

How Earl marked himself out

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In the latest of our series, the Saracens No8 tells **Alex Lowe** about the four big plays that underlined his pedigree

Moments. Ben Earl is all about moments. It used to be just the flashy ones; the eye-catching tries and the big-time turnovers. But not every game throws up opportunities to fill the showreel. So, what then? Earl would mentally shrug and accept that it was not his style of game; a limiting mindset that led to him losing his place in the England set-up under Eddie Jones. Even when he was named the Gallagher Premiership player of the year in 2022, Jones did not call him. But a transformation was taking place.

As a remarkable athlete — an age-grade county cricketer with a left-handed golf swing to die for — Earl will always be able to pull off the “wow” moments. Over the past two years, he has come to appreciate the value of those other moments; the unseen moments, the moments that require persistence not pizzazz, the moments that are celebrated richly by team-mates but rarely noticed by anyone else.

As the penny dropped, so Earl shattered his own glass ceiling. Steve Borthwick, who was appointed as the England head coach this time last year, recognised Earl’s development as Saracens won their first Premiership title since the salary cap scandal and brought him back into the fold.

Earl was then England’s best player at the World Cup, delivering performances from No8 that were consistently influential and studded with individual brilliance. The 25-year-old finishes 2023 firmly in the conversation to be England’s next captain.

The story of Earl’s true breakthrough year in international rugby can be told in moments.

DEFYING EXHAUSTION TO WIN PREMIERSHIP FINAL

69min 16sec: Saracens 28 Sale Sharks 25
A tackle from Jackson Wray forces a Sale knock-on in the Saracens 22. Ivan van Zyl launches the ball 85 metres downfield. Earl chases and puts pressure on Tom O’Flaherty, forcing the Sale wing into a short clearance. From the lineout, Saracens score the try that seals the title.

Earl has been working to maximise his potential with Calum Clark, the former Saracens flanker whose consultancy firm, Innate, specialises in

psychological coaching to help athletes “move beyond perceived limits” and “become who they truly are”. Their relationship began in November 2021, when Earl had been out of the England picture for a year and was not in the first-choice Saracens back row. “Ben came to me in a moment of frustration,” Clark said. “The pain and discomfort meant he was open to look at himself.”

Clark’s own experience of playing rugby was miserable. He was unhappy in himself and reacted negatively to international rejection. The message to Earl was to learn from that. “You sit there wishing someone was going to notice you and the world was going to change or you get on with getting better,” he said. “Ben has got incredible natural gifts. If we can harmonise that with work rate then you will get a hell of a player.”

That was Clark speaking to The Times in September 2022, three months after Saracens had lost to Leicester Tigers in the Premiership final. A year later, Saracens were back at Twickenham and Earl was conscious of that harmony in his game and his mind. When the moment came, he recognised it for what it was.

“If I can compare two moments 12 months apart,” he says. “If you watch the Leicester-Saracens final in 2022, it was a game for the purists. They kicked. We kicked. If you watch me individually in that game, probably within 45 minutes I look exhausted. I had accepted the game wasn’t going to go my way. It was like, ‘God, I hope we win this because I’m not playing my best.’”

“If you flip that forward 12 months against Sale. Someone kicks it down the middle. There’s a couple of us chasing and I remember thinking back to that game against Leicester and being like, ‘I remember how tired I was, I’m not going to show that again, even if I’m exhausted.’ I gave it my all to try to sprint down the middle. Tom O’Flaherty kicks it out and we get a 22 lineout. We scored off the back of it.

“I reflected on that, once I had sobered up a little bit, that 12 months of work had gone into that single moment. And that’s all it takes. The game nowadays is such small margins, small moments. Look at the World Cup semi-final we played, look at the quarter-final we played.”

Earl was highly emotional when the final whistle sounded.

“I didn’t expect the tears to flow,” he says. Earl was on the fringes of the Saracens team when they won the league in 2019 and then experienced successive disappointments. He believes Bristol Bears, whom he joined on loan when Saracens were relegated, should have won the league in 2021 but Harlequins went to Ashton Gate in the semi-final and pulled off “Bristanbul”, coming from 28-0 down to win.

Then Freddie Burns landed that last-gasp drop-goal for Leicester in the 2022 final. “A big goal of ours, and certainly mine individually, was to win the Premiership,” he says. “It was just such a relief. The pressure we’d been under in that game, the pressure we’d been under all season. Humility



As an excellent athlete, Earl often pulls off “wow” moments for his club and country

Photograph: Marc Aspland

is obviously massive for us, but it would have been a travesty if we hadn’t won the league. So when that final whistle went, it was just a relief. “I was just so driven to try to make sure that we as a team won. That was probably all coming out really. The relief turned to joy when I was walking off the pitch and I saw Mark McCall [the Saracens director of rugby]. I have known Smally since I was 14. To see some of the stuff he has been through, both personally and as the face of this team, and the effort he’s given this club, I was just so pleased to see his elation and how that aligned with mine. That was when it turned to joy. I saw my parents, you start seeing the boys, then you see the trophy and you’re in the changing room. I’m just thinking about it now and it’s making me smile. You can’t take those memories away. And that’s why I do it.”

Earl was named in Borthwick’s first England squad and featured twice off the bench during the Six Nations — at that stage, all 15 of his caps had been as a replacement — before dropping out of the team again. Borthwick said he was not fit enough for a kick-heavy game plan, which was going to require a lot of running.

“I thought I was pretty fit but international rugby is on a different level,” Earl says. “It is running. The kicking game he wanted to play meant a long ball-in-play time and a lot of explosive efforts. It is physicality. At club level you don’t get the same level of repeat contacts.

“And it is that mental side. That’s where someone like Owen Farrell and Courtney Lawes are brilliant. Physically they might be dust with 20

minutes to go but they always squeeze more out of themselves. I had three months to focus on that.”

The Premiership final demonstrated to Borthwick the progress Earl had made. His impact during England’s warm-up games was impressive, despite the wider team struggles, and earned him World Cup selection. With Billy Vunipola banned, Earl wore the No8 jersey for England’s opening game against Argentina.

Earl thrived in his role as an energy-giver for the team, making 13 tackles, winning two turnovers — and chasing down that kick as England turned the screw. That was the moment when disillusioned supporters first began to regain some faith in their team — you could hear it in the stadium.

“Cal and I talk about the snowball effect,” Earl says. “It felt like a home game. We could hear our fans singing. It’s massively important that we get aligned with the fans, so they can identify with us. We need to make ourselves as open, as vulnerable, as honest as we can to show that we are

as next England captain



DAVID ROGERS/GETTY IMAGES

Earl’s year brought World Cup recognition and Premiership final success, above

Consistent defence, relentless attack

Tackles made at the 2023 Rugby World Cup

Marcos Kremer (Argentina)	92
Ben Earl (England)	80
Franco Mostert (South Africa)	73
Sione Havili (Tonga)	67
Pieter-Steph du Toit (South Africa)	66

Back-row forwards at the 2023 World Cup

Metres made	Linebreaks
Earl	27
Ardie Savea (New Zealand)	24
Facundo Isa (Argentina)	15
Juan Martín González (Argentina)	13
Nicolas Martins (Portugal)	11

Source: Opta

fighting through a mass of Argentina players to buy some time as the clock ticks down.

The World Cup semi-final remains Earl’s favourite game to have played in, despite England losing by a point to South Africa. He exchanged jerseys afterwards with Duane Vermeulen, having once again displayed his full repertoire of skills in another high-energy performance, with lightning raids from the back of the England scrum and relentless defence.

There are moments for England to rue, not least the crooked lineout throw on South Africa’s five-metre line — “small margins, small moments” — but dwelling on the what-ifs is not part of the Earl/Clark mantra.

“That was such an emotional loss,” he says. “I’m pretty pleased with my resilience at certain moments this year,” Earl says. “I’ve had some pretty tough days and could be knocked off kilter. It’s about how you use that. It’s healthy to use your dark moments, the moments where you struggle to try and push yourself to greater, better moments.”

A week later, England won the bronze medal. Earl scored a try and then, with Argentina’s pack piling forward at the death, he took control of a messy situation at the base of a scrum. At that moment, with the game on the line, he did not look like a stand-in No8; he looked like a man capable of playing that role for good, of taking responsibility for the team.

“There are two ways I’ve looked at the World Cup,” he says. “Firstly I was so relieved that we’d come away with a medal because of the titanic effort it took from the week before [the defeat by South Africa] to then get yourself up for that game. There were some boys who might never play for England again. I was so pleased that they had come away with something.

“On the flip side, this has to give us a step up to something bigger. We’ve got a massive opportunity now to recreate the feel-good factor. The number of people who have come up to us as players and said, ‘Thank you for the brilliant World Cup, thank you for making us believe again.’ That means more than anything.

“It would be such a shame if we were to kick off the Six Nations in Rome in February and felt like we’d taken a couple of steps backwards. We’ve got to use that momentum. I am more motivated than ever. I’d love to keep performing well for both club and country. I don’t want to be the person who was a flash in the pan.”

Tuilagi could miss opening games against Italy and Wales

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an operation, we think he’s going to be back during the Six Nations, but not for the first week,” Alex Sanderson, the Sale director of rugby, said.

“I spoke to him and he’s like, ‘I need to play, and if I’m good to play, it’s up to England regarding selection.’ He was in the frame before and I’ve stated before his intent to keep playing international rugby.”

Tuilagi, the powerful centre, has played only twice for Sale since the Stade Français on December 10, then started against Saracens before sensing that he had a problem with his groin and alerting Sale’s management.

Tuilagi, who played six times for his country at the recent World Cup, suffered a series of groin problems earlier in his career and more recently has had issues with his hamstrings.

“It’s making sure he maintains good balance between all those muscle groups, he does all his preparation so it doesn’t go,” Sanderson said.

“There was no indication on-field [against Saracens], he wasn’t overloaded in the week.

“He just felt it, he’s that aware of his body — he called over to the physio and

Tuilagi still believes he has a future playing for England



said, ‘I need to come off’. When Manu says that, you know something’s wrong.”

Tuilagi’s return to fitness will come at a time when the Premiership takes an extended break during the Six Nations, with no league matches between the end of January and March 22.

Sale have potential friendlies during that period against Northampton Saints and Newcastle Falcons and a possible fixture against Caldy, the Championship team.

Meanwhile, Bevan Rodd, Sale’s loose-head prop, will miss the entire Six Nations after having surgery on an injured toe.

Rodd won his fifth cap from the bench in the World Cup third-place play-off, but has not played for his club since the Premiership victory over Bath on November 24.

As the back-up loose-head to Ellis Genge and Joe Marler, Rodd also started in the World Cup against Chile, scoring a try in the process, and then started three times for Sale on his return, but will not be able to feature in Borthwick’s Six Nations plans.

“He won’t be back in the Six Nations [after] his operation,” Sanderson said.

England’s Six Nations fixtures		
Saturday, Feb 3	Italy	2.15pm, ITV
Stadio Olimpico, Rome		
Saturday, Feb 10	Wales	4.45pm, ITV
Twickenham Stadium		
Saturday, Feb 24	Scotland	4.45pm, BBC
Murrayfield Stadium		
Saturday, Mar 9	Ireland	4.45pm, BBC
Twickenham Stadium		
Saturday, Mar 16	France	8pm, ITV
Groupama Stadium, Lyon		