

THE 2005 LIONS

By
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The author is ITV's chief rugby commentator and he was 'loaned' to TalkSport for the recent Lions tour to New Zealand. He played 26 times for Wales between 1966-73, went on 2 Lions tours and played in all 4 Tests in 1971 when the All Blacks were beaten.

I have never found it easy saying 'Sir' Clive Woodward and after the Lions Tour debacle it really sticks in the craw. His knighthood was, after all, given for services to rugby and down in New Zealand he did the British and Irish game a grave disservice.

Some have suggested that the players let him down, but I have no hesitation in laying most of the blame fairly and squarely at his door.

Players with proven track records at the highest level – some of them World Cup winners – suddenly looked mediocre, simply because they were just as confused as the rest of us. Clive's biggest crime was failing to establish any sort of playing framework that the players could understand and buy into.

From the moment he unveiled his radical blueprint for the tour, a number of us thought he had taken leave of his senses and perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the whole charade was that he was allowed to continue his lemming-like rush into the abyss without anybody in his huge coaching team challenging the sanity of what he was doing. Sometimes you really cannot reinvent the wheel.

When we toured New Zealand in 1971, the only time the Lions have beaten the All Blacks in a series, we played a total of 26 games with a squad of 30 players. If anybody was injured, that player had to leave the party before he could be replaced.

We played 11 games before the first test so there was plenty of time to experiment, but Carwyn James started to play his probable test team on Saturdays within a couple of weeks. From then on it was a question of working on the combinations, building momentum and creating our own style with the mid-week team keeping up the pressure by playing out of their skins and winning all their matches as well.

With his normal fanfare, Clive announced that he would be taking a party of 45 players for an eleven match tour (10 at that stage – the Auckland game was added later) but assured everybody that all the players would get a chance to challenge for a test place. It sounded like complete nonsense then and it proved to be a disastrous decision.

I totally accept that rugby is growing ever more physical and it was odds-on that he would have to call on a number of replacements but, with just six games before the first

test, it was impossible to give four scrum-halves and four fly-halves, for example, a chance to stake their claims. In the end he lost the plot completely and chose three players – Jason Robinson, Gareth Thomas and Stephen Jones, who had only just arrived in New Zealand as well as playing Jonny Wilkinson out of position.

We now learn from Nigel Horton, the former England second-row who attended all the training sessions as keeper of the scrummaging machine, that the forwards never spent more than 20 minutes in any one session working on scrums and line-outs so we had a seriously undercooked pack and a back division that had never played together before.

Woodward's pledge before the first test? "This will be the best prepared Lions team ever to take the field." From then on it got worse. In the second test he bowed to popular opinion and brought in little Shane Williams, so we had two diminutive wings (Robinson was on the other flank) running from deep positions at the likes of Tana Umanga. The result? Suicide!

Had nobody noticed that Wales were playing a totally different style of rugby – employing the rugby equivalent of one touch passing to give Williams the yard of space (and that is all he needs) to be effective?

New Zealand have since gone on to win the Tri-Nations but South Africa and Australia both proved the All Blacks are certainly no 'Super' team as was being suggested to excuse the Lions' failure. I shall never forget Ian McGeechan's words during the victorious 1997 tour of South Africa. "What you have to realise is that a Lions tour is completely different to anything else you will ever attempt as a coach. You have to accept you will never see your team fulfil its potential because there is just not enough time. All you can do is get them playing as well as possible as quickly as possible and hope that is good enough." Woodward never got them playing at all.

Some have suggested that Lions' tours should be discontinued because they can never be competitive again. Rubbish! They will always be underdogs, but the 1997 Lions pulled it off and the 2001 Lions went very, very close. It is one of the great rugby experiences – unique to British and Irish players who have unanimously declared they are still up for the challenge.

The lessons from 2005 are very simple. Clive Woodward got it completely wrong in concept and execution. He spent so much time preparing for every contingency, he completely forgot to think about a game plan. Only he could have persuaded the four Home Unions to give him carte blanche with no checks and balances – effectively, he was manager and chief coach combined - and nobody, not even a knight of the realm, deserves that much power. It must never be allowed to happen again.