

Waterboy Sinfield and wisdom of old boys on bench vital for England

SAM WARBURTON



While I felt sorry for Tom Curry, the red card that he received against Argentina last weekend was actually one of the best things that could have happened to England. It simplified everything for them. It meant they could return to basics without fear of being criticised. It meant that they could return to what they are good at.

Yes, of course a team can still attack with 14 men, but it created the illusion for England that they couldn't and so they simply returned to their traditional strengths.

At an event for this newspaper before the tournament began, I was asked what would be the one piece of advice I would give to the England head coach, Steve Borthwick.

I said: "Steve doesn't need my advice, but if he asked, I would say, 'England need to be England. They need to be physical. They need to be set-piece dominant, aerially dominant. They need to scrum, maul off kick-off receipts, go to lineouts, kick-chase and have an aggressive line speed, and then, when they have those chances in the opposition 22, they need to turn on their attack.'"

They delivered all those things against Argentina. They delivered the line speed, they delivered at set piece, they went to the air, they won more metres. And George Ford dropped the goals. This was the England I have always known and admired.

I know some fans may not like it but it was perfect rugby for England's DNA. They don't play like Fiji — that is not what they are about, that has never been the case.

It sounds as if England had been ready for such adversity, with a scenario at training on the previous Thursday created to challenge the team on how to win a game without some of their leaders, and they came up with Ford dropping a goal.

Good coaches are constantly challenging their players in this respect. I remember at the 2011 World Cup when Wales were playing Fiji, Warren Gatland took me off and did not replace me. We were winning 59-0 but for ten minutes the team had to work out what to do with 14 men and without their captain.

What happened after that then became the focal point of our next training session, with the coaches asking, "Why didn't you do this or that?"

The backs coach Rob Howley was excellent at preparing us for this sort of situation. He would often get the back row together after a training session and give us scenarios of being one player down and ask us, for example, which set-ups we would use at scrummages, both on our ball and



England defence coach Sinfield, left, played a big role in the Argentina victory

the opposition's. I remember him doing that once and it was really awkward because none of us knew the answers. But that is the learning you have to go through in training sometimes.

With Wales we trained for what we called the "critical moments". The coaches would suddenly stop training, tell us what the score was and what the time was on the clock, and we had to make up our minds what to do.

We would sometimes make a bit of fun out of it, say, by putting pressure on the kicker if we had decided to take the three points, and, if he missed, he would have to make coffees for everyone later, but there was always a very serious point to it. There were so many times I realised that in games, knowing we had dealt with a certain scenario at training and then knowing what to do in the heat of the battle.

I think the England defence coach, Kevin Sinfield, running on with the water against Argentina last weekend was quite significant for England. I don't know if that was the first time he had done that, but I have seen him up in the stands before. What I do know is that from a captaincy perspective having someone of his stature coming on to the field is hugely beneficial.

It seems to be the longer you are retired, the better captain you become, but I know that I needed an awful lot of help on the field as a skipper. I have to remind myself this when I am working on television now. You can see everything so clearly from the gantry, but down at pitch level when you are fatigued, it is so very different. Sometimes you just do not see the space. Often clarity is so elusive.

The kicking coach Neil Jenkins would always come on for Wales, and

he would always give me a lot of insight about what the coaches were seeing. And sometimes he would urge me to speak to the referee about something.

I remember one incident with the referee John Lacey. Jenks came on and told me to ask Lacey about the opposition not rolling away at the tackle area. So, I did that, and Lacey said, "No problem, when was it?"

Rather than trying to brag it, I just said, "I'm not going to lie but Neil Jenkins just told me that the coaches have seen it on their laptops."

I saw an interview with Lacey years later and he mentioned that incident and said that he liked that I did not try to pull the wool over his eyes. He said he realised it was probably more accurate and credible coming from the coaches than a player or captain just mouthing off, thinking they can see everything.

So I think Sinfield's input could carry a lot of weight. It will also keep England's line speed up because you know as a player that, if the defence coach is constantly running on, especially someone as inspirational as Sinfield, he is going to be on to you all the time. It really is all about a collective effort from players and coaches.

I also think that the experience of the bench is very important. A lot of players on the bench are not really watching the game like a coach, they are very focused on themselves, but I know as captain that to have an old head come on and point out things is invaluable.

I used to think I was a bad captain sometimes when a replacement would come on and say something like, "Warbs, they are defending like this, we need to do this." I would think, "I haven't seen that," and I would doubt my ability, but I soon

realised that you cannot see everything and you do need that input.

You see that often at half-time. If you have an inexperienced bench, they will not say anything to you, whereas experienced players will be offering valuable advice and information. I always think that is when you know you have a formidable squad when, before the coaches have spoken, the players and replacements are all talking and problem-solving themselves. That is a great position to be in.

That is where Wales struggled a little against Fiji last weekend. This is not to diss the replacement fly half Sam Costelow, who will doubtless learn a lot from the experience, but once Dan Biggar went off with Wales 32-14 up, the game took a totally different direction.

It is so much harder than people think to come off the bench and make those crucial decisions, and it raises an interesting debate about the make-up of a bench. Often observers want energy and innovation off the bench, and, of course, you need some of that — in fairness the likes of Joe Marler and Lewis Ludlam brought great energy off the bench for England against Argentina — but you need cool heads too and often it is better to have experience and pragmatism to close the game out rather than open it out.

You learn from your mistakes. The big one for me was a defeat by Australia in Cardiff in 2012: there were only seconds left, we were winning 12-9 and we had a lineout in Australia's 22. We got it wrong, they had a scrummage and before we knew it Kurtley Beale was scoring.

Our right wing should have pushed up because they had to run it but he stood back as he usually would to cover a crossfield kick. The defence coach Shaun Edwards went mad with him afterwards. "Why were you there?" he asked.

"Because that's how we defend in the opposition 22," the player replied.

But Shaun said, "Look at the scoreboard and the clock! They had to play, and you needed to set up flat."

I didn't notice that at the time but I never forgot that, and when on TV now I still look at the positioning of the wing in such a scenario.

Wales will review the last 20 minutes against Fiji and learn from that. They will know they made some big mistakes there, but against a very good Fiji side — so much fitter and better organised than before — they just about handled that adversity. England handled theirs much more smartly, but dealing with such scenarios is going to be a telling factor in this tournament, as it always has been.



DAN MULLAN/GETTY IMAGES
Maintaining the aggression shown by Earl and others will be important for England

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Former Premiership players of the season in England squad: Earl, George Ford, Jack Willis and Ollie Lawrence

From solo shows to ultimate team man

Ben Earl had to shift his outlook to become a fixture for England, his Saracens coaches tell **Alex Lowe**

When Ben Earl broke through into the professional game he was a player for the times: a wonderfully gifted athlete whose highlights reel for Saracens was dazzling and perfect for social media. Earl would play for those moments but a glance behind the Instagram videos would reveal a hugely skilful individual player who did not influence his team consistently enough.

The realisation hit Earl just under two years ago, in the last week of November 2021. Saracens picked their strongest team for a Gallagher Premiership game against Sale Sharks and he was named on the bench. It was over a year since he had slipped out of the England picture and now, having returned from an eye-catching loan spell with Bristol Bears, he was no longer in the first-choice Saracens back row.

Earl had a choice. "It would have been easy to pack it in," he says. Instead he sought help. That decision was the first step towards Earl's second coming as an England player and his transformation into the ultimate team man, typified by his performance against Argentina. England were down a loose forward and they needed others to step up, take over different responsibilities and play with such energy and intensity that the Pumas were squeezed out of the game. Earl led that effort.

The man he turned to was Calum Clark, the former Saracens flanker who had studied psychology and was in his first season as the club's head of player development and wellbeing.

"Ben came to me in a moment of frustration and disappointment at how things were going for him at club level," Clark says. "There was a selection decision that sparked it for him and he felt his career and his life could be more than what it was.

"He thought, 'There has got to be more in this for me than being a decent Premiership player.' They are



Earl has focused on adding value to his teams rather than personal glory

the really important moments because the pain and discomfort meant he was open to look at himself.

"He was courageous enough to look within. It is not easy to do and it is not always the norm to be introspective. It was trying to get him to think differently about himself, about performance and what is important in a game of rugby.

"We do live in a culture where it is highlight reels and these magic moments, these clips on Instagram. Actually, 99.9 per cent of the life of a professional sportsman is the exact opposite: boring, mundane, session after session.

"In our sessions we got him to look through a more accurate lens about what is important about the game and what is impactful. He grasped that and took it on.

"The thing that strikes me when I see him is he is starting to put together mature performances. He is living by his own standards."

Earl was able to learn from the mistakes that had hindered Clark, who struggled mentally with the life of a professional player. Clark urged him to respond to selection disappointment by getting even better, not by sulking and allowing his performances to plateau.

Earl responded to that and has changed his whole outlook on the game, understanding where he can add the greatest value to the team rather than seeking out the glory moments. By the end of the 2021-22 season, Earl had been named the Premiership's player of the year.

England selection still did not come. Even in this year's Six Nations, Earl made a couple of appearances on the bench and was then released. But the force of his performances, taking his chance in the absence of Tom Curry, has been a factor in Steve Borthwick changing tack in his back row, opting for a more dynamic unit than the power approach he had planned for.

The Argentina clash was the perfect example of where Earl's game now is. "Owen Farrell talks about this a lot — whatever the game demands of us, we have got to be able to match those demands and be effective," Clark says. "When you encourage players to become rounded and see the game wholly rather than in small moments they are more capable of reacting like Ben did at the weekend."

While Earl's habit of celebrating the small wins on the field — even those that come purely from opposition mistakes — can annoy some, Clark sees it as the most obvious indication of how he has developed from a highlights generator to a team-first player.

"It is a manifestation of him recognising the value of the small moments in a game and seeking the opportunity to drive energy. Emotion is contagious so to spread that throughout the team in moments that may not seem that huge to an outsider looking in, that shows the difference in the way he thinks about the game. It is a genuine love for all of the game and its moments."

Earl has been at Saracens his whole career, apart from the one season he spent on loan at Bristol. Back in St Albans, they have watched Earl's acceleration in the England ranks, through the World Cup camp and into the tournament with immense pride.

"I can fully understand now why he is in the England squad," Joe Shaw, the Saracens head coach, says. "He brings energy to the game because he is involved in every play. He is living that moment with everyone around him. It is purely for his team-mates. He is 25 and growing into a leader at this club. That is because of how he has worked.

"The younger players see a guy who works on his game every day. The responsibility of being an all-court player is to keep those skills at such a high level. It is not easy being like that. His skill set is right up there with the best in the world."

Sakate out to create more World Cup history

Will Kelleher
Nice

There were two moments in Atsushi Sakate's youth that sold him on rugby. The hooker, who will play against England for Japan tomorrow, was 12 when he first watched the Brave Blossoms live.

It was May 2006, when Japan played Georgia, and legendary wing Daisuke Ohata scored a hat-trick in Osaka. Those tries took him beyond David Campeze as the top try-scoring international rugby player of all time, with 64 in 55 Tests. A young Sakate was captivated.

"It was then I knew I wanted to play for Japan," he says.

Sakate was a student at Kyoto

University in 2015 — you mention that year and the Japan rugby team in the same sentence and there is only one story you can be talking about.

"That was the most amazing memory," Sakate says of Japan's 34-32 World Cup victory over South Africa in Brighton. "I was in my university dormitory watching it on TV. It was midnight in Japan, and because it was such a historic win I couldn't sleep at all afterwards."

The first sport that took Sakate's interest, as a child from Kyoto, was volleyball. However, he soon switched to rugby on the advice of a friend at his high school, using the skills he had learnt from his old sport.

"Definitely some of my footwork and movement with a ball I learnt playing volleyball," Sakate explains.

"Volleyball doesn't have any contact element, but rugby does, so I really found it more attractive!"

Sakate is part of the Japanese League One club side Saitama Wild Knights (formerly Panasonic Wild Knights) who are led by Robbie Deans, the former Australian head coach, and have won five of the past nine league titles. For him there is nothing like playing for Japan, though.

"I always feel that playing for the Japan national team is so special," he explains. "I think it brings out something different in me. It's a big honour and source of pride for me. That's the reason why I always want to put on a good performance and would like to win on the big stage at the World Cup."