' from Ludlam. It can present a problem when the carb-heavy dish is a pre-match meal option. "If others are eating it, I'll put menus either side of me and in front of me so I can't see anyone else," Ludlam explains. "I honestly couldn't tell you why, maybe the texture, but it gives me goosebumps and makes the hairs on my neck stand up."

Spag Bol isn't the only unusual phobia that Ludlam has, although he has learnt to cope with the other one more →

➔ effectively. “I used to be scared of the white foam you get when brushing your teeth,” he says. “My own foam is okay, but seeing someone else’s white foam... No. I’ve got better with it now.”

We move on from fears to discuss Ludlam’s interests outside of rugby, of which there are many. He’s a keen painter, abstract skulls a regular theme of his work, and he’s also interested in traditional tattoos. He’s using apps on his iPad to experiment with different tattoo ideas and would like to design one himself to go with the spaceman and sumo wrestler he already has. The latter he had done with Ellis Genge and Luke Cowan-Dickie during the World Cup in Japan. “It’s a little memento for the trip. I always wanted to do art at school but my mum wouldn’t let me. She said it would never get me a real job.”

You could argue that he hasn’t got one of those regardless, but rugby does allow him the time to explore other possible career paths. Music is another passion and he has recently been working on his DJing skills. So far he’s



“I’ve always been a passionate player and as soon as the team is announced I’m ready to rip in”



just been trying things out at home but gigs could be on the cards in the future. His former Saints team-mate James Haskell, a keen DJ himself, has critiqued a few of his mixes while Simon Dunmore of Defected Records – a season-ticket holder at Franklin’s Gardens – has invited Ludlam to his office to find out more about the business. It’s a hard ‘no’ when we ask if he can sing but making music clearly appeals as a future career. “I never really knew what I wanted to do before rugby,” he says. “I’m quite creative and something like that could potentially be the ideal job for me. I’ve got a lot of creative hobbies off the pitch. I like the idea of creating something and putting my mark on it.”

Ludlam is also poised for a star turn on *Bargain Hunt*. Last season, he and Northampton scrum-half Alex Mitchell applied to be on the daytime TV show – a favourite to tune into after training – but when the call came to invite them on, Ludlam was getting stuck into England’s pre-World Cup training camp. “It was too late by then but as soon as we’ve got some time off they want us to go on.” The producers of *Bargain Hunt* could be waiting a while as Ludlam has a fair amount on his rugby agenda. First there are the Tests against Wales at Twickenham and Italy in Rome as England bring their

Six Nations campaign to a close and then there is Northampton’s push for silverware. Saints sat second in the Gallagher Premiership after ten matches behind Exeter Chiefs, who they also face in the quarter-finals of Europe. Given all that has happened in the past 12 months – that anthem rendition on his England debut, becoming the surprise pick in Eddie Jones’s World Cup party and being part of the squad that reached the final in Japan – it’s easy to forget that Ludlam started last season unsure if he’d be a professional rugby player by the end of it. He was given a shot by incoming Saints director of rugby Chris Boyd and finally delivered on his potential after several years when injury and international-calibre competition in the back row had limited his game time. A

new club contract was agreed and the England honours followed. “It’s been a bit of a wild year for me,” reflects Ludlam as he talks to *Rugby World* in the bowels of Twickenham stadium. “This time last year I’d just signed a new contract having broken into the first team (at Northampton). That’s testament to the coaching team and a new coach coming in and giving me opportunities. He took the pressure off me, telling me to go out relaxed, enjoy myself and play my natural game.” He is still very much at the start of his rugby journey – he is in single-figure caps and this is his first Six Nations – but before we discuss the here and now, let’s rewind a little. He was into boxing before rugby; it was something he did with his dad, with whom he also shares his support of Tottenham Hotspur. He picked up the oval ball at Ipswich RFC aged eight and also had a spell at Colchester RFC before being offered a scholarship by St Joseph’s College, which has a strong rugby pedigree. “Going to a private school was never on the cards. Everyone in my family went to high school and I always thought private schools were where posh boys go. On my first day we had an RE

FACT FILE

- Age 24 (8 Dec 1995)
- Born Ipswich, Suffolk
- Club Northampton
- Position Back-row
- Height 6ft 2in
- Weight 16st 5lb
- England caps Eight
- Points Five (1T)
- Instagram handle @lewisludlam



class and the teacher had a full gown on. I felt like the Fresh Prince going from high school to a posh, traditional environment. It was a culture shock but it was interesting and I settled in quickly. I enjoyed it and made friends for life.”

He also developed his rugby skills at St Joseph's, so much so that he regained a place in the Saints Academy having been released in his mid-teens. That ability to recover from knockbacks is also evident in the determined attitude he shows on the pitch. There is a huge desire to improve too – and that is where a certain South African comes in.

Before he was forced to retire through injury last October, former Springbok

Heinrich Brüssow regularly worked with Ludlam at Northampton, giving advice on the breakdown and playing in the back row. Given the havoc Brüssow inflicted with his turnovers when playing against the British & Irish Lions back in 2009, it's little wonder Ludlam has felt the benefit of that advice.

“Being a back-row, you've got to be good at everything and I want to get better at everything.

“For me as a rugby player, it's incredible to get to learn from a bloke like that and for him to pass on his own experience to me. We'd look at defensive breakdowns, getting over the ball, when are the best opportunities at the breakdown. He's world class at that, a specialist, so there's no better guy to be teaching you. With breakdowns you can get a lot of opportunities coming to you but it's important not to over-chase. The real difference is knowing when to compete and I have a better understanding of that now.”

That nous is borne out by statistics, with Ludlam joint second for turnovers in this season's European Champions Cup. Yet it is not just technical expertise that Brüssow imparted; he also gave Ludlam counsel on mindset and managing emotions. There's no doubting Ludlam's passion, particularly when wearing the red rose, but that emotional energy can be draining given the physical output needed at the top level.



Guidance

Heinrich Brüssow

“I've always been a passionate player and tend to build up really early on in the week. As soon as the team is announced I'm ready to go, ready to rip in and that can probably take a lot out of me in training. He (Brüssow) helped me on how to deal with being on the international stage and preparing for games. In the past I'd be riled up early on, whereas experienced guys are more relaxed.

“He talked to me a lot about being relaxed off the ball and ready to go. Then when I get a chance on the ball going full out and 100% ripping in completely. Excitement is a good thing and I do get emotional during games but it's about controlling that. My focus is to have as big an impact on the game as possible, a positive impact. It's about targeting what I do rather than over-chasing things; it's best to let the game come to me, stay relaxed and then when the opportunity comes impact the game.”

There's plenty of rugby left this season for Ludlam to have an impact on – just don't give him spag Bol pre-match. **RW**



PICS Getty Images & PA

Climbing frame Winning a lineout versus Scotland



SIX SENSE

Words **Alan Pearey** // Main Picture **Ian Cook/CameraSport/Getty Images**

A latecomer to rugby, Dragons and Wales back-row

Aaron Wainwright is rising to the challenge in every way

THESE ARE early days in the WAG (Wales after Gatland) era, so much so that the cabinets housing the ceramic Groggs at team headquarters feature two figurines of Gatland but none of his successor, Wayne Pivac.

Josh Adams, Cory Hill and Rob Evans ('two-week delay') are newly available, and it surely won't be long until one of the youngest talents joins their number.

With his glasses and bushy moustache, Aaron Wainwright would make perfect Grogg material. And if he were required to do a sitting while the clay statuette was crafted, doubtless he'd be an impeccable artist's model. He is polite, engaging and a credit to Welsh rugby.

He's had what is termed a 'meteoric rise', making his Test debut aged 20 in Argentina two summers ago and rarely missing out since. Gatland has spoken of the satisfaction a coach gets from →



➔ identifying and fast-tracking a player not in the limelight, and no one fits the bill better than Wainwright.

“He’s a quick learner, a talented ball player and a terrific athlete – a modern-day No 6 with a huge future,” Gatland said. “He will make mistakes for some time to come but being like a sponge in soaking up information, he tends not to make the same ones twice.”

His mistakes were not immediately apparent at the start of the Six Nations, when Wainwright was knocking seven bells out of Italy (22 tackles), but Ireland in Dublin provided a reminder that he’s a work in progress. Split centres and highly skilled back-rows, attacking in the wide channels, were a hallmark of Pivac’s great Scarlets side of recent vintage and Wainwright is trying to get up to speed.

“We’re looking to play a bit more expansively (under Pivac), get the ball wider and play to the edges a bit more. That’s one of the main differences I’ve noticed so far,” says Wainwright.

“You’ve probably noticed that the back-rows are holding a bit wider on the edges, similar to how they did at the Scarlets. For us as back-rows, it’s about

trusting our skill-set and ability to get the ball through the hands and buy into what they’re trying to do. I think it will come. We didn’t quite get it right against Ireland, but we’ve every confidence and so do the coaching staff that it will come.”

Wainwright’s football background is well documented and he believes his experiences at Cardiff City and Newport County have helped him read the game in rugby. But the flipside of launching a rugby career at 17 is all those lost years when he could have honed the basics.

“I guess so,” he says when I ask if he feels he’s playing catch-up. “I haven’t been playing as long as other players and it’s about trying to improve my skills as much as I can, so I can back myself when I’m out in those wide channels.

“But in any other sense I don’t think I’m playing catch-up. I’ve worked hard in the time I’ve been playing rugby and I’ve been rewarded from that by getting chances to play for Wales.”

It helps that he has an unquenchable thirst for knowledge and advancement.

At an age when many of his peers will while away evenings on PlayStation, Wainwright is coaching Division Three East team Whiteheads, as well as managing a sevens team, the Stags, that he co-founded. Chris Cornford, a regional coordinator for the WRU, is head coach of Whiteheads and first saw him in a Newport & District Cup final just before he took the job.

“Aaron was 18 at the time and as I watched the game I thought, ‘My God, look at that No 8’. He wanted the ball, he wanted to make yards, he was the go-to player at such a young age. I knew, when I took over at Whiteheads, that Aaron wouldn’t be playing for me because he was too good for that level.

“He’s coaching with us, he’s amongst the boys, running around with them. He’s like a sponge because he wants to learn all the time, playing and coaching.

“I’m a coach educator and when he did his level one and level two (badges), I thought I’ll help him out when he’s doing his sessions. But you haven’t got

“It’s about trusting our skill-set and ability to get the ball through the hands. I think it will come”

Push and shove
Throwing his weight
around v England



to help him. For such a young man he has an old head on his shoulders. He’s one of the boys, no airs and graces; he takes a lot of stick off the lads as well, they rib him a lot. He’ll play a Dragons game and an hour later he’s in the club with the boys, drinking his pint of water.”

Wainwright was coaching Whiteheads just before getting on the plane to Japan last September. “It was a Tuesday night and he had to leave his house at 10 o’clock. From 7-9 he was with us coaching the contact area. I couldn’t get over that. But they’re all his mates. Boys he was in school (Bassaleg Comp) with.”

Wainwright’s gratitude to those who’ve helped shape him is palpable, and he name-checks a string of coaches, from his days with Whiteheads’ youth team to Danny Milton and Chris Davey at Cardiff

Met University, then James Chaperon, Richie Rees (now Blues) and Thomas Rhys Thomas at the Dragons’ academy, and Ceri Jones with the seniors.

He’s now learning from one of the great back-rows in Sam Warburton. “One thing I’m working on

FACT FILE

Age 22 (25 Sept 1997)
Born Cardiff
Position Back-row
Region Dragons
Height 6ft 3in
Weight 16st 12lb
Wales caps 21 (1T)
Twitter handle
@aaronwain97

On the charge
Alongside Justin Tipuric
in Ireland



is my jackal and trying to slow the ball down, and he was one of the best at that. So he's giving me a lot of pointers.

"And it's not just the technical side; it's decision-making as well, when to go in and when the right opportunities arise. He's so experienced and familiar with those sorts of pictures and positions."

One innovation is the 'jackal anchor', something we saw Wainwright doing on opening Six Nations weekend when he supported Dillon Lewis and Wales won a turnover. "Sam's said when you see someone getting on the ball, look to anchor them in and protect them. It's a lot harder to remove two blokes supporting each other when you're on your feet than one bloke over the ball.

"That comes with decision-making. If you can see that someone's in there but they're not going to be effective, then, not in a horrible way, don't go in and help, leave them so you can spread out and keep more numbers on your feet."

He is relishing playing alongside Justin Tipuric and Taulupe Faletau in a unit to rival any in Europe. When Wainwright was starting out, his father Adrian, an ex-Wales U21 back-row, would tell him to watch clips of top players and Tipuric was one of those he would always cite.

The Osprey has assisted Wainwright with his lineout work, helping him become one of the best operators both

defensively and offensively, while Faletau is developing Wainwright's footwork with sidestepping drills. "It's great to play with them. We're still getting used to each other.

Ireland was just the second game I've played with Toby."

He has twice started for Wales at eight and I ask if he's striving to have the skills to play anywhere across the back row?

"I wouldn't say I'm there quite yet to be an out-and-out seven, I see myself more as a six," he says. "I haven't much experience at eight but feel comfortable there. Playing seven I wouldn't say I'm as effective as some of the other boys at getting the ball or slowing it down."

Limitations or not, he's already been flagged as a contender for next year's Lions tour by Gatland, the team's head coach. Wainwright recalls watching one of the 2017 Tests in a London pub but otherwise the Lions haven't been on his radar; in his youth he preferred watching Arsenal, and his heroes Patrick Vieira and Thierry Henry.

"A lot of friends and family sent it to me," he says of Gatland's Lions remark. "Obviously it would be great to get picked and it's a goal of mine. But you've got to play each game one at a time and if you aren't performing up until selection you're not going to get picked. That's the pressure I put on myself. But it's also nice to have the external pressure just to drive you and think that that's what you can achieve if you're playing well."

For all his exploits, he's best known for being viciously elbowed by Sébastien Vahaamahina in last year's World Cup. As he talks me through it, I realise that

WAINWRIGHT'S TEAM-MATES

Funniest

"Tomos Williams. He's a Treorchy boy"

Cleverest

"Hallam Amos. He's training to be a doctor."

Vainest "Elliot Dee. Loves his properties and himself."

Most generous "Dillon Lewis probably. He has his own coffee company so he brings coffee."

Stingiest "Matthew Screech. Never buys coffees for the boys."

Best dancer "Rio Dyer. He's on the sevens circuit, and at Dragons. Young and confident."

Best singer "Johnny McNicholl. He sang *Take it Easy* for his first cap song."

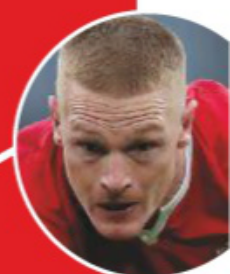
Most serious

"Alun Wyn probably."

Dopiest "Leon Brown. He loses keys in his own car."

Fastest "Josh Adams or Louis Rees-Zammit. They've not gone head-to-head yet."

Most skilful "James Benjamin from the Dragons. He's on the sevens as well at the moment."



Notorious moment The elbow incident in Japan

the blow that earned the French lock a red card was the least of it; it was the initial elbow to the throat which bent him backwards that alarmed Wainwright.

"We were in a maul and my legs were caught underneath. I couldn't move so I thought my back was going to break. And that was really painful, so I was trying to shout at the ref. I think he elbowed me to try to shut me up." He has no hard feelings, the pair later exchanging best wishes via email.

Life moves on and for Wainwright that means trying to knock over England and Scotland this month as the next obstacles on a path to dreamt-of glory in France less than four years from now.

"The main goal is the World Cup, 2023. When Wayne came in that's what he set out, it's what we're building towards. Next four years, let's hit the ground running," says Wainwright.

"Anything is possible. I don't see any reason we can't win it. The World Cup just gone, losing to South Africa in the semi-final through very small margins, that's how the game goes. The goal is to get to 2023 and flip it round and see if we can get those margins on our side."

Aaron Wainwright, the sponge on the run, will be there every step of the way. **FWW**



SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 22 (23 Mar 1997)
Born Condom, France
Position Back-row
Club La Rochelle
Height 6ft 3in
Weight 18st 2lb
France caps 14 (4T)
Instagram @gregalldritt

GRÉGORY ALLDRITT

The La Rochelle and France back-row on his thunderous rise

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Getty Images**



WITH SO many of his dad's side of the family based in Scotland and his own brother even

working in Edinburgh, it is no surprise that every time Grégory Alldritt scores for France against the Scots the texts fly. UK-based relations support the young back-row, sure, but mick-taking is an inevitable part of family life.

"That game in the Six Nations is a very important one for our family," Alldritt tells *Rugby World*.



All-star Alldritt
Taking the fight to Wales

The No 8 scored twice when he faced the Scots for the first time, in Paris in 2019, and he scored the very next time he faced them, in Nice in a World Cup warm-up.

"It is always the big game, but mostly when I wear a France jersey my family are supporting France and me. We are at Murrayfield for our second-last game in the Six Nations (on 8 March) and I'd be really happy to play there again. We will see."

The La Rochelle star should get a fine reception when he plays – such is his form this tournament it is unfathomable to drop him, especially after his Man of the Match performances against England and Italy. One of the most impressive aspects of Alldritt's arrival as Six Nations star, though, is the journey to get here.

Born in Armagnac country, Alldritt took up the game in Auch where the former France boss Jacques Brunel played his rugby. Although Antoine Dupont also came from the same side and would play with Alldritt at the elite end too, the back-row plus friend and hooker Pierre Bourgarit had to be plucked out of the amateur team in Auch by La Rochelle after seasons of playing lower-league rugby. No national institutions or starring for *les Bleuets* for Greg.

"In my last year at Auch we were in the third division of France," Alldritt, 22, explains. "An academy coach from La Rochelle was a former player and coach there, and he asked if I was interested in going to La Rochelle. That was (around) three years ago that I started there."

"For the first six months I was with the U22s before (then-coach) Patrice Collazo gave me a few games on the bench for the first team. I had ten games with the pro team and then played most of the next season under Xavier Garbajosa. I started most games the next season and then Jacques (Brunel) called me into the Six Nations squad."

"I was at Auch from ten to 19 and I made just two games on the bench for France U19 but I was not really involved. Normally in France you have the *espoirs* stuff, but I wasn't in the structure."

The Marcoussis-based National Rugby Centre was not a finishing school for Alldritt. And yet he has

come roaring up the ranks, doing his rugby a different way as he has learnt to adapt and evolve rather than being moulded.

He continues his rugby upbringing outside the most elite structures: "Maybe I never had the chance. When guys are 15 or 16 you need direction to get into the structure. Maybe I wasn't the type of player they wanted. It's hard."

"I played my game with the club and trained and I think for me that was better. When I was 17 I was already training with older players."

Is there something in the fact he did this at a lower level, allowing him to work into the adult game further down the leagues? His improvement was indeed quick, though as he goes on to tell us, it was not a case of walking into the La Rochelle elite squad so soon.

The gym was not his natural habitat and he had to step up his physicality to deal with all those full-timers. Conditioning became the watchword and he believes it took him the best part of a year to be primed for the big time. And then there was the analysis side, with Alldritt initially stunned by the level of detail that was needed to understand any opponent.

However, a subject needs the ideal conditions to thrive and from what Alldritt says of La Rochelle, it could well be the ideal petri dish.

"They have tried to play step by step," the *Bleus* star starts. "They are not the kind of club with a lot of money but they do want to be No 1 in France. So it started by earning our place in the Top 14 (in 2014, before Alldritt arrived there)."

"Then they've recruited players like Victor Vito and Tawera Kerr-Barlow, and we maybe have the best facilities in France. It's also for the academy – the club also really trust in young players."

"Now they have added coaches in Jono Gibbes and Ronan O'Gara. That Anglo-Saxon culture is very different for us in France. It is a new thing for us and possibly a very good thing. We will see."

At its core, though, is it the way La Rochelle play their rugby that has helped some outsiders thrive?

"What is good at La Rochelle," he adds, "is that we like to play rugby. Look at Vincent Rattez (the diminutive wing). Good players who play with the ball, surprise and are active." Simple. Fun. **RW**

MY TOP 3



RUGBY HEROES

IMANOL HARINORDOQUY
"He had so many skills when he played at No 8"

JAMES HASKELL
"He was a really physical player and I like that side too"

MICHAEL HOOPER
"Between him and David Pocock, they are both incredible"



SCALING NEW HEIGHTS

Words **Tom English** // Main Picture **William West/Getty Images**

Zander Fagerson has come a long way since spending his days mountain biking. Here the Scotland prop talks fatherhood, fitness and finding his way

O

NE QUESTION and about ten seconds is all it takes for Zander Fagerson to mention the word vasectomy – an unconventional beginning to a chat with the Glasgow and Scotland tighthead, a man who has the size and the ability to become a huge force in the game if only he can catch a break on the injury front.

Fagerson is 24 years old and it feels like he's been around forever. He made his Glasgow debut at 18 and his international debut at 20 against England in Eddie Jones's first match in charge. His CV includes mountain biking, choir singing, lifeguarding, something involving prawns – and rugby.

"I'm a changed man," he says, when talking about his new life as a father of little Iona, born in May 2019 while her dad was hauling his battered body back into life in time for the World Cup, which he just about made. "Being a father, I see the world in a whole new light, with far less sleep," he says. "It's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Way better than I ever imagined it would be.

"I'm one of five kids and I'm the oldest. I was 11 when my wee sister arrived, so I had a little bit to do in looking after her. I changed a few nappies – or tried to. I had some training before my own one arrived. It's all been pretty hectic. I got married in August 2018, Iona arrived →



→ a year later and we're having another baby in April. A boy this time. That'll be me then. Snip. Maybe. Two kids might be enough. Could change our mind about that, of course. I might hold off with the snip after all."

What Fagerson plans to do with his privates is, er, private, so we won't pry. But becoming a dad would appear to be a part of why he has exploded back into form this season. That and a clean bill of health, which is a very welcome change.

After making a hugely encouraging beginning to his Six Nations career proper in 2017, playing all five games, including the victories over Ireland and Wales, he played only one game in each of the 2018 and 2019 championships. Full fitness has been a long time coming.

"A lot has changed since Iona arrived. If I fail at everything else in life, I want to succeed at being a father. I try to get the work-life balance right now, whereas before, if we had lost, I'd always be in bad form and going around in a huff. I'd take it personally, beat myself up over it.



Youth work
At the U20 World Cup in 2014

'I let my family down and my team down' and all the rest of it. I can't dwell on it as much because I'm straight into dad duty. I don't have time to grump around.

"It still eats away at me a little. I mean, I put way too much pressure on myself going to the World Cup. I wasn't in a good head space because I'd been injured for five months, probably came back too early, was a bit overweight and wasn't playing my best. I was frustrated. Even in the months since Japan I think I've matured. I've got a lot better at not showing disappointment. Life goes on if you lose. That mindset definitely helps."

Post-Japan, Fagerson shed a few pounds – a change that's upped his mobility around the park – then got help with his scrummaging from Petrus du Plessis, the former Saracens prop who's now on the coaching team at Scotstoun.



Family man
With daughter Iona

He's also benefited from working with Pieter de Villiers, the wily old French prop who's been assisting Gregor Townsend with the national team.

"I love working with these guys. I've worked more with Petrus and he's been massive for me. Absolutely instrumental in making me better and more confident, more technically sound. Pieter has added to that. He's such a clever guy. Little tweaks here and there make a difference. He's got huge knowledge.

"I think guys like Petrus and Pieter should be sitting alongside TMOs and telling them what's happening in scrums because refereeing of scrums, across the whole board, is not up to par. One

week they get it right and the next they don't. It's so up and down. The one that breaks me is when a ref comes to speak to you and says he knows the illegal things the opposition front row get up to and he's going to do something about it if they try it on, and when they try it on he does nothing but penalise you.

"That gets to me. 'Ref, you came to me before the game and said you knew exactly what they do and you'd penalise them for it, you were saying all the right stuff but in the spur of moment, under pressure, you haven't backed it up'. Now, you can't say that to them but I think reputation, or a home crowd, can come into decision-making.

"An ex-front-row player should maybe be in on the TMO thing. Maybe he can advise the ref as to what is going on and who to keep an eye on. He can help refs make valid calls because he knows all the tricks. I won't say anymore as I'll get into trouble, but it's a frustrating part of the game for any front-row forward."

Fagerson can be anything he wants to be in this game. He has the raw materials to become a Test Lion if things go his way. He has the power, the ball-carrying, fast-improving scrummaging – and time. He hates it when people tell him that he's young and he's got years in which



Down the line
Fagerson scores against Japan at the World Cup



Hard yards

Trying to make ground against Ireland in Dublin

Scotland

to achieve the things that he wants to achieve. He wants those things now.

His is a story of adventure, a life spent in the outdoors, exploring different terrain around him. He grew up, as he puts it, “in the middle of nowhere”, in Kirriemuir, 100 miles north-east of Glasgow. “I was surrounded by glens and hills and woods. I got into mountain biking from about the age of nine or ten.

“I started off doing dirt jumps in the woods. My dad got me a BMX and I was

over the moon. I’d be out every night on my bike. My mates would give me second-hand parts and help out. We’d go to the woods for a whole weekend. Mum would drop us off at 8am with a packed lunch and a spade and we’d dig out our own tracks. It was awesome.”

He became a Scottish champion downhill rider at one point. He was 13 or 14 at the time. The way he tells it, the honour came out of the blue. He hadn’t been on his bike much that summer. His

got concussed in a game and missed out. I got my lifeguard qualification but then rugby took hold and that was that.”

You know those kids who become stars and there are queues of people who’ll happily tell you that they saw their talent from the get-go? You won’t find too many of those in the Fagerson story. Instead, you might find a fella called Shagger Wilson. Fagerson’s not sure if that was his real name, or even close to it, but that’s the name he has in his head from a certain day on the back pitches at Lochinch when his Glasgow Hawks team went up against Stewart’s Melville in a second-team fixture.

Shagger, or whatever his name was, represented the young Fagerson’s scrummaging opposition that day. He talks about all of this when asked about the greatest lesson he’s ever learnt on a rugby pitch. “This guy had long hair, might have been about 40 years old, or maybe it just felt like that to me. He bent me over backwards, horrendous. I was just a young pup. He damaged my ego

a bit, but I went up to him afterwards and asked for a few tips. He gave me a few things to work on. I woke up the next day and couldn’t move my neck. He did a proper job. You go into some

dark places at that level. These boys just live for the weekend so they can kill young props. That weekend, it was me.”

One of his pet hates is cheap shots. His team-mates wind him up about how wound up he gets when he sees opponents taking liberties. Instead of calling his reaction ‘handbags’ they call it ‘Zandbags’. “I lost my head against Zebre this season,” he says. “A flying headbutt on Scott Cummings. I’ve got a bit of a short fuse for that kind of stuff. I’m better, though. I’m trying.”

Becoming a dad might have made him a more serene character off the field, but the realities of fatherhood have been a part of his progression, too. Rugby is the thing that provides for his growing family. And, to Zander Fagerson, family is everything. **RW**

“If I fail at everything else in life, then I want to succeed at being a father. I try to get the work-life balance right”



grandad had been a fisherman in Peterhead back in day but life had brought him to East Lothian where he was a ship chandler, supplying boats and tackle and waterproofs.

He’d been helping his grandad. His gig was to weigh the boxes of prawns coming in off boats. “I loved it but I had this race coming up and hadn’t been on my mountain bike at all. The race was in Dunkeld in Perthshire and I was buzzing to go. I remember this so clearly. It was the national championships. About 15 or 20 boys were brought up the hill in the back of this transporter. No windows, no oxygen. All of us in our gear, sweating. Our goggles steaming up. Couldn’t see a thing. Pitch black. I managed to win, which was great.

“Next thing I tried was singing in the national boys’ choir. I did that for three

or four years. My mum got me into it. She’s a great singer. After that I got a lifeguard qualification. I didn’t know what I was going to do after school. I didn’t get an academy rugby contract, so that was out. I was told I was going to get one, then

FACT FILE

Age 24 (19 Jan 1996)
Born Perth
Position Tighthead
Club Glasgow Warriors
Height 6ft 2in
Weight 18st
Scotland caps 28 (1T)
Twitter handle
@ZanderFagerson



Oh happy day Celebrating in Glasgow colours

PICS Getty Images & Imphoto



THE MAKING OF

JOSH VAN DER FLIER

Words **Sarah Mockford** // Main Picture **Harry How/Getty Images**

The flanker is becoming an ever more important member of Ireland's back row. We find out about his route to the top – from those who've helped him get there

H **E ALWAYS** played with a smile on his face and still does." Those are the words of Brian Clarke, president of Wicklow RFC where Josh van der Flier first took up rugby. Clarke is also quick to pay tribute to the Leinster and Ireland back-row for giving up his time to continue to support the club, including being an ambassador for their inclusive team, Wicklow Warriors. Van der Flier's humble, friendly nature ← is a common theme when talking to

people about his rise to the top – as is his work ethic. Here's an Opta statistic from the first two rounds of the Six Nations that illustrates what the 26-year-old is all about: van der Flier has been the first man to 41 of the 65 rucks he's hit, more than any other player; his 63% ratio of first arrivals is also the best rate of the 35 players to hit 40+ rucks this campaign.

Rugby World talks to those who have worked with van der Flier at various stages of his journey to Test rugby...

THE MENTOR

Mick Higgins guided van der Flier through his first forays into rugby as minis coach at Wicklow RFC

“Josh and his brother Johan came in as part of the U8s. Their dad, Dirk, gave me a hand with the coaching. My memories are of a little lad with a red scrum cap on – he started wearing it aged eight or nine and then always seemed to have it. “He played with Wicklow until he was 13, then he went to Wesley College. His dad was a great motivator; he had high standards and backed the boys 100%. Dirk was a great tackler himself – that’s where a lot of the tuition came from. “Josh’s enthusiasm never wavered, but Johan was probably bigger and faster at that stage. I think his progress comes down to the right attitude and the right support. He had the character, being

single-minded and determined, to carry it through. From an ordinary start, he’s progressed and is still progressing. “He’s extremely busy but still makes time to come back to the club and when you do meet him now, he wants to know you, asks how things are. He’s never lost that sense of where he started.”

THE TEACHER

As head of rugby at Wesley College, Iain Wallace saw Josh progress from schoolboy to age-grade international “I first came across Josh when he was 13. I was actually his boarding master at Wesley and what always struck me was his dedication. He may not have been the most talented player but he worked very hard. He was out on the pitch after training and would be in his room doing press-ups and sit-ups before breakfast.

“His attitude and work-rate shone through. He never missed a tackle and anything you told him to do as a coach he implemented. He was very diligent. “He was a scrum-half when he came to Wesley but when he moved into the senior age groups, myself and fellow coach Craig Petrie thought he had all the attributes to move to the back row. “In his second to last year of school, when he was 17, we sent him to a Leinster Schools trial but he was sent back for being too small. He had a bit of a growth spurt but also did a lot of gym work. His room-mate was Peter Tierney – a sports scientist at Leinster until last year who is now at the English FA – and those two would push each other. They had the motivation to get to the gym. “He worked really hard that summer and got into the right place physically, so we said to the Leinster coaches they needed to have another look. He got into the schools set-up and was playing for Ireland U19 by the end of the year. “Any opportunity he’s given, he’s always grasped it and worked hard to make the most of it. He always had that willingness to do the nitty-gritty and get through a huge amount of work, and he’s taken that attitude with him. “I’m proud to see him performing to such a high level. What stood out as a schoolboy are still his standouts – the work he gets through, tackle counts... “In every element at school he strived to do his very best. And he tried things out of his comfort zone, like giving the school musical a go. His talent is more suited to the rugby pitch!”

THE TEAM-MATE

Ireland wing Adam Byrne has not only played alongside van der Flier



Group hug
Adam Byrne celebrates a try with Jordan Larmour and Josh van der Flier



School days In action for Wesley College

for UCD and Leinster but has also lived with him for seven years

“My first impression of Josh was that he’s one of the nicest people I’ve met. We were in the sub-academy at Leinster, played in the same uni team at UCD and ended up living together on campus.

“After uni we moved in with a couple of rugby lads and lived together until the end of February. He had a little growing up to do at the start – I remember him asking me how long to boil carrots for! He’s blossomed in terms of cooking now.

“He’s not the best at cleaning but that is his only downfall. He’s a great person to be around; he’s always in a good mood and brings good energy. There’s a great mix of silly chat but if you want to talk about something more serious he’s always there to listen. He’s one of my best friends and is almost like a brother – he’ll give me honest feedback and we’ve lived together for so long that we know each other inside and out.

“Josh is the ultimate professional, so if I’m doing most of what he is doing I know I’m on the right track – eating, recovery, sleeping. We wondered if he’d let things slip when he got a girlfriend but he hasn’t. His performances back that up.

“His biggest strength is doing the basics well and the bigger the game, the better he does them”

“I’ve not seen him have a bad game. His biggest strength is always doing the basics really well and the bigger the game, the better he does the basics. He’s known for tackling – he’s probably missed two tackles in his whole life!

“He’s not the most extrovert type of person, but he leads by example and brings energy by bringing line speed and making big tackles. His micro chat is also really good; he’ll gee up the front row and give positive feedback during a game. I really love playing with him.”

THE COACH

Leinster’s contact skills coach Hugh Hogan has worked with the flanker since his academy days

“I first started working with Josh shortly after he left school and have transitioned with him from the academy to



Euro star
Carrying hard
against Lyon

the senior team. When he was coming through schools rugby, I was impressed by his athleticism and ability to show explosive impacts in games. He was a very powerful ball-carrier in school at that age and it’s been interesting to see him add more strings to his bow over the last number of years.

“In the last few seasons, he’s been known for his relentless tackling, high

and is an excellent tackler. He’s probably not carried the ball as much as he did as a younger player, but coming into this season he had a conversation with Stuart Lancaster and they both targeted that as something for him to do more of this season. It’s then how you go about doing that and making smart decisions.

“It’s important for players to have an awareness of what they see in themselves as a player and where they want to improve. Josh has always been like that, working on different aspects of the game and taking a lot of initiative in those areas. We’ve talked about players he was interested in modelling parts of his game around, picking out bits and pieces that might help him to improve.

“Here’s an example from early last season of Josh taking the initiative. George Smith was playing for Bristol at the time and Josh got in touch with him to have a conversation about the breakdown – his thought processes, practices, cues to help him make good decisions at the ruck and affect a turnover at key moments of game.

“While he’s striving for excellence, it’s also great to see collaborative learnings and he’s very happy to share those ideas with the rest of the group. He’s a hugely humble guy but there’s no

resting on laurels with Josh. He’s ambitious and is always looking to stay on top of his game. He recognises the need to push himself out of his comfort zone and is not a guy you’ll see stagnate. He’s relentless and meticulous.” **RW**



Surrounded
Caught by Wales’ defence

FACT FILE

Age 26 (25 Apr 1993)
Born Wicklow
Province Leinster
Position Flanker
Height 5ft 11in
Weight 16st 9lb
Ireland caps 26
Points Ten (2T)
Instagram @joshvdf



SPOTLIGHT ON

Age 21 (14 Feb 1999)
Born Waterloo
Club Harlequins
Position Back-row
Height 5ft 10in
Weight 15st 1lb
England caps 16
Twitter @SEBeckett

SARAH BECKETT

The back-row is a key member of the England team chasing back-to-back Grand Slams

Interview **Sarah Mockford** // Pictures **Getty Images**



S

ARAH BECKETT

has not yet lost a Six Nations game, having helped England to a Grand Slam last year and wins over France, Scotland and Ireland so far in 2020. So as the Red Roses build towards back-to-back Slams, we asked the back-row to tell us more about herself, starting with why her Twitter profile says: ‘Working to prove doubters wrong’...

Growing up I was a bit of an underdog. I was never really

rated, sat on the bench for a lot of age groups, did U20 trials twice and didn’t get in. It’s what motivates me – when someone says you can’t do something, you want to prove them wrong.

The girls say I’ve come out of nowhere. I eventually made it into the U20s. Matt Ferguson, then England forwards coach, saw me playing for Waterloo when I was 18 and sent me to the next camp.

I had a retrial and got in, then I went on the tour to Canada. From playing well on tour I got called into senior camp and in the space of nine months I went from my first U20 cap to my first senior cap.

I started playing rugby aged seven. We live on the same road as Waterloo RFC and I’d go down there every weekend. My brother, Charlie (now at Jersey Reds), played, then I did. My twin sister, Kate, never played growing up but picked it up when she went to uni in Leicester and is now playing on her year abroad in America.

Me, my dad and my brother are constantly talking about rugby.

When watching rugby, most families just watch the game but we’d pause it every two minutes to talk about what we’re seeing, what players should have done, how those defenders are there...

I credit my dad for me having a good rugby brain. He comes to my games but also records them. I’ll watch it back too and then text him about this or that. He’s very black and white, and if something isn’t good enough he’ll tell you. I like having that honesty.

Women’s rugby has massively changed. At Waterloo there were only two or three girls in the minis section; now there are whole mini sections of only girls. Elite women’s rugby has progressed so much too. It’s great to see more visibility and it’s a great product.

My brother wrote an article talking about how skill-sets in women’s rugby are equal to, if not better than, men’s games because it’s less about bash. He challenged people to watch women’s rugby to see if it’s not as skilful.

It’s about changing perceptions. Women’s rugby is different but it’s just as valuable. It may not be as fast or as strong or have as big collisions, but if you think there are no collisions look at our game against France. Regardless of it

being men’s or women’s, it’s just a good game of rugby.

I lasted ten weeks at uni. I’d taken a gap year where I taught PE in a primary school, then I went to uni to study international disaster management. I’d been called into the England squad to prepare for the autumn Internationals and missed six weeks of uni for training camps, so it just wasn’t working.

Playing for England had always been my dream. I wanted to be 100% committed and not let the opportunity pass me by. I didn’t expect to get a (RFU) contract and thought I’d go back to teaching in the school, but I was extremely lucky to pick up a contract.

This season’s move to Harlequins was for my own development.

I’d grown up at Waterloo and I was very comfortable. I felt like I needed to experience a bit more.

I was the only professional at Waterloo and it’s hard to be a professional athlete alone, in the gym or a skills session. It’s not a reflection on the club – they did everything they could to support me – but I’m now with other players who could relate to my lifestyle and push me.

I’m fighting to keep my contract. If I’m not pushing myself and other people are pushing harder than me I won’t have it renewed. I need to be the best I can be.

The ultimate goal for this squad is to win the World Cup.

That’s the environment we’re in so if your behaviour is not up to standard, people will pick you up on it. If standards slip, performances slip and we’re under no illusions we need to get better to win the World Cup.

Walk quietly and carry a big stick. That’s something my dad told me. It basically means don’t hype yourself up. Carry on doing what you’re doing and keep performing, but you don’t need to shout about it, you don’t need credit, you’re just doing your job.

Be like Richard Hill – he was the first man on the team sheet, but he just went about his business and got the job done quietly.

I can play the guitar. I don’t bring it into England camp, though; I don’t play in front of people! I’m a big country music fan but I room with Shaunagh Brown and she’s more into rap and reggae. 

MY TOP 35



COUNTRY MUSIC ACTS

Luke Combs
Florida Georgia Line
Dan + Shay

FOODS

Pizza
My mum’s scouse
My mum’s chilli

FILMS

Catch Me If You Can
The Shawshank Redemption
High School Musical



Cold front

Beckett prepares to face Scotland in the snow

EUROPEAN PLAYER
OF THE YEAR 2020



MARCELL COETZEE
ULSTER RUGBY



JOHN COONEY
ULSTER RUGBY



LUKE COWAN-DICKIE
EXETER CHIEFS



TADHG FURLONG
LEINSTER RUGBY



STUART HOGG
EXETER CHIEFS



JEROME KAINO
TOULOUSE



JORDAN LARMOUR
LEINSTER RUGBY



GEORGE MOALA
ASM CLERMONT AUVERGNE



ROMAIN NTAMACK
TOULOUSE



SEMI RADRADRA
BORDEAUX-BÈGLES



GARRY RINGROSE
LEINSTER RUGBY



FINN RUSSELL
RACING 92



SAM SIMMONDS
EXETER CHIEFS



TEDDY THOMAS
RACING 92



VIRIMI VAKATAWA
RACING 92

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#EPOTY2020

2020

CHAMPIONS CUP

Words Sarah Mockford // Pictures Getty Images & Inpho

The best club teams in **Europe** will go head-to-head for a place in the last four at the start of April. Here's what you need to know



CHAMPIONS CUP

QUARTER
FINALS

Wide berth
Setariki Tuicuvu tries to evade
Racing's defence in January



CLERMONT AUVERGNE

V

RACING 92

Saturday 4 April, 3.15pm, Stade Marcel-Michelin

OVERVIEW

When these two clubs met at Stade Marcel-Michelin in the Top 14 last season it ended in a 31-31 draw – and they look evenly matched as they head into this last-eight tie too.

Neither side had it all their own way in the group stages but they still topped their pools – and top some of the stats as well. Racing's attacking intent is obvious, with the most metres made (2,932), most defenders beaten (197) and most clean breaks (85) of all teams during the pool matches.

Clermont, meanwhile, are fearsome at the breakdown and won the most turnovers (52), so will look to disrupt their opponent's possession to limit those attacks.

There will be a sense of unfinished business from both clubs in this competition. Clermont have lost three finals (2013, 2015 and 2017) and Racing have lost two (2016 and 2018), so there is a huge desire to progress further and have their name engraved on the trophy for the first time.

CRITICAL BATTLE AREA

Clermont will be hoping to reap the benefits of home advantage as they go in search of that elusive silverware. They have won 49 of their 60 home games in European competitions, with the Yellow Army renowned for creating a hostile atmosphere for visiting teams while inspiring their own players.

However, it is not the fortress it once was. Indeed, Racing beat Clermont 28-17 there at the same stage two years

ago. If the Paris-based side can negate the effect of the home fans, they are likely to reach the last four.

KEY PLAYERS

Virimi Vakatawa's form for Racing has been outstanding. The dynamism of Finn Russell at ten has helped put him into space and the Fiji-born centre has made the most of it. Clermont's George Moala has also been hugely impressive this season, so keep an eye on who excels in midfield.

Yet the power of Racing's pack could just give them the edge over Clermont – and if they have good front-foot ball, Russell will be looking to weave his magic.

PREDICTION

Racing, by one point.



39

Defenders beaten by Racing centre **Virimi Vakatawa** (left) in this season's Champions Cup. Next on the list is Clermont's George Moala with 27

Try for Chiefs
Tom O' Flaherty scores
against Northampton



EXETER CHIEFS



NORTHAMPTON SAINTS

Saturday 4 April, 3.15pm, Sandy Park

OVERVIEW

This may not be the first time the sides meet in a knockout match this season, because Chiefs and Saints also lead the way in the Gallagher Premiership.

At the start of April, however, it will be Europe on the agenda. It's 20 years since Northampton were crowned European champions. In contrast, Exeter are relative newcomers to Europe's elite event and this is only their second foray into the quarter-finals.

Despite that, Exeter are third favourites with the bookies behind Leinster and Toulouse. They were unbeaten in the pool stages and secured the most try bonus points (five). Plus, if they win this tie they will have home country advantage in the semi-finals having qualified as second seeds.

CRITICAL BATTLE AREA

This could be something of a clash of styles. Saints have caught the eye with their

attack-orientated game plan while Exeter are known for a more pragmatic approach, with the power of their pack, particularly in the maul, often decisive.

Northampton have conceded nearly 11 penalties a game in the league and Leinster's power exposed flaws in their defence in the pool. So if Exeter can limit the opportunities for a visiting side that has been leading the way in England in terms of metres made and

clean breaks, they should reach the last four for the first time. After all, they have put 30-plus points past Northampton on Saints' last five visits to Sandy Park.

KEY PLAYERS

Dan Biggar has shown creativity with ball in hand at Northampton – and with players like Rory Hutchinson and Taquele Naiyaravoro outside him he can release plenty of running threats.

Chiefs have always been about the team ethos but No 8 Sam Simmonds continues to make a mockery of his England exclusion and Stuart Hogg has added an X-factor from 15.

PREDICTION

Exeter, by 12 points.



13

Offloads made by Northampton's Taquele Naiyaravoro (left) in the pool – the joint-most of any player with Toulouse's Sofiane Guitoune

CHAMPIONS CUP

QUARTER
FINALS



Looking for a lift
Leinster's Devin Toner wins
a lineout in last year's final

LEINSTER



SARACENS

Saturday 4 April, 5.45pm, Aviva Stadium

OVERVIEW

Even without the salary cap storm, this would be a mouth-watering tie; the off-field drama just adds more spice.

This will be the third time the teams have met in the Champions Cup knockout stages in as many years, with Leinster going on to lift the trophy after beating Saracens 30-19 in the last eight in 2018 and Saracens triumphing 20-10 over their Irish rivals in last year's final.

In seven of the past 11 seasons, one of these sides has been crowned European champions.

Leinster cruised through the pool, scoring 28 tries and conceding just nine – the most and least of all teams – to qualify as top seeds.

Saracens squeezed through as third-best runners-up. Few would bet against them in a knockout tie and, with Premiership relegation confirmed, this represents their only chance of silverware this year. But with so much disruption, pulling out a performance good enough to beat Leinster will be a huge ask.

CRITICAL BATTLE AREA

The breakdown contest between back rows of this quality will be fascinating.

Leinster openside Josh van der Flier is joint top of the turnover statistics, Rhys Ruddock and Scott Fardy can fill the workhorse role at blindside, and Max Deegan and Caelan Doris have both proved strong ball-carriers from No 8.

Billy Vunipola faces a race to be fit after breaking his arm, but Saracens

have depth with the likes of Ben Earl, Jackson Wray and Calum Clark in the mix, as well as Maro Itoje and Nick Isiekwe able to play at blindside.

KEY PLAYERS

The two tens, Johnny Sexton and Owen Farrell, captain their countries and will play a big role. Jordan Larmour will hope his footwork can outfox Sarries' defence while the visitors have dangerous runners, too, in the likes of Elliot Daly and Sean Maitland.

And that's before we get on to a front-row contest featuring Lions Tadhg Furlong, Cian Healy, Jamie George and Mako Vunipola.

PREDICTION

Leinster, by ten points.



98

Tackles made by Leinster flanker **Josh van der Flier** (left) – the most of any player in this season's Champions Cup pool stages

On red alert

Antoine Dupont gets away from Gloucester tacklers



TOULOUSE

V

ULSTER

Sunday 5 April, 3.15pm, Le Stadium

OVERVIEW

Two former champions meet in the South of France in the last quarter-final. Ulster lifted the title back in 1999 while Toulouse have won it on four occasions.

The French side haven't been back to a final since 2010 but are looking red-hot contenders this term. They topped their pool, winning all six games and conceding just 85 points, and have been playing the sort of sublime rugby that brought them so much silverware in the past. They top the offloads chart with 76 – that's more than 12 a game.

Ulster have impressed in the way they have ground out victories en route to the knockouts. There was a Jacob Stockdale intercept to deny Bath a match-winning try in round one and a 79th-minute penalty to condemn Harlequins to defeat in Belfast. Four of their five wins had single-figure margins.

Ulster won their last two matches against Toulouse, 38-0 in Belfast and 25-23 in Toulouse back in late

2015, but the French giants will be a different proposition this time around.

CRITICAL BATTLE AREA

A head-to-head between two of the form players in Europe? Yes please. Antoine Dupont is being touted as the world's best scrum-half while such has been the form of John Cooney there was shock when Conor Murray was preferred in Ireland's No 9 shirt.



Both players are talismans for their clubs, dictating matters through their kicking or sniping. With a vocal home crowd and the carrot of a final in Marseille to inspire Toulouse, Dupont is most likely to be on the winning side.

KEY PLAYERS

The Toulouse side is packed with Test quality – Dupont, Romain Ntamack, Cheslin Kolbe, Jerome Kaino, Julien Marchand... the list goes on.

Ulster have lots of internationals in their ranks, too, with Marcell Coetzee the standout overseas man next to Ireland stars like Iain Henderson and Jacob Stockdale.

PREDICTION

Toulouse, by 15 points.

71

Points scored by Ulster scrum-half **John Cooney** (left) in the pool stages this season – making him the top scorer in this European Cup



STEPHEN JONES

Rugby's most outspoken and influential journalist

“Replacements guarantee a climax of chaos, not tension”

Should rugby revert to a time when only injured players could be substituted? Stephen Jones certainly thinks so – here he explains why

BILL BEAUMONT, the chairman of World Rugby, is to act to stop mass pitch invasions by a group of people who I've always regarded as undesirables, intent on wrecking rugby matches.

You've guessed it. Beaumont wants to stop replacements making a farce of the game and believes that if he does, then the game will be safer, the hits will not be so punishingly hard, matches will be more dramatic and more

coherent late on. And that we will see the return of a type of player we used to adore – multi-talented, multi-positional players with the ability to play in two or three positions. Bill, now you're talking. This is long overdue.

Decades ago, they used to end the English rugby season with a quaint but popular tournament called the Middlesex Sevens, which sold out at Twickenham and did wonders for bar receipts.

One year, at a time when replacements were not allowed

WHAT DO YOU THINK?


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on a club rugby field, there was an injury to Keith Fielding, the wing who was then at Loughborough. He wrecked his knee ligaments but because of the lack of replacements the poor man had to stand out on the wing and stagger about in the hope some fool carrying the ball would run straight into him for the tackle.

Gradually, replacements became part of the scene. At first, and right up until 1996, you could only replace a player if an official doctor had deemed the player →



All change please
Tendai Mtawarira is replaced by
Steven Kitshoff in the World Cup final



Reinforcements
The Leinster bench

➔ unfit to continue. There used to be little pantomimes where doctors would drag a hobbling unfortunate up and down the touchline trying to assess whether he had pulled his hamstring or whether he was pulling a fast one. This all became a farce when it became clear that team doctors had lost their independence and were taking orders from their own head coaches. Mystery injuries became the norm. The next stage was that people began to call for that contradiction in terms – an independent doctor – to proclaim whether your man was injured or not. So in 1996 they gave up trying to police it and allowed tactical replacements. Not because they thought it was a good

idea but because they could not enforce the old regulation. Gradually the number of tactical replacements allowed has crept up so that now, in the big Test matches and other major professional games, you have enough players on the bench to change more than half your team. If you add to the normal replacement flow such matters as sin-bin reversing, Head Injury Assessments (HIAs) and changes to the three specialist positions up front – loosehead, hooker and tighthead – then the last quarter of any match resembles one of those old silent *Keystone Cops* movies. If you're not old enough to remember them, then just imagine hordes of people rushing back and forth for no apparent reason. That is exactly what the closing stages of rugby matches can now resemble, and it usually guarantees a climax of chaos rather than tension and sporting merit. There is another drawback. Up to 16 fierce, fit and fresh monsters arrive and this ensures that the essential brutality of modern-day rugby is maintained. You're supposed to get tired, for God's sake. It's like allowing a runner just to run the last mile of a marathon. Beaumont wants to revert, and *Rugby World* understands that he has powerful support amongst World Rugby's laws grandees. "I do worry that it's become a game for big people," Beaumont told



Board games
A replacement is signalled

BENCHMARK

How the replacement laws have changed at the top level

1968 Substitutions first allowed if a player was injured. Mike Gibson was the first-ever replacement in a Test, coming on for Barry John (broken collarbone) in the SA v Lions first Test

1996 Tactical substitutions introduced. Six players on the bench, with five allowed to come on as tactical changes and all six for injury

1998 The bench increased to seven replacements and all could come on for tactical reasons

2012 The bench increased to eight replacements, three of which had to cover the front-row positions

The Daily Telegraph. "You've got players who only play 50 minutes because of the use of substitutes. In the old days, in the last 20 minutes of the game it all opened up because fatigue came into it. But fatigue doesn't come into it now because teams just make wholesale changes." England coach Eddie Jones has spoken frequently about the need for fatigue to enter a game to allow a team to take advantage and to prosper. Beaumont's initial proposal is not just to reduce the number of replacements allowed, but that the game should revert to the days when replacements were allowed only after injury was confirmed in the departing player.



Up to eight super-fit, super-fresh beasts arrive to augment each side, so the ferocity never wavers

That is radical. A lot of work would be needed because of the likelihood of doctors being in league with their coaches. The HIA is there to check on head injuries, we can see dislocations with our own eyes, but is there a test to confirm a pulled hamstring or a twisted knee? In principle, Beaumont's ideas are wonderful but they need considerable thought to enforce them in practice.

However, consider the upside if he succeeds. His prime motivation is safety and, as he says, at present up to eight super-fit and super-fresh beasts arrive to augment each side, so the level of ferocity and the power of the hits in a match never wavers. In past days one team tended to fade quicker than the other, now it seems that both teams are blasting away at each other until the final whistle. And the hits never weaken.

To revert to injury replacements only would see the game reach some sort of climax, would provide due rewards for the superior team. Why do you deserve to bring on a replacement prop, say, if your starting prop has not been good enough?

Gaps for attacking play will arrive towards the end. And the power of the hits would lessen. Matches would climax towards the end, whereas now the key time is around 50 to 60 minutes; so often, the last quarter of games are grim, halting and disorganised.

Players might complain that they are no longer trained to last 80 minutes. Tough. So what? All that happens is that the fitness trainers and the players change their approaches, plan to stay on the field for the whole game and to be there for the whole way. It is all very well being able to call up a legion of 'superheroes', but it is quite another to make the game safer. What is the problem with training to play for 80 minutes? Teams did it for a century and more.

Best of all, those long-forgotten players will return to the game.

These days, coaches are only happy with ultra-specialists. Almost every professional rugby player can, it seems, survive in one position only.

But remember the time of multi-talents, when props were equally able to play on either side of the scrum? They could seamlessly switch. Matt Stevens of Bath and England was one such, and the line of the versatile props goes back to the great Fran Cotton himself.

In the 1974 Lions series in South Africa he was on the tighthead in the pack that

crushed the home side; in 1977 he was on the loosehead in a pack that embarrassed the All Blacks in the forward exchanges.

If teams are given, say, one year's notice of a cut in the number of replacements allowed, props can work at becoming equally effective on either side of the scrum or perhaps even work on being able to move to hooker. These days the hookers are all prop-sized anyway. We must get over this idea that to ask a player to move about two yards to his left or right is some horrible equivalent of banishing him to a wilderness on Mars.

It's the same in the backs. There used to be the concept of the utility player, always handy to take on tour. If they slashed the number of replacements allowed, the utility player would be back with a vengeance. Austin Healey could switch effortlessly from scrum-half to fly-half to full-back. So, too, many others, but these days wings tend to throw a wobbler if you ask them to change from the left to the right. Hardly radical.

What happens now? Beaumont's idea will be referred to the World Rugby laws and medical groups. Provided a workable new regulation framework is established, then it would have to be trialled in various competitions.

Say that as a start they reduced replacements from eight to five. Two would be front-rowers, and at least one of those could play in another front-row position. Then there would be one forward to cover all the back five. There would be two backs to cover every position, perhaps an inside back and an outside back.

How would you sort the biased doctor problem? Just one solution perhaps: if your coach wanted to bring a player off but the independent match doctor could not confirm that he was too injured to carry on, you could make a tactical replacement. But only one tactical replacement would be allowed per match. For the rest of the time, the match doctor's word would be law.

There are many difficulties ahead, but well done big Bill for guarding the field against the hordes. Trust me, the game would improve dramatically. And think of the laundry bills you would save. **RW**





TOO MUCH TOO SOON

Investigation **Alan Dymock** // Illustration **Charlotte Chesher**

Life comes at you fast. For a few unlucky young rugby pros, it can be too fast.

In this **special report**, we look at why the physical and mental demands of the game can overwhelm, and celebrate those who ensure the kids are alright →

Special Report

H **E WAS** earmarked as special, early. As one respected youth mentor tells us, “He was described by top coaches as the next England tighthead.” But things didn’t quite pan out like that for Jack Stanley.

Brought into Exeter for his second of two years with Truro College, he played A league and LV= Cup in 2015 and trained with the first team. But soon he decided he did not want that life. As the Cornish native tells *Rugby World*: “There was a small element of being exposed to it all too soon. I must have been 18 when I had this feeling come down that I didn’t want to be at Chiefs.”

The prop was not coerced to sign up and is full of praise for the academy and coaches in Exeter. But after struggling with a broken wrist, enjoyment sapping away in the rehab room as frustrations he could not verbalise grew, there were months of “feeling s**t; I felt pretty depressed”. He abruptly walked away from the club, not even consulting his parents before making the decision.

In two years out, he moved on to “12-hour days stacking shelves in a supermarket” and his weight climbed to 155kg before he realised what rugby could be for him if he started over.

Now 23, Stanley (right) grabbed a prospect opened up by friends and is on a dual contract with Edinburgh and Super6 side Watsonians. He says he’s loving his second year in the Scottish capital, grinding within Richard Cockerill’s structure there, happily working back from a time when he felt he had to run away from the sport.

He also harbours no ill feelings and adds of his departure: “To be fair, Rob Baxter (Chiefs boss) was great about it all. He was always very understanding and apologetic – he said pretty much that they probably put too much on me as a youngster.”

On current practice, Chiefs academy head Rob Gibson tells us: “We have to make sure players are emotionally ready, they are physically ready. We are looking to put players in the Premiership at the right time, sometimes 21, 22, but it changes. It’s getting tougher due to the strength of our squad.

“Education is paramount – that’s the (focus) we push.



Success story
George Ford made his pro debut at 16

But not every player wants to go that way, so we’ve got to try to find what’s best. You don’t always get it right, the individual doesn’t always get it right. You have to adapt to support (players).”

For those who pride themselves on developing talent, lessons along the way must be vitally important, for all parties. Of course by nature the sport is confrontational. It is not for everyone.

In a recent column for *The Irish Times* about entitled young athletes, former Leinster and Scotland coach Matt Williams wrote: “The privileged life of professional sport is not offered to many people and there are many doors that can quickly take you out of it.” He praised the virtues of being selfless, hard-working and willing to sacrifice.

By his own admission, Stanley says bad habits crept into his game when he thought he’d made it. But he’s glad to have seen the real world out there and is knuckling down now.

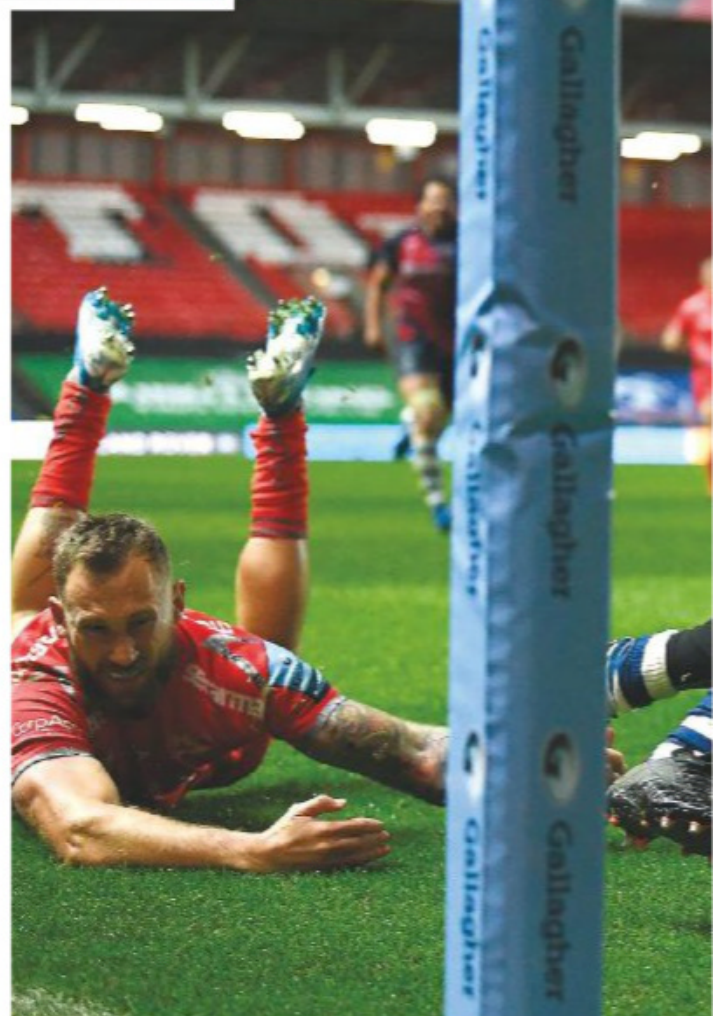
Yet, as you will read, there is much to be aware of when dealing with kids. We want them to love it.

This report looks not to point fingers or pretend there is widespread crisis. It is to show what young, ambitious players can face; the mental load, hits, added pressures. We heard stories of great work, worthy of praise. Many reflect on experiences – good and bad – constructively.

There may not be many getting it wrong but we must still safeguard against too much, too soon for future stars...

MENTAL LOAD

Stanley says that what was missing for him was the ear of

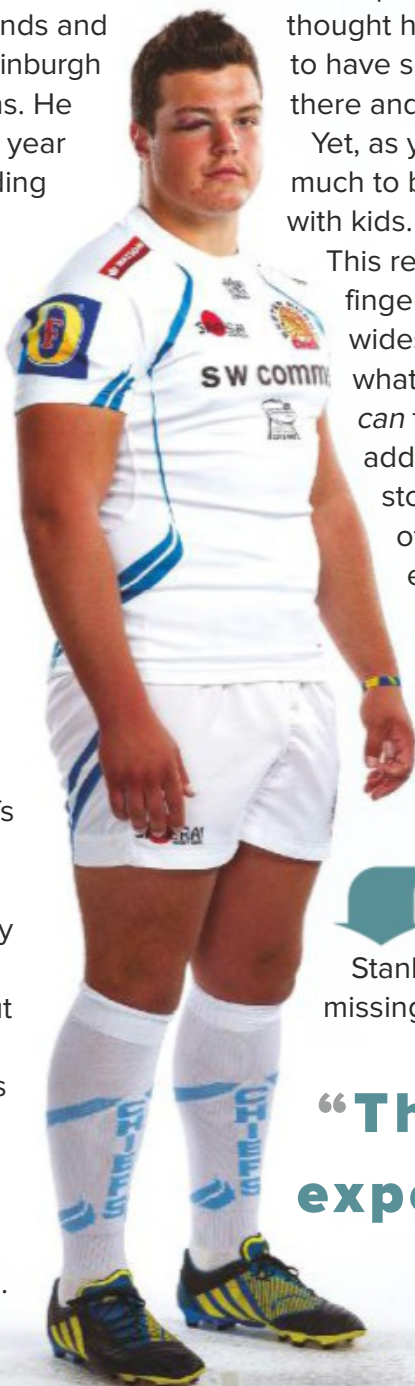


someone who knew what he was going through. As he says: “I just feel like I should have had a bit of guidance. There wasn’t really anybody else in that situation from my college that I could relate to. I didn’t really have anyone I could share the experience with or know how to get it right, so that I didn’t end up falling out of love with it.”

He also holds his hands up and says he could have been proactive and sought others to talk to – everything was new, but “acting tough was a big part of it, because that’s probably the most important characteristic that you need to have just to play the game”.

Creating a better pathway for younger players to discuss issues is something more people in the game are working towards. But as Jack’s tale makes clear, watching how players ‘transition’ is key.

“There was an element of being exposed to it all too soon. I must have been 18 when I felt it”





Well managed The way Bristol integrate talents like loan Lloyd has been praised

The Rugby Players' Association (RPA) tells us: "Our welfare programmes, such as 'Gain Line', have focused on academy players for many years, as we're acutely aware of the transition pressures involved in players coming from a school environment into a senior professional rugby environment and then, a year or years later, making the transition into a senior squad, a different level of rugby or out of the professional game completely."

A Premiership-wide study is underway to look at what young players deal with, as new experiences and pressures mount. The RPA adds: "We are aware of the psychological load faced by academy players and, together with the RFU, Premiership Rugby and Cardiff Met University, are undertaking (soon to be completed) research in this area."

The RPA cannot be the only people considering mental load management. However, related studies are too few.

In the 2020 paper *Applied Sport Science for Male Age-Grade Rugby Union in England*, Professor Stephen Mellalieu of Cardiff Met wrote part of it

on 'psychological challenges and development'. It went: "Psychology is acknowledged as a key determinant in the realisation of potential and long-term success in sport, especially rugby union. However, despite this importance, the prevalence of systematic psychological inquiry into both senior and youth populations worldwide in the sport is scarce. To date, five studies have investigated the psychological challenges and developmental demands faced by age-grade English RU players. These studies have focused upon the stress and coping experiences of players and the psychological factors contributing to successful talent development."

Later in the paper, it summarises: "RU players face a range of psychological demands and adopt numerous strategies to cope with these challenges... Understanding the psychological characteristics that facilitate and derail progression can enhance coaches' player

assessment when identifying and supporting youth rugby union players.

"Given the limited literature to date, future research should seek to examine in greater depth the psychological demands age-grade RU players from England face, the skills/strategies deployed to successfully transition to the elite professional level and the factors (eg, personal, situational, organisational and cultural) that mediate this progression."

It would be naive to assume as we talk about load and transition that we are suggesting mollycoddling kids is the way ahead. According to ex-England U18 coach Russell Earnshaw, they'd prefer to play fixtures away from home, often with younger sides than their opponents, with players exploring new positions. Small bumps in the road were desirable.

Someone who has looked at the youth game through an academic prism is Jamie Taylor, who was an academy



Winning feeling Leicester's youngsters

head coach at Leicester Tigers and now works as a senior performance pathway scientist for the English Institute of Sport, out of Loughborough University.

"What is widespread is those who have it too easy falling away," Taylor tells us. For him, it's a disaster if any kids cruise through school racking up wins, reach rep rugby and it happens again but then

at the first knock – a sharp rise in training standards with the pros, playing badly or picking up an injury – they aren't equipped to handle it.

"Someone who has an earlier birthday in an age group has a two-to-three times greater chance of being selected for a talent platform. That's called the 'relative age effect'. However, ➔

DID YOU KNOW?

In 2020, 81 first-year academy players have attended RPA sessions on: mental wellbeing, social media, media training, personal responsibility and the law, finding your place, overcoming adversity.



Working on the neck
Young players in Lyon

➔ the data at senior level shows those numbers flattening out.

“So you might be twice as likely to be selected for a talent pathway, but you are far less likely to make it at top level.”

For Taylor, asking about ‘too much, too soon’ is the wrong question – it’s more about ‘how hard is it and for how long?’ Progression is better than sharp inclines.

He’d also like to see more education to help academies manage challenge levels appropriately and for standards of schools rugby to be raised to support long-term player development.

Taylor wants tailored plans for existing talent. A watered-down version of first-team training won’t cut it. But any plan must consider the physical side too.

PHYSICAL TOLL

“Rugby is a unique sport and I don’t think there’s another sport in the world like it,” says Peter Walton, the popular coach who led the England U18 programme for years alongside John Fletcher. Yet when asked if he thinks we often assume that academy prospects come out the sausage machine ready for the senior pro game, he answers in the affirmative. And for him we need to consider the physical maturity of kids.

“We think, ‘Yeah, he can bench-press 180kg – he’s strong’. But that doesn’t mean he’s strong enough to scrummage.

“That worries me. That people think anybody is coming out and it’s ‘Right, you’re a big-framed lad, we’ll get you in the front row.’ It doesn’t mean his whole body is ready for it. My motto is there’s no rush. I feel we rush people.”

It is worth pointing out that Walton played in Newcastle with Jonny Wilkinson – “one of the first ones who really got the chance at a young age to play the game as it got professional” –

and he is now managing the youth in Gloucester, where teenage sensation Louis Rees-Zammit is tearing up trees against Premiership foes. Walton has seen a few different approaches.

He is also realistic enough to realise clubs have necessities. There is only so much money you can throw at a squad and there are fixtures to fulfil. For each fixture you need two full front rows. For him, you should have at least ten props in your squad and with some youngsters.

Injuries mean that some, not ready for full games yet, may go in. He gets that. What irks him is something else.

“There have been other times, I know, where people put players in because they think they’re good enough,” Walton says. “It’s ‘He’s played age-group rugby’ or ‘He was an U18 prop’. And they are good enough (at rugby) but strength-wise, under their skeleton, under their skin, are they really good enough yet?”

“That’s what worries me – that we don’t know what’s under them. We don’t know how developed neck muscles are and sure they can go on machines and push things, but are they really ready? I’m not so sure they are. I’ve spoken to guys who should be further on in their careers and aren’t. I’m convinced they were pushed into that environment a bit early.”

Walton’s next point is important: he is adamant no one does that on purpose. He also believes that every player, every scenario and every club is different. Everyone wishes they knew the exact right time to throw someone into action.

But before we jump to the medical view, it is worth getting a player’s perspective on the physical side.

Walton, and many others, believe that were it not for a career-ending neck injury, Falcons prop Scott Wilson would



End of the road
Scott Wilson’s neck injury in the Premiership semi-final

“Strength-wise, under their skeleton, under their skin, are they really good enough yet?”

WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT

“If you’ve got a long-term view of youth your players will be in a better space,” writes *Northampton Saints DoR* Chris Boyd of how they integrate starlets.

“They also need to know that you trust and have faith in them, physically and mentally. Three or four times we’ve given guys opportunities and they’ve not actually played well but it’s a great part of their learning. It’s individual development, as well as performance.

have had a special career for England. So when Walton says that if he could have one wish, he would want all young players to suddenly “think long-term” it chimes with Wilson’s view on his time.

“I wasn’t your average kid leaving school,” says Wilson, who did labouring upon retiring. “I was slightly bigger and able to handle myself. Looking back, whether that benefited me or maybe the brakes should have been put on

“When I arrived I made a decision to have a coaching group of young, English, high-potential talents. That’s slid into the playing group. I’m not naive enough to miss competency in that group, but Owen Franks can bring on young props like Ehren Painter and Paul Hill. But they can’t get impatient.

“The biggest issue is fear of failure. I remember when

Painter played Clermont in the Challenge Cup and got dusted by their prop. He was pretty dark but in years to come he’ll do the same to someone else. So it was a great day for learning.”



Saints prospect
Ollie Sleightholme, 19

so I wasn’t exposed to so much at a young age, I am not 100% sure about it.

“Because I would never say that I was pushed to play, but in my own head I probably pushed myself through injuries when I should have maybe taken a backwards step, with being so young.

“I’ve never spoken to anyone about it, but when I started at the Falcons at 18 I felt like I was bottom of the chain, I had no right to moan or complain or have my opinions. My mindset was just to get my head down and graft and hopefully gain respect through that.

“That sort of mentality maybe meant that in some training sessions, maybe games, I was playing through injuries – be it my lower back, which I had problems with for a number of years. I probably could have done with a bit more education on how to handle yourself with some injuries. Not just trying to be a hero or grit my teeth.”

Yet how can you know you need something like that? Coaches can’t read minds when youngsters bottle things up.

Wilson thought the Falcons academy was brilliant – a point we hear several times. He has no regrets and despite

his career length, says: “I loved it.” Yet when talking about physical demands, he makes an interesting point.

“I wouldn’t say it’s about all the rugby but the amount of training as well. Realistically, you’re hitting a lot more scrums in training in the week than you do in the game. You probably make more tackles in the week as well.”

This is where we introduce Lesley McBride, a former physio for England U20 and a physiotherapy lecturer doing a PhD on neck strength in rugby players. The RFU, FA and Formula One figures are interested in her findings. And when Wilson wanted to talk about his final injury, guess who he called...

“What I know is all about adolescence and how that is a period of vulnerability,” McBride says. “They are more susceptible to injury when they reach peak height velocity and peak weight velocity due to the combination of new bone formation and increased load.

“The question is if coaches at all levels understand the different requirements of adolescents, and if so, can they modify training to account for these variables? Adolescence is generally categorised into early (ten-13), middle (14-16) and late (16-20). However, chronological age and skeletal/somatic growth often follow a less predictable and fixed sequence.

“The clavicle (collarbone) is the final bone in the body to fuse, at around the age of 21, so it’s not really a surprise that the second-highest incidence of injury in the Junior World Championship (after concussion) is the AC joint at the shoulder.

“Then consider scientific understanding around sleep. When the adolescent is asked to do gym training at 7am, in terms of their circadian rhythm it’s similar to asking an adult to do it at 3 or 4am. This is a recipe for disaster in terms of sleep deprivation and its impact on injury rate. Adult coaching principles cannot be applied to adolescents and yet I know that in many cases younger players’ sessions are not planned around



Hitting the sled A typical scrum session, at New Zealand’s Hurricanes

Special Report

→ the large body of evidence that surrounds their physical development.” McBride likens physiotherapy to avoiding a cliff edge. You cannot wait for them to be broken at the bottom to help.

The answer, she believes, is coaches listening to and learning from the academics and the science available. Wellness testing, on the whole, is done well she adds, but you must be aware of the signs that you are overloading or, just as important, underloading players.

For example, if some are at a Premiership club and don’t play at a high standard regularly enough or train at a certain intensity often enough, they can ‘spike’ their load when it’s time to play U20 games; they’d suddenly have much more high-level training and competition than they’re used to, increasing risk.

McBride sees poor tackling as a red flag for potential neck injury, albeit a harder one to spot in open play. If a youngster isn’t up to elite standard in the scrum it can be obvious from the get-go and you can take them out and work on it. But like Wilson, there’s another aspect of the scrum she wants us to monitor.

“How many scrums are in a match?” she asks rhetorically. “An average of 13. Now how many scrums do they do in a training session *in a row*? Over and over again. And do people prepare for that aspect in the gym, then? No, they don’t.

“So I’ve stripped it right back to saying that for a game of rugby, which is live and intense and difficult, that you train for that sensibly. That’s doing a few scrums in each rugby session in the week – not one big scrum session, otherwise you are really stressing that neck. What we know is that as soon as the neck muscles get fatigued, your balance goes so you’re more prone to other injuries and you can’t do everything you need in a game as well.

So if we looked after them from an earlier age and we planned sessions more to mimic what a game looked like, you would be protecting them.”

At the highest levels, McBride believes this happens because coaches are well educated. And with her research, which hopes to produce a standardised measurement of neck strength, she reckons teams all over the world can better determine a young player’s readiness to play on the biggest stages.

For the moment at least, you cannot tally it all. So it is about entrusting a system to do the right thing. In Bristol there is another set-up earning praise.

According to senior academy manager Gethin Watts, careful consideration goes into planning for the long-term needs of each player. Look at their breakout star, 18-year-old playmaker Ioan Lloyd.

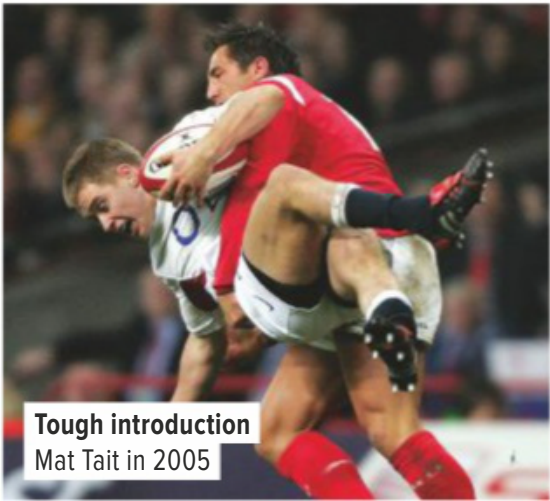
“It was too much for my mistake. I killed nobody but journalists tried to go to my mother’s house”

“If you look at the amount of minutes Ioan has played, the exposure he has had has outshone the actual number of minutes he’s had. That’s actually down to design. It’s not by accident. He’s had small introductions to prepare himself for lots of minutes later down the line.”

INTERNATIONAL ACTS

If we want to talk about the greatest stage, we must talk Tests and the desire to one day get there. For some of those who make the climb early, though, there can be perils aplenty along the way.

We all know the story of Mat Tait in 2005, making his England debut at 18, being manhandled by Gavin Henson



against Wales, dropped the next week. And on that Tait tells *Rugby World*, when asked if he was handled well by his national side afterwards: “Probably not!”

He believes that from a rugby perspective, dropping him was the right call but he adds: “We went back into camp on a Monday or Tuesday and I dropped out of the 23. And then I think I had to go down and watch the France game (in round two) which was torture.”

It became a national discussion. Tait wouldn’t make that side again until June 2006. He is certain that the coach at the time, Andy Robinson, and his staff will have learnt from how they used him.

Later echoing the sentiment, Tait adds: “Sport is all about failure but also after you make mistakes on and off the pitch – players, coaches, management. The important thing is taking the learnings from that to move both individual and team performance forward as the game evolves.”

In the years since, Tait has noticed an increase in public dialogues about being in a healthy place, mentally, saying: “Ultimately, if someone is in a good mental space, you will get the best version of them, whether that be in an office or on a field in front of 80,000.”

He feels Falcons’ choice to let him play sevens was great man management

and helped him to evade the spotlight. But he’s wary of social media traps for kids. It is an area of intense discussion today.

Tait tells us: “When people texted me after the Wales game – friends meaning well, saying ‘Don’t read anything, you did really well’ – I thought f*** off, stop texting me! I don’t want to know, even if it’s not



Current crop Sam Mauger leads out England U20. Such players have years of development ahead

DID YOU KNOW?

Mat Tait completed a masters degree at the University of Salford in September, on sports directorship. His dissertation looked at the impact of private equity investment in the Premiership.



Skip and a jump
Australian fly-half Quade Cooper learnt the hard way

PICS Getty Images

specifics, I know I'm dealing with this anyway. So imagine what players like Quade Cooper, Danny Cipriani – players who are potentially polarising – have to deal with, being on a platform that allows keyboard warriors to abuse them.”

Before social media really forced its way into our lives, though, there was a band of young players introduced to the very top level early, who know all about the glare. Players like Tait and Cooper, but also Mathieu Bastareaud.

“In France it was a big, big, big, big story,” Bastareaud says of the 2009 controversy when he was sent home from a tour in New Zealand for lying about falling over and injuring his face after a drunken night, claiming at first he was assaulted by five Kiwi locals.

“The prime minister talked about it in the newspapers. A lot of people talked badly about me. That was very hard for me but more for my family.

“They knew I made a mistake but all those bad comments, for me it was too much for my mistake. I killed nobody but some journalists tried to go to my mother's house, call my father with withheld numbers. It was very hard for my family and friends.

“But at the end of this story I think it made me stronger. After that I see the real face of professional world rugby. After my international debut I was successful, I was on the top. But in two

months people talked of me like I was garbage and I was finished with rugby.”

In his autobiography, Bastareaud later revealed the horror and dysfunction back home in France, of drinking and a suicide attempt. He was just 21.

Aftercare. If we learn anything from these two stories from the spotlight we can deduce that talking to youngsters at the top end, where it's toughest, is vital. Both feel they learnt from the time, but would you want others to go through it?

There is no manual for all this. Though there are some things you can learn along the way. Eventually, somehow.

Ever since his Super Rugby debut at 18 for the Reds, Quade Cooper has caused

chatter in Australia. He was a Wallaby by 20. He tells us: “It's not like when you're well-known at school but you're still just kids. I don't want to use the word ‘famous’ but as a public figure, like it or not, what you do has an impact. After my first season I didn't understand that. I just wanted to be an 18-year-old kid.”

There was something else too. “I didn't understand much about money. I'd never had it, my family never had it. So I'd never had advice. Who could you go to?

“I learnt the hard way. I'd spend all my money, pay cheque to pay cheque, every cent, because I knew it would fill back up. There was a lightbulb moment in the Australia U20 camp. A team-mate had just put a deposit down on a house. He was telling me about it and I thought, ‘I've not even bought a house.’ He saved for two years, while I was getting paid way more a week.”

He acknowledges the infantilising nature of rugby – performance is often the focus. So he found help via his agent. Sounds simple, but he still sees young players baffled by money.

Yet Cooper also sees a lot more teams getting it right, offering help and giving good advice. And he finishes with a point that sums up so much: the ideal, he says, is to have support networks in place so you can err and learn – without leaving a legacy of damage. **RW**



Torrid time
Bastareaud in 2009



STIRLING COUNTY

Words **Alan Dymock** // Pictures **Robert Perry**

On Scotland's famous Burns Night, **ALAN DYMOCK** takes in some Super6 rugby action under the looming Wallace Monument...



T

THE STARS are aligned. Everything falls into place. On the unique crossover of Burns Night and Chinese New Year – or as one mate down the pub dubbed it, Chinese Burns – we are in Stirling to see County's first home win in the FOSROC Super6 league.

Do you not know much about the new competition? Well, currently made up of six teams (Ayrshire Bulls, Boroughmuir Bears, Heriot's, Stirling, Southern Knights and today's opponents, Watsonians), it is a semi-professional division championed by Scottish rugby supremo Mark Dodson. The idea is to have a step between the traditional club game and the two professional sides.

There have been grumbles in some quarters about the selection process for the franchises, with three Edinburgh teams, Stirling the sole representative of

the Caledonia region and no side playing in Glasgow. Unsurprisingly, there are some who think it is just another mad reshuffle from business heads who don't really know the grass-roots game, while those who support the plan are aware that season one will be a bit all over the place due to the timings.

For one season only, the competition runs from November to March, thanks to the Rugby World Cup, meaning conditions can be dicey – remember, Stirling is a place where flooding at the car park entrance has necessitated transfer by dinghy in the recent past.

There are play-offs and a final in March, then from April there will be a cross-border tournament between the Scottish six and Welsh Premiership sides. Then next term it's all about a first full season running with a traditional season schedule, with better weather. ➔

THE BASICS //

Home Stirling is as central as you get. Part of the Caledonia region, it's 26 miles from Glasgow and 37 miles from Edinburgh.

Team colours Red, black and white hoops.

Stadium Bridgehaugh Park, which has allotments on one side and the imposing Wallace Monument on the other.

Greatest player A lot of mighty fine talents have come through here, such as Kenny Logan, Ian Jardine, Ally Hogg, Al Kellock, Finn Russell and Grant Gilchrist. But few summed up the on- and off-field ethos of Stirling County quite like their 1995 league-winning skipper Stuart Hamilton.



Huddle up
Stirling after
their victory

Happy catering staff
Gemma Gilmore and
Alesha McNabney



Power up!
Touchside



Welcome To My Club

➔ “I think there’ll be a big change when we get into season two and everyone sees how it’s actually going to run,” says County head coach Ben Cairns, the ex-Edinburgh and Scotland centre. In with the bricks at Currie, when that side failed to win a place in the Super6, Cairns joined up with Stirling.

“That will be really important – there’s less clash with the club game, there will be better weather and you can probably back up games on our main pitch. So we could have a club XV play and then we play after them. All of that is possible because of the weather we play in.”

So what are the challenges of starting out in this new league, being more pro?

“You’re constantly thinking on your feet and finding new barriers to try to get across,” says Cairns. “It’s challenging in the first instance in terms of recruiting 35 players, building a squad of 35.

“Because we’re doing it at the same time as five other franchises. We’re all looking at the same pool of players really, and the pool is not that deep. We don’t have huge amounts of money to go and just pull from everywhere in the world. So the core of the squad was either here already or guys in and around (central Scotland) already.

“But the level of competition has definitely been a step up. And I think that will become more apparent when we get into the usual season.

“I reckon we’ve tripled our time on task, going from club environment to Super6 environments. So we train Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, five to nine. And the physical conditioning of players has improved a lot. I think it will continue to improve as players get used to it all and get the balance with running what else they’ve got in their lives.”

Cairns isn’t the only person involved with the club who has seen a physical change with some players who were purely amateur here before. However, no one is going overboard with the word ‘professional’ around here.

The cap for the whole squad is £125k, with an individual player cap of £12k. So there are students supplementing their lifestyle, while others fit it in around their work. As we are told, there are some who “get next to no money from this because they want to be part of it”.

While we are on numbers, Cairns calculates that the average age of his squad is 22.6 years old (though visiting Watsonians head coach Fergus Pringle, who was assistant to the calculating



Towering
A lineout below the
Wallace monument

Cairns at Currie in the past, jokes with us: “Knowing Ben, it’s probably 22.63!”).

Looking at more figures, before round eight of the new league kicked off, competition organisers were keen to point out that the average number of tries scored in each fixture was six. Also, the average points difference in each of the fixtures was ten points. The average attendance? That was 790.

Rightly, people here are proud of this club’s heritage and the stream of quality players that come from the area. If the grand plan to have junior games, senior games and semi-pro games all in one place on a match day next term comes

Orders up!

Dymock serves
the pints





Pointing the way The main entrance to the clubhouse and changing rooms at the 140-year-old club



to fruition, legacy should be obvious. Sitting with president Lorne Boswell, he explains that before deciding to ‘audition’ for one of the Super6 places, amongst the motivations to do so was that County didn’t want to be just an academy for the rest of the country.

There is another little story he tells us, when entrance to this competition was under discussion between those who love the club, that sums the place up.

“We had a meeting down here,” Boswell begins with a smile. “We had about 40 in there, for the guys and girls. And we said to them, ‘Should we do Super6?’ And we’d had this discussion, particularly about being a feeder club for everybody else. Oh yeah. Then somebody stood up at the back and said, ‘Don’t come up with some new identity – if we’re going to do it, we do it as Stirling County!’ So that’s why we decided we are staying with the Stirling County name!”

Boswell goes on to explain that next season the hope is for nearby fans of other clubs to come and see what the new competition is like and to give this new outfit a chance, with old rivalries nothing to do with this fresh project. The amateur side here still exists if they want a rival – though they changed their name, becoming the Wolves (a nod to the club

badge, in case any of you wondered whether it was a labrador or overfed fox!).

There is a bit of a buzz about former players coming back and getting excited about fixtures, too. A table of names from the Nineties can be heard laughing away during the

lunch service. This is held up as a sign that maybe some regular faces from years gone by will want to come back to the clubhouse here more often than they had done in recent seasons.

We also get a guided tour of the gym facility, a well-kept space that not only caters for County’s needs but for those of the regional academy sometimes.

Things, it appears, are modernising at a steady rate around these parts. However, as we stand about shooting the breeze, something else catches the corner of the eye. At the bar, a few of the taps have a logo of an elderly gentleman in County kit, enjoying a beer. That, we are informed, is the local lager dedicated to club member Easton Roy. We are also told it was the players who decided the drink needed his name.

“I still play the occasional game for the club,” Roy tells us as we catch him by

the refreshments stand. “I am 96 years old and I will turn 97 in March.

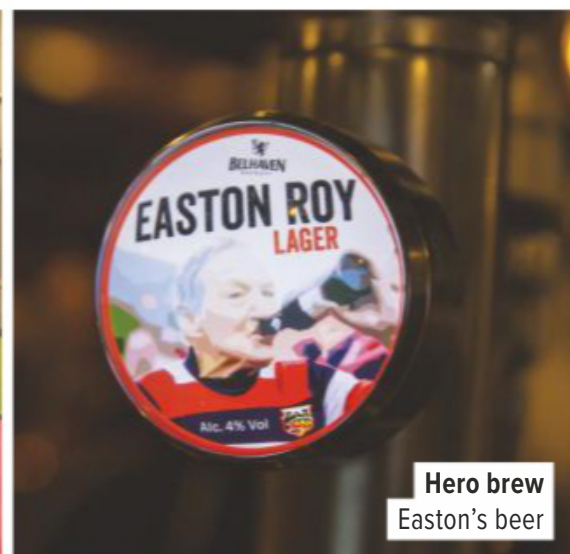
“I have been a member of this club since 1946, after the War. I had never played rugby until I joined the services. I didn’t go to a school that taught rugby – there was only one school that taught rugby (when I was young) in Stirling and I went to a technical school, Riverside.

“In the services, overseas, I met some Welshmen, around 1941. They wanted to get a team together and saw me in the gym lifting weights. They said, ‘We’re looking for a forward.’ I said I didn’t know the game and they said, ‘See that funny-shaped ball? Follow it but don’t get in front of it!’ Eventually I fell into it.

“I still play because I just love the game. The social side I like, though it’s not the same these days. I enjoy the game, and after the game you’d have a dram and you enjoyed it. The game is not the same though – there are all these scrums and lifting up now. Before you just had to jump for the ball!

“Oh yes, this club means a lot to the people of Stirling. Especially winning!”

Having characters like Roy, you can all agree, is something to treasure about a local club. Which is why you can imagine keeping the name with the side on the newest stage in the national ➔



Welcome To My Club

➔ game would be important and also why identity is a theme many are conscious of on this new journey.

Club stalwarts John Wright and Ian Jardine pull me into a back office while speeches carry over at the lunch club. That snazzy gym was Wright’s pet project when he was president here, while Jardine looks bashful when I ask the pair who County’s greatest-ever player is and his mate points at him.

Both start off by talking about the 200 kids coming through in the morning on Saturdays, with the place a beacon for local rugby talents. Jardine explains that what is also a real draw is “good, enthusiastic coaching”. In the same breath he recalls the time before professionalism when Stirling would play Northampton and Cardiff, leading into a period where “half the Glasgow and Caley guys were from Stirling”.

As Wright says: “You’d look at an international programme before and it would be ‘Ian Jardine – Stirling County. Kenny Logan – Stirling County.’ Now you open it and it’s ‘Grant Gilchrist from Edinburgh’ and ‘Adam Ashe from Glasgow’.”

However, while some in Scotland clench fists and glare at the new league, wondering what it all means, Jardine believes that while you are joining in with it you can still honour your past.

“I know you can’t always keep what you had,” he says. “When we were



youngsters coming through, we had about five teams, plus a social side. We will never get that back, but if you can have rugby throughout your club that’s a combination of different levels, so that whoever wants to play rugby – so an Easton Roy can still play rugby – that makes your rugby club vibrant.

“If your club is only aiming at the top end you lose a lot of the characters. When we were coming through there



was an interest in youngsters, because they knew they would develop the club. We’ve got to keep that and that’s one of the good things with the Wolves side.”

As for the game here, Stirling pull off the miraculous, handing Watsonians only their second defeat, coming back from 24-12 down to win 27-24.

No 8 Alasdair Mackie roars along to a hat-trick of scores, while coach Cairns is thankful for the experience and guile of Sean Kennedy at nine. Josh Henderson is another name they say to look out for.

As Super6 reaches its first final, many want us to reserve judgement until next term. Yet what you can respect now is County’s respect for past and future. **RW**

STIRLING OUT OF 10

ATMOSPHERE



Okay – particularly after a win – though not as busy as their game against the Southern Knights.

7

FOOD



The buffet lunch looked good but we only had eyes for the Scotch pechs. A national classic.

7

PINT



The Schiehallion was good, the Guinness alright, and the Easton Roy deserves a big ol’ nod.

8

TOILETS



Decent enough, once you learn how to navigate the clubrooms. Never too busy either.

7



OVERALL

29

FOCUS ON... CLUB RUGBY

On a mission
Sunderland first XV



CONTRIBUTORS Paul Bolton & Brian Owen, PICS Andrew Neilson

Team of the Month Sunderland

OVAL AND round ball overlap at Sunderland RFC, where former pro footballer Leon Ryan is full-back and goalkicker. Ryan was once on Middlesbrough's books and played in England's lower leagues and in Finland before returning to rugby in his mid-30s.

"He last played rugby when he was 12 or 13, so when he arrived three years ago he was playing like a 13-year-old," says John Gregson, one of the first XV's three coaches with Clive Fish and Martin Watt. "He's 6ft 3 or 4 and it was all cuddle

tackles and sideways running. But his thirst to get better is unbelievable. He's the kind of person who rings coaches on a Sunday for feedback on the game.

"I wouldn't say he's our best player but he's a talisman. Opponents will try to get in his ear when he's going to take a kick and he'll go, 'Mate, I've done this at Wembley!' He likes to wind people up."

Ryan's boot helped propel Sunderland to second in Durham-Northumberland Two, January wins over Whitby (43-12), Darlington (79-12) and Sedgefield (42-27) supplementing a 29-13 semi-final defeat of Hartlepool in the Durham County Junior Cup.

Marc Edmundson, 21, is a Cipriani-style ten ably assisted by inside-centre Cam Toole, while the pack brims with talent such as bruising No 8 Adam Barrass, cockney lock Luke Victory, prop Ki Hanlon and No 7 and captain Joe Arrowsmith. "We're built on pace and width, with forwards who are ball-players," Gregson

adds. "We tackle aggressively and when we counter we can be devastating."

Belief, too, has been a hallmark, as illustrated by a remarkable 31-30 win at Ponteland from four tries down. Such character helped the team ride the storm of a heavy loss at Guisborough.

"We're a city club but not massive. We have a really good youth section but it's not huge. We feel DN1 is where we should be and it's where we want to go."

We think that's where they're heading. Sunderland are our January Team of the Month, an award open to any amateur side. If your side deserves to be our next winner, email us to tell us why, including your February results and photos. ^{RW}



GET IN TOUCH

Email stories and pics to Clubs Editor Michael Austin at aus231@aol.com or call **01400 282189**. Team of the Month entries to alan.pearey@ti-media.com



Old pro Leon Ryan
scores v Hartlepool

Edinburgh's Bennett builds for big finish

The centre is gearing up for an exciting end to the season, including a European quarter-final...

MARK BENNETT spent his mid-season break in Turkey playing golf. "Seven rounds in seven nights," the Edinburgh and Scotland centre says. He's also got back into the swing of things – see what we did there! – on the rugby field.

Bennett's first two seasons at the capital club, following his move from Glasgow, were disrupted by injury, but by mid-January he had already played more games this term than in the entire 2017-18 or 2018-19 campaigns. Those early spells on the sidelines meant it was hard for him to settle in his new environment, but he's made up for that lost time this season. The 27-year-old kicked off his campaign with a hat-trick against Zebre and has formed a productive centre pairing with Matt Scott.

"My first full pre-season in years put me in a great place," says Bennett. "I'd often missed part of pre-season with tours or injuries, but getting fit and fast and strong again after a hard few years with injuries makes a big difference."

"When I came across to Edinburgh, for the first six months I wasn't involved with the team at all as I was coming back from my ACL injury. At a new club, you want to be on the pitch making your mark and the best way to get to know guys is by playing with them. So it was tough going that first season, but you've just got to get your head down and get on with it."

"When I came back I was wondering why I wasn't playing my best but never mind getting over a serious injury, I was playing with new guys and I didn't appreciate how hard that was. The next season I did my hamstring ten minutes into the second game. Now I feel I'm settling in and playing good rugby; I'm more comfortable in my surroundings."

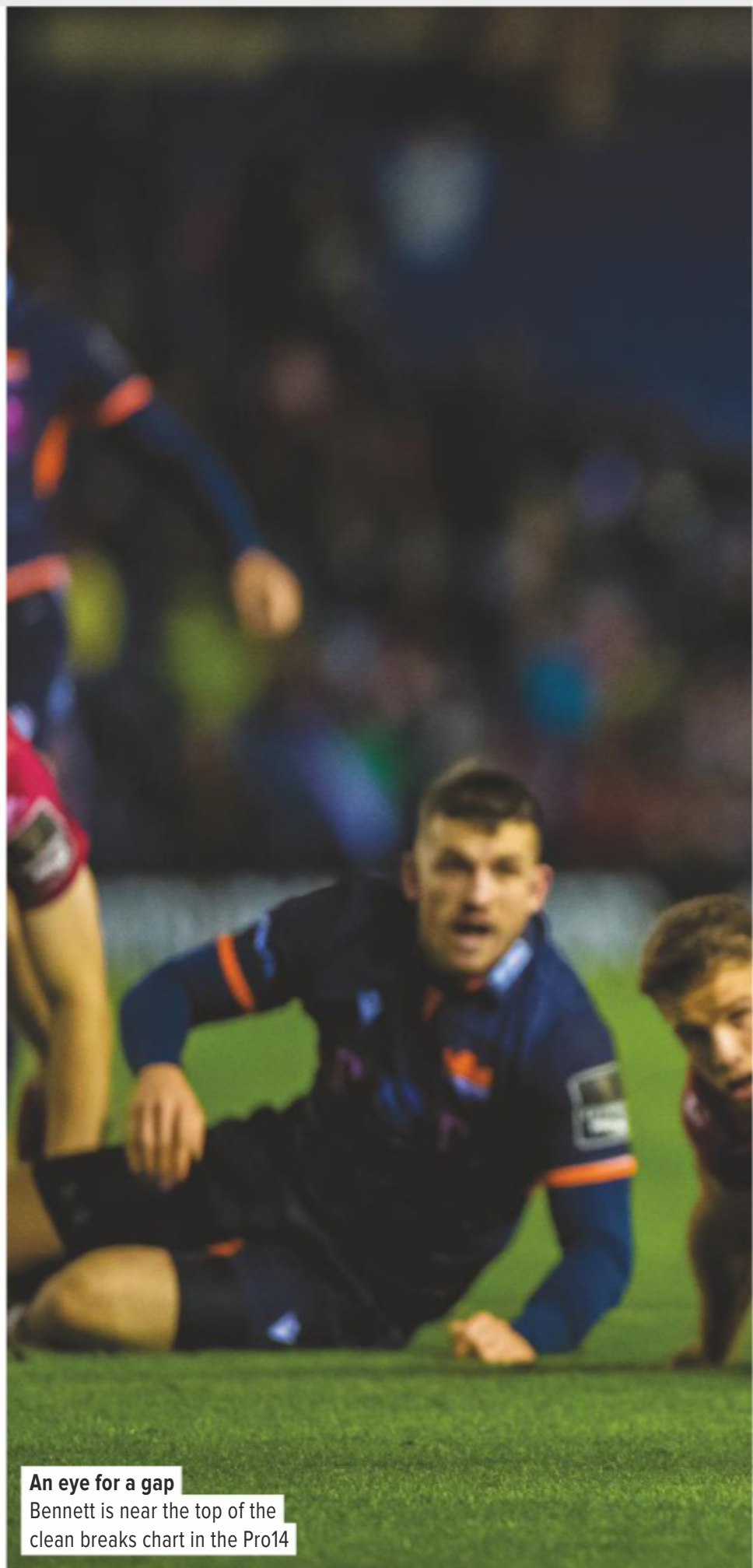
Bennett's run of form has coincided with a great season for the club, with Edinburgh reaching the European



FACT FILE

Name Mark Bennett
Age 27 (3 Feb 1993)
Club Edinburgh
Position Centre
Nickname Benzo
Personality Reserved
Favourite TV show You can't beat *Friends*
Best holiday Portugal, on a golf trip
Childhood rugby hero Brian O'Driscoll
Other sport you'd like to do professionally Golf or darts – that looks good fun
Toughest opponent I had a tough time against Matt Giteau a few years ago
Team-mate you'd like to be Duhan van der Merwe – he's genetically gifted
Rugby highlight Probably playing in a World Cup quarter-final (against Australia in 2015)

"We've been building for the past couple of years," says Bennett. "We've looked to expand our game. Last year we got a bit stodgy, played a bit of a ten-man game; now we're a bit more expansive and playing a more varied game, which is a lot harder to defend."



An eye for a gap

Bennett is near the top of the clean breaks chart in the Pro14

Challenge Cup quarter-finals and sitting atop Conference B in the Guinness Pro14 after 11 games. So how have they improved their win-loss rate?

"But the big difference is we're putting teams away now. Last year we were in a lot of arm wrestles and missed chances; we're playing in really tight games but now we're putting teams away. That's probably one of the big changes."

Edinburgh face a familiar foe in their Challenge Cup quarter-final on 4 April: Bordeaux-Bègles. The two teams met in the pool stages, playing out a 16-16 draw at BT Murrayfield before Bordeaux won the return leg at Stade Chaban-Delmas 32-17. That is the venue for the knockout tie, too, and Bennett is well aware of what Edinburgh can expect.

"They're a big physical side and are actually very structured for a French



team. French teams are normally quite loose but Bordeaux are structured, don't mess around in their own third, are physically on top of you and if they get the chance they have stardust in the back-line. Semi Radradra is outstanding. He's deceptively quick and is a big lad so can step around or over you.

"I think it's a good thing we've been there before and know what's coming because it's a very different set-up to what we're used to. It's a five-minute walk from the changing rooms through the tunnel to the pitch, which is really weird but really cool at the same time.

"Bordeaux are one of the form teams in Europe and if you want to go further

in cups you've got to take on big teams. Being in knockout games is massive and silverware is always everyone's aim. We're in a great spot in the league and we're in the quarter-finals of Europe."

With Bennett performing so well this season, he is not only driving Edinburgh forward but pushing for further Scotland honours. The last of his 22 caps came in June 2018 and with competition at centre so high he wasn't part of Scotland's Six Nations squad. "I was gutted not to be involved but I've just got to keep doing my thing and playing well. If I keep doing that, chances will come."

It's a good philosophy for both Bennett and Edinburgh to follow. 

NEWS ROUND-UP

► **African adventure** Mikey Heron, Cole Lamberton and Adam Scott are following in the footsteps of the likes of John Barclay, Jonny Gray and Finn Russell having been awarded the John Macphail Rugby Scholarship. They're spending five months at the high-performance training facility at Stellenbosch University in South Africa.



WORDS Sarah Mockford. PICS Inpho

► **Staying put** Leinster lock James Ryan (above) and Ulster wing Jacob Stockdale have signed new three-year deals with the IRFU until the end of the 2022-23 season.

► **New recruits** Rugby World Cup winners Damian De Allende and RG Snyman, as well as Saracens back Matt Gallagher, will join Munster for the 2020-21 season.

► **Quiz masters** Want to test your rugby knowledge? The trivia game Taxi! now has a Scottish Rugby and English Rugby edition, with a Welsh one to follow later this year. See taxiboardgame.co.uk for info.

Franco's going from strength to strength

The Italy captain and Harlequins back-row is thriving for club and country. RW's Sarah Mockford reports

T

HERE'S A running joke at Harlequins Women about players taking a break from their friendships during the Six Nations

and, looking further ahead, World Cup qualifiers. The club's mix of nationalities will all pull together when wearing the famous quarters as they look to end Saracens' dominance of the Tyrrells Premier 15s, but when it comes to Test matches there is a change in approach.

"At Quins I live with an Irish girl, Leah Lyons, and play with Scottish girls, Jade Konkel and Chloe Rollie," explains Italy captain and back-row Giada Franco. "We've said we were friends in January, in February and March we stop being friends, then we're friends again until September, when we're not friends!"

It's little wonder September's World Cup qualifiers, which will feature Ireland, Italy, Scotland and the winners of the Rugby Europe Championship (most likely Spain), are already on people's minds. Securing a place at the 2021 tournament in New Zealand is a huge carrot for these nations – and it will be hugely competitive too. Only the winners automatically book a place, with the runners-up going into the repêchage.

Italy were second in last year's Six Nations and started this year's championship with a win over Wales before losing to France, but can they make it to RWC 2021? "It's a dream for us," says Franco. "We really want to achieve qualification. We just need to work and work to be able to reach it."

"I think other teams find our way of playing unpredictable and this is one thing that we're really working on. Of course, we also need a little bit of structure – our set-piece, exits, management of the game, playing in the right areas of the pitch – but we don't want to be predictable, we want to play whatever is in front of us."



FACT FILE

Name Giada Franco

Age 23 (11 July 1996)

Club Harlequins

Position Back-row

Nickname In England it's Frankie and with Italy it's 'Giado' – my name but with more of a Brazilian sound as my mum is Brazilian

Personality Happy

Favourite TV show I love cartoons. For a TV series, *Grey's Anatomy*

Film *Hachiko*. It's about a dog and is beautiful

Dish you like to cook Carbonara – it's really easy and really good

Other sport you'd like to play professionally Football. I support Juventus – they have a good women's team too

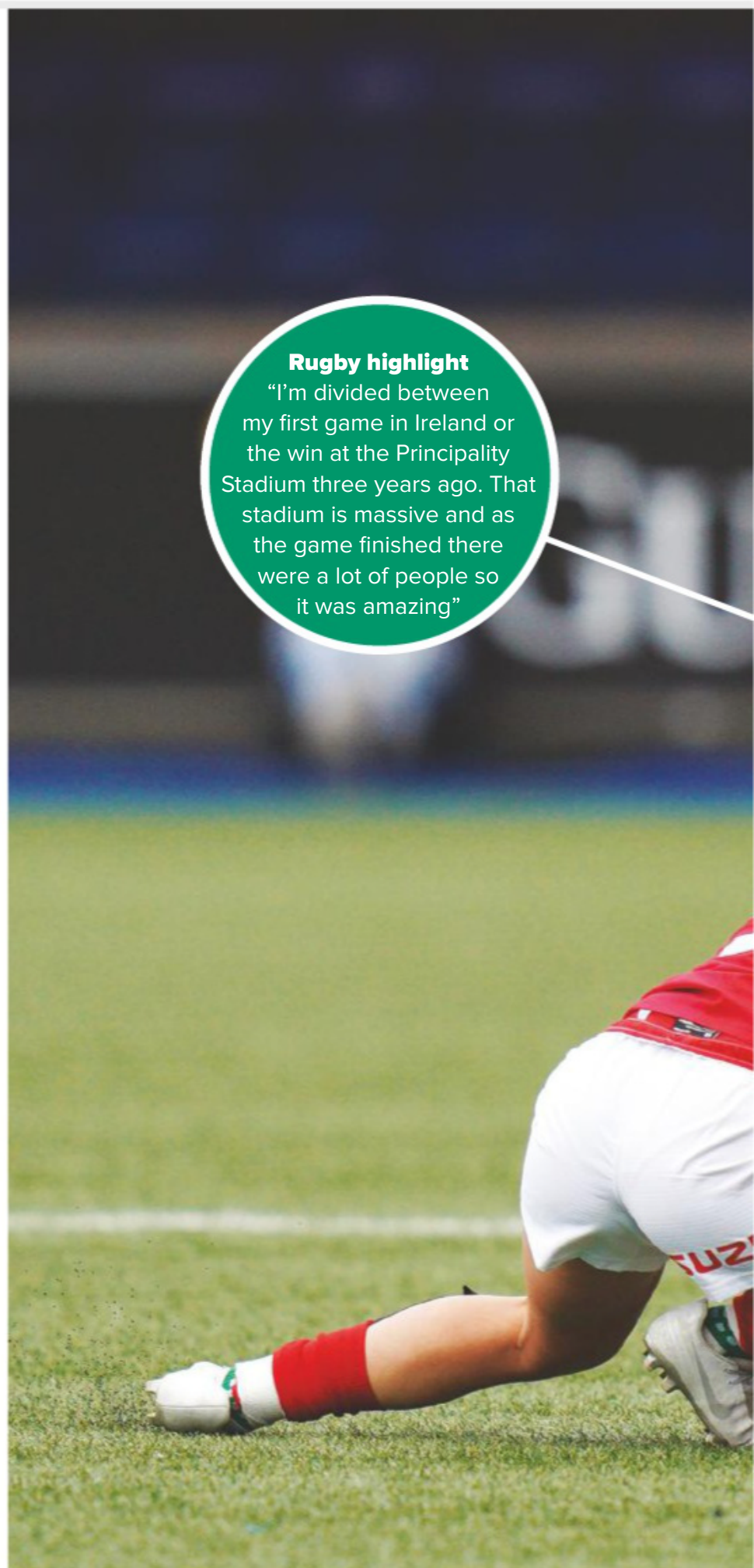
Rugby funny When someone gets naked on the pitch, with their shirt or shorts caught in a tackle!

and Melissa Bettoni. Yet it is Franco herself who is so crucial to this team.

Named Italy captain at just 23, her influence has grown over the three seasons since her debut. She gives her side huge go-forward with her strong ball carries and is a powerful defender

Rugby highlight

"I'm divided between my first game in Ireland or the win at the Principality Stadium three years ago. That stadium is massive and as the game finished there were a lot of people so it was amazing"



Asked to name Italy's key players, Franco prefers to focus on the strength of the group but does name-check Sara Barrattin, Beatrice Rigoni

too, helping to bring momentum both with and without the ball.

Her ability is impressive given that she only took up rugby aged 14 when her local club, Salerno, ran a session at her school. She had always been sporty but immediately fell in love with rugby – and progressed fast, moving to Benevento and then Colorno on the club circuit. She also switched positions, going from the backs to the back row.

"Everyone knew I was a little too slow to be in the backs," she laughs. "For me, back-row is the best role in rugby. You have to be good in defence but good in attack as well. It's not only tackling but carrying hard, making good passes."



Toughest opponent

"I've mainly played Six Nations teams and probably the best player I've played against is Emily Scarratt. She's so difficult to stop when she has the ball. France's Marjorie Mayans is good too"

Childhood rugby hero

"One of my favourite players, more than my hero, was Ma'a Nonu. He was a centre but could have played in the back row! He was really physical and solid in defence"

I think it's the most complete role in rugby – this is why I enjoy it."

To continue developing her game, Franco moved to Quins last summer. She's continuing her sports science studies while here, although she has to go back to Italy to sit her exams, and believes the back-row competition at the club is helping her to improve.

"I wanted to move to discover something else in a championship like the Premier 15s and with a club like Harlequins which really believe in their women's side. I wanted to find more challenges and I really enjoy it. There are a lot of strong players to help you and the coaches, Karen (Findlay) and

Gary (Street), are amazing; they bring competitiveness to training and push standards so we challenge ourselves all the time, not just on the Saturday."

That's progress from a personal perspective; Franco is also pleased to see the whole women's game growing in Italy. Crowd figures are rising, more clubs are involved in 15s leagues and player numbers are on the up, although Franco is pragmatic when saying: "We have to work to make sure the quality is going up as well as the numbers."

Franco's quality is not in doubt – and Italy need her to be to the fore for the final rounds of the Six Nations and those all-important World Cup qualifiers. **RW**

NEWS ROUND-UP

► **Tender time** Bristol, Gloucester-Hartpury, Quins, Loughborough, Saracens and Wasps have secured their place in the Tyrrells Premier 15s for the next three years after an independent audit. DMP Sharks, Firwood Waterloo, Richmond and Worcester have to retender for a place while applications from other teams are also being assessed.

► **Eden project** The 2021 World Cup in New Zealand will run from



PICS Getty Images & Impho

18 September to 16 October, with pool matches and quarter-finals at Waitakere Stadium and Northland Events Centre. Eden Park, which staged the launch (above), will host the semis (9 Oct) and final (16 Oct).

► **Leading the way** The Black Ferns top the Women's World Sevens Series standings on 96 points after four straight cup wins. Australia and Canada, both on 80 points, follow ahead of the next event in Langford on 2-3 May.

“More and more people are interested back on the island”

Jamaica stalwart Conan Osborne eyes a bright future for the Crocs

SPRINTERS, BOBSLEIGHS and reggae. Whenever Jamaica men's sevens compete, the headline writers get excited. But there's so much more to the team than the clichés and stereotypes. With the Crocs to compete in the final Olympic qualification repêchage this summer, and with World Rugby's Challenger Series in Chile and Uruguay under their belts in February, Jamaica see the sunny side.

“We're not just there to make up the numbers anymore,” skipper Conan Osborne says. “As we go past big teams in the corridors at competitions, it's no longer a double take from them.

“We're almost part of the furniture now, even if it's furniture that doesn't get sat on that often! People are starting to recognise us, which is nice.

“And it's also giving us a mentality change. We had this problem before where people were turning up to

training a few weeks out from a tournament, hoping to get selected. If they didn't get in, then we probably wouldn't see them for a little while, outside of the core group.

“Now, as opportunities come thick and fast, we play in five, six tournaments a year. People know that if they want to represent us they gotta stay in the fight.”

Raising funds has always been a priority for the Crocs and in the past there has been internal politics around how many boys are selected from ‘the island’ and how many come from the diaspora of talent around the world; players like England-born Osborne.

Things also came to a head at the Sevens World Cup in San Francisco in 2018, when selection policy and internal politics caused a rift within the camp.

Now, with US-based coach Stephen Lewis in charge, a new dynamic has been forged. Talent identification in the Caribbean is underway, with Osborne



Jamaican power
Osborne takes on
the Argentinians

“The new Challenger Series is a much better opportunity”

adding: “More and more people are interested back on the island.”

Young players are growing in stature. And how the season is shaped helps. The new Challenger Series creates more meaningful competition among equals – they had a significant result in beating Portugal in the Chile event.

“The Challenger Series is a much better opportunity. If we are to become a core team, we must understand what it’s like to get on a plane, train a few days, play in a tournament, do it

somewhere else.

“In the past we’d qualify for Hong Kong (core team promotion play-off) in October or November, and play no rugby until the start of April, when you’d be up against Ireland, Japan, Germany. How are you supposed to play no rugby, then compete against some of the best in the world with no warm-up tournament?”

In this huge season, the Crocs want us to double take in awe. RW



FACT FILE

Age 26 (19 Mar 1993)
Born Kent, England
Series qualifier debut Hong Kong, 2017
Height 6ft 1in
Weight 14st 9lb
Twitter handle @ConanOsborne

SEVENS GALLERY

Catch some of the action from the helter-skelter Hamilton Sevens



Sevens, baby! A fan dressed as Austin Powers



Scorchio Spectators in the sun



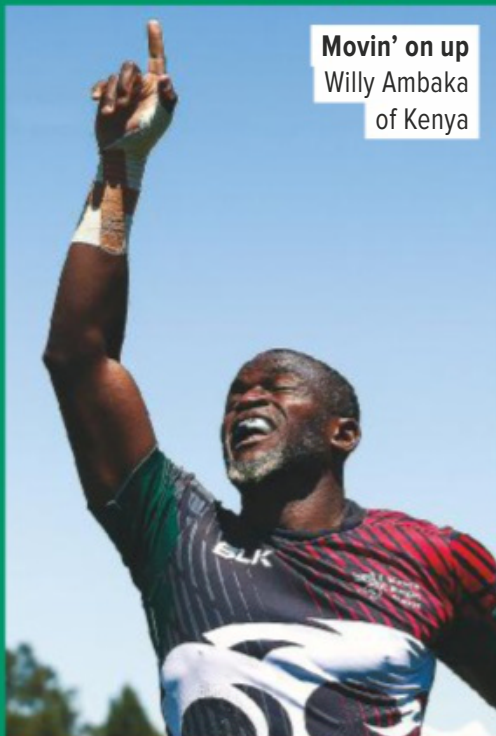
Up in the hair Ellia Green carries for Australia



Upended Nick Malouf is hit by England’s Tom Bowen



Champion Stacey Fluhler scores for NZ



Movin’ on up Willy Ambaka of Kenya

SEVENS FACT

In Hamilton, Canada’s Bianca Farella became the second woman to score 150 series tries. Only NZ’s Portia Woodman has more (195). With the Hong Kong Sevens put back to October, the next women’s event is Langford on 2-3 May.



PICS Conan Osborne & Getty Images

NATIONAL 1&2

SEELEY SENSE Sutton & Epsom have a resourceful campaigner in Chloe Seeley, a prop and captain of their U15 girls' team. She led a successful mission to have rugby put on the curriculum at her school, Blenheim High in Epsom, after asking why the sport was available only to male students there.

Sutton spokesperson Elle Ross said: "Chloe wrote an amazing letter to the school to put her case. Several members of our women's team attended Blenheim and would have loved this opportunity. Chloe worked with teachers to set up a team and they beat Bishop Thomas Grant School 35-20 in their first match."

LOCAL SPIRIT Wharfedale made a magnificent contribution towards a fund to help seven-year-old Luke Mortimer, a mini player with neighbours **Skipton**.

He has lost limbs to the complications caused by bacterial meningitis and Wharfedale collected £5,500 in a weekend of fund-raising that included a bucket collection and senior players, coaches and physios waiving match fees.

The Foresters, who are Wharfedale's second team, the development XV and the mini-junior section raised significant amounts towards the final total too.

NOAH'S ARC Stourbridge have played a valuable part in full-back Noah Heward winning a place in the England U20 squad for the Six Nations. A member of Worcester Warriors Academy, he has gained senior experience with Stour on a dual registration agreement with the Premiership club.

Heward, who began his career in the mini-junior section at Birmingham & Solihull, also played football for Walsall Academy before focusing on the oval ball. He showed impressive form for Stourbridge and scored three tries in his first two senior games for Worcester in the European Challenge Cup.

STUDENT LOAN Newcomer Joey Gatus is strongly tipped by **Cambridge** head coach Richie Williams to excel in National One.

Gatus, a student at Cambridge University, has been tracked by Williams for two years, has played in two Varsity Matches and can feature at full-back and wing.

Reaching out
Jamie Prisk wins the ball at Worthing



REDRUTH

Not many clubs can claim to have been permanent members of the National Leagues since the dawning of serious competitive club rugby 33 years ago. Redruth, now of Two South, have come close with ever-present status since winning South-West One in the competition's inaugural season. They even rose to National One and now have a poignant link with the past. Back-row Sam Stevens, the son of legendary England prop 'Stack', is in his first season as captain and led the Reds into the top four with three months remaining.

DoR Nigel Hambly has a new coaching team in backs mentor Matt Shepherd and Chris Fuca, in charge of the forwards. Fuca joined the Reds at 14 and moved through the age grades to lead the senior side. They have 250 players ranging from U7 level to colts and two men's XVs. Team manager Chris Allan said: "The most pleasing thing is the togetherness of the squad."

PIC Warwick Baker

He made his debut when Cambridge beat Canterbury 29-28, a sixth straight win. Williams said: "James Shanahan, the university coach, is keen for his players to get National One experience. It's a different style of rugby for them."

BUILDING WORK Luctonians won praise from coach Ryan Watkins despite a 31-3 home loss by Caldy in Two North. He said: "I'm pretty proud with how the boys played. We caused them problems and did enough to deserve a try."

Soon afterwards Luctonians, 14th in the table, turned the theories of Watkins into hard facts with a 19-10 win over fourth-placed Loughborough Students.

POOLE OF TALENT Captain and No 8 Zak Poole marked his 50th consecutive appearance for **Rotherham Titans** with two tries in a ten-minute spell in the 41-27 defeat at Darlington Mowden Park. He initially stepped up against Old Elthamians in September 2018.

Poole is not the only man of distinction to appear at the Darlington Arena this year. On 14 June global star Sir Tom Jones will perform there, with **Darlington Mowden Park** members given a priority pre-sale ticket opportunity.

ROTATION POLICY Worthing Raiders opted for pragmatism by rotating their squad for a run of games against the top

four clubs. After a 33-7 loss to leaders Henley Hawks, coach Jody Levett said: "We gave some players an opportunity to throw their hat in the ring and others a much-needed break. Therefore our cohesion was lacking on occasions."

UNSTOPPABLE Caldy, powerful challengers for the Two North title after 21 straight wins, also have a terrific second team that triumphed in all their 16 matches in the regular North-West Premier League season. They took a try bonus point from every game too.

SCRUM DOWN Exeter and England prop Harry Williams regards his appointment as **Plymouth Albion's** scrum coach as "a great opportunity".

Williams said: "If I'm away, I'll look at match clips online and give my input. I'll speak to the front-rowers primarily if there are any points they want to go over. If I'm about, I'll be down at Brickfields as much as I can."

SAD LOSS Old Elthamians, of National One, are mourning Kobus Paulsen, 54, their chief benefactor and long-term supporter, who was the driving force for ten years during their most successful period. Generous and warm-hearted, he nurtured close links with Eltham College and instigated a five-year academy partnership with St Mary's University. **RW**

SHORT PASS

It's reunion time at Shaftesbury Park on 25 April for Dings Crusaders players involved in the U15 and U17 teams that reached the 1991 Gloucestershire Cup finals. Organiser Dave Lucas said: "We want to get as many of the lads as possible back together."

MIDLANDS

THRILL SEEKERS **Wolverhampton** are living up to coach Ian Harley's ambitions for his side to be the entertainers in Two West (North). A 24-22 opening defeat at Burntwood was followed by 14 straight wins. He said: "We go into every match targeting four tries, knowing more often than not we'll win by achieving that."

FINAL DATE **Malvern** reached the regional Intermediate Vase final in which they will meet Leighton Buzzard, in one of the three Midlands play-offs on 14 March.

To qualify, they staged a stirring fightback to beat Leek 37-32 in the semi-final. Leek led 22-3 after 30 minutes but a hat-trick from wing Lewis Hardiman took Malvern towards victory. Their previous National Cup final was in the 1994 Pilkington Shield at Twickenham.

ED BRACE **Spalding** secured a place in the Midlands Senior Vase final against Dunstablians with a 10-0 win over Buxton, wing Ed Booth scoring both their tries.

SHORT PASS

Nuneaton Old Edwardians have the 'Bog Seat Trophy' back in their possession, having beaten Silhillians by an aggregate of 64-29 over their two matches in Two West (South) this season. The trophy is a toilet seat taken by Old Eds as a souvenir from Silhillians' clubhouse in 1948.

Clee Hill, Four West (North) high flyers, will visit Leicester-based Birstall in the regional Junior Vase final after beating Tenbury 10-3. Clee captain Charlie Evans said: "The pressure might be off slightly more than if we were at home."

FOND FAREWELL Former **Burton** players have one last chance to appear at Peel Croft, the club's home since 1910. The One West club are moving to their new ground at Branston in readiness for next season. But an over-45s match will be held on 7 March before England v Wales is screened in the clubhouse.

Flooding prevented **Hereford** playing at Wyeside for three months, but they celebrated their return with an 11-7 victory over Dudley Kingswinford. Sadly, the One West club soon suffered more damage due to Storm Dennis.

VIP VISITS Not long after being a surprise visitor for a Sunday mini-junior session at Three East (North) **Kesteven**, Tigers and England centre Manu Tuilagi was back at Woodnook to see the senior side beat Nottingham Moderns 48-0.

RWC winner Neil Back also revisited the grass-roots scene as a spectator when **Stamford** beat Huntingdon 19-10 to retain top spot in Three East (South). Neighbours **Stamford College Old Boys**

are on the march – to the Notts, Lincs & Derbyshire Vase final after scoring 24 points without reply against Bingham.

MAJOR WINS East Midlands clubs **Old Northamptonians** and **Northampton Old Scouts** have achieved landmark victories. ONs, of One East, won an away match for the first time in three months when beating Wellingborough 14-10. Old Scouts, of Two East (South), triumphed 18-10 for the first time in away league games against Melton Mowbray.

HEALTH KICK **Kettering**, of Midlands Premier, now have an official healthcare sponsor in Woodland Hospital, based in the town. The partnership gives the squad access to first-class healthcare facilities, including diagnostic services.

DoR Doug Bridgeman said: "It's fantastic. These facilities will play a key role in achieving our goals."

HARDING HONOUR Former **Walsall** captain and DoR Bob Harding was presented with an 'unsung hero' award by the Rugby Union Writers' Club. He played more than 430 first-team games for Walsall and survived a car crash in which he was impaled by a fencing post.

Part of the post is now displayed in the club's trophy cabinet while Harding's team-mates also gave him the nickname 'Kebab' in recognition of his escape.

ONE FOR ALL **Coventry Corsairs**, based at Coventrians' ground at The Black Pad, are the city's first fully inclusive rugby club. Formed last year by Diego Dominquez and Carl Edwards to provide for the LGBTQ+ community, they have around 60 members and play against sides from across the Midlands.

UMAGA ROLE Wasps fly-half Jacob Umaga has become the backs coach of **Aston Old Edwardians**, of Four West (North). Umaga is the son of former Samoa centre Mike Umaga.

Aston are mourning stalwart Brian Roberts, 85, who played his last match for the club when 55. He taught English at King Edward VI School, Aston, served Old Eds in numerous roles and wrote the club's centenary history in 1989.

ROBBO MISSED **Paviers** will miss Dave 'Robbo' Robinson, 67, who lost his battle with cancer. He helped to create their mini-junior section in 1990, became the coaching co-ordinator and last year was presented with 'A Lifetime of Service Paviers Award'. **RW**



PICT Michael Austin

Watching brief
Wing Rhys Overland eyes up Dronfield's challenge

NEWARK

Nurturing mini-junior players is the name of Newark's game. Now in their centenary season, they have an age-grade membership of around 400, along with an impressive legacy to Leicester Tigers. Wing Jordan Olowofela, prop Joe Heyes and scrum-half Jonny Law have all graduated to Welford Road, following in the stud marks of Dusty Hare, John Wells, Tom Ryder and Greig Tonks.

Newark are even hosting the Tigers A League match against Sale Sharks on 23 March at Kelham Road, a ground resplendent with a £1.4m clubhouse completed last season.

More recently, the Two East (North) club – led by centre/fly-half Will Britten – reached the Midlands semi-final of the RFU Intermediate Cup, losing 27-10 at Leighton Buzzard. Newark will also stage an annual sportsman's evening at which Sir Ian McGeechan will speak on 8 April.

LONDON & SE

ON A ROLL West Norfolk, based near King's Lynn, have been enjoying one of the best sequences in the club's history.

Backed by a successful youth system, the London Three Eastern Counties side averaged 40 points a match in 13 straight wins stretching into February.

Coach Darren Clarke's team were locked in a two-horse race with Cantabrigian, who led by four points but had played a game more. West Norfolk also reached the London Senior Vase final after a 57-17 defeat of Hitchin.

NERVY FINISH Havant will remember their 27-24 win over Cobham, whether or not it helps them win the One South title. They ended the game defending with 13 men due to two yellow cards and coach Will Knight said: "In many ways we had no right to hold on as we did. We showed unbelievable resolve and intelligence and kept our nerve."

COMEBACK TRAIL Horsham hit back from 13-0 down with two late tries to clinch a 27-21 win over Medway in One South. "Our second-half performance was excellent," said coach Nick Stocker.

That winning feeling returned to Basildon, whose losing run spanned 26 matches in 15 months before they beat Ilford Wanderers 15-7 in London Three Essex. They remained at the bottom of the table but the new coaching team of head man Alex Lee, backs specialist Gary Bettis and forwards mentor Joe Brace had something to build on.

SURVIVAL MODE Royston had a five-month wait for a win in Three North-West before winning 16-14 at Tabard but relegation still loomed.

DoR Jamie Green said: "With men's rugby suffering at all levels, the important thing is surviving as a club, whatever standard it is at. Locally, Cambourne have folded and Sawston are struggling."

Sussex RFU president John Feakins likes to get to the county's clubs and representative matches.

Seaford, of Sussex One, are among those who have impressed him with their youth policy. He wrote in his blog: "They are doing great work with their young players and now have a YDO."

Tearaway runner
Back-row Jon Howard challenges Brighton



PIG Warwick Baker

TRING

As an amateur club playing in London Premier, Tring confront their challenges head on under DoR Mason Wallace, who is steeped in their history. He was a prop and lock for 20 seasons, finally retiring last spring. Wallace said: "I played a little at school, came along to the club, worked my way up from the thirds and had 15 years as a first-team player."

Tring's best league finish was third in 2017-18 but this season they have used 35 players, prompted by long-term injuries. Wallace added: "We have great numbers at training and the young squad is very coachable."

Head man in that department is the highly experienced Giles Wallis, a former front-row. Tom Newton coaches the backs, Mike March looks after the forwards and No 8 Oliver O'Gorman captains the first team. Tring run three senior sides, along with a developing women's team and 450 mini-juniors.

MASTERS CLASS Former National League club North Walsham, of One North, are setting their sights on London Premier level next season. The Vikings won 18 of their first 19 matches under the guidance of Kiwi head of rugby Johnny Masters.

Their success is also reflected across the club with a 25% increase in youth, girl and mini registrations and record numbers attending pre-match lunches.

WINNING UGLY Coaches like to see their instructions carried out on match days, but when it doesn't happen a lot of heart can compensate. Such was the case as Winchester won 38-18 at London Exiles in Two South-West.

Injured captain Jim Beavan said: "Moments of magic and persistence retrieved the match from a shortfall in skill. It's not how we train to play."

REBUILDING WORK US Portsmouth are aiming to have a new DoR in place in readiness for the build-up to next season. The club, who withdrew from Three South-West last November due to a lack of players, have been advertising for a key addition, with a priority on player recruitment and administration.

East Grinstead flanker Ben Tottman was described as a "tackling machine" in the 15-12 victory at Eastbourne in

Sussex One, despite playing on with a two-inch gash along his temple that required stitches afterwards.

TOM ON TARGET One South club Chichester had to wait until early January for their first away win of the season – and it came in dramatic style. Full-back Tom Blewitt, who had earlier scored a try, got a penalty in the last five minutes to secure an 18-15 success at KCS OB after 'Chi' had blown a 15-3 lead.

HARD YARDS Hampshire One club Fawley are putting in the miles for a much-needed new clubhouse. They are sending a team to the Jurassic Coast 100km non-stop walk challenge in May to kick off their fund-raising.

Sudbury, mid-table in One North, made strides of their own when beating Ruislip 110-0 with seven games to go. It took them to 53 league points, the same as in the whole of last season.

PAT WARD-LEE Brighton Blues were saddened by the death of Pat Ward-Lee, a past president whose tenure included the move from their previous home to their current premises at Waterhall.

Less than a fortnight before his passing, Ward-Lee had watched Blues' thriller against Rochford Hundred that they lost 19-16 in London Premier. **RW**

SHORT PASS

Past and present Newmarket players paid tribute to a former team-mate in the Robert Hayes Memorial match. He was killed ten years ago while serving in Afghanistan. Forty players took part and it raised more than £1,200 for the Royal Anglian Regiment Benevolent Charity.

SOUTH-WEST

LONGEVITY AT SEVENTY You can't keep a good man down, as **Cheltenham Civil Service** would testify. Flanker Steve Yiend, 70, turns out regularly for the second XV and vets' team at the Gloucestershire Two North club, and is reputedly the oldest player in the county.

He has been with Civil Service for 35 years and after his recent birthday was presented with a framed shirt with No 6 on the back, signed by past and present team-mates. He said: "I get aches and pains but I'm happy to take that. Guys who take part in vets' games just love rugby."

Club president Marcus Johns said: "I had to retire at 28 and I'm 37 now. Looking at Steve playing at his age makes me very envious!"

ON THE UP One of the season's most spectacular comebacks belongs to **Reading**, who rocketed from eighth last autumn to second in Southern Counties North under coach Ben Wills. They scored 53 tries in a seven-match winning run, a sequence last achieved in 2013.

SHORT PASS

Littlemore regrouped after being ejected from BB&O Premier for failing to fulfil six fixtures. They beat Wheatley 73-19 in a friendly after a recruitment drive sparked by an increased social media presence. Nine former Chinnor players and two ex-Henley Hawks shared in the victory.

TOP JOB Devon have appointed Mike Lewis, of Devonport Services, as the senior coach for their Bill Beaumont County Championship Division One matches in May. He will be assisted by Plymouth Albion players Josh Skelcey and Sam Daly for games with Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Hampshire.

FITTING GUESTS Oxford University will mark their 150th anniversary by playing the Barbarians at Iffley Road on 16 May, bridging a 50-year gap since their previous meeting. Tim Stevens, Oxford's general manager, said: "Our committee felt the fixture would be the most appropriate. They're still the world's premier international invitation team."

The match will be preceded on the same day by the university women's side playing Penguin International XV.

BIG CHEESE Cheddar Valley expect to welcome 1,500 players to their 40th junior festival on 26 April. It spans the U8 to U14 age grades and is one of the biggest events of its kind in England.

Junior chairman Andy Shire said: "The event has grown year on year. Last April, 1,000 children were involved and Eleanor Febrey, an England U20 squad member and former Cheddar player, presented commemorative medals."

The 11 competing clubs include Drifters, from Buckinghamshire, Barnes, Wells, Chard, Taunton, Newbury, Stratford-upon-Avon and Bridgwater.

That's not all – Cheddar Valley have settled into fourth in Somerset One, also field a women's team, have junior sides up to U14 and plan to launch a colts' XV.

FINDING THEIR FEET Penryn, known as the 'Borough', are pleased with their progress in Western Counties West after lifting the Cornwall-Devon title last year.

Ten wins in 19 games brought mid-table stability and spokesman Ross Hancock said: "The side has been extremely competitive in a tough and unforgiving league. Highlights were thumping home wins over Saltash and Wadebridge. The future looks bright with new faces, including top point-scoring scrum-half Sam Carter, coming through the ranks."

GOAL SETTING One West club **Bridgwater & Albion** rose to seventh but DoR Geoff Sluman still has two key objectives. He said: "We want to be more consistent in our performances and to develop our second team, together with the depth of our squad."

Albion have made strides off the field with a refurbished clubhouse and their committees have been restructured.



Evasive action
Full-back Lewis Allan tries to elude Dorchester

INSPIRING TV Windsor are using *The Chase*, an ITV daytime game show, as inspiration in One East after hovering around the bottom of the table during the first half of the season. They took 17 points from a maximum of 20 to elevate them to tenth in a 14-club league.

Head coach Jack Pattinson said: "We talk about *The Chase* a lot when trying to catch the side above us in the table."

YES WE CAM! Onwards and upwards for South-West Premier club **Camborne**, who in the past ten years have achieved two promotions and lifted the Cornwall Cup a record four straight times. They have reformed the second team, the Crusaders, and have a 100-strong vets and former players' association that raises funds for the club and charities.

OFFICIALS NEEDED The **Plymouth Referees Society** is searching for recruits. Two successive Devon Merit Table matches involving Plympton Victoria were postponed through a lack of an official and some Plympton players attended a refereeing course, subsidised by the Plymouth Combination, to boost their numbers. **RW**

WEYMOUTH & PORTLAND

The trend to appoint female officials has not been lost on this Dorset & Wilts One (South) club. Fiona Goldsmith is chairperson, Alison Hunter is treasurer and until recently Sarah Hughes served as secretary. In addition, Goldsmith, 49, still plays in the back row for the Ridgeway Roses, a combined Weymouth & Portland and Dorchester team. She has a reputation as a tenacious below-the-waist tackler, as befits a member of the Dorset & Wilts disciplinary committee.

At senior men's level, W&P won 12 of their first 15 matches, while the A team are in the Dorset & Wilts Merit Table. Club president Willie Wildash said: "Many second-team games are on Friday nights and, like the social XV, they enjoy playing for fun and enjoyment without the distractions of league rugby." Lock Dave Oaksford captains the first team with Richard Bament as coach.

NORTH

UPSTREAM Whitley Bay Rockcliff's return to Durham-Northumberland (D-N) One after a 15-year gap has underlined the physical, high-tempo game that exists at Level Seven. Last season they won all 26 games in D-N Two but this term they have a 50-50 record.

Secretary Andrew Sugden said: "Our first eight bonus points were for scoring four tries or more, illustrating that our ability to cross the line has not deserted us. Scrum-half Dan Leach is leading the side and we also value the ongoing work of head coach Darren Cunningham and player-coach Craig Hamilton."

HISTORICAL DEAL Harrogate, challenging at the top of North Premier, have a new sponsor in Ashville College, which already had a long association with them. Founded in 1877, Ashville are almost as old as the rugby club that dates back to 1871 and headmaster Richard Marshall said: "It's great that we are now formally linked with the club."

In the late 1960s, hooker Jeff Young taught at Ashville, played for Harrogate, and won 23 caps for Wales and one for the 1968 Lions in South Africa.

LEEDS THE WAY Leeds Beckett University are the first grass-roots sports and community club to benefit from a nationwide sponsorship drive launched this year by Velocity Commerce, an online marketplace specialist based in Cambridge.

The initiative #BackedByVelocity has donated £6,000 to the university for kit and the cost of travel, medical staff and administration during the rest of this season. The sponsors are accepting applications throughout 2020, with teams and clubs being selected on the basis of need and community impact.

POWER LUNCH North Two West club Aspatria organised a lunch to help former flanker David Robinson, one of Cumbria's most celebrated players who is suffering from Alzheimer's and reduced mobility.

All the tickets were snapped up in 72 hours, a tribute to Robinson, who played in back-to-back John Player Cup final wins for Gosforth in 1976 and 1977, having shared in the North-West Counties' 16-14

Smooth operator
Dom Walsh gets set for a box kick



Pic Michael Austin

HEATH

After 14 seasons in Yorkshire One, the time is ripe for Heath to climb into One East, though Old Brodleians, their closest rivals, are challenging at the top too.

Last May, second-placed Heath lost 24-23 at West Hartlepool with the final kick in a promotion play-off. Head coach David Harrison said: "Each season as a group we reflect on the previous campaign and assess how we can improve. This time we decided that only small changes were needed. We wanted to be fitter and stronger. Now our all-round game is much better and the backs are maturing under Mark Sales, an astute specialist coach."

Rich Brown nurtures the forwards and hooker Alex McFadden is in his first campaign as captain. Their season has been marred by the death of president David Bradley, 77. "He was a great clubman," said Harrison.

defeat of the All Blacks in 1972. He also coached Aspatria in the early 1990s.

FALLING SHORT Penrith failed to fulfil a senior fixture for the first time in memory when withdrawing from the One West match at Wilmslow. They were unable to raise a side in a tough season in which they had already used 42 players. Only 14 were available, with five abroad, ten injured and the rest ill or unavailable due to social, family or short-notice work commitments.

TOUGH CHOICE Creighton lost their first 18 matches in the Cumbria League. League restructuring in the county meant they had to decide in pre-season whether to step up a division or play friendly matches on most Saturdays.

They opted to have a go and manager Matt Liddle said: "The lads just want to play every week. We knew it would be a challenge but were keen to compete."

RICH HERITAGE Leicester prop James Whitcombe, a fourth generation rugby player, who was with Skipton and Bradford & Bingley as a junior, made his England U20 debut in the 29-24 win over France at Stade des Alpes.

A former student at Woodhouse Grove School, he is the son of ex-Tigers and England B prop Martin Whitcombe and grandson of Frank Jnr, who appeared

for Bradford, Yorkshire and North-East Counties. Frank Snr played league for Bradford Northern and Great Britain. James has stepped up from the Tigers Academy to the development squad.

FAMILY BOND It was a family affair, too, for the Markey father-and-son pair Simon, 44, a hooker, and debutant Ben, 17, a flanker, at Bradford Salem. They played together from the 55th minute in the 34-31 defeat by Malton & Norton in the Yorkshire Shield quarter-final.

Simon, who helped to launch Salem's junior section, said: "Ben's worked his way up to where he is now. He loves the game and plays for the right reasons."

MATT OF ALL TRADES Matthew Flint, of Guisborough, had an unusual experience in the 78-5 win at Whitby in Durham-Northumberland Two. He played in the front row, at lock and in the back row at various stages – and scored a try in the penultimate minute!

THOMAS TRIBUTE The fifth Thomas Froggatt Memorial match at Egremont ended in a 28-26 win for the hosts, who resisted a revival from an ex-St Bees Schools XV. It raised £1,300 for the Calvert Trust, the charity chosen by his parents Nick and Maggie Froggatt. Thomas played rugby locally but died in 2015 of an incurable brain disease. **RW**

SHORT PASS

Tarleton, of North Two West, are welcoming World Cup winner and ex-England centre Will Greenwood as their special guest at a gala dinner to celebrate their 30th anniversary on 9 May. He first started playing at Tarleton's neighbours Preston Grasshoppers.

HOW TO USE HALF-TIME

Turn the interval into a military operation, says **Sir Clive Woodward**

“During my time as England coach, we transformed our half-time routine into a meticulous, military operation. The aim was to recreate the feel of the start of the game, and no matter what the score was we had a 0-0 mindset. One coach went to the changing room just before half-time. We would make three key points – no more.”

“On entry, nobody said a word. In the first instants, the players changed their shirts and shorts, took on any liquids and fuel, and the medical team got to work. Everyone took a moment to think and looked at the three points on the board. For the next three minutes I was on my feet with the other coaches going through the points. Then we split into forwards and backs for a few moments, before coming back together with the captain, who had the final word.”

“Especially effective was the silence. Changing rooms in the middle of a Test were cacophonous and chaotic affairs when I first took over. How could players be expected to return to the field in the right mindset of focused endeavour and calm execution if their half-time refuge was a place of swearing, shouting and conflicted messages? We ultimately filtered this down to three key messages on a whiteboard, and a period of silence to reflect and process. It worked wonders.”

“Here’s how it broke down: **0-2 mins**: Absolute silence. Think about performance. Shirts off. Towel down. New kit. 0-0 on the scoreboard. **2-5 mins**: Coaches’ assessment. Take on food and fluids. **5-8 mins**: Captain/coach final word. Take on food and fluids. **8-10 mins**: Absolute silence. 0-0 on the scoreboard. Visualise kick-off.”

WHY FRANCE COULD EMBARK ON A GOLDEN ERA

Les Bleus have stepped up on both sides of the ball, says **Sean Holley**



BOLD SELECTIONS can be fraught with danger in a Six Nations. But judging from how a new-look France side performed in the early rounds of this year's championship, they have the bit between their teeth.

In the likes of scrum-half Antoine Dupont and No 8 Grégory Alldritt, they have unearthed potential superstars.

And few would have anticipated that the signing of the world's best defence coach, Shaun Edwards, would have had such an immediate impact. There has been a marked improvement in France's defensive system, especially in attitude.

The freshness that players like flanker François Cros, lock Bernard Le Roux and hooker Julien Marchand have brought shows that they're buying into

the new philosophies. At half-back, the fearless attacking potential of Toulouse pair Dupont and Romain Ntamack has been unleashed, complemented by the experience outside them of Virimi Vakatawa and Gaël Fickou.

It's still early days but the already impressive leadership from new captain Charles Ollivon is a sign that

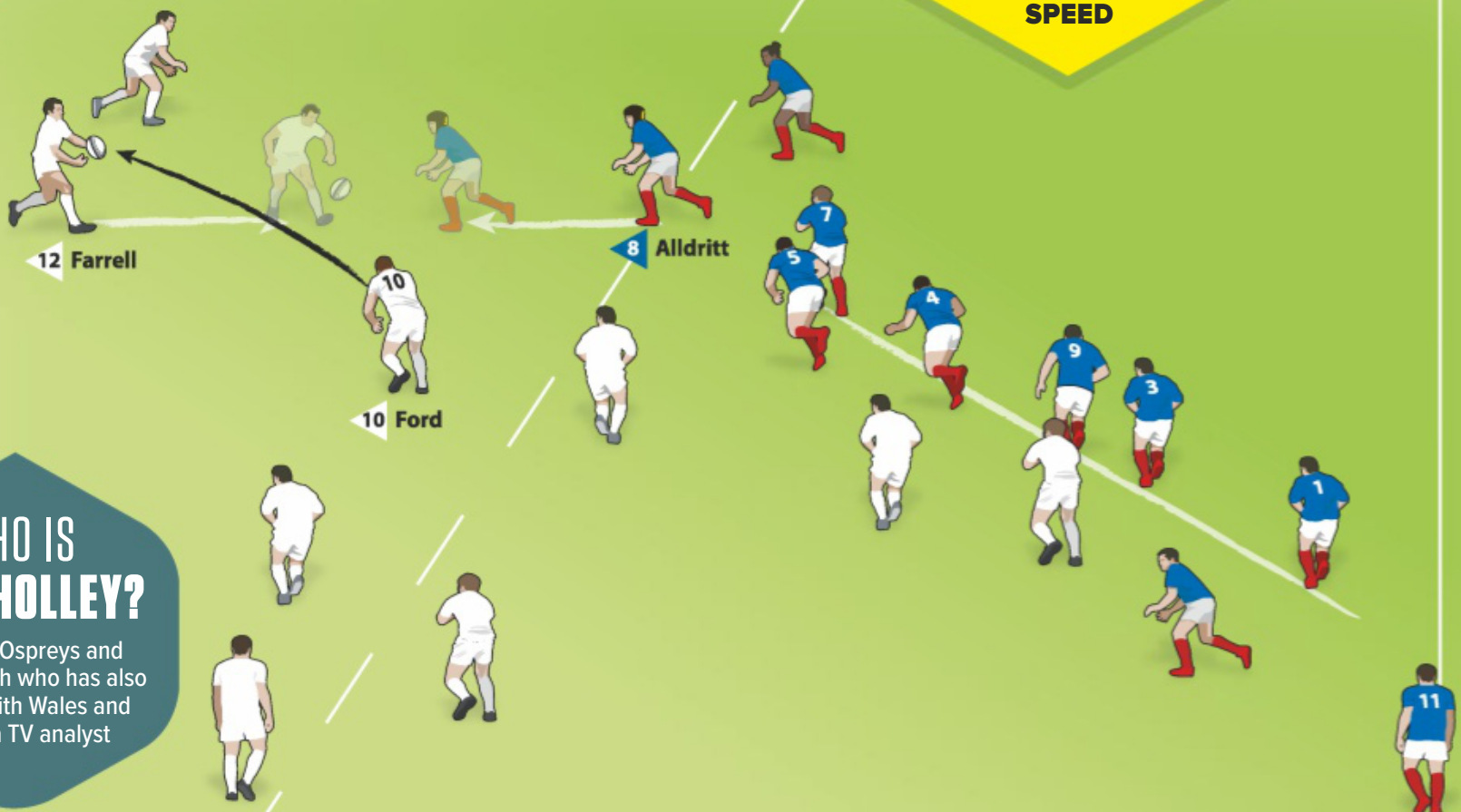
this French team means business, not just for the 2023 World Cup in their country but for the next few years in preparation. This could be the start of a golden era for France.

This month I've taken a closer look at the win against England to highlight three areas in which France are showing signs of improvement...

1

Shaun Edwards teams are renowned for their speed off the defensive line, getting into the eyeline of key decision-makers and passers, and knocking the big ball-carriers back behind the gain-line. France forced England into 12 knock-ons and 23 handling errors and they managed a 94% tackle success – an impressive stat for a first-time performance under Edwards. In this example, England have aligned deep to negate France's line speed, yet Owen Farrell is still intimidated by the onrushing Grégory Alldritt and knocks on.

FAST LINE SPEED



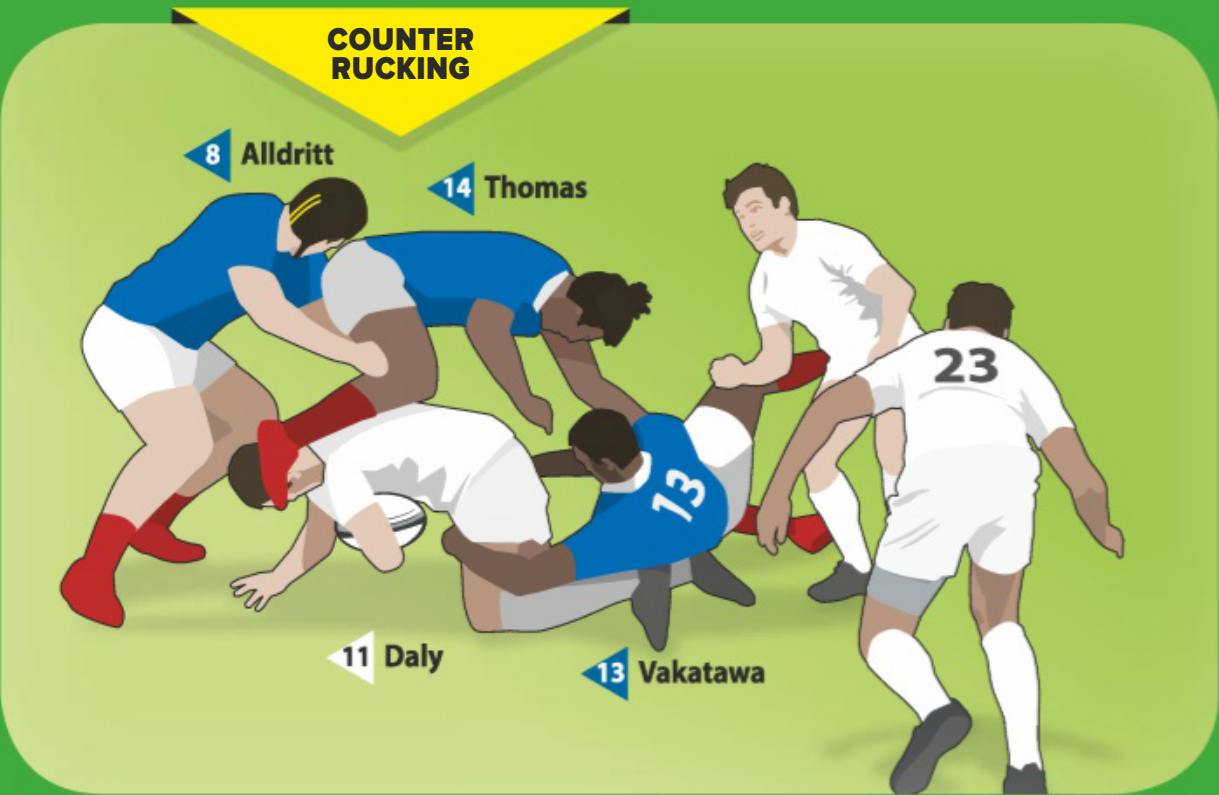
WHO IS SEAN HOLLEY?

A former Ospreys and Bristol coach who has also worked with Wales and is now a TV analyst

2

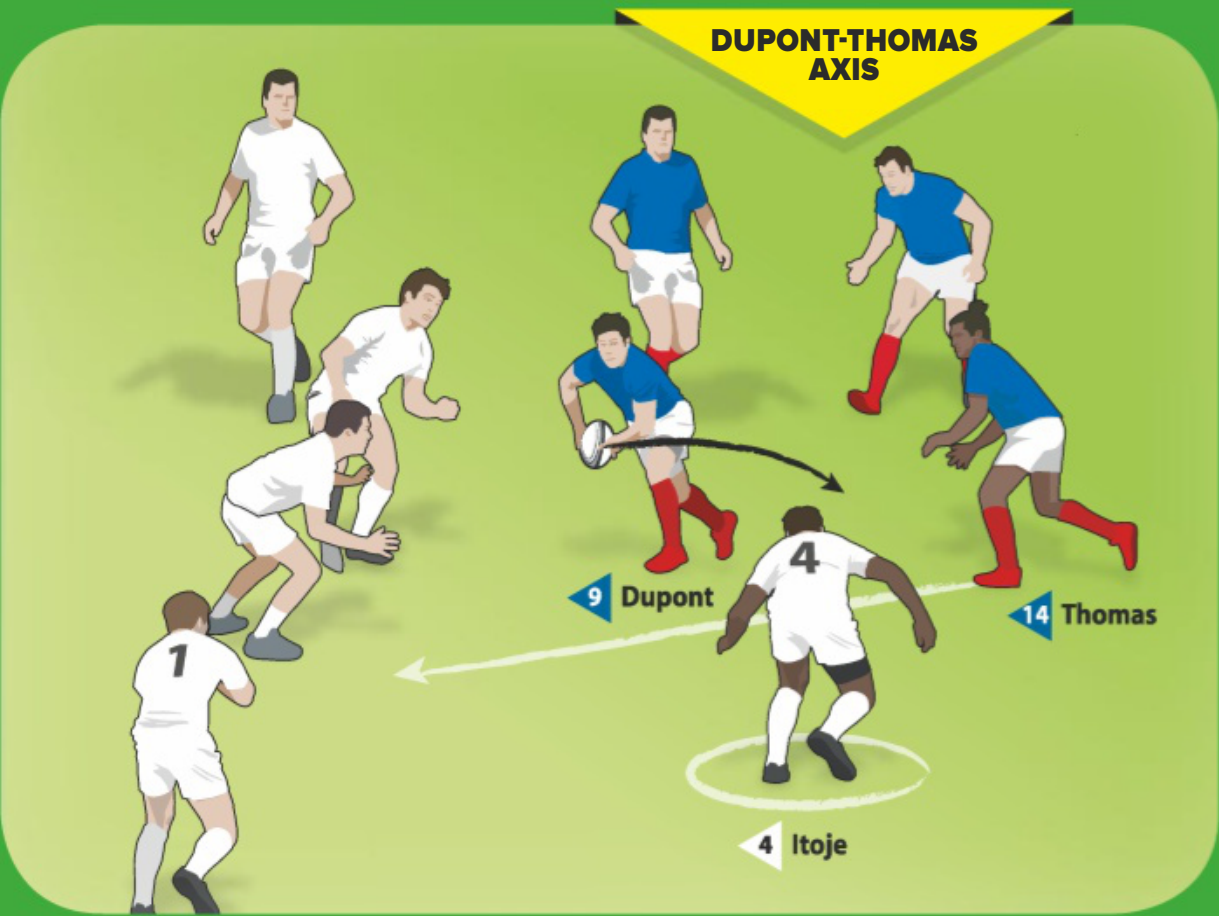
The aggression and technique that France are showing at the breakdown in defence complements their line speed and is essential to buy time for the realignment. The risk is in committing too many numbers and leaving yourself short in the line. There are so many infringements that can happen at this tackle contest that players' technique is important, and this will be interesting to monitor as they progress and get coached in this area.

At the very least, the work at the ruck is designed to slow down the opposition, force errors and put pressure on the half-backs. Against England, France won five turnovers and gained four breakdown steals, backs and forwards together causing disruption.



3

In Antoine Dupont, France have the makings of a *petit générale* who can bring forwards into the game and provoke the offloading skills we've seen from Grégory Alldritt and Charles Ollivon in particular. His combination with Teddy Thomas is an offshoot of this. In a cleverly planned set-up, the mercurial wing runs off Dupont's shoulder and into gaps created as the nine snipes and encourages big forwards to fire out of the line. Here, Maro Itoje gets isolated and Dupont puts Thomas through a hole with a shoulder ball that leads to France's opening try.



THE INSIDE LINE



Graft and guile underpin these three French tactics

1 Squeeze tight

Ferocious line speed takes hard work. There is a big physical commitment as players sprint for at least 10-15m before retreating back and out away from the ruck to get the width in the line for the next phase.

France usually work 'out to in': players aim to get opposite their man but to the outside shoulder, so they can press up on the outside and force carriers inside or shut off the attack before it gets to the wider channels.

Communication usually comes from the outside as players there have to spot attacking plays designed to break the blitz.

2 Low entry

Players must be *au fait* with breakdown laws: they must stay on their feet and be bound. They can't go through the ruck to play the nine, or kick the ball.

The aim is to enter the ruck at a good height. Coaches often get players in training to touch the ground just before engaging a defensive ruck to check their height level, and players should keep their chin off their chest to help keep their backs straight.

Leg drive is also important, and it really tests opponents coming to clear out defenders.

3 Trail finder

Thomas sets up just behind the ruck and a little on the blind side, out of the view of the guard defenders. Dupont, after a call from Thomas, breaks from the base of the ruck – ball in two hands – and runs an arced line, engaging the first two defenders.

Thomas trails Dupont's run and times his burst based on the decisions of the defenders. As Dupont engages the defenders, he slows and leaves a deft pass, almost suspending the ball in the air, to allow Thomas to burst onto the ball and into the gap.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BE DOING THIS MONTH...

RETAIN ENERGY AS YOU EAT VEGAN

MOVE

VEGANISM IS a plant-based diet avoiding all animal products, such as meat (including fish, shellfish and insects), dairy, eggs and honey, *writes nutritionist James Morehen.*

When going vegan you must know where to get your key nutrients. If you drop meat and fish, all of a sudden you drop a lot of protein. You can get it from other sources, but it becomes harder to ensure you get the full spectrum of amino acids – the key for muscle growth.

You also drop your intake of leucine, which aids muscle protein synthesis – the building of new muscles! As a comparison, 100g of beef = approx 2,945mg of leucine. Whereas 100g of tofu = approx 1,392mg leucine. And

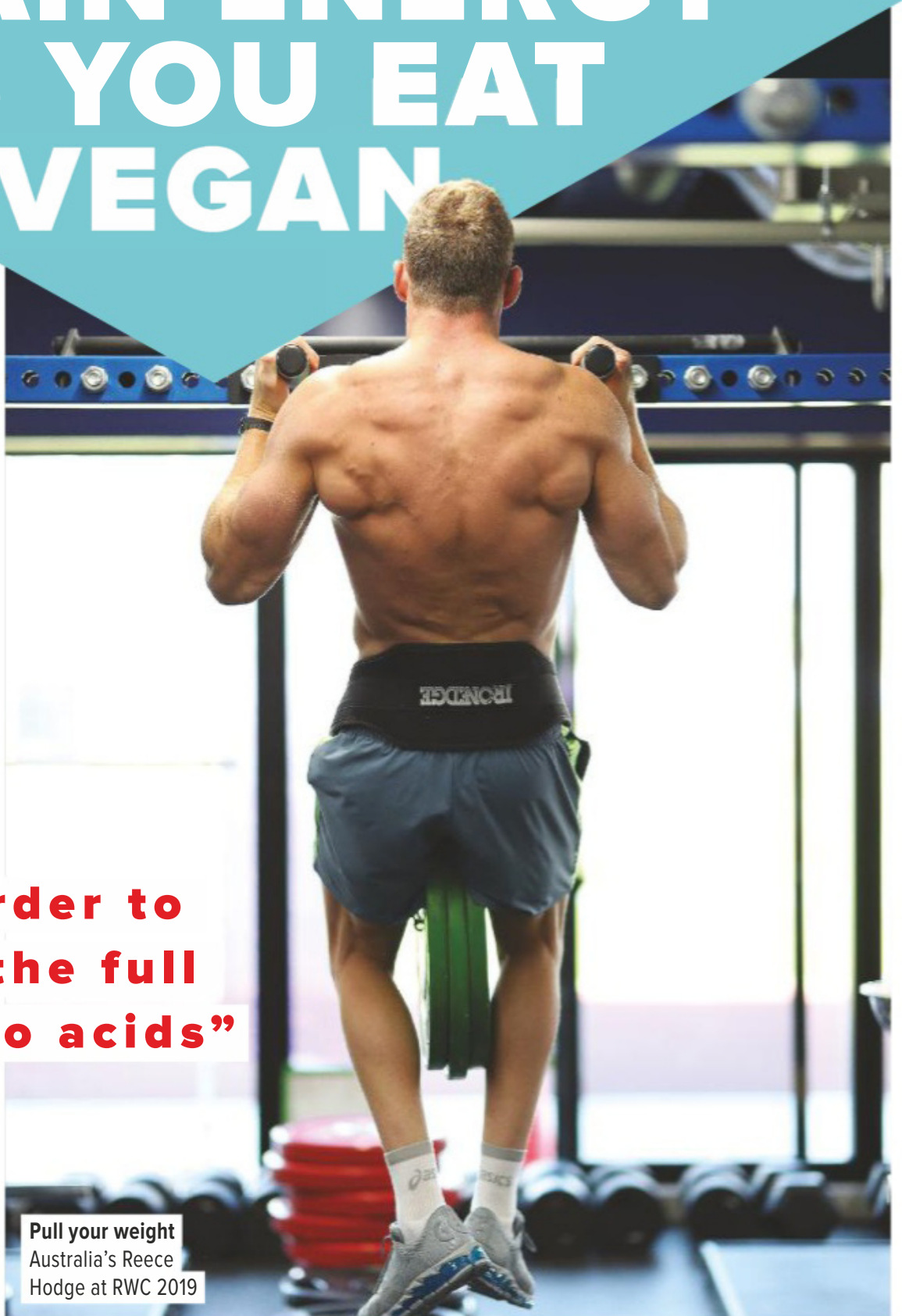
“It becomes harder to ensure you get the full spectrum of amino acids”

100g of beef is quite a small portion due to its density and thickness, so 100g of tofu is going to be a lot more in quantity.

When many athletes go vegan, by default they must increase their intake of carbs and fruit and veg. If historically you are a player that didn't really like vegetables, this increase can result in a much better immune system! Combine that with an increase in carbs and you may also see players more energetic and even recovering better.

I firmly believe the art of periodised nutrition comes in here, finding the balance and considering protein intake for vegan athletes around major events.

Where can that protein intake come from? A big supplier is going to be plant-based produce: think of edamame beans, lentils, chickpeas and most other beans, seeds (hemp seed, etc), green peas, spirulina, quinoa, soy milk and other plant-based milks, oats, rice, nuts (almonds, brazils, cashews) and tofu.



Pull your weight
Australia's Reece Hodge at RWC 2019

How do vegan athletes continue to make gains, maintain muscle and keep their energy levels up?

Q

A They must work closely with chefs to ensure meals contain lots of plant-based protein, from a variety of sources, so that all amino acids are supplied, *writes James Morehen.* Combine this with adequate carbs at each meal, periodised in a manner so that breakfast and lunch are the higher-carb meals, with a slight reduction at dinner.

A Six Nations player will hit around 6g/kg of carbs for a captain's run. That's 600g for a 100kg player – 600g of carbs equates to about 12 jacket potatoes or 12 bottles of Lucozade! Each meal must also have lots of fruit and vegetables.



2 BBQ CHICKPEA SLIDERS MAKES 12

1 Put the chickpeas, BBQ sauce, garlic powder and chili powder in a saucepan.
2 Cook over a medium heat for 10-15 minutes, stirring constantly and mashing about half of the chickpeas with the back of a fork or slotted spoon.
3 Add 1 tablespoon of water (15ml) at a time if the mixture starts sticking to the

bottom of the pan. Remove from the heat, season, and roughly portion.
4 To assemble, shape a spoonful of the BBQ chickpeas into a rough patty on the bottom of a bun. You can layer a sprinkling of sesame seeds on the top of each patty and roasted sunflower seeds add some extra crunch, if desired.

- 1 can of chickpeas, rinsed and drained
- ½ cup BBQ sauce
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ¼ teaspoon chili powder

- Pinch of sea salt, to taste
- 12 whole-wheat slider buns
- Sesame seeds (optional)
- Roasted sunflower seeds, for serving (optional)

RECIPE James Morehen

3 TRAIN STEPS TO SUCCESS

World Cup winner Kat Merchant – now a personal trainer – gives us an all-body workout. You can find her at Kat14.com



1 Power bag burpee snatch // 3 x 15 REPS

Start in press-up position. Jump to feet, chest out, flat back. Drive up, hips through and lift the weight overhead. Control the power bag to floor and repeat.



2 Overhead reverse lunge // 4 x 12 REPS EACH LEG

One arm straight with kettlebell overhead. Step back with same leg, core tight, drop knee close to ground. Step up, keeping the KB behind your head.



3 Medicine ball squat and press // 3 x 15 REPS

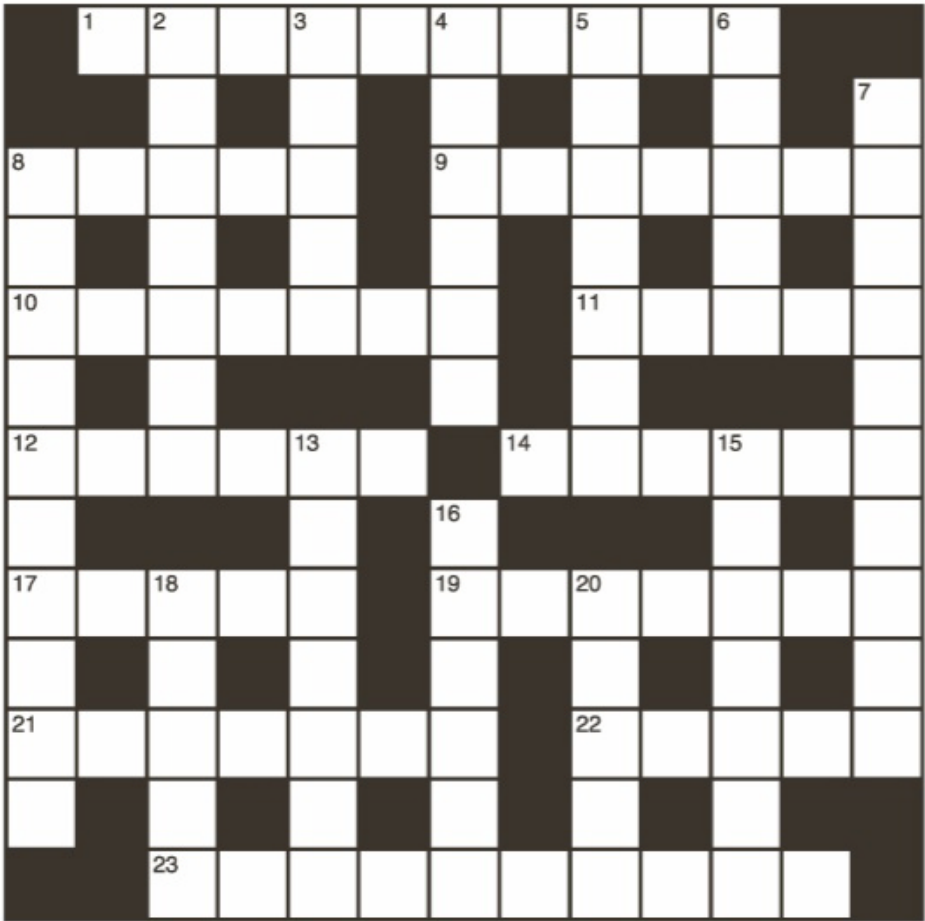
With your weight through the heels, squat down low. Use legs to drive up, plus shoulders, to lift the ball. You can throw the ball to be more explosive.

ACROSS

- 1 What's needed to transfer the ball from the hooker to the front of the lineout (5,5)
- 8 Is rugby-grip spray in poor taste? (5)
- 9 The - - - Sevens, a beach rugby tournament in Florida in which teams donate blood (7)
- 10 Matthew - - - , Olympic rowing great who played lock for Henley 5ths (7)
- 11 Sebastian - - - , Italy back-row who enjoys romantic comedies (5)
- 12 French referee Mathieu - - - took charge of Ireland v Scotland (6)
- 14 Wenceslas - - - , flanker omitted from France's Six Nations squad... (6)
- 17 ...*Les Bleus* had a sleepless one ahead of their RWC 2015 match with Italy due to a noisy wedding party (5)
- 19 This hooker was one of eight uncapped players named in England's 34-man Six Nations squad (3,4)
- 21 Initially Renwick and Ian McGeechan enjoy new tunics – fancy clothing! (7)
- 22 Ian - - - , Western Force scrum-half who had a brief spell at Harlequins (5)
- 23 Leinster have it in the European Champions Cup following their emphatic form in the pool stage (3,7)

DOWN

- 2 East London club whose various teams include Griffins, Gargoyles, Gogs and Gladies... (7)
- 3 ...while another junior club, Rolls - - - from Derby, was founded during the Second World War (5)
- 4 - - - Cavubati, second-row for Harlequins and Fiji (6)
- 5 They play Russia and Belgium this month in the second-tier Rugby Europe Championship (7)
- 6 I leave wiring to Justin, the former Bristol, Leeds and Otley prop (5)
- 7 Irish forward rigs dinner vote (5,5)
- 8 His score against Namibia at Japan 2019 won World Rugby's Try of the Year award (1,1,8)
- 13 New part arranged for European port city that staged rugby at the 1920 Olympics (7)
- 15 Oldham RUFC combined a recent players' one with a sausage festival (7)
- 16 There's a bronze one at Rugby School in honour of William Webb Ellis (6)
- 18 Eddie Jones recalled Chris Ashton in 2018 because of "a - - - in his eye" (5)
- 20 Ex-rugby player Stephen Canny tackled a thief riding a - - - (5)



THE WINNER OF THE FEBRUARY CROSSWORD IS CLIVE MARTIN FROM BRIGHTON, EAST SUSSEX

ACROSS 1 Julien 4 Stoker 9 Starmer 10 Smith 11 Nine 12 Lane 13 Lyn 15 Read 16 Ross 19 Don 21 Earl 22 Jets 24 Angel 25 Davydov 26 Dillon 27 Alison. DOWN 1 Jason Woodward 2 Learner 3 Emma 5 Tisseron 6 Kriel 7 Rohan Janse van 8 Bread 14 Waterloo 17 Speedos 18 Trudi 20 Nigel 23 Oval.

The crossword winner will receive a £50 gift voucher from Raging Bull, the leisurewear company founded by ex-England and Lions prop Phil Vickery (left). See their clothing range at ragingbull.co.uk. Closing date for entries is Thursday 2 April. Results will appear in our June 2020 issue. Send your entry, name & address and an email address to: Alan Pearey, Wellside Cottage, Cranes Lane, Kelvedon, Essex, CO5 9AX. The competition is open to all ages – full rules are on page 97. Compiled by Alan Pearey.

DON'T MISS NEXT MONTH

SIX NATIONS REVIEW



Analysis of how the 2020 championship was won and exclusive interviews in the May issue of *Rugby World*

PLUS

- Rugby in a warzone – a special report
- Behind the scenes at the LA Sevens
- Technical advice from Sean Holley in the Analyst
- Grass-roots club news

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★ STAR LETTER ★

Volunteers deserve support

Much of the detailed analysis in February's extract from *Unholy Union* strikes a chord, identifying many of the problems facing community clubs. I do, though, strongly disagree with the suggestion that RFU campaigning has been the main factor in preventing participation numbers falling further.

Indeed, by spending a reducing proportion of its revenues on support for the grass roots, they have arguably been hampering the efforts of club volunteers around the country, battling against the odds to create, develop and retain players. It is to this army of volunteers that the relatively good health of the community game is owed.

If Twickenham is not able to release more funds to restore levels of central support to club administrators and to invest in basic facilities, the resultant increased pressures on the mostly aged/aging volunteers running clubs will result in the battles being fought to sustain the game locally being lost.

At that stage, rugby's transformation from a mainly participant sport to a spectator activity becomes a sad reality.

Unfortunately, the success that American Football has achieved with no grass-roots participation is not in my view realistic for rugby union and I fear spectator numbers will also fall.
John Allanson, Bishop's Stortford, Herts



Backbone of the game
A volunteer at work

Weighty issue

As serious injuries in rugby are related to the increasing weights of players, why not challenge selection criteria by having a pre-match weigh-in, as in boxing?

The heavier team could start the match with the penalty of a negative score. If this resulted in the selection of lighter players, perhaps also more skilful, it could reduce injuries and make matches fairer and more entertaining.

Simon Plant, Bristol

RW says: Injuries aren't all down to size but interestingly a weight-restricted competition has just launched in NZ.

Double headers

Women's Six Nations matches should be played on the same day in the same



Double up
Wales v Barbarians Women

stadium as the men's, in the way the Wales v Barbarians matches were held in November. This is a great way to get more support for the women's games.

Nicki Davies, via Twitter

Rassie's know-how

The current substitutions structure makes the game more attractive and faster. Coaches just need to figure out how to use their subs to benefit their game plan. Most of the time there is no strategy for how to use the subs.

If England had beaten the Boks (in the World Cup final), this would not even be a discussion. Rassie Erasmus outsmarted everyone and gave a lesson on how to use subs. If Eddie Jones did it, he'd have been a genius.

Johan Le Roux, via Facebook

Subs way

If no substitutions are allowed, gone will be the days when, if coaches are trying to manage workloads or players coming back from injury, a player can play limited time in their first

few games. But overall I do think it would be a positive initiative.

Alun Jones, via Twitter

Let girls play to win

As a team we feel the current viewpoint of the RFU is that "everyone's a winner" and that girls aren't encouraged to be competitive, unlike boys of our age.

This lack of equality is shown in schools. Boys of the same age group play 15-a-side, full-pitch rugby to win. Girls play random numbers (usually 8-12)

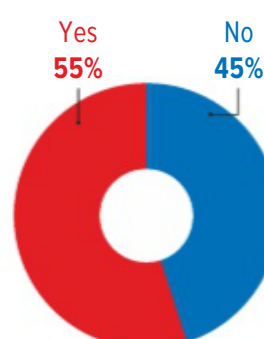
on a half-pitch and the onus is on taking part. There is also a boys' schools cup but not a girls' one. Whilst we acknowledge the numbers is in part due to how many girls play in schools, the lack of competitiveness is not.

Whilst as a club we want to include girls of all abilities, we want to be competitive too; we want to play hard and win – like the boys!

We need a competitive league in Hertfordshire with teams that can put out a side of 15 so we can measure our improvements. This can

THE RW POLL

Should the Women's Six Nations be played at the same time of year as the Men's? Here's how you voted on Twitter...





Getting stick
Owen Farrell was booed at Murrayfield

be run in line with friendlies against clubs that may not have the numbers to field a full team, so we can help them develop.

Fullerians U15 Girls, Hertfordshire

RW says: Your passion for the game is brilliant. The challenge for the RFU is to balance the needs of teams like yourselves and those starting out.

Ban the booers

Booing is relatively new. In the 1980s and 1990s you could hear a pin drop

at the then Five Nations. How is this becoming the norm for all ‘fans’ to do? I hate it, no matter who is taking the kick.
Agatha Poirot, via Facebook

Funding shambles

A board of people who are oblivious to the game 95% of the population follow, and most of whom have never even visited a community club, made a terrible decision to reduce Championship funding.

It will see no development opportunities for youngsters (see what those who’ve been in the Championship and now play for England have said). Premiership clubs will bring in yet more foreign players; England will be developing foreign players. Shambles.

Steve Smith, Burton-on-Trent

RW says: Read Martin Haag’s view on this on P31.

Change in pay?

Why not cut players’ money slightly when on England duty and plough it into the Championship and grass roots?
Tom Dix, via Facebook

Say no to closed shop

Mike Roberts is right (Rant, March 2020): ring-fencing the Premiership would be an abomination! Who are the people who think they can isolate the top level from the rest?

The cry that protection from relegation is needed to ‘safeguard the owners’ investments’ is hypocrisy from a group who made their fortunes in open competition in the market.

Why should the current occupants be protected forever and all opportunities for other dynamic clubs and entrepreneurs be denied?

There is far more money in French rugby but no one talks of sealing off the Top 14.

Unfortunately the RFU, who should stand against this nefarious initiative, seem to be colluding with it via their apparent attempt to financially cripple the Championship.

Norman Young

Lambsheim, Germany



Reaching for the stars?
London Scottish v Bedford Blues in the Championship

PICS Getty Images & Inpho

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THE SECRET PLAYER

Our former pro provides a unique insight into the game

“This insane itinerary takes its toll. No wonder Finn Russell drinks”

► **TOUGH LIFE**, being a rugbyman. And, paradoxically, the better you are at it, the tougher life becomes. In many jobs, reaching the top of the pile affords a certain level of privilege and ease. I have a friend who recently qualified as a consultant, and while his earnings have leapt up, suddenly he has the time to recognise his two young children. More responsibility but also more leeway.

In rugby, if you end up as a staple in your national team, everything multiplies. Greater workload, longer hours and, most of all, constant pressure. Let's be honest, 40% of any pro squad will consist of guys who are happy to pootle along at 6/10, do a job, take their pay cheque and with any luck fit in a trip to Dubai during the Test window.

But the big dogs almost never get a breather, slogging away from July to June. Think of the year they've just had; straight from the domestic season into World Cup camp, the agony and ecstasy of the tournament, followed by a perfunctory couple of weeks off before being chucked back into the idiotic schedule of domestic and European rugby with their clubs. And before you know it, it's Six Nations time. No wonder Finn Russell drinks.

Clearly, this insane itinerary takes its physical toll but coaches aren't stupid, and will manage their top men so that their bodies last beyond the age of 27. An army of sports scientists are charged with monitoring and tailoring their programmes. Load management, as the cool kids call it – though it sounds like Eddie Jones doesn't subscribe to that.

This is all well and good but mental exhaustion, burnout, overstimulation – these are harder things to measure. Or manage. Nobody on the outside knows how much whirring a player's brain does away from training. Every Sunday, there is a new set of inputs to compute, amid the elation of a win or self-loathing of a defeat. Your average player at least gets to decontract in his own home. The men in the Six Nations will barely see their

coffees and top bantz with team-mates during spare time, but after a while you realise that even too much purely social interaction only adds to your overloaded brain's exhaustion. So sometimes the only option is to retreat to your cave with the iPad and noise cancellers and settle down to uncover Noah's latest scrapes in season five of *The Affair*. Phone in hand, naturally, to monitor your social media following. There's money in those shenanigans, it seems.

My first years in national camps were pre-smartphone and way before endless streaming, and back then we gazed in wonder at the guys watching *Prison Break* on their old-school hard drives.

Being the latest of late adopters, I stuck firmly to books for entertainment well into the Noughties. I remember carting half a library round one Australian tour. I've heard it said that reading a new book is like giving your brain a software

update, which sounds like a pretty good thing for an overworked, mentally-taxed top sportsman. As to the benefits of watching hours of TV and fiddling with your Insta account? Yeah, the jury is out.

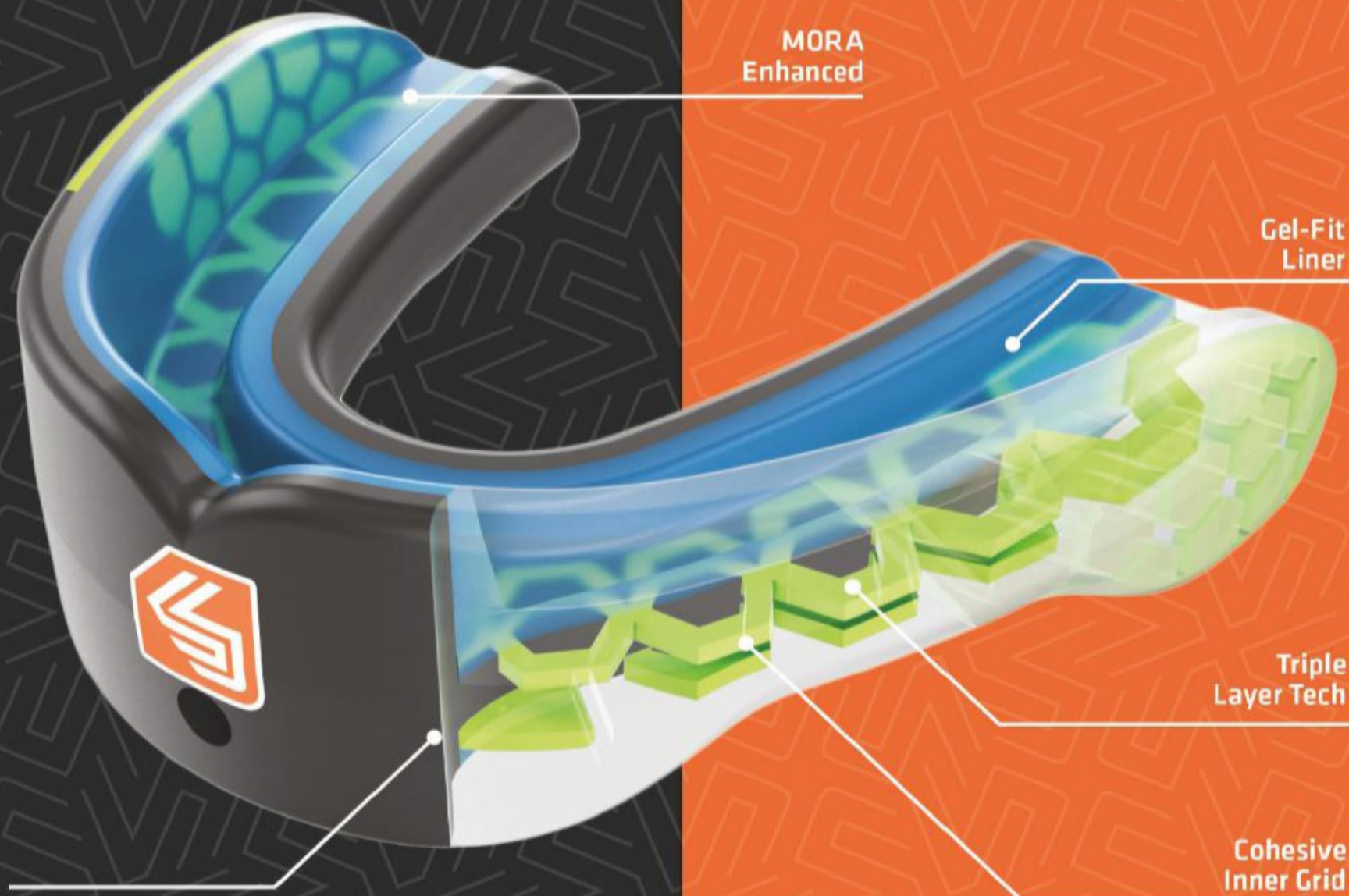
But who the hell reads an actual paper book these days? I can't remember the last time I did. At the risk of sounding like a reactionary old fool, it may be that these days a player's downtime (mine included) is actually taking him further away from achieving that 'present', zen-like state to which we all aspire. **RW**



own beds for two months. All that time spent in a foreign environment (even a five-star, foreign environment) can only add to their mental degradation.

So how do you remain sane, or at least temporarily distract yourself from the stress, in among the discombobulating switch from club to country, home to hotel, all the different sets of calls, negotiating the subtleties of each group's dynamics? Well, exactly like any other right-thinking human. You ram a box set down your eyeholes. Prosaic, but there you go. In the squad hotel, there is endless opportunity for leisurely

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