

PROPS – WORTH THEIR WEIGHT IN GOLD?

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England Saxons recently named a squad for this spring's Churchill Cup and the side's coach, Jim Mallinder, had to dig pretty deep to unearth a group of forwards. With England's frontline squad in South Africa already shorn of players from European Cup finalists Leicester, Wasps and Bath, some unfamiliar names were included in Mallinder's squad.

A potential Saxons front row could have been the London Irish veteran Neil Hatley, his club-mate David Paice and the Northampton prop John Brooks, who is moving this summer to Harlequins. All of them are capable players but, with the greatest respect to them, they would probably walk unrecognised down their own streets. And one was born in South Africa, another in Australia and another New Zealand. So, is there a national shortage of props? England suddenly have a plethora of exciting young fly-halves, one that would not have disgraced Wales's once famous fly-half factory. Ryan Lamb, Shane Geraghty, Adrian Jarvis and Danny Cipriani will hopefully be vying for the England No10 shirt come 2011, but where are England's young endomorphs? Perhaps a reality TV programme, call it Prop Idol, could unearth a few.

Gloucester's Jack Forster, who was also in the Saxons squad, and David Wilson, the promising young giant from Newcastle, are two of the fancied names to fly to New Zealand in four years time. But the most significant signing of the year in the Guinness Premiership is surely Carl Hayman, by far the best tight-head prop in the world, a wrecking-ball of a man who also, as England discovered at Twickenham last autumn, has a fair turn of speed too. Hayman joins Wilson at Newcastle after this autumn's World Cup and the cost of his transfer - he is reported to be being paid around £350,000 a year by the Falcons - is an indication of the worth of a good tight-head on the world market. Newcastle have this season been regarded as a good set of backs searching for a pack. It is not strictly true but even their most one-eyed fan would admit that their forwards lack the raw power of Leicester or Wasps. The arrival of the man from Otago will certainly help change that perception.

Traditionally, England have not been short of good scrummagers but this has been a doleful season for the men in the frontline. Andrew Sheridan, Sale's giant who converted from the second row to play loose-head prop, has missed most of the season with injury and Steve Thompson, a certainty to wear the No2 shirt in France this autumn had he been fit, called time on his career in April, the victim of a long-term neck injury and told by a specialist that he risked paralysis or possibly death if he suffered more injury. Thompson follows the prop Trevor Woodman from the 2003

World Cup team into retirement. The third member, Phil Vickery, has suffered chronic back problems since the World Cup. Vickery battles on but, a natural tight-head, he has been forced to play loose-head after Wasps No1, Tim Payne, damaged knee ligaments in the Heineken Cup quarter-final win over Leinster, an injury that threatens to put paid to Payne's World Cup chances. The mournful list goes on. Bath's David Flatman has battled against a series of Achilles injuries in recent times but has returned this season only to injure his shoulder when he was asked to move across the scrum to play tight-head in the absence of Duncan Bell. Not surprisingly, Bath are wrapping Flatman in cotton-wool, telling him to rest all summer to be fit for next season.

The sheer physicality of front-row play in the modern professional game is taking its toll, sometimes with catastrophic effects, as in the case of Matt Hampson, the young Leicester prop who was paralysed in a scrum while training with the England Under-21 team. The injury to Hampson has cast a pall over the sport in England while also bringing out the best in the game. The goodwill towards Hampson and the fund-raising efforts on his behalf have been heartwarming. A group of Wasps supporters recently walked from Adams Park to Welford Road to raise money for Matt Hampson. They would have recognised the almost cruel irony that the game they saw featured a man-of-the-match display by Leicester's tight-head Julian White, who made life in the scrum very uncomfortable for the converted loose-head Phil Vickery.

Vickery himself moved to Wasps last summer because, as one of the club's coaches, the former All Black Craig Dowd explained, Wasps were anxious to recruit a world-class tight-head because the No3 is the cornerstone of the pack. "He's the plug," said Dowd. "Take him out and everything goes gushing down the hole." Which is why the likes of the South Africans Cobus Visagie and Pieter de Villiers are so valuable to their clubs Saracens and Stade Francais.

This year's law change, whereby front rows must crouch, hold and be at an arm's length before engaging, so preventing one set of forwards crashing into another unprepared pack before the start of the scrum, has been designed to prevent the nightmare that has befallen the parents of Matt Hampson.

Dorian West, the former Leicester and England hooker, is now a coach for the National Academy and has been working with the England Saxons. He acknowledges that there has been a shortage of young props but is optimistic about the future. "Yes, there has been a gap behind the Julian Whites and Phil Vickerys and in England there is a shortage of props in that 24-26 age range, but below that there are players coming through. Nick Wood, for instance, was picked for England's South Africa tour and is a very promising player. Below him there's David Wilson and Jack Forster, Tom Mercey at Saracens, Charlie Beech at Northampton and Dan Cole at Leicester. At Under-19 and Under-18 level there is a good crop of teenagers coming through, players like Nathan Catt at Bath and Alex Corbisiero at London Irish. In three of four years time the picture in England should be more healthy."

Dorian West acknowledges, though, that it takes a lot longer for young props to learn their trade than backs. It would be inconceivable for the London Irish Academy

graduate Corbisiero to be thrown into the full England side as was his academy colleague Shane Geraghty with such spectacular results at Twickenham this year. Part of the reason is that up to Under-19 level the engagement laws are the same at the scrum but packs are not allowed to push more than a metre and a half to try to prevent an unequal and potentially dangerous contest at the scrum. Pushover tries, therefore, should only be seen in adult rugby. “Yes, it does take longer to produce props but Mercey and Forster have played and held their own in the Premiership. Jack Forster has played against the likes of Duncan Jones and Marcos Ayerza already and not disgraced himself. I am quite hopeful that these players will be making an impact before very long.”

“The kind of injury that Matt Hampson suffered is very rare in professional rugby and I don’t think the answer is to depower the scrum. Instead, working on technique can help prevent this sort of accident. If the scrum is depowered, as it is in rugby league, you would get a different kind of player in the front row, players built like back rows and they would clutter up the pitch more and make the game more dangerous. There has to be a place in the game for young lads who are the shape of front-row forwards. Otherwise there aren’t a lot of other sporting options for them. Front row forwards are built to scrum and if it is an equal contest the risks are fewer.”

Dorian West thinks that the scrum is an elemental part of the game that gives rugby union its special dynamic, a game within a game. Front-row play is rarely understood, other than by the gnarled characters who practise it week-in, week-out. And while they may not be exactly in the David Beckham league, the transfers of Vickery and Hayman shows that good props are worth their weight in gold.