

THE LIONS BY RYLAND JAMES.

The author is the former deputy sports editor at the South Wales Argus and was the rugby writer at the Bristol Evening Post. He has been in New Zealand since January 2004 and is a sports sub-editor for the Sunday News, New Zealand's national tabloid. He celebrated the Lions' third test defeat before the game kicked off by flying home to get married and was glad to be 12,000 miles away from the gloating when the Lions got thumped...again.

It was billed as the tour to end all tours, an all-singing, all dancing, £9million jaunt pitting the best Britain and Ireland had to offer against the All Blacks in a three-test showdown.

New Zealand was full of anticipation as the series promised to be close and dramatic. A monstrous band of 45 players was coming with five main coaches and a huge backroom staff including a lawyer, a chef, fitness expert, kicking coach and numerous PR types all holed up initially in Auckland's plush Hilton hotel.

With the congratulatory slaps on his back still fresh from winning the World Cup some 19 months before, Sir Clive Woodward was looking to cement his position as the world's best coach by winning where only the 1971 Lions, with Welshman Carwyn James at the helm, had tasted success before. The tour was as hyped up as any sports event can be before a ball is kicked, but it ended with Woodward's reputation in tatters and his mantra that big is best lay in shreds.

Before the tour many former All Blacks were baffled by his need for 45 players. Less is more, they said, and the progress of the 2005 Lions in New Zealand merely reinforced that idea. You can bring as many players as you want, but they have to perform. When it was all over, Woodward said, "I wouldn't change much but (when the Lions go to New Zealand again in twelve years time) I would, say, take more players and play more games. The people who say we took too many players are totally wrong, they have to look at what has happened. Because we are in New Zealand, you just can't fly in someone and play them." Oh, but you can.

The Lions' two form players both came from way off centre stage when tour replacements Ryan Jones and Simon Easterby forced their way into the backrow for the second test. Jones in particular, fresh from the Welsh tour of North America, put in a memorably barnstorming display against Otago just a week after being summoned over the Pacific.

Sir Clive is a coach that likes to think outside the box and, having seen how many players the Lions ultimately used in 2001 after injury struck, he brought the *total* number that had previously been used in Australia. Woodward's insistence that all of his 45-strong cast would get game time meant that combinations had little chance to forge and the test team didn't play as a team before the first test.

Too many cooks spoiled the broth and it seems madness that the strongest XV never took to the field before Christchurch and that so few had opportunities. Step forward Shane Horgan and Gareth Cooper! Both the Irish wing and the Welsh scrum half were given just one start to impress, plus a few appearances from the bench. Surely, it would have been better to take the traditional 35-strong squad and fly in replacements from the Home Unions who were also touring? Better to have a player fresh from a tour and full of the joys of promotion, rather than a player who is frustrated and surplus to requirements.

There were other things the Lions didn't need in New Zealand. They had a press officer, better known on British streets than some of the players. The decision to bring Britain's highest-profile press officer, Alastair Campbell, on tour is typical of Woodward's unconventional approach and was a grave mistake – at least from the New Zealand media's perspective. The main problem Campbell brought to the Lions was his baggage. Before the Lions arrived, your average Kiwi sports reporters had only ever used the word 'spin' when Aussie bowler Shane Warne was hurling a few tricky deliveries down at New Zealand's batsmen. Now, with the introduction of Campbell, they learned a new word that had been created in Downing Street – and they were keen to use the spin aspect at every opportunity and suddenly everything the Lions did off the field had the suspicion of being given the 'spin' treatment.

A haze of hidden agenda shrouded the Lions' every move, regardless of the actual truth, and positive deeds *looked* contrived and forced whether they were or not. A touring press officer's job is to make sure that the relationship between journalists and players is open, easy-going and that reporters are on side. Simple as that. But among the feature stories that appeared in the sport's pages of New Zealand's papers, there was a handful of profiles on Campbell himself. The 2005 Lions' press officer had as high a profile as some of the players and that is not right. Fleet Street's finest are simple creatures; they are kept happy with plenty of access to players and the chance to do their job in peace.

There were mutterings that Campbell got offside with his own British media, but the point is that the Lions arrived under a cloud of suspicion that never lifted from New Zealand's media and shouldn't have been there in the first place. The dark clouds of suspicion – lots of words, not much action - finally emptied on the tourists in a Canterbury cloudburst within 40 seconds of the test series kick off and ultimately shaped the 2005 tour.

As has been well documented, virtually from the start, the All Blacks dumped tour skipper Brian O'Driscoll from the equation with what is widely regarded as an illegal spear-tackle and then went onto post a 26-3 one-sided hammering. Yes, the perpetrators of the 'tackle', Tana Umaga and Keven Mealamu, should have been

handed a ban for it. Yes, it robbed the Lions of their main playmaker, their back line general and their captain in one fell (and foul) swoop. Yes, as captain, Umaga should have checked on O'Driscoll as he lay writhing in agony and he should have apologised at the first opportunity.

But South African citing commissioner Willem Venter didn't see it that way and "Speargate" became one of the most closely dissected on-field acts in recent times. There was no ban, no immediate apology from the All Blacks. Since when, though, have players gone around saying sorry to each other, anyway? As was pointed out by British and Kiwi reporters, if England's Danny Grewcock – banned from the tour for biting Mealamu in the first test- had to apologise to every recipient of his indiscretions, his mobile bill would be a king's ransom.

Instead, the 'outraged' Lions spent the next four days venting their spleen. This simply looked to New Zealanders as the Poms whinging away a very poor first-test performance. Pure Campbell spin, and for us ex-pats in New Zealand, it was embarrassing.

The attention on O'Driscoll's injury deflected attention away from the glaringly obvious fact that the Lions had been abysmal. The vaunted British forwards looked shell-shocked as their lineout imploded with a staggering – and unacceptable - 10 balls lost on their own throw. Hopefully, this will be a record never again matched by a British Lions' side and definitely never beaten.

Having lost his key forward, Lawrence Dallaglio, through a bad ankle injury in the tour opener, now Woodward was robbed of his key back and his frustration was understandable, especially as he thought more devious forces than simply lady luck were at play. But Woodward's prolonged whining simply pushed the home side further into themselves and you don't want to do that against the All Blacks. They were portrayed as the bad guys and they had a point to prove. This is a dangerous frame of mind to hand any New Zealander. As a small nation, they genuinely believe that the rest of the world likes to bully the proud little underdog and the All Blacks weren't going to lie down in their own backyard. Suddenly, their captain was under pressure and the British had made the situation personal. Big mistake. With a point to prove, New Zealand went out and stuffed the Lions to win the second test and neatly wrap up the series with Dan Carter in the No 10 shirt doing a good impression of Clark Kent's alter ego.

It was all over bar the shouting and Woodward was just another coach who had found out how seriously they take their rugby in New Zealand. But for all Woodward did wrong off the pitch between the first and second tests, there is no escaping the fact that the British players simply did not front up when faced with the All Blacks' challenge. The writing was on the wall from early on.

Too few players were in form and by game three, against the New Zealand Maori, the playing strength of the Lions was exposed. Some of the All Blacks had been released to play. They were only fringe players, but they did the business and the Maori recorded a first win over the Lions after seven failed attempts. The All Blacks'

second-string open side flanker, Marty Holah, was up against Welshman Martin Williams, arguably the best No 7 Britain had to offer. It was a no contest. Williams was beaten to the ball time and again by Holah, who can't break into the All Blacks' side unless future captain Richie McCaw is injured. Holah twice drove Williams back and twice won penalties when the Welshman infringed in desperation. A back-row of Welshman Michael Owen and Williams, as well as England's Richard Hill, the potential test combination, came off second-best to a Maori trio who were, at best, second-choice for the All Blacks.

Woodward had seen enough and reverted back to his trusted English generals of Richard Hill, Neil Back and Martin Corry for the first test. He ignored the Celts, which had them burning their Lions' shirts in the Welsh valleys.

There were other problems from the Maori match. Hooker Steve Thompson was missing the mark, centres Brian O'Driscoll and Gordon D'Arcy appeared to be a new combination rather than Ireland's established midfield pair. More importantly, the winning try by fullback Leon MacDonald came despite four attempted tackles by various Lions. It was 19-13 at the end, but the Lions had shown they had neither the personnel nor the strategy to cope.

You only have to look at the class of the 2005 forwards, compared to their Lions' counterparts in 2001, to see a gulf in class. The Lions' pack for the first test in Australia in 2001, when the Wallabies were smashed off the park, contained the likes of Martin Johnson, Keith Wood, Richard Hill, Scott Quinnell and Neil Back. The names Paul O'Connell, Julian White, Gethin Jenkins and Shane Byrne do not have quite the same ring about them and the difference showed in the first test. The shocking figure of the ten lost lineout balls has already been mentioned, most of the kicking was poor and there was little enterprise from the midfield. The wingers had no chance.

Woodward made seven changes for the second test, but it only widened the gulf in the scores as the 48-18 second test final score showed. The last week was a long one for the Lions and the test side were again hopelessly outclassed 38-19 at Eden Park. The All Blacks were missing several of their key players for the final act and looked tired - but they were still far too strong.

Woodward was not particularly gracious in defeat and his classic comment, "The only time you can judge teams is at World Cups where everyone arrives with the same preparation and at full strength," again antagonised an already unimpressed group of locals.

Minnows Romania, Japan or Tonga could never afford the same preparation as the likes of New Zealand, Australia, France or England and surely that mistress of ill fortune, known as injury, strikes whether there is a World Cup on the horizon or not. Woodward's comment came across as both petulant and poorly timed, it was perceived as 'rugby is only about World Cups, I won the World Cup and you haven't since 1987', as if anyone seemed able to forget.

Woodward advocated making the tour party even bigger next time. His comments exasperated, amongst others, Scottish taskmaster and hardcase Jim Telfer, who forged the Lions' pack into a unit that beat the 1997 Springboks. "In truth, there were a lot of people in New Zealand who had not earned the right to be a Lion, both on and off the field. That was the fault of the management," said Telfer. "It is inevitable with a squad of 45 players and 29 officials that many among them will have been handed what hundreds of players have viewed as a lifetime's pinnacle achievement, and worked and made great sacrifices for it."

When the chips were down and few others were putting up their hand for test selection, Woodward showed he was human and fell back on the tried and tested. He opted for the veteran English players who had helped him to World Cup glory two years earlier. Flankers Neil Back and Richard Hill, lock Ben Kay, first five-eighth Jonny Wilkinson, midfield back Will Greenwood and winger Jason Robinson were all either past their best, suffering niggles or had been away from rugby for lengthy periods.

Sir Clive Woodward's Lions arrived in New Zealand hoping to be crowned the Kings of the Jungle in world rugby. They left with tails firmly planted between their legs; they had been exposed as toothless and simply not up to the job of matching the All Black beast on the paddock. Too many players didn't front up and you can't blame Woodward for that.