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Matt Dawson's Lions Tales

Written by Matt Dawson

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MATT DAWSON'S LIONS TALES

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PROLOGUE

Olympic Stadium, Sydney
6 July 2013

It was lunchtime across Britain and Ireland, closing in on midnight in Australia, when finally it happened. Sixteen years searching for a series win in the southern hemisphere was brought to a glorious conclusion by Warren Gatland's Lions.

As the final whistle blew in Sydney to spark scenes of celebration not seen in this Olympic Stadium since England won the World Cup there in 2003, my mind raced back to 1997. To Durban in South Africa, where I was lucky enough to play for the last Lions team to come out on top.

As Gatland's Lions partied like it was 1997 I thought back to that night at Kings Park, where we clinched the series and shortly after I sat on the loo as the phone rang in my pocket. It was Harvey

Thorneycroft, my team mate from Northampton, calling to congratulate us and wondering if I was free for a word.

'Sure pal,' I said as he switched his mobile to speakerphone and, unbeknown to me, the sound of my post-match ablutions were broadcast to a packed clubhouse back home where Lions fans had gathered to watch us finish off the world champions!

That seems a long time ago now: the carefree scrum-half with the full head of hair, albeit shaved tight to my skull, is no more. I am married to the beautiful Carolin, we have a son, Alex, who is the joy of both our lives, and rather than play rugby any more I talk and write about it in the media.

The history books show a sixteen-year gap between parties. They highlight my try in Cape Town and Jeremy Guscott's dropped goal in Durban, then fast forward to this summer and the try-scoring brilliance of George North and the near flawless goalkicking of Leigh Halfpenny. But that only scratches at the surface of what the Lions have been about since the game of rugby union became a professional sport.

This book, my personal voyage through that period, attempts to delve far deeper. To chart the peaks and troughs, the laughs and fallouts, the pleasure and the pain. I have experienced the best and worst of these times, I have known acclaim and criticism, been showered both with bouquets and brickbats. Above all, though, it is the fun and camaraderie that springs to mind when I think of my time in the red shirt.

I hope I reflect that in this book. The stories I recount are told with affection for the characters involved and, I hope, a fair degree of accuracy. If there is the odd exaggeration, please forgive me for that.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to thank all those who made it possible for me to fulfil my lifelong dream of becoming a

Lion. There are too many to name here, team mates and coaches at every stage of my career at school, club and international level. But three I must mention are Sir Ian McGeechan, Sir Clive Woodward and Warren Gatland.

Geech coached me at Northampton and capped me as a Lion. He has also done more than any other individual to steer the Lions through the choppy waters of professionalism. Clive enabled me to become a World Cup winner and gave me the chance at least to partially redeem myself with the Lions in 2005 after the offence my newspaper diary caused four years earlier.

Last, but not least, Gats reignited my career when he signed me to play for Wasps. And this summer it was his coaching skill and courage as a selector that put the Lions back on the pedestal where they belong. It was fantastic to see.

CHAPTER 1

LIVING ON MY NERVES

It's May 1997 and I'm bricking it.

The squad has been announced, I've received the letter inviting me to become a British and Irish Lion, driven to a hotel in Surrey and been handed a room key. Oh, and by the way, you're rooming with Scott Gibbs.

'What?'

Yep, Scott Gibbs, the great Wales centre. Sharing a room with me. He's been to a World Cup and played on a Test-winning Lions side in New Zealand. He has twenty-nine Wales appearances and three years of rugby league under his belt. I've got five England caps, none of them in this year's Five Nations Championship.

'Are you sure about that?' I ask the guy on reception.

'Quite sure.'

'Holy shit.'

I drag my kitbag over to the elevator and push the call button. I look around, wondering what I have let myself in for. I am out of my depth. I've never met Scott, know nothing about him as a

person, only his reputation as a fantastic player, the guy who, at the age of twenty-two, kept three-time Grand Slam-winning England captain Will Carling out of the 1993 Lions' Test midfield and then crossed over to rugby league and played in a World Cup.

As I put the keycard in the door a big part of me hopes he's out.

'All right Matt?' says this friendly Welsh voice as the door swings open to reveal a half-dressed Scott, his Lions gear strewn all over the floor. 'You want me to steam your shirt?'

'You what?' I gasp.

'You'll need a shirt for tonight. Don't worry about it, I'll do it.'

Before I know what's happening I'm handing this legend, whom I have only just met, a white shirt out of my bag. He disappears into the bathroom, hangs it on a rail in the shower cubicle, turns the water on hot and closes the door as the steam starts to rise.

'How good's that?' he laughs, a few minutes later, reappearing with my pristine crease-less shirt. 'You'll never have to iron another shirt again.'

You know what? I haven't.

Contrary to what some may think, none of us are born know-alls. Take Jason Leonard, England's most-capped player, a man who achieved everything in rugby union – and still had time for a good drink!

Jason was capped by England when he was just twenty-one. That might not sound remarkable these days as half the current England team seem to have broken through at around that age. But for a front-row forward in the early nineties it certainly was. Jeff Probyn, for a while England's most-capped prop, didn't play his first Test until he was thirty-one.

Jason always appeared to me to be pretty much on top of things so imagine my surprise to learn of a conversation he once had with Paul Rendall, another great England prop of yesteryear. Rendall was universally known as Judge, a nickname given by Bill Beaumont when Paul was nominated to dispense justice in a players' court on a tour of Australia, when he was still uncapped. It stuck, particularly after he had passed sentence on team manager Geoff Cooke, ordering him to eat a daffodil sandwich.

'Judge,' Jason asked, quite seriously one day. 'Why don't you have a nickname?'

Jason takes up the story. 'I'd just got so used to calling him Judge that I never considered it a nickname. The abuse I got for the question was unbelievable. Judge took me to one side and said: 'Look, no one minds you making a complete prick of yourself every now and again, but for God's sake don't let the backs hear you say things like that. You're a forward and have a reputation to uphold. Stupid comments are for backs only.'

Jason appeared in five Test matches for the Lions on three separate tours between 1993 and 2001. His rugby talent was absolutely phenomenal and it's no surprise to me that he's currently working his way up the Rugby Football Union towards the presidency. But rugby being rugby, reputation is no protector against banter. Not when you put your foot in it.

'I'll probably be best remembered for the washing-machine story,' he admits, and recalls how a journalist interviewed him a few days before he played his first home game for England and wanted to know how proud he was to represent his country.

'Really proud,' Jason recounts in his autobiography *Full Time*. But that isn't proud enough for this reporter who asks the question again. 'Look, very,' says Jason, who is then asked what the shirt

means to him. 'Oh God, I don't know. It just makes me proud.' You can guess what the reporter comes back at him with. Yep. 'How proud?' Jason by now has had enough, so to try to bring the interview to an end he flippantly replies: 'So proud that when I put my England kit in the washing machine I watch it going round and round because I'm that proud of it.'

That seems to do the trick and the reporter puts the lid on his pen, shakes Jason's hand and says his goodbyes. England are staying in the Petersham Hotel and when the paper arrives the next morning Jason's joke comment has been taken seriously and is the banner headline. He walks into breakfast where many of his team mates are already tucking in. No one says a word, they just move their heads round and round in unison.

'I was being sarcastic! I was joking!' He's wasting his breath.

Imagine making a fool of yourself like that? I don't have to, I've been there. I was playing for England B at the time, that's the team that became England A before being re-branded, for some reason that I still can't quite fathom, as England Saxons.

I'm in camp with the B boys and as per normal on the Wednesday before matches we make our way down Richmond Hill from England's swanky team hotel perched high over one of the most picturesque stretches of the Thames to visit the Park Avenue nightclub.

Adedayo Adebayo, who played on the wing for Bath and won six full England caps, has organised our evening and I have only one question for him. 'How the hell are we going to get back in without the management wising up?' Ade smiles. 'Daws, don't worry about that.'

It transpires he knows the pretty girl in reception – I'll say no

more than that – and she assures him she will let us in through the conservatory round the back. Ade was quite a ladies' man and on this occasion he is accompanied by a girlfriend who has brought some pals over for a few drinks. We party in Park Avenue until finally the girls' lift home arrives.

I have been getting on well with one of our companions and it seems only right and proper that I should offer to take her to lunch the following day. I make a note of her address on the back of my hand, a street in Fulham just around the corner from Craven Cottage, and agree to meet at 2pm.

Morning comes and we have training at the Bank of England sports ground in Roehampton. It is a mucky day and by the time the session ends my kit reflects it. I am dripping with mud. Training has run over and I'm late for my date.

Suddenly I am reminded of that scene from *Top Gun* where Tom Cruise is late for dinner with Kelly McGillis after playing a game of beach volleyball with his pal Goose. Maverick, that's Cruise, jumps on his motorbike and turns up all sweaty and horrible at her house. Charlie (McGillis) opens the door and, bold as brass, he asks if he can come in for a shower. That's such a great line, I think to myself. I've got to try it.

So there I am in a taxi, inching its way through heavy traffic on the Fulham Palace Road, sitting on a towel to keep the seat clean and the driver sweet. This is going to be great, I tell myself as I pay the cabbie and tell him, grandly, to keep the change, all 20 pence of it.

I check the door number, press the bell and look up and down the street while I wait for my lunch date to let me in and laugh with me at the joke while showing me up to her shower room and handing me a sumptuous Egyptian cotton bath sheet. The road is

quiet but for an old dear making a dog's dinner of reversing into a parking space that would comfortably house the Space Shuttle. I'm still watching this painful process when the door opens. I look round and smile, winningly I think, only to be met with a blank stare.

'And you are . . . ?'

Looking at me is a well-dressed woman in her late forties whom I have never seen before. Unbeknown to me the girl I have agreed to meet is a live-in nanny. Too late to change the game-plan now.

'Can I come in for a shower?' I ask the lady of the house rather too boldly as her nanny stands behind her, half way up the staircase, doubled over in silent laughter. The reply I receive from the woman standing there, looking at me askance it has to be said, is short and sweet. 'Er, no actually you can't.'

I'm rooted to the spot, mud trickling down my legs into socks rolled round my ankles thinking, 'What the hell do I do now?' After what seems an eternity, she breaks the silence. 'Right, well you'd better come in. 'To the kitchen. You can have a coffee.'

To be fair, I think she actually gets the joke. As I sit there trying to make polite conversation, her expression says 'Nice try son, fair play for giving it a go'. At least that's what I tell myself as I drain the cup and get up to leave, apologising as I go for the mud on her Tuscan-tiled kitchen floor.

If re-enacting Hollywood movies wasn't my strong suit back then, what was, I hear you ask? Think of some of the stuff I've done on TV since and you may conclude that I was a nause when it came to quizzes, that I could perhaps cook a bit and maybe, just maybe, put one foot in front of the other on a dance floor. Er, not exactly. I did

watch every episode of *A Question of Sport*, lying on my front in our living room at home with my dad getting more and more annoyed as I beat him to almost every answer. And for as long as I can remember I have been a decent cook – as long as you like tuna sweet corn pasta, corned-beef hash and mushroom risotto. But *Strictly Come Dancing* . . . I was deluding myself.

Nothing in my life will ever compare to the horror of dancing on live television. I'll come back to my *Strictly* experience in more detail later, but for those who see me as a cocksure sportsman, let me offer you a glimpse of the other me and confess right away that without doubt, appearing on *Strictly Come Dancing* was the most nerve-racking experience of my life. Just thinking about it now makes me want to throw up.

It is 2006, I've not long hung up my rugby boots when my agent phones to ask whether I fancy *Strictly*. I don't hesitate. How hard can it be?

It would be an exaggeration to say dancing had been a central theme running through my life. That said, my grandma would go for a spin in Liverpool every week with dance partner Brian, and during my childhood in Birkenhead I would be instructed to sit with her in front of the box every week and watch *Come Dancing*.

I also went through a breakdancing phase after we moved to Marlow, me in a red shiny tracksuit – over my Kevin Keegan Southampton football kit – my mate Spencer Tuckerman in blue. We'd practise on the lino in my kitchen and perform at the Holy Trinity C of E disco. I'd then hook up with Donny and Marlon from the nearby estate and we'd body pop at Donny's house, providing one of us had a 50 pence piece for the electricity meter.

Backspinning to Ollie and Jerry's *There's No Stoppin' Us* soundtrack to that classic movie *Breakin'*, was my party piece. I'd

finish the routine by balancing on my hands. I once even took part in a dance-off at Liston Hall in Marlow.

But my 'career' hit the skids when Donny, Marlon and I were in town one weekend and I thought it would be cool to go into a shop and steal a party streamer spray. No sooner was it in my jeans pocket than I felt a tap on my shoulder. The store called the police, the police called Mum and the daughter of Chief Inspector Thompson went ballistic. The upshot was that I received a police warning, Dad grounded me and Mum said I couldn't hang out with Donny and Marlon any more.

So call it unfinished business or simply arrogance but when the call comes from my agent offering me *Strictly*, I jump at the chance. It will it be good for my media profile away from rugby, methinks, and let's face it, if Darren Gough is reigning champion, it can't be that hard.

Oh, how wrong you can be.

As the start of the series gets nearer I'm loving the training and the dancing and think I am doing all right. There is an unofficial eve-of-series golf day at which all the competitors turn up and muck about. Everyone is there, from actors I have barely heard of to sporting legends Mark Ramprakash and Peter Schmeichel. We spend the day laughing and joking, sort of weighing each other up. Aside from Ramps and Peter there is Spice Girl Emma Bunton, Radio One's DJ Spoony, BBC newsreader Nicholas Owen, comedian Jimmy Tarbuck, singer Mica Paris, TV presenter Carol Smillie and actors Ray Fearon, Claire King, Louisa Lytton, Jan Ravens and Georgina Bouzova.

I come away from the golf in high spirits, convinced I'm going to be okay. Then comes the eve-of-show dress rehearsal. We're down to do the cha-cha-cha, a modern ballroom dance originating

from Latin America. It is all about small steps and swaying hips. Watching one or two of the others go through their routine the reality of my situation slaps me square in the face. I am not even near to where I need to be.

I go into a bit of a panic. More than a bit in fact. Full-blown. There is a lot of glitz, glamour, acting and razzmatazz on display, but none from me. Not in my routine.

My partner, Lilia Kopylova, won the show the previous year with Goughie and she picks up on my alarm. 'Matt, you'll be fine. You'll be fine,' she says over and over again. I know I won't.

We do our rehearsal, I completely balls it up. My footwork is all wrong, I forget all the steps. I know it is crap. I feel myself freefalling into a gaping void with nothing to grab on to, because I know the next day we are going to have to perform in front of the nation, live on BBC1 with however many millions of people tuning in to watch me make a complete fool of myself.

I might never recover from this.

I start to feel giddy, like I am going to faint. I need fresh air. I rush out of the studio and try to calm myself. I take a couple of slow deep breaths then flag down a black cab, which takes me straight home.

'No chat tonight Drives, if you don't mind. Cheers.'

The taxi pulls up outside my house. The place is in darkness, there is nobody in. I draw the curtains, turn off my phone and start to count.

'One . . . two . . . three . . . step . . . two . . . three . . .'

I go through the routine, imagining Lilia dancing with me, then sit down and panic. I get up and do it again, get it wrong and panic again.

This goes on all night.

What I've failed to grasp is that on this show you have to throw every part of yourself into it, you've got to embrace wearing dodgy clothes and be able to laugh at yourself.

I haven't got that at all. When invited, I thought, 'Great, learn how to dance, meet Bruce Forsyth.' That was it, as much thought as I gave it. I didn't realise the commitment, I didn't do my homework.

I try to approach it as a rugby player would learning team moves. 'Right, let's crack this, one and two and three . . .' But my head is spinning with all the numbers to count, moves to execute, positions to put my body in. There's no flow to it. It absolutely freaks me out.

Little do I know that Lilia has left half a dozen messages on my voicemail urging me to call her back. She needs to know I am all right. I'm not. I'm shitting myself. But there is no way out.

We all get anxious when we step outside our comfort zone. And in rugby terms, for a kid who was still in effect an international rookie, the British and Irish Lions in 1997 was a place well outside of mine. So when a few of the Northampton boys sit down round a table in the old Trinity Pavilion at Franklin's Gardens the night before the squad is announced, there are a lot of nerves.

It is the place at Saints where we have all our team meetings and meals and on this occasion there is only one topic of conversation for Gregor Townsend, Paul Grayson, Jonny Bell and myself. Into the room walks Ian McGeechan, our director of rugby and, far more relevantly at that precise moment in time, head coach of the '97 Lions.

'Come on Geech, this is ridiculous,' I say. 'Give us half an idea whether we're in or not.'

McGeechan is big on words of reassurance. His management style is to encourage and bolster confidence, rather than rant and shatter it.

But he laughs, and walks out. Unbeknown to us, one of us has missed out. Jonny will be left at home. Embarrassing folk isn't Geech's style either. I know that now. At that time I assume I'm not in, to the point that I agree to team-mate Allen Clarke cutting off all my hair in the unlikely event I am picked.

The following morning we are out on the training field, and I'm doing extras with the kickers at the end of the session. No one's heard a word from the Lions and it's reached a point where nobody wants to ask. Out the corner of my eye I spot Allen jogging towards us. He's got this ever so slightly mad look in his eyes and something in his hands. What is that? Looks like a pair of scissors . . .

'Oh f**k, I'm in!'

Sitting in the pub with Paul Grayson, England's first-choice fly-half and my great mate, I run my fingers through the bristle on my head where once was a rather trendy 'curtain' hair style. In front of me on the table is a pint of beer, my fifth or sixth of an increasingly emotional evening.

'We're only British Lions, Grays,' I slur. 'Happy days.'

We leave the pub and weave our way back to his house in Chapel Brampton, a village on the outskirts of Northampton, where we pick up where we left off while flicking through his collection of video tapes in search of *The Greatest Lions Moments*.

What I know about the Lions at this point could almost be written on the back of a postage stamp. I'm aware there were some great Lions tours in the far-off days before sport enjoyed the

wall-to-wall live coverage it does today. I guess, like most people, the tours of 1971 and 1974 stand out in my mind because the Lions won those series in New Zealand and South Africa with the great names from my childhood: Gareth Edwards, Barry John, JPR, Gerald Davies and Phil Bennett.

And not to forget Willie John McBride, widely regarded as the greatest Lion of them all. Not only did Willie John break every Lions appearance record and become a ridiculously successful player and captain, he also came up with the most famous call in rugby history: '99'.

Unless you sell ice creams for a living the mere mention of '99' will evoke images of brawling rugby players on far-flung pitches. Willie John invented it. He had grown so sick on previous tours of seeing key Lions players targeted with violence in provincial games shortly before Test matches that he decided the 1974 Lions in South Africa would take matters into their own hands.

His concern was not only that he could lose players to injury, but that matches could also be lost as his players were distracted by a thirst for revenge. Far better, he thought, that the first time the opposition start something, the Lions finish it 'on our terms' – and in such an emphatic way that there's no repeat.

He suspected Eastern Province might be the team to try it on so, even though he wasn't playing in the match, he went to the team meeting the night before. 'Tomorrow, if anything happens,' he recalled in his autobiography, *The Story of My Life*, 'we are all in it together – and I mean all. You belt the guy that is nearest to you as hard as you can. Whether he has been the one guilty of the illegal act has nothing to do with it. If that doesn't stop it, you haven't hit him hard enough. Then, once you've done that, it's all over and we are back playing rugby.'

His attitude was 'hurt one of us and you hurt us all'. He insisted his players would not start any trouble but if the opposition chose to, they would learn a painful lesson. The call, he said, would be '999'. Too much of a mouthful was the consensus. Okay, then '99'.

Next day the game kicks off and sure enough, as Willie John had predicted, Eastern Province target Edwards, one of my scrum-half heroes and surely the greatest No. 9 ever to play the game. As he passes the ball he is hit with a rabbit punch on the back of his head.

'Down went Gareth,' Willie John said. 'And, within seconds, down went half the Eastern Province team. Almost before I could blink there were five or six of the local team laid out on the pitch. It looked like some terrifying tornado had just swept across the ground, flattening almost everyone in its path. Players who were standing around suddenly found themselves on the ground, their jaws aching or bleeding. Others were hit so hard that they didn't feel anything for some time. It looked like carnage and it was – which was exactly the desired effect.'

The Lions won the series 3–0.

Willie John, Gareth, JPR, Benny . . . my mind is overwhelmed by the legends in whose footsteps I am about to follow as I arrive at Lions HQ with Grays and our Saints club mates Nick Beal and Tim Rodber. I am petrified. I don't know where to go, how to behave. Other than my three mates I don't really know anyone as I haven't played against a lot of them in internationals and I haven't figured at all in the Five Nations due to first a medial knee ligament injury then England coach Jack Rowell picking Andy Gomarsall instead.

Gomars had done okay but thank God I had Ian McGeechan as my coach at Northampton. He told me not to worry about the Five Nations, that he would monitor my fitness and form and that I would have 'probably seven club games' before the Lions select the tour party. He said it might count for something, it might not.

Austin Healey says it definitely did. Austin, like me, is a scrum-half. He was born in Wirral, four miles down the road from my birthplace in Birkenhead, and he also won a few caps for England. He never tires of telling me that I was selected for the 1997 Lions only because Geech was my club coach. His running joke, even to this day, is that whenever he knocked on a coach's door he'd see me coming out of the shower. Hilarious, eh? Yes, of course, there was an element of luck involved. I went despite being probably third-choice England scrum-half and Geech did take me based on my club form alone. But I had played well for Saints and was putting in the performances.

Geech knew me and the way I prepared for games and felt I was a 'Test match animal'. He had a fatherly presence about him and felt protective towards his players. I think because I was interested in how we ran the game at Saints I caught his attention. Geech and I talked a lot together about strategy and tactics. We seemed to be on the same wavelength. We knew exactly what the other wanted to get out of the game and out of the players in the Saints team. He used me very much as his voice and his mind on the field.

'As a barometer for the whole team,' was how Geech put it in his autobiography *Lion Man*. 'Matt and I never had a problem with each other. We talked a lot about his game.' His day-to-day knowledge of me swayed the balance in my favour ahead of

Gomars, Kyran Bracken, Ireland's Niall Hogan and Scottish duo Gary Armstrong and Bryan Redpath.

There was no 'them and us' when it came to management and players at Northampton. A lot of the boys were living in villages on the outskirts of town and we often ended up at a pub in Pitsford, where Geech was living. He'd come down and we'd all have a drink together. That was a different planet from the one rugby inhabits now, where you rarely see management and players out together.

The nineties were different from the professional rugby world in which we now reside. Union was amateur until 1995, something we played in our spare time when work commitments allowed. Although it went pro almost overnight, some of the amateur habits, happily, took a little longer to shake off.

At Northampton our concession to the brave new world was that rather than go to Auntie Ruth's bar in town for a beer and an eve-of-match chill-out on a Friday night, we'd do it on the Wednesday.

One occasion sticks in my mind. Tim Rodber, Paul Grayson and I were working on a new drop-goal routine. Rather than pore over video footage, we each poured another beer, then got down to business. Rodders stood at one end of the room, holding above his head two bar stools as posts, while Grays and I took turns 'converting' plastic pint glasses full of ale through the uprights.

We were good mates with the owners and the doors were long since locked and the curtains lowered. Soon after we passed out, only to be woken at 5am by what we thought was a bomb going off. In fact, it was two bottles of champagne simultaneously exploding in the freezer where we'd put them to chill nicely. We were sophisticated lads after all.

My mum blames my dad for introducing me to the link between rugby and beer. It all stemmed from my first visit to Twickenham in 1982.

England versus Australia with half-time entertainment laid on in the shape of Erika Roe taking off her top and streaking across the pitch. To be honest, this is slightly lost on me given that I was just ten years old and had only just managed to get over my confusion about why we had four tickets when Mum had dropped off three of us – me, my dad and a mate of his – at the station. It wasn't until we arrived at the ground and made our way to our seats in the North Stand that it all became clear. Dad opened his overcoat, produced a barrel of beer and proceeded to place it on the spare seat next to him.

I remember Dad roaring with laughter when Erika, whom I suspect had also taken drink, ran onto the pitch. 'I heard all this screaming and thought "I have to get off, the second half is starting," she later said. 'But I quickly realised the roar was for me.'

Yes and no, Erika. You did have some competition, although only my dad's mate noticed, looking at the wrong end of the pitch as he was.

'Who is this idiot, dressing up as a monkey!' he yells, laughing like a hyena in his slightly worse-for-wear state.

'What are you talking about?' Dad replies, his gaze fixed on the buxom intruder. 'That's a woman. Surely even you can work that out!'

Unbeknown to Dad – and, to be fair, all but the one bloke sitting next to him – at the same time as Miss Roe had revealed herself, a guy dressed in a monkey suit came on to the pitch at the other end. Funny how he didn't attract the same level of global media coverage

as Erika. Still, Dad's mate thought gorilla-man was hilarious. Takes all sorts I guess.

The last laugh was on Dad, however.

We get off the train and Mum is waiting for us with a face like thunder. 'What are you thinking about taking our son to a game like that, Ron?!' she yells. 'He's only a child.'

If Dad is accused of being a bad influence that day – though I don't quite see it myself – my new rugby 'family' quickly pick up the baton and move things to a whole new level.

Take my first senior tour to Canada, with England B in 1993. We are in Victoria where the Commonwealth Games will be held the following year, providing golden memories for Linford Christie, Kelly Holmes, Sally Gunnell and Denise Lewis.

The only medal coming our way is for consistency in spending pretty much every night in a strip bar called Monty's. In this particular classy establishment scantily clad girls danced around poles in the main bar area, which is pretty standard in such haunts. Monty's, however, had introduced a clever twist: another pole built inside a clear-glass shower cubicle. Local custom demanded that if one of the girls was considered especially hot, the patrons would yell 'shower, Shower, SHOWER!!' and she would be obliged to head into the cubicle to cool down.

One night we are doing what we have done every other evening – necking bottles of beer and chanting, 'shower, Shower, SHOWER!!' at every girl we see – when suddenly there is a commotion. We look to the right and the cubicle is occupied. Yes!! Eh, no. The apparition before us isn't some curvy Canadian beauty but a scaffolder from Coventry called Darren Garforth (or as he liked to describe himself, a 'tubular technician'). Now

whatever the correct job description for Darren's occupation may have been, it certainly didn't include the word 'dancer' as was all too clear to everyone enjoying Monty's hospitality that evening.

Sadly, I rip my hamstring in the first game of the tour so a few of the lads, including Steve Hackney, gallantly agree to accompany me to Monty's to help drown my sorrows. Steve is a top bloke, but quiet, until he's had a few beers that is. Anyway, we enjoy a cracking night and I successfully banish all thoughts of my injury. When the time comes to leave we say our goodbyes and all of us head back to bed. Almost all of us, I should say. At breakfast the following morning there is no sign of Hackers.

The story eventually comes out. Walking back through the park near the hotel Steve stops to say hello to a couple of tramps and, being the worse for wear, sits down for a momentary rest and passes out on their bench. Hours later he wakes up minus shoes, socks, watch, tie and dignity. You can probably guess the level of sympathy he received when he eventually walked, bare-footed, into the hotel.

Fortunately for him he is not the sole target of our banter. Enter Matt Greenwood, a second-row forward from Wasps. It's my last day before flying home alone and the tour has moved on to Vancouver, one of the great cities of the world. England are put up in the magnificent Pan Pacific Hotel on the harbourside, where the views are incredible and the rooms palatial. I cannot believe how unlucky I am to be going home.

On arrival we stream off the coach and traipse into the lobby where each of us is handed a key to a pre-assigned room. We head to the lifts and pile in. On either side of the doors is a panel with numbered buttons for each floor, which illuminate when pressed. Matt is on one side of the lift and I am on the other. Nearest to one

set of buttons is Paul Grayson and he calls out, 'What floor boys?' We yell a range of numbers. He pushes the relevant buttons and each one lights up. Rocket science it is not. But the lift is full and we are all squeezed in tight and Matt, who is standing by the second panel, does not realise that Grays is doing the honours on his side. As each number is called out and immediately lights up in front of him, I can see him thinking, 'Voice recognition? That's amazing.'

Sure enough, later in the day I'm heading back down to reception with my bags and I walk into Matt standing in the elevator with the doors open shouting, 'Ground floor, GROUND FLOOR!'

Those early days with England B were a scream – a lot of young lads away together on trips with next to no media profile. There is no comparison with my first day as a British and Irish Lion.

'What is the form here,' I wonder as I walk around the Oatlands Park Hotel in Weybridge, smiling and greeting everyone I meet with a cheery hello. I'm in awe of the history and tradition of the Lions and of the great players around me. Should I be bold and brash when introducing myself and risk being seen as an English tosser by the Celts – or keep my head down and risk looking insecure and unsure of myself? The latter is hardly ideal for a prospective Lions scrum-half.

I try to pitch it somewhere in the middle but my nervousness is clear for all to see. At our first team-bonding session we are split into groups, given a flip chart and asked to select a spokesman to present our group's ideas on the way forward. The boys hand me the red pen and tell me to get on with it. This is not the moment for smart-arse wisecracks. I die a thousand deaths and quickly concede defeat. 'I can't do it, I really don't want to do it.'

The truth is I don't feel confident enough. It is like my first day

at school or my first appearance on *A Question of Sport*, during which I'm so gripped with fear I can't even use a pencil. Sue Barker asks me my first question and my hands are shaking so much I'm unable to write on my notepad let alone come up with an answer.

'Calm down, breathe slowly,' I tell myself.

'John,' says Sue, directing the next question at John Parrott, the former world snooker champion. 'In which sport would you use a spider?'

I press my buzzer.

'Yes, Matt,' says Sue, the surprise clear in her voice.

'Er, snooker?'

I am right but John goes absolutely ape. He stands up and pretends to walk off, raging, 'Am I not even allowed to answer my own questions?' He is only messing about – I think – but I am mortified. I feel I've spoiled the whole show.

By its very nature a Lions tour has to hit the ground running. Four nations are thrown together with only a matter of weeks to build a team and a spirit capable of conquering one of the southern hemisphere's three rugby superpowers. That's why the first week together is spent flushing out shrinking violets, emboldening the less assertive and creating a sense of togetherness.

On day one Scott Gibbs did his bit to help me settle into my new surroundings, not so much by getting the creases out of my shirt but by making me feel I was as much a part of the show as he was. You cannot overestimate the benefit to an international rugby team of that sense of unity. Fifteen individuals will never win a bean in this sport, whereas a tight-knit unit can conquer anyone – in our case with South Africa in 1997, the champions of the world.

On that subject, it was no coincidence England were champions

in my first Five Nations campaign in 1996, given the laugh we had as a squad on the night of my championship debut against France in Paris. The match was played at Parc des Princes, the magnificent old home of French rugby. France were overwhelming favourites against a young English side, yet we only went down to a last-minute Thomas Castaignède drop goal, helpfully deflected over the bar by the fingertips of Paul Grayson.

This was my introduction to Five Nations rugby and I loved it. I remember running out with Grays and Jon Sleightholme beforehand and Sleights dropping the ball as we ran around the pitch. You should have heard the abuse from the Parisian crowd. You'd think he'd dropped it over the line in the last minute to lose the game. We all looked at each other, everyone clearly thinking the same thing. 'Bloody hell, this is going to be some occasion.'

Despite coming up inches short, we changed into our penguin suits afterwards and headed to Versailles for the post-match banquet, amid priceless paintings and the sort of chandeliers you would not want to let Del Boy and Rodney loose on.

The starters arrive, a thick pea soup with accompanying bread rolls. Dean Richards, the vastly experienced Leicester No. 8 who would almost single-handedly beat Scotland at Murrayfield a month later, starts a food fight. The French lads fight back and the officials on both sides go completely bonkers.

As a cease-fire is called – well, demanded actually – Deano disappears outside with the intention of taking the team bus for a spin. He climbs on, starts it up but succeeds only in completely wrecking the gearbox. Not to be put off, he removes the 'England team' sign from the dashboard and swaps it with the one saying 'RFU Committee' on the adjacent bus. The dinner ends and players

and alickadoos alike pour into the courtyard and clamber aboard what they think are their buses.

As we pull away, leaving the committee bus stationary and its driver shaking his head, someone from the back yells, 'Man down, Deano's not on board.' We screech to a halt, our driver sticks on his hazards and we wait. Still there is no sign of the big man. By now England head coach Jack Rowell is having a sense of humour failure.

'Leave him, we're off. He can find his own way back.'

We join the road heading towards the city with the flashing blue lights of a police escort in front and to the rear, and soon find ourselves approaching the team hotel. It's at this point I happen to glance out of the window to my right. I do a double take. The bike-riding gendarme is dressed in black tie, albeit with helmet and gloves, and bears a remarkable resemblance to a rugby-playing former policeman from the Leicestershire constabulary.

There is Deano, bold as brass, escorting the 'team' bus, with its cargo of players, back to the hotel on a police motorbike. We pull up outside our destination, file off the bus and make our way through reception into the bar.

'There you are boys,' booms a familiar voice. 'What are you having?'

This was a very different era of rugby from the professional world of academies and centres of excellence we see today. I'll let you into a secret: when I first broke into the senior England squad, I was enrolled into an élite drinking corps, known as the 'five before five' club.

The concept was simple. Those players selected on the replacements' bench would go up to the Roebuck pub on Richmond Hill

the afternoon before game day and have to down five pints before five o'clock ahead of the 6.30pm team meeting. Remember, this was at a time when tactical replacements were not permitted. Substitutions were as rare as white rhinos.

At least that was the theory. Shortly before I was selected for the squad, England played Wales at Twickenham and during the eve-of-match 'five before five', replacement hooker John Olver was persuaded to wear nothing under the all-in-one quilted boiler suit that replacements in the early nineties used to be given. Well, nothing except socks and boots. You've got to look the part after all.

With two minutes on the clock England hooker Brian Moore went down and stayed down, which he never did. It's clear he is hurt. There is commotion on the home bench as a red-faced Olver jumps to his feet, turns on his heels and sprints off down the tunnel in search of underwear and playing kit. By the time he emerges, battle-ready, Mooro is up, the game has resumed and the rest of the lads are wetting themselves.

The 'five before five' club was in its pomp in the late eighties and early nineties. The arrival of professionalism changed things, though not completely to begin with. On Saturday nights ahead of international week we would all travel down to the England hotel after playing for our clubs and a small crack unit would go to the Sun Inn in Richmond for a late-night lock-in. It shows how 'professional' they were because I never noticed. Not once. They were never late for a meeting, they never shirked any training. And in that time England won three Grand Slams.

Still laughing at the memory of Dean and the motorbike, we won our next three matches, against Wales, Ireland and Scotland, and

England were 1996 Triple Crown winners and champions for the fourth time in six years. The question now was could that success be carried into Lions 'year' and on to a tour we are not given a snowball's chance in hell of winning.

Geech tells it to us straight – there is nobody on this planet, other than the people in this Lions squad and their families, who believe we will win this Test series. Pretty much everyone reckons we will be lucky to win a midweek game let alone any of the three Tests. The common consensus is we are going to get gubbed.

Joel Stransky, whose extra-time drop goal had made South Africa 1995 world champions, is typical of many. 'The South Africans play at a level above what the Lions are used to,' he said. 'If the Lions are lucky, they may get the last Test, but South Africa will win the first two because the Lions won't have had time to adjust to that level of rugby.'

It is hard to argue with that. This year had been a far from vintage Five Nations and the Boks are World Cup holders, a team full of very experienced players. From minute one it is all about how can we get the better of them tactically. The management are absolutely meticulous in working out what they can and cannot get away with. Primarily, we know we have to be defensively tough. Hence the selection of a fistful of players with top-level rugby league experience: Scotty Gibbs, John Bentley, Alan Tait, Allan Bateman and Dai Young. The physiques of these guys are way ahead of most of the union lads; they were also mentally rock-hard.

Next we set about combatting South Africa's areas of strength – the breakdown and scrum. It is widely assumed the Lions will go with the all-English front row of Jason Leonard, Mark Regan and Graham Rowntree as that is physically the strongest combination. Jim Telfer, our forwards coach, looks at the numbers. Our boys can

push 600 kilos, but as the South Africans can shove 650k he recognises we will not be able to outmuscle them. So he decides we must beat them by being more mobile. Tom Smith, Keith Wood and Paul Wallace, a Celtic combo who could push 450k, get the call. What we lose in power we will make up for with technique.

That same principle is also applied to rucking where Jim and Geech know we need to push the boundaries of what is acceptable if we are to gain the upper hand. They identify that the referees in South Africa let players dive in and seal off the ball, which is illegal. Rather than moan about it, we get practising. Jim produces cargo nets and flag poles, holds them out, 'limbo' style, and we are drilled in adopting a lower body position by having to get underneath them. Again it is a case of brain trumping brawn. At least, that's the theory.

First, though, we have to get the team spirit right. A big night out at a local pub in Weybridge sets us on our way. We all wake with sore heads, which is hardly surprising since on returning to the hotel we joined in with a wedding party. We are friendly fellas, after all. In the morning we are split into teams of eight, each given four two-man canoes and the instruction to get out on the water and swap boats within our teams. It's all going well until John 'Bentos' Bentley decides to do a headstand on the seat of his canoe and ends up in the drink.

Bentos loves a laugh and is quickly appointed entertainments manager. His philosophy, spelt out in his book *Lions Uncaged*, is this: 'Touring is unique. It's not just playing rugby union, it's life itself. It's about people dropping barriers and becoming great friends overnight. On tour you eat, sleep and crap with people. A guy that you've only ever seen on the television or played against, you suddenly find yourself rooming with, following him into the

bathroom and things like that. You see a completely different side of a bloke then.'

Mark 'Ronnie' Regan would certainly agree with that after being paired with Tom Smith, the Scotland prop better known as the 'Silent Assassin' on account of being very, very quiet. Tom would watch television into the middle of the night. Usually when you share a room it reaches a point when one of you says, 'Right, shall we call it a night now?' and you agree to flick the switch. Ronnie would hint, but Tom would quietly, but firmly, say he wanted to keep watching the box – and he'd continue doing so until the wee small hours.

One night Mark nods off, as usual with the volume blaring, only to be woken at 4am, TV still on, with a sleep-walking Tom standing over him with his hands out as though he's about to throttle Our Ronnie. Not surprisingly, it puts the fear of God into Mark, who can't get to breakfast quick enough to tell everyone and then spends the rest of the tour trying to get himself a single room. Tom is henceforth known as the 'Boston Strangler'.

Mind you, it makes a change for Ronnie not to be the butt of the joke. This is the guy who left Victor Ubogu open-mouthed as they travelled up a building in Durban in a glass-sided lift. Victor says what a beautiful clear blue sky it is and Ronnie replies: 'Of course it's clear, we're at altitude. That means we're above the clouds.'

One particular story Simon Shaw tells about Ronnie makes me laugh. It concerns another Bristol stalwart, Derek Eves, who after training one day tells the boys he is organising a charity greyhound race night to raise money for the Colts tour to South Africa. He asks his team mates if they will buy a dog for the event, which will then run in the races he has footage of. Your dog wins, you win. Usual race-night rules. Pretty straightforward.

Only Ronnie responds to being asked with the following: 'I'll have to think about that.'

'There's not much to think about,' replies Eves. 'You either want to buy a dog or you don't.'

Ronnie again says he needs to give it some thought and Eves turns on his heels muttering, 'Whatever.'

The following day Derek bumps into Ronnie before training and says, 'So, what have you decided?'

'I have spoken to my ma,' says Ronnie, 'and she said we've got an Alsatian and we don't need a greyhound.'

For all the stick that comes his way Ronnie has a wonderful ability to make people laugh. Take the day at England training when he was working with forwards coach Andy Robinson, who was known as 'The Growler' on account that he always seemed to be miserable and telling people off.

Ronnie was throwing the ball into a lineout but was not sure of the calls and hesitated. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Robbo stomping towards him with a face like stink and decided to get his retaliation in first.

' 'Ere, Babs,' he yelled. 'Call off the dogs!'

As the week at Oatlands Park Hotel progresses, my self-confidence grows. Paul Grayson and I had come up with this money-making idea of launching a new rugby ball, which we called '9210', as in scrum-half No. 9 (me) passes to fly-half No. 10 (Grays). In the boot of the car we travelled down in from Northampton we have stashed a big bag of these balls and I decide it would be a good way to get our business venture off the ground by getting the entire Lions tour party to sign them – just in case we are successful in South Africa.

Over the course of two days I ask everyone I see to put a squiggle on each of the ten balls. I'm thinking competition prizes, promotions, money, money, money. I'm guessing now that the players I asked were thinking something else. Something like, 'God Almighty, who is this chancer? We've only just met and he's getting us to sign stuff straight away.'

Of course, nobody actually complains or gives me a hard time because we are in full team-building mode but the fates conspire against me. At the end of the tour when I return to the hotel to collect my booty, I discover someone has nicked the lot. And it's not my mum, though she has been down to pick up a massive bag I left there before we departed for South Africa. In it I packed enough Lions kit and accessories to satisfy an entire rugby club.

What is it with free gear that brings out the kid in all of us? Look at the boys even in today's game. They're being paid to play, earning a really good wage, yet all the majority of them are after is a black card so they can walk into Nando's and get all their meals for free.

When it comes down to it, we are simple animals. If I could have wangled an extra pair of shoes that were three sizes too big but might fit my dad, I admit I would have done so. And boy, do the Lions get a lot of freebies.

Each of us in 1997 was assigned three giant kitbags, full to the brim with goodies. I had brought some pants to play in, my gumshield and my own boots, a couple of pairs of jeans and two or three T-shirts. I had some photos of my nearest and dearest, a laptop, a boxed set of *24* and a book written by Karin Slaughter entitled *Undone*, about a deranged killer. Everything else – sunglasses, watches, wash bags, suits, you name it – was provided by the sponsors.