



THE RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB
RUGBY
Lions

v Plymouth Albion
Saturday 26th October, 2002
Kick Off 3.00pm
Matchday Sponsor
BUILDER CENTER

Season 2002/03

Disaster

The dust had hardly settled on the previous season before it was learned that the Lions Scottish full back and reliable kicker, Chris "Cliff" Richards was to rejoin Bedford for the new season. During the latter part of the spring and early summer no information emerged as to the squad that Rugby were assembling though it was rumoured that plenty of talking was taking place.

The first bits of information found their way into the Rugby Advertiser on 11th July. Richard Cockerill had by then resisted Leicester's attempts to retain his services and he had moved to France for a season with Montferrand, so severing his ties with the Lions. David Owen's promised five-year funding commitment was now at an end and, though he would make a contribution, there would be less money available.

As a consequence Mal Malik was attempting to promote a closer relationship with Leicester Tigers. It was suggested that James Overend would look after the backs, and an unnamed current Leicester forwards coach would take over Cockerill's task; In addition to his main job as Chief Executive, Mal Malik would continue to fulfil the role of Director of rugby. Clive "Cranky" Brewer remained as fitness advisor.

In the Rugby Observer of 27th July three new signings were announced. These were, Guy Manson-Bishop, an ex-Tigers second row/No.8 forward, Dan Cullen, a fly half from Worcester and Jason Critchley, a former international rugby league player who could play anywhere in the three-quarter line. Manson-Bishop, the report added, would take over the forwards coaching role. In the first draft of the National Division 1 fixture list Rugby were scheduled to open the season by playing newly promoted Orrell at Edge Hall Road. The former Courage Division 1 club, having fallen on hard times, had been rescued by the owner of Wigan Warriors rugby league team early in the previous season.

A fortnight later the 8th August the Rugby Advertiser announced the Lions proposed pre-season trial games. On Saturday 10th August the squad would travel to the Black Country to take on

the improving Dudley Kingswinford team and then, a week later, they would take on neighbours Nuneaton at Liberty Way; unusually there was no trial game scheduled for Webb Ellis Road. Further signings were made known at this time, including ex London Welsh full back, Matt Vines, and Cambridge University wing, James Baker; Flanker Ben Smith and props Richard List and Simon Black would be arriving from Leicester. It was also said that forwards coach, Guy Manson-Bishop would be assisted by Leicester's second team coach, Ian Smith and first team prop Darren Garforth. As it turned out Manson-Bishop had to manage on his own.

About this time news filtered out confirming that flanker Ben Lewitt had departed to Orrell and that fly half Richard Davies had returned to play in Wales. It was also rumoured that Tim Collier wanted to join London Welsh in order to avoid travel from the capital to the Midlands; this news was affirmed in the next issue of the Advertiser. The paper also reported on the trial game at Dudley Kingswinford, which the Lions lost by 10-5. Rugby were missing a number of their backs that were playing in the Henley 7s. Of the new signings on view Ben Smith and Jason Critchley looked promising; a number of Rugby U21s had also taken part.

The following Saturday it was the turn of Nuneaton. They put up a stout resistance but faded in the final two quarters. Jaques Steyn, who was expected to be playing at fly half rather than his preferred centre position, and in the absence of a recognised kicker to be given the kicks as well, succeeded with two conversions. Stuart Potter scored a first quarter try, something he had not yet achieved in a real game. Last season's captain, Tristan Prosser-Shaw returned for this game and, with Potter and Reed also back, the boost to the team was noticeable.

The Rugby Observer, reporting on the Nuneaton game, added Mal Malik's thoughts on the season to come. "We really want to be in a position to be competing with the top three or four in the league. It's our ambition to get back into their company. We want to be knocking at their door." A late announcement imparted the news that, as some of the Edge Hall Road

buildings had been damaged by fire, the Lions opening game against Orrell would take place on Sunday 1st September at the Wigan Warriors JJB Stadium.

In the Coventry Evening Telegraph Pink of August 24th, rugby correspondent, John Wilkinson, once again gave some background information on the new season's National Division 1 teams together with a prediction of how they might fare. John's thoughts on the Lions were, "At strength, Lions have a side more than capable of finishing in mid table or higher. The question mark, however, is the depth in their squad and as things stand they could be vulnerable in places if injuries bite in again. It could be another difficult season." Though he thought namesake John (Brain) could do it for Worcester, "Wilko" chose Rotherham as champions with Orrell as runners-up. At the other end his choice for the drop were Manchester and Moseley. John had also noticed that, with the exception of Birmingham, Rugby's opponents would always face Worcester the following week and, with the same exception, Rugby would always play Rotherham's opponents a week later.

The Club's Annual General Meeting took place on Thursday 29th August, just two days before the first league game. The main points of interest included chairman David Owen reminding the meeting that his substantial financial input was at an end, and that additional finance would now have to come from some other source, either from the members or from local businesses; the RFU's contribution would be £190,000, slightly down on that for season 2001/02.

Some additional players names were made known. These included three more loan players from Leicester, Rob Hurrell (second row), Tom Hayman (second/back row) and Ben Wheeler (back row); the latter's father being the former England hooker and Leicester chairman, Peter Wheeler. Other late additions were James Bingham (scrum half) and James Black (wing). Fergus Gladstone had gone off to Cambridge University and to the disappointment of most members Peter Roberts late, late departure to Stourbridge was confirmed. He was in fact in the team picture that appeared in the match day

programme for the first home game. To complete the bad news, the reported signing of ex-Coventry fly half Elisi Vunipola had been premature and he eventually joined his brother at Nuneaton.

Of the twenty-two players that travelled to Wigan for the first league game, nine of the starting XV were "old boys" with one more on the bench. Prior to the game the Lions had to lay out on the pitch a number of still damp shirts to take advantage of the drying power of a strong afternoon sun. This activity perplexed some of the spectators who might well have imagined it to be a sponsor's gimmick

After 34 minutes of the first half Rugby were within a score of their opponents at 17-16, having come back from 17-6 down. Rugby's points included two successful penalty kicks from Jaques Steyn and a try each from scrum half Phil Reed and new winger James Baker. Both tries resulted from kicks ahead, Reed's from Steyn and Baker's from Potter but both conversions went begging. Between then and the half time whistle Orrell ran in two more tries to get their first bonus point and leave Rugby well behind at 27-16.

The second half began as the first had ended with Orrell, following on from a Phil Jones penalty, crossing Rugby's line three times in quick succession to take them out of sight at 49-16. As the game went on the Lions began to wilt and Orrell scored twice more before Phil Reed got a second try for Rugby from a quick tapped penalty. Orrell had the last word with number ten to secure victory 70-23.

Orrell: Wes Davies; Richard Welding, Scott Barrow, Wade Kelly, Simon Haughton; Phil Jones (Dave Wood), Paul Newton (Jon Whittle); Alistair Livesey (Steve Barretto), Mike Howe, Kris Fullman, Steve Moore, Chris Bentley (Chas Cusani), Matt Lacey (Ben Lewitt), Drew Hickey, Nick Easter.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Jason Critchley, Stuart Potter, Alex Taylor, James Baker; Jaques Steyn (Dan Cullen), Phil Reed; Phil Greenbury (Richard List), Matt Williams (Marek Kwisiuk), Glen

Carson (Simon Black/Phil Greenbury), Guy Manson-Bishop, Rob Hurrell, Sam Tovo (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tim Stannard (Tom Hayman). *Man of the Match – Phil Reed.*

Referee: David Grashoff.

Rugby had not conceded so large a total of points since the first game of the 1999/2000 season at Worcester, but this time they had been good in patches and, though their defence had been flimsy, their attack looked promising. The Rugby Advertiser report, however, tempted fate by suggesting, "Given the talent within the squad and an injury crisis apart, this should be about as bad as it gets: Orrell will test a good many teams this season." The observation about Orrell's capability proved to be uncannily accurate

The Lions first visitors, Otley had provided the Lions with nine of their 47 points in 2001/02 and, as far as was known, their squad had not been greatly strengthened. On the basis of the previous season's results this was a game that had to be won if relegation was to be avoided, without any thoughts of a top five place. In the selected team the new signing from Nuneaton, prop Richard Moore replaced Glen Carson and Tom Hayman pushed Tim Stannard on to the bench.

Rugby's lineout throwing and catching let them down early in the game and Otley were the first to score with a Simon Binns penalty. That was followed by a James Tiffany try from a good lineout take, the result of a corner penalty kick. Binns failed to convert, but Otley were 0-8 up and the Lions were looking disorganised. Jaques Steyn, whose obligation to play fly half rather than centre was producing mixed results, eventually kicked a good penalty after some Lions pressure, tapped the next one to himself to score a try between the posts: unaccountably he missed the easy conversion. That tied the scores but just before half time Otley pressure, though initially resisted, ultimately produced a try for Rob Whatmuff from Binns' deft chip across Rugby's line; the fly half also kicked the conversion.

After the break Rugby appeared to be increasing the pressure on the visitors but Sam Tovo's enthusiasm took him to the sin-bin. Otley were then able to lift the short siege with a Binns' penalty goal, and a try by Ian Shuttleworth, who chased a Binns' grubber kick; the latter adding the extra two points. When Tovo returned, Glen Carson and Marek Kwisiuk replaced Richard Moore and Matt Williams, but the only change in the score was another Binns penalty. As time marched on an Otley infringement gave Rugby a penalty kick that Steyn cornered and, after the move was repeated, Guy Manson-Bishop scored a try, but Steyn again missed the conversion.

More Lions replacements followed and with them another Rugby try from a "corner kick", this time from Tristan Prosser-Shaw. Matt Vines took over the kicking but failed to convert, however, Rugby had narrowed the gap to 20-28. Though the Lions collected an unconverted fourth try through replacement James Black to claim a bonus point, so did Otley. Binns converted theirs before adding his fourth penalty. Otley won an exciting game by 25-38.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Jason Critchley, Stuart Potter (James Black), Alex Taylor, James Baker; Jaques Steyn, Phil Reed (James Bingham); Richard Moore (Glen Carson), Matt Williams (Marek Kwisiuk), Phil Greenbury, Guy Manson-Bishop (Tim Stannard), Rob Hurrell, Sam Tovo (Ben Wheeler), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tom Hayman. *No Man of the Match nominated.*

Otley: Ian Shuttleworth; Neil Law, Rob Whatmuff, Phil Greaves, Mark Kirkby; Simon Binns, Matt Bacon; Ronnie Kelly (Adam Pogson), Duncan Sayers (Mark Luffman), David Hall (Peter Hall), Jason Oakes (Matt Holmes), Gareth Manuel, Paul Williams (Peter Osbourne), Nathan Bland, James Tiffany.

Referee: Tim Wigglesworth.

With the first two league games lost the outcome of a trip to Exeter's County Ground was likely to result in more of the same. Exe had two successive excellent seasons in the bag and their squad retained its tried and tested strength. They had lost

fly half Chris Malone to Gloucester but had signed Worcester's Tony Yapp who was also a reputable kicker.

It was a beautiful day with warm sunshine, but the sun was focussed on the home team. Exeter could hardly do anything wrong and the Lions barbed wire defence turned out to be made of tinsel. Rugby's attacking ploys in the early part of the game did highlight chinks in the home defence, and they were rewarded by tries from Matt Vines and Tom Hayman, that miraculously (in retrospect) put the visitors in the lead, albeit briefly, on two separate occasions. Tim Miller then sin-binned Lions captain Tristan Prosser-Shaw for a second high tackle and Exeter took possession of the game from then on. They had scored six out of the eight tries in the score of 39-12 when the two teams left for their dressing room lectures at half time.

Apart from a late-on try from Phil Reed, the second half traffic was one-way, as Exeter crossed the Rugby line another eight times. Had it been a boxing match the referee would have stopped it before the end. Exeter's Tony Yapp and Ben Thompson missed six of the conversions and that served to keep the Lions from conceding a three-figure score with the final result being 89-17. It was the largest score conceded by the Lions since Newcastle's record league score of 156 in 1996.

Exeter: Glen Bunny; Chris Wall, Alistair Murdoch, Stephen Ward, Piran Tretheway (Ed Lewsey); Tony Yapp (Ben Thompson), Richard John (Ian Sanders); Altan Ozedmir (Ryan Hopkins), Sam Blythe, Phil Sluman, Ian Brown, Robert Baxter (Dave Sims), Ben Cole, Gary Willis, Richard Baxter.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Jason Critchley (James Bingham), Stuart Potter (Dan Cullen), Alex Taylor (James Black), James Baker; Jaques Steyn, Phil Reed; Richard Moore (Glen Carson), Matt Williams, Phil Greenbury (Richard List), Guy Manson-Bishop (Tim Stannard), Rob Hurrell, Ben Wheeler (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tom Hayman. *No Man of the Match nominated.*

Referee: Tim Miller

By now the Lions were propping up the league table behind Moseley and Manchester, and it was the latter team that would be coming to Webb Ellis Road the following weekend. This would be the second Sunday home game, a fact that a number of regular supporters were not happy with. If the Otley game was a "need to win" match Manchester was a "must win" one; It was another game that Rugby had won in the previous season.

Manchester were one of the two teams that John Wilkinson had fingered for relegation, but they had obviously failed to read that copy of the Coventry Evening Telegraph Pink, and by the end of the game they showed why Rugby might well take their place. Rugby's start was a disaster and the first try was conceded after only four minutes. Thereafter they had enough possession but squandered most of it. Even so Jason Critchley (this week's kicker) notched two penalties and Jaques Steyn dropped a neat goal to give rugby a 9-5 lead on 24 minutes. Surprisingly this did not steady their game, as the Lions errors continued unabated, and they eventually conceded a penalty that was successfully kicked by Marcus Barrow. Just before half time, in attempting to illegally defend a self-induced crisis, a penalty try was conceded for Manchester to retake the lead at 9-15.

The Lions renewed their efforts after the break but to no avail and even failed to take advantage of second row David Jessiman's ten minutes in the sin-bin. The Rugby eight were rolled back 30 metres by the visitor's seven and in due course ex-Lion Dave Muckalt got another Manchester try. James Baker revived Rugby's fading hopes with a fine, unconverted try but 14-20 was as close as they got, as Manchester's Martin Worthington evaded three weak tackles to score their fourth try that Barrow easily converted. The final score was 14-27. Manchester took away five points and left the Lions with nothing.

That this performance precipitated criticism on the supporters website was hardly surprising. It was the first game when there had been no effective attacking play with only a solitary try, and to most observers it appeared that the "Lion" had taken a

backward step, with its back already against the wall. The match report's summing up illustrated the fans disappointment and frustration, and this was followed by a discussion on the site message board.

Rugby: Matt Vines; James Black (Sam Cole), Stuart Potter, Jason Critchley, James Baker; Jaques Steyn, Phil Reed; Richard Moore (Richard List), Matt Williams, Phil Greenbury (Glen Carson), Guy Manson-Bishop, Rob Hurrell (Tim Stannard), Ben Wheeler (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tom Hayman. *No Man of the Match nominated.*

Manchester: Marcus Barrow; Martin Worthington, Isaac Richmond, Richard Hughes, Karl Long (S Davidson); John Broxson, Ricky Pellow; James Carew, Mike Armstrong, Ian Davies (Rob Bieniasz), David Jessiman, Andy Whittle, Chris Wright, Alex Aylesbrook (David Wilks), Dave Muckalt.

Referee: Alan Biggs.

While Rugby remained at the foot of the league table Manchester's win and better points difference temporarily took them above Otley and Wakefield. Bedford was the Lions next opponent and on the last Saturday of September, with the "Indian Summer" still holding on, players and "dyed in the wool" supporters made their way to Goldington Road. The lively crowd of almost 1700 contained a more than substantial number of Blues followers, and their team ultimately gave them something to shout about.

For once Rugby got off to a good start and forced Bedford into making errors that were capitalised upon. Jason Critchley put over two early penalties conceded within kicking distance for a 0-6 lead. Shortly afterwards a Bedford attack was arrested by Stuart Potter and Jaques Steyn quickly moved the loose ball through to Matt Vines who chipped the defence to score a try that Critchley also converted. With the score now 0-13 Lions supporters were pinching themselves to determine whether or not they were dreaming. Bedford soon, however, confirmed that they were awake with a try from scrum half Stephen Gray after Quigley had duped Rugby's thin defence.

The Lions did not give up and pressed on with more attacks but this time, though coming close, they had no success and the next score was a Bedford penalty. Steyn's restart was short and Bedford immediately resumed their attacks and, Rugby having conceded 10 metres for "remarks", another Bedford penalty was easily converted to level the score at 13-13. Steyn's next restart was no better and Bedford were quickly back in Rugby's faces, where another unnecessary penalty was conceded to give Bedford a 16-13 half time lead.

The second half got underway with pressure from both sides who denied each other's close attempts to score. Rugby came closest with Critchley's 40-metre penalty kick that, had it not dropped just short of the posts, would have tied the scores. Glen Carson replaced "Necky" Mee, who had been put back up front for appearance number 98, and Tristan Prosser-Shaw and Ben Smith took over from Sam Tovo and Ben Wheeler.

Unfortunately Glen Carson's tactics in repelling the next attack earned him a yellow card and Bedford seized the opportunity to score a try through Lee Anker that James Pritchard converted. Shortly afterwards a corner penalty from ex-Lion "Cliff" Richards resulted in Lions 7-man scrum being pummelled again and another Bedford try, from centre Mike Staten, was the eventual outcome; Pritchard again added the extra two points. Rugby were now down and out and Bedford flanker, Matt Cornish gave his team a bonus point with their fourth try just before the end: Pritchard's conversion left the final score at 37-13.

Bedford: James Pritchard; Lee Anker, Ben Whetstone, Mike Staten, Spencer Brown; Ed Barnes (Chris Richards), Stephen Gray; James Ross (Kelvin Todd), Paul Saffy (Kramer Ronaki), Matt Volland, Arthur Brenton, Andy Orugboh, Fred Fichot, Matt Cornish, Howard Quigley (Steve Halsey).

Rugby: Matt Vines; James Black, Stuart Potter, Jason Critchley (Alex Taylor), James Baker; Jaques Steyn, Phil Reed; Phil Greenbury (Richard List), Matt Williams, Richard Mee (Glen Carson), Guy Manson-Bishop (Matt Hunter), Rob Hurrell, Ben

Wheeler (Ben Smith), Sam Tovo (Tristan Prosser-Shaw), Tim Stannard. *Man of the Match – Tim Stannard.*

Referee: Mark Wilson.

The verdict on the Bedford game was that it had been a great improvement on the Manchester debacle, but only a victory would dispel the gloom that was taking hold on Webb Ellis Road. Rugby had now lost their first five league games, something that had not happened since 1996/97, the first full professional season, when they lost the first eight in Courage Division 2. Past history did not offer much hope of a victory from the next home game, against London Welsh, whose fast backs had a recent habit of running Rugby ragged.

This was of course the season's first Saturday game at Webb Ellis Road, but in view of their team's bad run of form some of the absentee fans failed to return to support them. Had they turned up they would have seen a new fly half take the field, Jon Boden, a former Leicester U21 who had been playing in Italy; Jaques Steyn gratefully moved to centre. They would also have noticed the familiar face of Eddie Saunders who was benching in view of the continued injuries among the backs, the most serious of which was a broken bone in James Baker's hand. Sam Cole was making a first league start in Eddie's old No.14 shirt but the old stager replaced the young buck in the latter part of the game.

After 20 minutes the score was 7-19. Rugby had defended well against repeated early pressure, but in due course the visitors worked the ball from a scrum for a try from No.11 John Swords converted by Paul Farmer. Lions scrums and lineouts now went awry and the Welsh drove into Rugby's 22 where Rob Hurrell's brand of defence earned him a yellow card, thus making Matt Fitzgerald's pushover try a mere formality. The first clean lineout take for Rugby saw them pile into the Welsh half and, after a near miss and a corner penalty lineout, the ball reached Jon Boden who put Matt Vines through to score Rugby's first try, that the new fly half converted. Vines was temporarily

injured and Welsh took advantage of Rugby's (now) 13 men to score a second converted try.

A Welsh attempt to clear from a scrum outside their 22 was neatly charged down by Boden who caught the ball and went through to score, and then convert the try to make the score 14-19. Unfortunately Rugby's tendency to concede points just before the interval had not deserted them and Adam Bidwell's jinking run was good enough to send Swords in for his second try. The score was 14-24 at half time.

Alex Taylor took over from injured Jaques Steyn as the game resumed but it was the unlucky Sam Cole's inexplicable failure to trap a Welsh grubber kick that let in replacement full back Richard Mahony for the visitor's fifth try, that Farmer duly converted. Lions replacements came on and the team mounted a number of unsuccessful attacks, in the course of which a return visit from the Welsh resulted in a first penalty kick for Farmer that took the score to 14-34. More replacements for both sides preceded a third Rugby try from Tristan Prosser-Shaw, after a storming solo run from deep in his own half, having intercepted Tom Lewsey's wayward pass from a Welsh lineout. As time ran out another familiar ex-Lion face, Tim Collier, found himself on the field in a barrage of barracking from his erstwhile supporters. After Rugby muffed their last good chance, the Welsh showed them how to score with a blindside dash from Lewsey who wrapped things up at 19-39.

Rugby: Matt Vines; James Black, Stuart Potter, Jaques Steyn (Alex Taylor), Sam Cole (Eddie Saunders); Jon Boden, Phil Reed; Richard Moore (Glen Carson), Matt Williams, Phil Greenbury, Guy Manson-Bishop, Rob Hurrell, Ben Wheeler (Ben Smith), Sam Tovo (Tristan Prosser-Shaw), Tim Stannard. *Man of the Match – Jon Boden.*

London Welsh: Dylan Pugh (Richard Mahony); Rory Greenslade-Jones (Richard Catt), Adam Bidwell, Steve Ravenscroft, John Swords; Paul Farmer, Tom Lewsey; Steve Millard, Chris Ritchie (Gregg Botterman), Chris Cano (Sean Phillips), Chad Eagle (Tim Collier), Andy Johnson (Dave

Ramsey), Richard Griffiths (Paul Mansfield), Florent Rossigneux, Matt Fitzgerald.

Referee: Wayne Barnes.

Jon Boden's arrival was marked by Dan Cullen's departure shortly afterwards, as it had become obvious that he had not been quite the quality fly half that the Lions had been looking for.

On the Sunday, Rugby Minis staged their annual National Festival, being held for the second time at Webb Ellis Road after having been held for a number of years on Rugby School Close. It was as ever a resounding success with more than 600 youngsters taking part, but the hosts failed to win any of the trophies on offer.

After shipping 102 points against Rotherham at Millmoor, Moseley had slipped below Rugby on points difference and by applying John Wilkinson's second law of fixtures it meant that Moseley were Rugby's next opponents, on this occasion, at Bournbrook. Moseley had escaped from the jaws of extinction during the close season and were now operating on a shoestring, so surely the Lions could beat them, even if they were playing at home. During the preceding week Rugby signed up two South African players one of whom, Chris Frara, was put into the team at centre; Richard Mee was back in the front row for appearance number 99 and Eddie Saunders made his 381st appearance on the wing.

Right from the start Rugby gave the impression (true or not as the case may be) that they were not committing themselves and Moseley made all the early running that soon culminated in their taking a 5-0 lead with winger Geoff Gregory's corner flag try. After some hesitancy Rugby put together an attack and from a lineout drive Phil Reed sent in Eddie Saunders for try number 251; Jon Boden failed to convert but the Lions were now level at 5-5. Moseley soon got back in front when Greg McDonald put over a penalty awarded when Guy Manson-Bishop went over the top at a ruck.

Both sides continued to make errors but once again it was Moseley who scored with another McDonald penalty, but this time the Lions came straight back with a converted try. New boy, Chris Frara was the scorer having taken a perfect pass from Manson-Bishop. Rugby were leading 11-12 and it was nearly half time, but an interval lead was not going to be theirs, as another penalty was conceded and drilled home by McDonald to give Moseley a 14-12 advantage as the whistle blew.

Jaques Steyn replaced Stuart Potter as the second half got underway but it was not long before Richard Mee was shown a yellow card for a scrum indiscretion. He was foolish enough to question the need for a period in the sin-bin and was promptly shown the red card as well. This not unnaturally made Rugby's task more difficult but McDonald did miss the subsequent penalty kick. The Lions continued to make errors and a poor lineout throw 10 metres out was lost to Moseley hands and resulted in a try for Simon Brading. McDonald's conversion moved the home side well ahead at 21-12.

Rugby retaliated at once and gained a penalty that Jon Boden put over to narrow the gap slightly, then the game returned to its previously moribund state. Both sides brought on fresh players but this had little effect and although Boden missed a simple penalty kick, Moseley's Steven Nutt was successful with his even easier one. That last unnecessarily conceded kick took Moseley to a 24-15 win and erased the Lions losing bonus point.

Moseley: James Hinkins; Andrew Gray, Andrew Binns, Simon Brading, Geoff Gregory; Greg McDonald (Steven Nutt), Chris Millichip (O Thomas); Alex Clarke, Richard Protherough, Ben Buxton, Alex Hadley, R Stott, T Warren (Tom McIntosh), Rob Mourino, Mark Evans (A Tibbetts *temp*).

Rugby: Matt Vines; Eddie Saunders, Stuart Potter (Jaques Steyn), Chris Frara, Jason Critchley; Jon Boden, Phil Reed; Phil Greenbury (Richard Tarrant), Matt Williams (Marek Kwisiuk), Richard Mee (Richard Moore), Guy Manson-Bishop, Rob Hurrell,

Ben Wheeler (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tim Stannard.
No Man of the Match nominated.

Referee: Sean Davey.

The fall-out from this, seventh successive lost league game was a sense of despair that was apparent in the website match report and among the otherwise unshakably optimistic core of supporters. On the playing side Richard Moore, who had played in five of the first seven games decided to return to Nuneaton, who were by now looking to be serious contenders for promotion to National Division 2.

The 3rd round of the Powergen Cup, the point at which National Division 1 teams entered, gave Rugby a break from league competition, but they still had to face a team from their own league, as they had been drawn at home against the very much improved Birmingham & Solihull side. New fly half Jon Boden was cup-tied so Jaques Steyn reverted to number ten with Alex Taylor moving to centre. James Bingham, Simon Black (back from injury) and Matt Hunter all made debut starts. Richard Tarrant was also a first choice, while U21s Ryan Banks and Alex Williams were given seats on the bench. Prior to the game there was a minutes silence for the victims of a terrorist bomb attack in Bali that had killed a number of touring rugby players, and also in memory of regular Lions supporter Peter Watkins who had died a week earlier.

In the pattern set at Moseley the Lions started off very badly and within 16 minutes of the kick-off they were trailing by 0-19 with three Bees tries from David Knight, Paul Knight and Leigh Hinton, the latter converting two of them. The visitors missed two more opportunities and then the Jaques Steyn of old, with a feint right, a shimmy and a dummy sent "Reedo" in for a welcome Rugby try which Jason Critchley converted. That move seemed to galvanise the home side and after some real pressure they were awarded a penalty that Critchley converted to make the score 10-19. The Lions were soon back again and with the Birmingham defence reeling, Matt Vines went in for try number two but Critchley failed with the conversion. A

successful penalty kick from Hinton, then a 40-metre miss from Critchley brought the half time whistle with the score at 15-22, a considerable improvement on the Lions poor start.

Rugby resumed where they had left off, and within minutes they had equalised with a try from Guy Manson-Bishop, converted by Critchley. Vines long kick out of defence benefited Rugby, as the late tackle on him provided Critchley with a kickable penalty at the other end. It went over and the Lions had edged into a 25-22 lead, but unfortunately another 40-metre attempt was missed shortly afterwards.

Birmingham introduced a few changes but it was not long before Terry Sigley, who had come on at half time, was shown the red card for illegal use of the boot. Rugby failed to use the advantage that was anyway temporarily lost, when Tristan Prosser-Shaw was sin-binned for "tué le ballon" or some such infringement. This signalled a renewed effort from the Bees who, with a corner lineout move, eventually found space for replacement scrum half, Gavin Cattle to score a try that Hinton converted. Both sides now played musical chairs with their players but it was the visitors' new fly half Luke Smith (on loan from Saracens) on whom all eyes were focussed. Before the end of the game he had added another ten points from a penalty and a converted try. Shortly before the final whistle Bees' Neil Fletcher and Rugby's Phil Greenbury were sin-binned for fisticuffs. The Bees won a fluctuating game by 25-39.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Jason Critchley, Alex Taylor (Sam Cole), Chris Frara, Phil Reed; Jaques Steyn, James Bingham (James Black); Simon Black (Richard List), Marek Kwisiuk (Richard Tarrant), Richard Tarrant (Phil Greenbury), Guy Manson-Bishop, Matt Hunter, Ben Wheeler (Ryan Banks), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Ben Smith. *No Man of the Match nominated.*

Birmingham & Solihull: Dave Knight; Leigh Hinton, Shaun Woof, Adam Irwin, Nick Baxter; Steve Perry (Luke Smith), Paul Knight (Gavin Cattle); Andy Collins, Rob Merritt (Gordie Houston), Lee Fortey (Terry Sigley), Mike Walton, Neil Fletcher, Ed Orgee, Tom Jordan (Nathan Carter), Hesse Fatatou.

Referee: Wayne Barnes.

Whatever had been the reason for it, wholesale changes and/or the lifting of league pressure, the upturn in Rugby's performance in the middle part of the game was a tonic for their supporters and, although the situation was still grim there was some sign of progress. The question in people's minds was would it be built upon in the second successive home game a week later? The visitors would be newly promoted Plymouth Albion who, under the leadership of ex Bath and England hooker Graham Dawe, were getting back into the big time. On their last visit to Rugby 14 years earlier when the teams were in Courage Division 3, they had put the Lions in their place. On their current form a repeat performance was the most likely outcome. Jon Boden returned at 10, Rob Hurrell at 5 and Tim Stannard at 8.

The first half was an entirely Plymouth affair as their powerful pack dictated all of the play. Of the four tries that they scored three came from their exciting Kiwi No.8, Dan Ward-Smith who had a fair turn of speed to go with his large frame. Fly half Ross Winney scored the other try and scrum half Brett McCormack kicked a penalty. A solitary penalty from Jon Boden was all the Lions could muster. At halftime the score was 3-29 and Plymouth were out of sight; or were they?

Early in the second half Jon Boden kicked a second penalty, but that only signalled a fifth try for Plymouth. The next move was Rugby's as they made four simultaneous changes, the scrum half, a prop, the hooker and a flanker. Phil Reed went to 9, Alex Taylor to 11 and Stuart Potter to 13. At that point the home team exploded into life. A high kick into the visitors 22 was fumbled and lost to Stannard who fed Reed who, via Taylor, sent Chris Frara in at the corner. More pressure produced a third successful Boden penalty kick. Good picking and driving saw Taylor away but Plymouth killed the ball so Ben Wheeler tapped and ran to get try number two, this time converted by Boden. Matt Vines was next to break clear and Guy Manson-Bishop finished it off; Boden's kick bounced back off the post.

Then, with 38 minutes gone Boden kicked his fourth penalty and the score was 36-34.

In the final seconds of 5 added minutes of stoppage time that man Ward-Smith won it for Plymouth with his fourth try. As the conversion missed the whistle blew: 36-39, almost there, but not quite!

Rugby: Matt Vines; Jason Critchley, Alex Taylor, Chris Frara, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, James Bingham (Stuart Potter); Richard Tarrant (Glen Carson), Matt Williams (Richard List), Simon Black (Phil Greenbury), Guy Manson-Bishop, Rob Hurrell, Ben Smith (Ben Wheeler), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tim Stannard. *Man of The Match – the whole team*

Plymouth: Tom Barlow; Nigel Simpson (James Shanahan), Graeme Kiddie, Kenny Fisilau, Andy Matchett; Ross Winney, Brett McCormack (Nigel Cane); Peter Risdon, Matt Kennedy (Graham Dawe), Danny Parkes (Wayne Reed), Andrew Perry, Brett Luxton (Ollie Kohn), Jason Hart, Danny Thomas, Dan Ward-Smith.

Referee: Geraint Ashton Jones.

A day or two prior to this game the Lions had announced the appointment of former Wasps and England international loose head prop, Paul Rendall as their new Director of Coaching. Paul, or "Judge" as he is popularly known, by dint of having presided over England's "courts of misdemeanour" during some of his front row tenure, had spent the 13 previous years bringing Bracknell up from the depths of junior rugby to National Division 1.

So with a new man at the helm, definite signs of revival and the signing of former Leicester scrum half, Aadel Kardooni, would the Lions bring back Wakefield's scalp in a week's time? The answer was a bitter no!

Kardooni was in at 9 as expected, but surprisingly most of those pack members who had finished so strongly against Plymouth

were still on the bench. Right from the start the Rugby lineout failed to win clean ball and Wakefield's forays in the rain were often terminated by unnecessary penalties. Casey Mee kicked the first, third and fourth to take Wakefield 9 points clear. The Lions were not winning much ball and what they did they contrived to lose again in turnovers or penalties for holding on. Not surprisingly it was Wakefield who scored next with crisp backs passing sending the still speedy Diccon Edwards in for a try, to which Casey Mee added the two extra points. Coming up to the break a Lions forward drive gained them a penalty that Boden put away, but Casey Mee got the last word with a long pass that provided space via Ryan Duckett for Jon Feeley to score in the corner.

Halftime had arrived, the score was 21-3 and the Lions play had been sadly reminiscent of the poor fare they had offered at Bournbrook in October. Could they suddenly transform themselves in the second half, as they had done a week earlier? It was not to be, though they restricted Wakey to a further ten points only (tries from Mark Sowerby and Mick Watson) and picked up six more themselves (two Boden penalties). Wakefield, having better-adapted their play to the wet conditions, were more than satisfied with their 31-9 victory.

Wakefield: Ryan Duckett; Jon Feeley, Diccon Edwards, Aaron Callaghan, Andy Metcalfe; Casey Mee, Dominic Castle (Robert Emberson); Derek Jelley, John Lawn (Steve Worsley), Richard Harryman (Reuben Bijl), Richard Hughes (Lance Hamilton), Mick Watson (Richard Wingham), John Skurr (Darren Fletcher), Mark Sowerby (Richard Wingham *temp*), Glen Wilson.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Jason Critchley (Jaques Steyn), Alex Taylor, Chris Frara, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Aadel Kardooni (Sam Cole); Richard Tarrant (Phil Greenbury), Matt Williams (Richard List), Simon Black (Glen Carson), Rob Hurrell, Guy Manson-Bishop (Matt Hunter), Ben Wheeler, Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tim Stannard (Ben Smith). *No Man of the Match nominated.*

Referee: Alan Biggs.

The Lions departure from the Powergen Cup competition a fortnight earlier awarded them the next weekend off. This would normally have left the supporters wondering what to do on the Saturday afternoon, but salvation was at hand with the first of the autumn internationals, England v New Zealand and Ireland v Australia. It also provided Paul Rendall with some extra time in which to sort out the players, and get his ideas across to them before the big game against Rotherham at Webb Ellis Road on the following Friday evening.

Rotherham's visit had been moved forward to the Friday evening in order to free up the Saturday afternoon for the tempting prospect of England v Australia at Twickenham. The Judge's team selection was constrained by injuries to Guy Manson-Bishop (now confirmed as forwards coach) and Jason Critchley (newly appointed backs coach to succeed Stuart Potter), not to mention the fact that Matt Williams, Marek Kwisiuk, Sam Tovo, James Black and James Baker were also still injured, and Steve Smith's shoulder was not yet match safe; Eddie Saunders was playing 7s somewhere in the sun and Kardooni was unavailable.

Tom Hayman was one player who had become available and was put in the second row with "Stomper". Ben Wheeler moved to No.8 and Richard List became a real hooker. In the backs Sam Cole played his first 80 minutes and Phil Reed was back with Jon Boden at the fulcrum. Rotherham were without four players on international duty and, due to chaos on the M1, their coach load of supporters did not arrive until halftime.

The game had a "big bang" start and after only four minutes Matt Vines and Roth number three, Simon Bunting were walking to the sin-bin. This was probably the earliest ever yellow card for a Rugby player. The Rotherham pressure was soon rewarded with a Jon Benson penalty for a Lions offside. This was shortly followed by a try from Michael Wood, the division's leading try scorer. Benson converted this as he also converted Wood's next two tries. Rotherham's forwards pressure was such that Rugby's defence, valiant though it was, did not prevail. In between Wood's first two tries Jon Boden just missed with a 40-metre

penalty kick, but that was the nearest the Lions came to a score before halftime. Rotherham were restricted to just one more try, from Chris Johnson after a corner lineout drive. The score at the break was 0-31, less than many of the local support thought it might have been.

Rotherham's failure to get a try bonus point against Birmingham had put them second behind Worcester in the league table. The two teams had an equal points difference so it was assumed that Roth would now go all out for as many points as they could possibly get. In the event they got none but neither did the Lions, though they did come close to scoring a try at one point and they missed out on a reversed kickable penalty. Rugby kept up their resolute spoiling game with lots of big hits which was sufficient to break down all of Rotherham's attacks, even the odd five metre scrum. Roth brought on all of their replacements but Rugby only used three of theirs, only one of them being in the front row.

Never had a game lost by a clear 31 points felt more like a game won, even the Rotherham supporters in the clubhouse possessed the long faces of a losing crowd. It was a great achievement by the Lions young team who had demonstrated that they did have both the resources and capacity to win games against lesser opposition.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Alex Taylor, Stuart Potter, Jaques Steyn (Alex Williams), Sam Cole; Jon Boden, Phil Reed; Phil Greenbury, Richard List, Glen Carson (Simon Black), Tom Hayman (Matt Hunter), Tim Stannard, Ben Smith, Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Ben Wheeler. *Man of The Match – the whole team*

Rotherham: Peter Massey; James Craig (S Dixon), Joe Ewens, Mike Umaga, Michael Wood; Jon Benson, Charlie Harrison (Dave Scully); Nick Lloyd, Chris Johnson (Harry Toews), Simon Bunting (C Noon) (Andrew Gravid), Dan Cook, Leon Greef, Alfie Tooala (Howard Parr), Russell Earnshaw (Neil Spence), Mike Schmid.

Referee: Robert Debney.

Notwithstanding their heroic efforts against Rotherham the fact remained that this was Rugby's tenth successive lost league game. The club's record number of successive defeats, as it stood then, was twelve and that "string" comprised the end of one season and the start of another. This was a record that Rugby would have preferred to leave unbroken.

The day after the Rotherham game England fans were treated to second "best game at Twickenham" when, following the defeat of the All Blacks a week earlier, their team, after losing a tidy lead to a considerable reverse, came back to complete a very narrow victory against Australia.

A week later Rugby's supporters outnumbered the locals at Sharmans Cross for the second meeting of Bees and Lions. Injuries to backs and forwards together with a Leicester recall for Ben Wheeler resulted in a flurry of hurried registrations, that included one Revan, T on short term loan from Coventry. Lee Morely filled in for Wheeler and winger Andy McAdam moved over from Barkers Butts. Aadel Karooni was back to make his second appearance.

Rugby's start was a world of difference from the earlier one in the Powergen Cup, and they put the home side under pressure from the off with good tackling reminiscent of a week ago. An early attack was kept alive with good recycling until Jon Boden found space to drop a goal out of the mud from 40 metres. Lions unfortunately lost Tim Stannard to a serious knee injury during the move and Ryan Banks took his place. More spoiling from the Lions saw Alex Taylor charge off downfield but he passed too early and Reed, slipping, was swarmed upon.

An even better try chance was missed not long afterwards, when Stuart Potter charged through the centre in Brian O'Driscoll style, only to be downed as the line beckoned with "Reedo" outside him. Birmingham's next move into Lions territory gained them a penalty that Luke Smith converted and, after an unsuccessful surging run by Matt Vines, Smith put over

a second. Rugby finished strongly but the Bees went in at halftime 6-3 ahead.

Trevor Revan replaced Simon Black in the front row from the restart but it was the home side that took charge. Almost immediately Nick Baxter scythed through a stretched Rugby defence but Matt Vines just got him at the corner, however, he had put "the writing was on the wall". Bees attacking pressure drew an offside from the visitor's defence and Smith made the score 9-3. The first try was heralded by a minor comedy when Alex Taylor's kick out of defence was charged down, to bounce back and glue itself in the mud a metre short of the Lions' goaline. The nearest Bees player tried to pick it up and knocked it on giving the Lions a scrum. Unfortunately for Rugby they lost the strike and were driven back for Ed Orgee to score under the posts, where Smith's conversion was a formality.

Though Rugby defended bravely, possession was at a premium and they rarely crossed the gain line. It was ironic that Tom Hayman's bullocking run eventually led to a lost ball that Smallwood hacked straight with three separate kicks as he ran through to score the Bees second try. Not only did he score it but he also converted it from wide out. Even the late yellow card for Bees' Michael Davies failed to provide Rugby with a useful break. The final score was 23-3 and Rugby had lost league game number eleven.

Birmingham & Solihull: Dave Knight; Leigh Hinton, Shaun Woof (Mike Davies), Adam Irwin, Nick Baxter; Luke Smith (Andy Smallwood), Paul Knight (Gavin Cattle); Lee Fortey, Alan Hubbleday, Warwick Bullock (Andy Collins), Richard Ward, Rob Walton, Nathan Carter, Tom Jordan, Ed Orgee.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Andy McAdam, Stuart Potter, Alex Taylor, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Aadel Kardooni; Phil Greenbury (Richard Tarrant), Richard List, Simon Black (Trevor Revan), Matt Hunter (Lee Morely), Rob Hurrell, Tim Stannard, (Ryan Banks) Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tom Hayman. *Man of The Match – Matt Vines.*

Referee: Trevor Fisher.

It had been the best overall performance so far in an away game, bettering that at Bedford and against a stronger team. Paul Rendall seemed to be improving the Lions blend but many supporters were beginning to wonder if it was all too late. The result of Moseley's home game against Otley on the following day, a 30-19 win with four tries scored by the home team, left Rugby even more exposed at the foot of the table. If the ailing Moseley, now with two wins, were not going to roll over survival would be even more difficult!

The fifth round of the Powergen Cup was scheduled for the last weekend of November so once again the Lions would be idle with the massive task of confronting Worcester at Sixways in the first week of December.

While Rugby were at Sharmans Cross, Worcester, after leading Rotherham at Millmoor by 6-13 at half time, lost the game by 38-13, their cause not being helped by having a winger sent off and a flanker sin-binned within minutes of each other. As a result Rotherham resumed their place at the top of the table. On the following Saturday Wuss travelled to Ovenden Park to take on National Division 3 North Halifax in the 5th round of the Powergen Cup and they just scraped home by a single point at 12-13.

As it had been for their previous game, the Lions introduced yet another three new players for their meeting with Worcester. These were Jon Roper, an international Rugby League winger/centre, Rhys Williams, a Leicester hooker and Jimmy Fornoni, a South African, former French Rugby League international forward. Former England U21 hooker, Matt Williams had been released and was now trying his luck at Coventry. New hooker, Rhys Williams was a surprise late choice ahead of the apparently competent Richard List

Sixways on a wet and windy December day would keep a penguin happy but not much else. Rugby's misery was compounded by the late loss of a sick Rob Hurrell that put new flanker Fornoni in the second row. It was poor fare for the Lions

as Worcester went straight on to the attack and after just under ten minutes, most of it spent in or near to Rugby's 22, fly half Tim Walsh went over for the first try and then missed the first of five out of eight conversions. Rugby were starved of possession and made very little ground when they had any. The new Williams and the bandaged second row had mixed fortunes with the linesout and at one stage they had snaffled more of Worcester's throws than they had caught of their own.

Further Worcester tries came in a stately procession as firm Lions tackling and Worcester's periodic transgressions stemmed the avalanche that always threatened. Duncan Roke then Tom Richardson scored tries and Walsh converted the first. New Scottish international centre, Ben Hinshelwood, scored Worcester's last try of the half, another Walsh blank, but as the whistle threatened, Jon Boden kicked the first in-range penalty to open Rugby's scoring. A 22-3 deficit was not a bad score for almost nil possession.

Would there be a Rotherhamesque second half? Unfortunately not. Worcester resumed with even more determination and rapidly raised their try count to seven with firsts from Nnamdi Ezulike and Richard Nias followed by Tom Richardson's second. This time Walsh converted two of them. At that point the Lions temporarily hit pay dirt and made rare inroads but it ended with a poor pass and in no time Wuss were back at the other end again. A penalty in Lions 22 was peremptorily reversed and Worcester lock Martin Morgan slouched off to the sin-bin.

Morgan's absence, on 58 minutes, only signalled a redoubling of Worcester pressure and they ran in four more unanswered tries through, Chris Hall, Tony Windo, Craig Chalmers and Hinshelwood. Chalmers who had replaced Gary Trueman at half time took over the goal kicking from the off-song Walsh and collected six more points. During the second half Andy McAdam replaced a limping Jaques Steyn, Richard List came on for Tom Hayman and Richard Tarrant took over from Gen Carson. At the end it was 67-3 to Worcester; it could have been much worse!

Worcester: Duncan Roke; Nnamdi Ezulike, Ben Hinshelwood, Gary Trueman (Craig Chalmers), Tom Richardson; Tim Walsh, Werner Swanepoel (John O'Reilly); Tony Windo, Chris Hall, Adrian Oliver (Neil Lyman), Dan Zaltzman, Martin Morgan, Richard Bates (James Ringer), Richard Nias, Mark Gabey.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Alex Taylor, Jaques Steyn (Andy McAdam), Jon Roper, Jason Critchley; Jon Boden, Phil Reed; Phil Greenbury, Rhys Williams, Glen Carson (Richard Tarrant), Matt Hunter, James Fornoni, Ryan Banks, Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tom Hayman (Richard List). *No Man of the Match nominated.*

Referee: Trevor Fisher.

Played 12 lost 12, the record number of consecutively lost league games had been equalled, but both Manchester and Moseley had also lost without gaining any bonus points, so the bottom of the league table remained unchanged and the survival challenge had not been made more difficult. In a week's time Manchester would be visiting Moseley so one or other or both would get some points.

Two of Rugby's U19 Colts, Glenn Bond (fullback) and David Clements (wing) were selected for the Midlands 18-group clubs squad and England trials, the first Lions Colts to reach this level for ten years. They had both been playing for Rugby's Minis and Juniors since the age of six. They were also invited to join the Worcester England Rugby Academy. Ex Lion, Rob Field, made his first appearance (off the bench) for OLs against Newbold in their Midlands II West league game at Newbold on Avon.

In the run up to the next weekend's game, the annual derby clash with local rivals Coventry, the weather turned cold and a bitter east wind reminded everybody that it was December. As for the previous match at Sixways, success or failure depended heavily on player fitness, though in this case the opposition strength would not be quite so formidable. On the Tuesday it was the annual Varsity Match at Twickenham. Alistair Newmarch, who played a few games for the Lions in the previous season, was the Cambridge fullback and Fergus

Gladstone got a seat on their bench with a cameo appearance just before the final whistle. Somewhat against the odds the Light Blues gained a narrow 15-13 victory as Oxford failed to convert a last minute try that would have tied the scores.

When Saturday morning arrived the weather had reverted to milder and wetter and some of the Lions injured had returned to the "front line". Old boys, Simon Brocklehurst (starting) and Sean Brady (bench) were in the Coventry team together with a debut start for another younger old'un, Jordan Hands.

Pressure from Rugby, and Coventry errors saw the Lions score first, as a series of attacks eventually saw Glen Carson collect his first try for the Club: ominously, Jon Boden sent the simple conversion wide of the posts. With a proper second row partnership to aim at, Rhys Williams was now providing better lineout ball but this did not prevent Cov setting up a score of their own as Mark Tinnock finished off Brocklehurst's initial break. Lee Rust converted the try to give the visitors the lead. They should have gone further ahead shortly afterwards but Rust was off target with his penalty kick.

Matt Hunter limped off to be replaced by Jimmy Fornoni, but Rugby kept up their aggressive play and, after a steal from a Cov scrum, the ball found Matt Vines at pace to be driven over by Fornoni. Jon Boden, whose kicking from hand was pure magic, uncharacteristically missed his second conversion, but Rugby regained the lead. Both sides continued to attack but it was the Lions who collected another five points before half time. The scorer was Stuart Potter, whose strength on the burst took him over to score his first try in 31 appearances for the Club. Boden's kicking success remained at 0%; however, the Lions went into the changing room with their first half time lead of the season.

With Boden's place kicking failures, Rugby's 15-7 lead was somewhat slender, and it remained so as replacement kicker, Jon Roper, missed a penalty not long after the restart. Missing kicks seemed to be in vogue for Rugby as Phil Reed was just wide with an attempted drop goal, however, it was not so with

tries, as new boy Jon Roper shot through a Coventry gap to score Rugby's "bonus point" try, but his kick was again unsuccessful. In the days of three-point tries, a lead of 20-7 would have been unassailable, but Coventry, with an influx of fresh players, then proceeded to overturn it in short order with two tries from Barrie-Jon Mather.

As well as kicking the conversions, Lee Rust added a penalty to put Rugby four points behind. The Lions back row had tackled itself to death and there were no replacements available to resuscitate it. Just before the end, Cov produced the coup de grace with their fourth try, from Simon Martin, which gave them an extra point and took away one of Rugby's; so much for Christmas spirit! The successful conversion brought the game to an end with a final score of 20-31.

Rugby: Matt Vines; Andy McAdam, Stuart Potter (Jaques Steyn), Jon Roper, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Aadel Kardooni; Phil Greenbury (Richard Tarrant), Rhys Williams, Glen Carson (Simon Black), Matt Hunter (James Fornoni), Rob Hurrell, Ben Wheeler, Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Tom Hayman. *Man of Match: Forwards – Ben Wheeler: Backs –Stuart Potter.*

Coventry: Lee Rust; Kurt Johnson, Simon Brocklehurst, Mick Curtis (Simon Martin), Jordan Hands (Barrie-Jon Mather); Alan Mitchell (Luis Criscuolo), Tobias Handley (Tigger Dawson); Mike Mika, Dave Addleton (Trent Mc Murray, Richard Siviter, Kevin Whitley, Mark Tinnock, Lee Crofts, Danny Collins, Julian Horrobin (Shaun Brady).

Referee: David Sainsbury.

Though a win would certainly have raised hopes of a late revival, the result once again carried the essence of improvement. Albeit that the improvement was agonisingly slow, hope had not yet been entirely abandoned. There would now be a break in the league programme with the sixth round of the Powergen Cup and then a weekend off after Christmas, before the visit of Orrell on 3rd January. In between there remained the Boxing Day charity game, inaugurated last

season, between Coventry and Rugby, for the Webb Ellis Trophy. This should have been played at Webb Ellis Road but was moved to Coundon Road in the hope of attracting a larger crowd. The game would, it was hoped, provide a workout for some of Rugby's players, Steve Smith, Sam Tovo and James Baker, etc, who were returning from long-term injury.

The issue of promotion/relegation between the Zurich Premier Division and National Division 1 was back on the agenda as a few "establishment" clubs were now hovering at the foot of the Premier league table. The usual reasons for self preservation were being trotted out but the waters had been muddied by Worcester's Cecil Duckworth, who said he had evidence of an attempt by some of the Premier clubs to bribe Rotherham to stay down at the end of the previous season (had they managed to satisfy the RFU requirements), together with evidence of a similar plot this season. The RFU appointed a senior QC to investigate the possibility of a prosecution and the Premier club owners quickly appointed a sports law specialist to deal with their defence.

The weekend of Powergen Cup ties in which the Lions had no interest marked the entry of the Zurich Premiership clubs with four of them playing National Division 1 survivors. Rotherham got the best result, with a 19-24 win at Bristol and a subsequent trip to the Majedski Stadium to take on London Irish in the quarterfinals. Orrell, who entertained Northampton were unlucky not to win, with the visitors scraping a draw to gain extra time, and then turning a 44-34 deficit into a 44-55 victory with three late converted tries. Worcester, trailing Leicester 12-9 at the break, conceded another 24 points in the second half, and Exeter were no match for league leaders Gloucester, who won comfortably by 35-6. Orrell's performance, with a newly available Gary Connolly coming off the bench, did not bode well for Lions January 3rd contest.

The mild spell of weather extended itself over the Christmas holiday and unlike so many Boxing Day games of the past, the contest at Coundon Road did not suffer a frost/snow cancellation. It was a rather dour affair and though friendly in

name it was not so by nature. The Lions fielded half a dozen regulars and, in addition to some players returning from long-term injury, there was a handful of "guests". Steve Smith, Sam Tovo and James Baker were welcome returnees while the guests included scrum half Harvey Biljon (Natal via Wasps), hooker John Barratt (Eng Students via Wasps) and centre David Bates (Castleford Tigers Rugby League). Another very genuine guest was former Lions wing favourite Paul Bale, now with Newbold.

Jon Boden's place kicking was still off target with an early 40-metre effort, so it was ex-Lion Shaun Brady who opened the scoring for Cov with a corner flag try; but Cris Berti failed to convert it. In the opening minutes it had been a case of, "is it a ruck or is it a maul?" "No it's a brawl!" The referee managed to calm down this early crossing of swords but at the next outbreak of hostilities Rugby's Sam Tovo and Coventry's Luke Andrews were sin-binned, and not long afterwards another ex-Lion, Jordan Hands joined them. Rugby took the opportunity afforded by playing 14 against 13 to exert some pressure, and Jon Boden ultimately dummied in for a try under the posts, his successful kick putting Rugby into a 5-7 lead that they took into half time.

The Lions brought on Glen Carson, James Baker and John Barratt for the start of the second half. Baker replaced Alex Williams who was shortly to move to Nuneaton. Rugby pressed strongly from the restart and Phil Reed broke down the right after good interplay between forwards and backs. As the cover came across, Reed's crafty infield chip saw Jon Boden win the race to touch the ball down, but this time he fluffed the easy conversion. The visitor's increased lead did not survive for long as a Cov "penalty-corner-lineout" move saw Trent McMurray crash over for a try, converted this time by Berti. Further Rugby personnel changes saw Ben Smith and Alex Taylor replaced by Ryan Banks and David Bates: the latter was almost immediately sin-binned.

Tom Hayman's "gammy leg" required the reappearance of Ben Smith while Cov judged that serious replacements were needed

in the form of messrs, Addleton, Tinnock and Mika. This astute appraisal of the situation soon had the desired effect, when ex-Lion Simon Brocklehurst touched down in the corner. Berti missed the conversion but Cov were already 15-12 ahead. The game ended with a fourth Coventry try scored by another more recent ex-Lion, James Black; Berti made no mistake with this kick to give the hosts a 22-12 victory and another twelve-month period in which to hold the Webb Ellis Cup.

Coventry: Cris Berti; James Black, Simon Brocklehurst, Mick Curtis, Jordan Hands; Simon Martin, Tigger Dawson; James Hadfield, Matt Williams (Trent McMurray), Trevor Revan, Kevin Whitley, Luke Andrews, Dave Campton, Danny Collins, Shaun Brady.

Rugby: Phil Reed; Paul Bale, Alex Taylor (David Bates), Jacques Steyn, Alex Williams (James Baker); Jon Boden, Harvey Biljon; Richard List (Richard Mee), Rhys Williams (John Barratt), Simon Black (Glen Carson), Steve Smith, Rob Hurrell, Ben Smith (Ryan Banks), Sam Tovo. Tom Hayman.

Referee: Eric Woodmason.

The game had served its purpose of providing a break those who craved a game to watch away from over-bearing mothers-in-law and dissatisfied children disillusioned with Father Christmas. It had also kept the rust off the players; run-in a few reconditioned ones, and allowed some new models to be test-driven. Fortunately only superficial damage was sustained. Richard's, Mee and List, had exchanged places in the front row at some point thus enabling RM to achieve his long sought after 100th 1st XV appearance. Three of Cov's tries were scored by ex-Lions!

So New Year's Day was reached with the setting of another unwished for club record as, for the first time in the Lions long history, the 1st XV had failed to record a single win in the first half of a season. The Christmas and New Year holiday period was notable for being thoroughly unseasonable with flood warnings aplenty. The Midlands was badly affected but a

relatively dry day reprieved the Lions Friday evening league game. Visitors Orrell were missing Nick Easter, and Gary Connolly had recently left Wigan to join Leeds Rhinos, but their backs led by Phil Jones were a formidable bunch and included Scottish international Andy Craig; ex-Lion Ben Lewitt was in their back row. Rugby made five changes from the league team, which played Coventry, these included the welcome return of Steve Smith and James Baker. New signing, Harvey Biljon, started at scrum half and an even newer signing from Saracens, England U21 and Sevens lock Kieran Roche, partnered Rob Hurrell in the second row. Returning Cambridge Blue, Alistair Newmarch replaced an injured Matt Vines at fullback.

As the players ran out in their pristine white shirts the home support felt that a bonus point could be on offer and, if the team played as it did against Plymouth, there might be a second point; a win was almost certainly a bridge too far. After the first five minutes it became apparent that it would be a hard task to get even the one bonus point. Richard Welding expertly fielded Jon Boden's up-and-under shortly after the kick-off and promptly launched an attack that cut through the scattered Lions defence as though it was not there. Andy Craig scored the try and Phil Jones kicked the conversion. As if in action replay, Orrell took Rugby's restart kick and once again slid through the Rugby defence with consummate ease to hand Craig try number two, which this time Jones failed to convert.

A rare error from Jones turned into a Lions penalty that Boden cornered, and Roche's perfect take launched the drive that ended with a try for Tristan Prosser-Shaw, but Boden missed the subsequent goal kick. Ecstasy of a sort was rapidly followed by a familiar agony as a kick out of defence provided the Orrell hordes with another successful charge, this time to the credit of winger Simon Haughton: Jones was back on target to make the score 5-19. The referee's denial of a chip-and-chase try by James Baker via Harvey Biljon that quickly followed turned out to be crucial to Rugby's fate, especially as the video later suggested that it was good. However, persistent Rugby pressure in scrum and lineout eventually afforded Biljon the

opportunity to dummy over as the ball went infield, and with Boden's conversion the Lions caught up to 12-19.

It was not long though, before Orrell's forwards once more launched their high-speed attack punching through again for Jones to score their bonus try (unconverted). Jon Roper was replaced by Stuart Potter, but Orrell remained resolutely in the ascendant during the second quarter, adding a fifth try as a wave attack ended with Jones over the Rugby line for his second. There was no conversion so the break came with Orrell 12-29 ahead.

A "different" Lions team took the field after the interval as they had changed their dirty white shirts for clean red ones: Orrell retained their dirty waspish attire. Ben Wheeler's first half clattering saw him replaced by Ben Smith. The visitors, who also made one change, quickly got back into gear and put another try on the board within two minutes. Steve So'oialo emulated Harvey Biljon with a neat dummy but also added a clever chip over the remaining defence to collect and touch down; Jones added the other two points. Orrell were conceding some penalties now but, despite the best efforts of Steve Smith, little ground was gained.

Glen Carson replaced Simon Black and Richard List came on for an injured Phil Greenbury. Poor Lions play gave Orrell another try (Drew Hickey), from a charged down kick that punctuated two batches of Orrell replacements. Jimmy Fornoni took over from Tristan Prosser-Shaw, the Lions defence firmed up and, as a result of good combined play, James Baker got the try he deserved; Boden missed another easy conversion. Desperate to get a fourth try Rugby allowed Orrell enough space for Craig to complete his hat trick, while Baker (or was it Phil Reed) was forced into touch just short of the Orrell line. The final result was Rugby 17 Orrell 46.

Rugby: Alistair Newmarch; James Baker, Jon Roper (Stuart Potter), Jason Critchley, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Harvey Biljon; Phil Greenbury (Richard List), Rhys Williams, Simon Black (Glen Carson), Kieran Roche, Rob Hurrell, Ben Wheeler (Ben Smith),

Tristan Prosser-Shaw (James Fornoni), Steve Smith. *Man of the Match: Steve Smith*

Orrell: Scott Barrow; Richard Welding (Wes Davies), Andy Craig, Wade Kelly, Simon Haughton; Phil Jones, Stephen So'dialo (Paul Newton); Alistair Livesey (Martin O'Keefe), David Giles (Peter Ince), Steve Barretto (Chris Fullman), Chris Bentley, Steve Moore (Phil Murphy), Mark Lloyd (Matt Lacey), Ben Lewitt, Drew Hickey.

Referee: Alan Biggs.

On the following day cold winter returned with frost and a little snow, and for the first weekend of the season some league games were lost to weather conditions. While Wakefield v Exeter and Rotherham v Otley were both frost victims, Moseley's home game against Bedford was lost to a waterlogged pitch. Coventry conceded ten tries at Worcester who regained pole position in the table.

The bitter weather rooted itself in the southern half of the country for the rest of the week with a light fall of snow in Rugby and penetrating frosts that made outdoor training impossible. As Saturday approached it seemed likely that the game at Otley would be a casualty, but its reputation for being the opposite of a frost pocket, together with the southerly movement of milder air from the north saved the day. Every other match in the division was postponed.

During the week the supporters learned of further player changes. Jacques Steyn was released, as was the very recently signed Jon Roper. After 13 appearances this season, Jacques had never regained his form of two seasons ago: a nice guy, the supporters were sorry to see him go. The other departure was Kieran Roche who, having played against Orrell decided that Rugby was probably not the place he wanted to be. This was a pity as he had looked to be a very classy second row. To replace these losses and bolster the squad still further another five players were registered, John Barratt, who had played in the friendly against Coventry, Martin Purdy, an ex England U21

back/second row and Jon Hylton an ex England U21 wing, all on loan from Wasps; both Purdy and Hylton were Cambridge Blues. On loan from Gloucester came ex England U21 prop Mark Irish and centre Josh Frapé. All of them started or came on as replacements at Cross Green.

Club chairman David Owen funded the supporter's coach to Otley but even that inducement did not even half fill it. Those hardy souls who did take the advantage of free travel, were joined by a handful of others who had found their own way north, but throughout the game they all remained unusually subdued. Before the game started there was a problem with shirt colours. Rugby only had their black strip with them and Otley, who also play in black, had to borrow a set of shirts from neighbours Wharfedale, whose game with Newbury had fallen victim to frost. During the game, as Otley pressed on with their runaway victory, one Otley supporter, old enough to have seen many a local battle, advised the visitors that, "Wharfedale always win when they come here!"

Otley were very quickly off the mark with the first of many rolling mauls that the Lions seemed unable to effectively deal with. This got them close enough to Rugby's line for Jason Oakes to touch down. Andy Binns failed with the conversion, though he did actually hit the bar, and made no mistake with a penalty goal after seven minutes. Watchers in Lions colours sat or stood open-mouthed as their team's game began to unravel in an all too familiar pattern, with Matt Kirby's try and Binns' conversion clocking up 15 Otley points in precisely 15 minutes.

Rugby made efforts to attack, but poor passes or strong Otley tackles continually frustrated them. On Boden's run of poor place kicking continued with a missed penalty before a rare breakthrough by Stuart Potter was snuffed out. Otley, whose passage through Rugby's defensive line seemed to encounter fewer obstacles, added another try as Kirby stuck again following Will Darby's run down the right touchline; Binns made it seven points. In the second quarter the Lions appeared to finally be getting to grips with the game and after a period of pressure the irrepressible Steve Smith got what, with Boden's

missed conversion, was to be Rugby's only score of the game. Half time was taken with the score at 22-5.

Otley began the second half with an uncharacteristic penalty miss by Binns, but it was soon forgotten as Ian Carroll collected Otley's bonus try from a driven lineout move, and Binns' touchline conversion redeemed his earlier miss. Later in the game, Lions attempt at a similar ploy ended with a penalty conceded for holding on. By the time the final quarter began the game had turned into a messy struggle with errors by both sides that continued until Otley repeated their earlier lineout drive for a Ronnie Kelly try, and another immaculate conversion from Binns. That marked the end for the Lions, the game was up, and Otley's unconverted sixth try, by Ian Clarke, was a formality. The final score was 41-5 and yet another "must-win" game had been lost badly with not even a bonus point. Having conceded the double last season, Otley had now convincingly turned the tables on Rugby.

Rugby: Matt Vines (Phil Reed); James Baker, Stuart Potter, Josh Frape, Jon Hylton; Jon Boden, Harvey Biljon; Phil Greenbury, Rhys Williams (Ben Wheeler), Simon Black (Mark Irish/Richard Mee), Martin Purdy, Rob Hurrell, Ben Smith (John Barratt), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Steve Smith. *No Man of the Match awarded.*

Otley: Ian Shuttleworth; Will Darby, Rob Whatmuff, Neil Law (Ian Clarke), Mark Kirby; Simon Binns (Phil Greaves), Andy Brown; Adam Pogson, Mark Luffman (Duncan Sayers), Dennis Hazelton (Ronnie Kelly), Jason Oakes, Ian Carroll (Chris Kendra), Paul Williams, Martin Anayi (Nathan Bland), James Tiffany.

Referee: Tim Beddow.

Confirmed relegation was still some weeks away, but losing so convincingly to the fourth from bottom team seemed to most supporters to make it inevitable. The Lions had now made five player changes for two consecutive games in which a total of 27 players had actually taken part, and this had patently failed to

stop the downward slide. Those supporters whose endurance had no apparent limit waited to see what the managers and coaches would try next. At this point Exeter, who were the next team to visit Webb Ellis Road must have been licking their lips with the prospect of a soft re-entry on their delayed return to league competition. Since losing at Gloucester in the sixth round of the Powergen Cup on 21st December they had seen two consecutive league games postponed due to frozen pitches.

Commenting on rugby union matters at large around this time, the national press had apparently forgotten about the "Rotherham affair" and were presently reporting financial worries from the Zurich Premiership clubs. The numbers of spectators had continued to rise, although now at a slower rate and in many cases though ground capacity was frequently being fully utilised, it was still producing insufficient income. Clubs were experiencing a money shortfall and there was talk of player's salaries being reduced as a counter measure. In the long term, increased ground capacity was offered as a solution, but this sort of venture required accurate forecasting. It was actually being said that many private owners were getting itchy feet, and within a few years the species would probably be extinct at the top level.

While Lions travelling supporters were bathed in lukewarm sunshine at Otley their friends and relatives back in Rugby were shrouded in freezing fog, but within a day or two the cold spell had silently vanished, to be replaced by relatively dry mild weather that was perfect for outdoor training to resume.

The comings and goings during the first half of January came to an end with the departure of full back and (at the time) leading try scorer, Matt Vines. He was released with some reluctance and subsequently joined up with fellow Welshman, Peter Roberts at Division 2 Stourbridge: Jacques Steyn, it was learned, had joined Division 3 South club, Barking. In press interviews Lions Chief Executive, Mal Malik, explained that many of the new crop of loan players were registered out of necessity to get through a rash of injuries to key players rather than in an attempt to stave off relegation.

On the Friday morning it was wet and windy but by late afternoon the clouds had cleared off and the wind had dropped leaving conditions ideal for running rugby. The squad of 22 showed six changes from the Otley selection, with Aadel Kardooni, Andy McAdam, James Fornoni, Richard List, Eddie Saunders and Sam Tovo replacing Matt Vines, Josh Frape, Harvey Biljon, Mark Irish, Rob Hurrell and Ben Smith, but this week there were no debuts. Exeter were almost at full strength.

Rugby started purposefully and the first scrum erupted into a flurry of fists as tensions on both sides broke surface. In spite of thrusting play and firm tackling, the Lions were unable to resist a series of Exeter attacks and eventually Alistair Murdoch went over for Exeter 's first try; Tony Yapp failed to convert. Rugby were undaunted by this as they too mounted an attack, but Jon Boden's attempted drop goal was also wide of the posts. They renewed their pressure as Exe dropped out but were denied on both flanks until a clearance kick taken by Phil Reed eventually became a scoring pass to James Baker. His pace and dexterity took him round the Exeter defence with a try out of the Saunders Classics Album.

Already back to form with his kicking from hand, Jon Boden now sent the touchline conversion kick straight and true to give Rugby a 7-5 lead. The Lions' revival carried on as Exeter continued to be contained and frustrated. Not long after Jon Hylton's searching clearance kick Exeter were penalised at a lineout and Boden's kick zoomed just over the bar but his next effort, gift of another Exeter infringement, went past the posts. Such was also the fate of Hylton's rocketing drop goal attempt. As the break beckoned Exeter stormed the Rugby line but had to retreat unrewarded as the whistle blew and the Lions departed 10-5 in the lead.

Within a minute of the restart Jason Critchley, who had spent eight minutes of the first half off the field for repairs, was invited (strictly NRPSVP) by the referee to spend another ten minutes sitting on the bench for his Mohammed Ali impersonation. Rugby were unfortunate to lose the services of

Aadel Kardooni to a leg problem shortly afterwards and with Andy McAdam coming on to the wing Reed reverted to his scrum half role. This increased Exeter's temporary advantage and they pressed the Lions very hard with a series of attacks, but the home defence was sound and it was not until just before Critchley had returned that Richard John scored the equalising try. Yapp missed the conversion so the scores remained tied.

As the visitors brought on their first trio of replacements, including their dependable captain Rob Baxter, Rugby continued to make inroads into Exeter's defence, whenever they had possession. However, a Lions mistake in front of their posts gave Exe an easy penalty kick, but to the relief of shed fans, the referee reversed it when advised of Exeter's foul play by the Touch Judge. Eddie Saunders replaced Andy McAdam but the home crowd's cheers were soon silenced as Richard John broke through to score his second try and put Exeter into a 10-15 lead, Yapp's kicking accuracy again deserted him.

From that point, with more replacements for both sides coming on at intervals, the Lions were in catch-up land and errors were inevitable. One such was Boden's knock on behind his own goalposts that gave Yapp a try. He failed once more with his conversion, but was finally successful with in converting Ed Lewsey's try, just before the referee's whistle ended the game. The 10-27 win flattered Exeter, who had been held to parity or better for almost 70 minutes.

Rugby: Jon Hylton; James Baker, Stuart Potter, Jason Critchley (*Andy McAdam*), Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Aadel Kardooni (*Andy McAdam*); Richard List (*Simon Black*), John Barratt (*Rhys Williams*), Phil Greenbury, Martin Purdy, Tom Hayman, Ben Wheeler (*James Fornoni*), Sam Tovo (*Tristan Prosser-Shaw*), Steve Smith. *Man of the Match: Back – Jon Hylton: Forward – Steve Smith.*

Exeter: Glen Bunny; Ed Lewsey, Alistair Murdoch, Stephen Ward (*Ben Thompson*), Piran Tretheway (*Phil Williams*); Tony Yapp, Richard John; Altan Ozedmir, Sam Blythe (*Keith Brooking*), Danny Porte (*Jason Hobson*), Dave Sims (*Robert*

Baxter) Ian Brown, Gary Will (Ben Cole), Simon Etheredge (Chris Hansen), Richard Baxter.

Referee: Robert Debney.

The Lions supporters were naturally elated with the team's performance after the dreadful day at Otley, but in terms of points the Lions position remained unchanged, as Exeter's last two tries had erased Rugby's losing bonus point. Both Moseley and Manchester also lost their games with no bonus points, but the latter, who were to be next Saturday's opponents, ominously held Rotherham to 34-10 at Millmoor. Worcester, who beat Otley at Sixways were unfortunate to lose their Scottish international Ben Hinshelwood who suffered a broken leg.

Before the next league game, the crucial away fixture at Manchester's Grove Park ground, the Lions had a rare 1st XV status, friendly fixture with Cambridge Blues, this seasons victors at Twickenham. Last season Cambridge had visited Rugby as part of their build-up to the annual Varsity Match to take on the Nighthawks so this season the Lions would be travelling to Cambridge for the Wednesday evening game.

With the long injury list and a league game to follow within a few days there were only a few of Rugby's regulars in a squad that leaned heavily on players supplied for the day by Leicester. It was an opportunity, however, for some of the Lions Colts to have a run out in a senior game: the Cambridge team was at full strength.

Cambridge took an early lead with a converted try by fly half Owen Edwards, but Rugby replied with a fine try from Alex Taylor whose jinking run left the students grasping thin air; Craig McMullen converted and the scores were levelled at 7-7. The game was continually interrupted by the referee's whistle, as every minor error was identified. Leicester guest, Ricky Nebbett was the first to be shown the yellow card but was unsure of his offence. As half time approached Cambridge pressure paid off when they were awarded a penalty in front of

the posts. The simple kick gave them a 10-7 interval lead. Cambridge had the better of the half, as the Lions/Tigers continually struggled to establish a platform from which to mount properly organised attacks.

Early in the second half the referee awarded another penalty to Cambridge, the successful conversion extending their lead to 13 – 7. Although the Lions were now playing with the wind, it was Cambridge who continued to control the game. An attack in the Lions 22 saw the Blues score another try to pull even further ahead, though the conversion was missed. Another penalty was added by Cambridge to take them well clear at 21 – 7. If the game was to be rescued the Lions would now have to mount some real pressure and that is just what they did. A line out, cleanly taken by the impressive Peter Short provided the opportunity for a drive over the Cambridge line where prop Glen Carson scored a try to reduce the deficit, but the conversion was missed.

From the restart Cambridge were awarded another penalty, but in moving the ball wide it was intercepted on the Lions 22 by full back Luke Gilbert, who outstripped the Blues' cover to touch down under the posts. With McMullen's successful conversion the score gap was reduced to two point at 21 – 19. The Lions were now firmly in charge, especially in the scrum. However, farce now ensued. When the Cambridge tight head prop was sin-binned, as the only replacement prop was already on, the scrums had to be uncontested. This naturally favoured the Blues as Rugby's pack was already on top. In a league game Cambridge would have forfeited the match points for this action. The last move in the game, deep in injury time, saw Lions fly half yellow carded for what looked to be attempting to run with the ball. Not so William Webb Ellis! The final score was Cambridge 21 – Rugby Lions 19.

Cambridge University: Paul Marchand; Aki Abiola, Simon Frost, Jason Wright, Simon Kingsbury; Owen Edwards, Ben Dormer; Rudolf Bosch, Max Wright, James Meredith, Gavin Webster, Martin Purdy, Matthew Hocken, Duncan Blaikie, Stewart Eru.

Rugby: Luke Gilbert; Gareth Raynor, Gareth Collins, Alex Taylor, Andy McAdam; Craig McMullen, Harvey Biljon; Simon Black (Glen Carson), Rhys Williams (Andy Morris), Peter Short, Ben Smith, James Feroni, Ryan Banks. *Other subs used:* James Bingham, Karl Lawson, Joel Stannard, Ben Harvey, Alex Williams.

Referee: Philip Milton.

The supporters had hoped that apart from Aadel Karooni, who limped off the field during the Exeter game, the Lions team that took the field at Manchester would for once be practically unchanged. By the time the day arrived it was evident that this would not be the case. Both fullback Jon Hylton and second row Martin Purdy (loan players) had collected injuries playing for Wasps in midweek. Lions, whose injured second row players now totalled five, were unable to find another fit one at short notice so flanker Ben Smith was given the job of partnering Tom Hayman.

Not long after a swinging of fists at the first scrum, reminiscent of the overture against Exeter a week earlier, Rugby took the lead as, led by their captain Steve Smith the gain line was crossed. The support was there and fullback Alistair Newmarch completed the try scoring process with relative ease. Jon Boden's wide-angled conversion kick was satisfyingly successful and with fifteen minutes gone the Lions were in the lead. A blood injury to Ben Smith that brought on Jimmy Feroni unsettled the Rugby lineout, and Manchester recycled clean ball to good effect with an unconverted try for Martin Worthington. Rugby also lost the hard-working Richard List to injury around the half hour. Manchester were by now beginning to open up the Lions defence, and just before half time, a Lions knock-on gave them a perfectly positioned scrum, which allowed their No.9 Ricky Pellow to dive through the melee and score near the posts. Simon Verbickas (a familiar Lions torturer) converted with ease and Manchester led 12-7 as the whistle blew.

Resuming with the wind in their favour, and a successful 40-metre Boden penalty goal after a few minutes, the prospect of a Rugby win would not at that point appear to have been thinking of the wishful kind, but then things suddenly seemed to change. Manchester, in the form of Verbickas, replied almost immediately with a longer-distance penalty goal of their own and from that point on there was only one team that looked like a winner. After fifteen minutes of the half Verbickas kicked his second penalty goal and it was not too long before he was converting tries as well. Centres Craig Cooper and Richard Hughes both scored near the end of the third quarter and replacement prop Liam Wordley added another near the end. James Baker scored for Rugby at the death and Boden got the conversion, but it was too little too late and “must-win” game had been lost 39-17.

Manchester: Simon Verbickas; Isaac Richmond, Craig Cooper (Nick Royle), Richard Hughes, Martin Worthington; Peter Murphy (John Broxson), Ricky Pellow (James Carew), Nick Flynn (Liam Wordley), Mike Armstrong (Rob Bieniasz), Damian Rawlinson, John Griffiths, Andy Whittle (David Jessiman), Chris Wright, David Wilks Alex Aylesbrook (Dave Muckalt).

Rugby: Alastair Newmarch; James Baker, Stuart Potter, Jason Critchley, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins (Eddie Saunders); Richard List (Glen Carson), John Barratt (Rhys Williams), Phil Greenbury (Simon Black), Tom Hayman, Ben Smith (James Fornoni), Ben Wheeler, Sam Tovo (Ryan Banks), Steve Smith. *Man of the Match: The long-suffering supporters who once again travelled so far to see so little.*

Referee: Geraint Ashton Jones.

Though some Lions players noticeably continued to give their all during the second half, the teamwork was no longer in evidence and Manchester were able to safely defuse the Rugby UXB. With the loss of this game any realistic chance of Rugby’s survival in National Division 1 had disappeared. That this had transpired from yet another disappointing away performance, only served to create feelings of frustration for the travelling supporters, on a day when the M6 was impeccably well behaved.

During the following week the cycle of winter turned once again to direct a blast of cold air over the country, though the Rugby area was more or less snow free until a light fall on Friday night. There was also worrying news concerning Lions Chief Executive Mal Malik, as reports appeared in the press, both local and national. The Coventry Evening Telegraph made the following report on Friday 31st January:

“Mal Malik's future as chief executive of Rugby Lions was in doubt today after a judge refused him permission to continue as a director of the struggling National League One club. Malik was disqualified from being a company director or having any part in the management of a company earlier this month after two nightclub businesses of which he was a director, went into liquidation in 1999 with debts approaching £135,000. Yesterday the former Cambridge University flanker applied to Birmingham County Court for an interim judgement so that he could continue his rugby commitments, but District Judge Peter Dowling ruled against Malik.

Malik will make a further application to relax the terms of the disqualification order on March 19 when the case will go before the High Court in Birmingham. In the meantime he will not be allowed to sit on the board of Rugby Lions Football Club Limited or the associated companies Rugby Football Limited and Ruck and Maul Limited. His position as the club's chief executive remains uncertain. Malik was appointed chief executive in 1997 and he has an agreement, but no contract, to be paid £50,000 a year. “I need to take further legal advice on my position and until I have done that I have no further comment to make,” Malik said after the hearing.”

The Rugby Advertiser carried a brief account of Mal Malik's disqualification but also reported, at greater length, on the Lions new school project. The project to promote health, lifestyle and fitness within the 14-20 year-old local population would be Sponsored by Ruck and maul.net and the national Sportmatch programme: it would in addition be supported by the Warwickshire RFU and Rugby FM. Following a pilot scheme at

local junior schools the next phase would be to involve the eight large secondary schools in the Rugby area. Paul Rendall assisted by Jason Critchley and Clive Brewer would direct the coaching aspects. The Lions professional players would run practically based workshop sessions at the schools.

The long-term aim of the scheme, more comprehensive than the one pursued by the Lions under the guidance of former coach Geoff Davies three seasons ago, would be to establish a network of qualified and experienced mentors, PE teachers, coaches, parents and volunteers, co-ordinated from a centre of development and excellence at Webb Ellis Road, who could reinforce the importance of sport and a healthy lifestyle in the teenage generation.

Fortunately for the Lions the snow that fell overnight on Friday was beginning to melt by the time dawn arrived and pitch inspections at 9.30 and 11.00am deemed the Webb Ellis Road surface playable

Though Rugby were still short of fit second rows, Rob Hurrell having withdrawn on Friday, the impressive Jon Hylton returned at fullback. Steve Smith moved forward to partner Tom Hayman and Tristan Prosser-Shaw returned to the back row, with Ben Wheeler switching to No.8. Alex Taylor made his first league start since early December. Former Lion, Chris Richards was also making a rare start for Bedford

Rugby managed to subdue Bedford's attacks in the first half but notably failed to press home some of their own, sometimes due to the taking of incorrect options; both Taylor and Prosser-Shaw found no takers for dummies, when there were potential try scorers overlapping the opposition's defence. Bedford were the first to score with a penalty goal kicked by James Pritchard but, not long afterwards, Rugby were awarded a kickable penalty with which Jon Boden equalised the scores.

After 25 minutes play was completely disrupted, as, within a five-minute period, there were two serious injuries, one for each side, that required the victims to be stretchered off and taken to

hospital. The first was Bedford lock, Paul Rollason and the second was Rugby's Sam Tovo: Ben Smith replaced Tovo and Fred Fichot replaced Rollason. Not long before half time Boden succeeded in kicking his second penalty and, having successfully withstood a late Bedford attack, the Lions were able to take a 6-3 lead into the changing room for the third time this season.

Glen Carson replaced Simon Black for the second half but Bedford returned unchanged except that there was now an air of greater purpose to their play. The Blues extra effort soon paid off as Pritchard equalised the scores at 6-6 with a second penalty goal and their replacement Fred Fichot crossed Rugby's line for the first try of the game. For a few moments it was déjà vu again but, to the delight of the Rugby part of the shed, Ben Wheeler's break, assisted by Phil Reed, got the ball to Jon Hylton. The fullback chipped through the Blues defensive line and scored from his follow-up run; Boden's conversion made it 13-11. In no time at all it got better still as Stuart Potter's interception at pace took him clean through for his second try of the season. Boden, whose placekicking accuracy had returned, added the two extra points and the Lions had a nine-point lead.

Bedford racked up the pressure another notch and, having lost the ball almost in the act of scoring, it was regained by Ben Whetstone on the bounce, from a poor clearance kick. The winger only had to walk over the line to touch it down; Pritchard's conversion brought the scores to 20-18. Shortly afterwards the Lions went further ahead to 23-18 with Boden penalty number three but, with only ten minutes or so to go, silly errors began to creep in to Rugby's game, and Bedford capitalised to take the lead with a converted try. The Lions had nothing left after that and the Blues collected two further tries to win the game by 23-35.

Rugby: Jon Hylton; James Baker, Stuart Potter, Alex Taylor, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Simon Black (Glen Carson), John Barratt (Rhys Williams), Phil Greenbury, Steve Smith, Tom Hayman, Sam Tovo (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw (James Fornoni), Ben Wheeler.

Man of the Match: Forward: John Barratt. Back: Stuart Potter.

Bedford: Chris Richards; James Pritchard, Paul Baird, (Mike Staten), Tom Kirk, Ben Whetstone; Ali Hepher, Stephen Bell (Andy Holloway); James Ross, Kramer Ronaki, Colm Hannon (John Brooks), Andre Fox, Paul Rollason (Fred Fichot), Henry Whitford, Matt Cornish (Arthur Brenton), Laurence White.

Referee: Nigel Higginson.

In front of their own crowd, the Lions play was again better organised and demonstrated definite commitment, but where they certainly could have won with a try bonus point they even failed to hang on to the losing bonus point, with the game almost over. Bedford's injured player, Paul Rollason was able to leave hospital and return home on the Saturday, but Sam Tovo was found to have a fractured tibia and remained in hospital to have it set.

In the Sunday Telegraph that weekend Malcolm Pearce, the owner of Bristol Shoguns, who had said that he will not continue to fund the club beyond this season, aired his grievances to Paul Ackford. His main points were that players should be more responsible, agents less greedy, the RFU more honest, the salary cap less duplicitous, England's management more grateful and relegation rejigged. His main bone of contention as a businessman was relegation, that possibility, he contends, exacerbates all the others. Money is the common denominator and there is still a lot more going out than coming in. Stuart Barnes, in Monday's Daily Telegraph, was also talking about money, specifically about the fact that some Premier clubs were asking their players to take pay cuts, and the hurt response from the Professional Rugby Players' Association headed by Damian Hopley. Barnes, hinting that the agents would be the most aggrieved party, came down in favour of cuts that should be worked out between the clubs and the PRPA.

It was a good weekend for the England Sevens squad who won the IRB Brisbane Sevens. Unbeaten in their pool that included Fiji, they beat Samoa in the quarterfinal, New Zealand in the

semi-final and then Fiji again in the final. Coach, Joe Lydon was fulsome in his praise for the team captain, former Rugby Lions utility back, Simon Amor.

On Monday 3^d February Rugby Lions chairman, David Owen issued a statement via the rugbyions.net (supporters) website "re his thoughts and appointment" relating to the club's current problems. The following verbatim extract contains the most important facts: -

"Reluctantly we have today accepted the formal resignation of Mal Malik as a Director of The Rugby Lions.

Mal will also relinquish his role as Chief Executive of the Club, but will become a consultant on recruitment and playing matters reporting to the Directors.

We are pleased to announce the appointment of Steve Smith as General Manager of the Club. He will, of course, continue his playing role. The Directors believe this to be an excellent appointment and feel Steve is well qualified for this task.

Paul Rendall will continue in his position as Coaching Manager with a remit to commence immediately to build a team for next season.

A further sponsor to myself has intimated his willingness to invest with me in the Club.

We will be trying to utilise local players into next year's squad. As seen by the inclusion in the team that played against Cambridge and who will be asked to play against the Navy and Nottingham in the forthcoming weeks."

In the remainder of his statement David defended Mal Malik's handling of playing affairs and criticised some of the personal attacks made on Mal that had appeared on the on the website message board. He also illustrated the injury problems that had made it necessary to obtain extra loan players, sometimes at short notice.

The team selected on Thursday, though by no means a full-strength combination of the talent available, was not without potential, but by Saturday morning it had been shorn of four key players. Steve Smith and Stuart Potter were flu victims, Rob Hurrell was still not fit enough and Wasps, having lost Rob Howley to injury, had reclaimed Harvey Biljon to sit on their bench. Peter Jenkins took over at scrum half, Jason Critchley at centre, Ben Smith in the second row and Ben Wheeler at No.8; only five players could be mustered for Rugby's bench on the day. There was one ex-Lion playing for the Exiles, though not the expected one. Tim Collier was out injured, but ex colt Richard Elliott was at scrum half.

It was overcast but dry when the game began, with Rugby kicking off and conceding a penalty as the opposing forwards made contact. London Welsh kicked powerfully downfield over Hylton's head to gain a lineout not far outside Rugby's 22. Welsh secured the throw and their maul, in the person of Chris Ritchie, soon had the ball down over the Lions' goal line; Dafydd Lewis converted. Not long afterwards Rugby were awarded a penalty from a kickable position, but Jon Boden failed to put it between the posts. T

he Lions managed to get a reasonable amount of possession, and often made ground with ball in hand, but the act of scoring was always denied them by some agency or other: on one such occasion Alex Taylor, with an unguarded Welsh try line ahead of him, fell over on the insecure surface and the ball was eventually lost. The home side did not suffer these "slings and arrows" as the "outrageous fortune" exclusively belonged to Rugby Lions. Another instance of this saw Ben Wheeler hobble off to be replaced by Ryan Banks. Lewis extended the Exile's lead with a penalty and converted Geraint John's first try on twenty minutes.

Rugby's backs continued to break through the Welsh line intercepting or picking up lost Welsh ball, but the moves were never finished off, while the home side seemed able to score tries whenever they found themselves in the Lions half. John

got his second try and Adam Bidwell his first in the second quarter, and with Lewis converting one of them and adding a penalty the two teams withdrew in opposite directions at half time, with London Welsh 32-0 in the lead.

Critchley's leg injury, that had earlier prevented him from scoring a breakaway try, saw him replaced by Eddie Saunders after the break, but the Exiles continued on their merry way with try number five from Matt Fitzgerald. Two further tries followed. The first one was scored by Florent Rossigneux, the co-owner of the Red Room Bar and Bistro, the day's Man of the Match sponsor. The second came from the hands of Dafydd Lewis who converted both of them.

At 53-0 in arrears Rugby's travelling supporters were now in need of a fix, and precisely on cue Phil Reed was on hand to take Taylor's pass as he once again (with a tap tackle this time) crashed in front of the Welsh line; Boden's kick came back off the left hand post. Bruno Green was the scorer of the next Welsh try, but Rugby's ploy at the restart presented Eddie Saunders with the ball in enough space for the veteran winger to get his second try in five games, four of them as a replacement. This time Boden's kick went between the posts.

Alex Taylor's efforts fully deserved a score, and with the end of the game approaching he got his reward. Taking Boden's perfect pass in space, this time he fell over the line and grounded the ball. Boden's penchant for hitting the goal posts was again demonstrated but the ball once again fell back in front of them. London Welsh were not quite finished as Richard Catt, brother of the more famous Mike, collected their ninth try just before the final whistle and Lewis kicked conversion number eight to bring the final score up to 67-17.

London Welsh: Richard Catt; Geraint John, Adam Bidwell (Tom Lewsey), Steve Ravenscroft (Bruno Green), John Swords (Dan Howells); Dafydd Lewis, Richard Elliott; Steve Millard (Adam Kelly), Chris Ritchie (Gregg Botterman), Sean Phillips, Richard Griffiths, Andy Johnson (Dave Ramsey), Florent Rossigneux, Lee Starling, Matt Fitzgerald (Paul Mansfield).

Rugby: Jon Hylton; James Baker, Jason Critchley (Eddie Saunders), Alex Taylor, Phil Reed; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Glen Carson (Simon Black), John Barratt, Phil Greenbury, Tom Hayman (Rhys Williams), Ben Smith, James Fomoni (Richard Mee), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Ben Wheeler (Ryan Banks). *Man of the Match: Alex Taylor*

Referee: Tim Wigglesworth.

Ben Wheeler was not the only Rugby casualty during the game as Tom Hayman's departure in the second half was due to a broken thumb, yet another second/back row player added to the long injury list. Fortunately there was no game scheduled for the next weekend as it was the start of the Six Nations Tournament, but on the following weekend Moseley would be the visitors to Webb Ellis Road. Surely the Lions could win that game?

Simon Amor continued gather plaudits for his captaincy of the England Sevens team, as they just failed to beat New Zealand in the final of the Kiwi's home-based round of the IRB series. England were in fact just ahead when Amor received a yellow card that opened the way for the New Zealanders to get in front and win.

For this season, exclusive coverage of the Six Nations competition was returning to BBC TV. This change principally affected England's home games that had for some seasons been broadcast by Sky Sports. The opening weekend brought France to Twickenham for what most people thought would be the Grand Slam decider. Wales were in Rome and Ireland travelled to Edinburgh. By Sunday evening when all the games had been completed the biggest shock was Wales first ever defeat by Italy. Ireland's first win at Murrayfield for 18 years was no more than they deserved. England won a somewhat unexciting game against France but were outscored in the try count, the Wilkinson boot had one more given them victory.

Four postponed games were played in National Division One, but full programmes were played in lower national divisions. It was from a National Division 2 game between Esher and Nottingham that the Lions players and supporters heard the sort of news that is dreaded in rugby circles. In a scrum collapse during that game former Rugby prop/hooker Tom Woolrich had suffered a serious neck injury that had resulted in two vertebrae being fractured. The immediate news was not good, but he was in a first class spinal injury unit and whatever could be done for him would be done.

With the new compact scheduling of the home internationals, there were another three games spread over the following weekend. England played Wales in Cardiff, Ireland continued on the road in Italy and Scotland took on France in Paris. There was a full National Division 1 league programme and this brought Moseley to Webb Ellis Road. For the second game in a row the Lions team was weakened by late withdrawals and on the day there were only four players sitting on the replacements bench, one back row and three props, with not a back in sight. The ever-versatile Phil Reed filed in at fullback for the missing Jon Hylton; Andy McAdam took the number 11 shirt and Ryan Banks the number eight.

Moseley kicked off and Boden cleared to touch. The Lions stole the lineout and Boden split the defence to send Reed in for a very quick and unexpected try. Boden converted it and one wondered whether Rugby's lashed up team might pull it off after all. Moseley's first chance to reduce their early deficit was not long in coming as Rugby conceded a kickable penalty, but Stephen Nutt's relatively simple kick rebounded off a post and the ball was cleared. The play moved from end to end as each side gained or lost possession, but following a near miss for Moseley's Carl Colvin their forwards managed to drive over from a lineout; Nutt's conversion drifted wide.

Rugby's next score came from a charged down clearance kick in the Moseley 22, when the defence strayed offside and provided a perfect position for Boden to kick a penalty and take the Lions further ahead again. Smith and Smith were working well

together in the second row and following a good take Boden launched the James Baker missile with a crossfield kick that almost succeeded. At this point there was an outbreak of hostilities and the referee saw fit to show yellow cards to Phil Greenbury and Richard Protherough and not long afterwards Nutt succeeded (at last) with a penalty kick at goal, courtesy of Lions handling in the ruck.

The tendency for lock forwards to disintegrate in the Lions ranks visited the team yet again as Ben Smith left the field clutching his shoulder to be replaced by Wasps loan player, Ben Harvey who was no doubt feeling lonely sharing the bench with just three props. Repeated thrusts by Rugby from a defensive position eventually saw Alex Taylor find a gap and send Tristan storming upfield. Phil Reed was perfectly positioned to take the eventual pass and cross the line for try number two but Boden's kicking accuracy had deteriorated. Moseley were quick to retaliate and carefully maintained possession until they were able to drive over again, this time for Alex Clarke to score; Nutt's conversion brought the scores level. Continuing Moseley pressure on the stroke of halftime forced the Lions offside and Nutt's sure kicking saw his side go off with a 15-18 lead.

As the second half got underway it was noticeable that the visitors' pack was beginning to take control, but possession and territorial advantage continued to swing to and fro. On one occasion when Rugby had the ball Phil Reed came close to a third try as his long mazy run was only just arrested. Even so the Lions were awarded a penalty with which Boden tied the scores. Parity did not endure for long as Stephen Nutt kicked an opportunist drop goal following a charged down Moseley kick. As the minutes ticked away Boden scuffed a kickable penalty. Another penalty kick/lineout produced good ball and a yellow card for replacement Richard Tarrant, but no try for the Lions. With no time left for finesse Boden sent a potential equaliser wide of the posts and the whistle ended the affair with Moseley winning 18-21. The Lions did, however, get a rare losing bonus point.

Rugby: Phil Reed; James Baker, Jason Critchley, Alex Taylor, Andy McAdam; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Phil Greenbury (Simon Black), Richard List, Glen Carson (Richard Tarrant), Steve Smith, Ben Smith (Ben Harvey), James Fornoni, Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Ryan Banks. *Man of the Match: Forwards: Tristan Prosser Shaw. Backs: Phil Reed.*

Moseley: Stephen Nutt; Carl Colvin, Andy Binns, Paul Cox, Geoff Gregory (James Aston); Greg Mc Donald, Gareth Taylor; Alex Clarke, Richard Protherough (*Alex Dalgleish temp*), Kevin Wirachowski (Matt Long), Erick Anderson, Richard Stott, David Hunt, Jason Mellors (Andy Tabbatts), Greg Hamish.

Referee: Eric Woodmason.

After the game the suitably late-scheduled Six Nations meeting between Wales and England at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff was shown on the big screen in the Long Room. After their miserable performance in Rome the Welsh were decidedly motivated but England won comfortably if not tidily. Earlier on Italy, still in Rome, had failed to do a "Wales" on Ireland and on Sunday afternoon France polished off the visiting Scots, who nonetheless demonstrably got in the French faces. England and Ireland's Grand Slam opportunities remained unscathed.

The first Nighthawks home fixture of the season went ahead on the Wednesday evening. This was classed as a 1st XV game but with the long injury list eight U19 Colts and a number of guests filled the numerous empty berths.

For the opening thirty minutes it was a Lions party. They set up camp deep in the nautical half, but unlike Neptune they were unable to cross the line. A penalty from fullback Glen Bond was scant reward for their efforts. On 32 minutes the Navy wheeled a scrum in centre field and promptly broke away to score an unconverted try in what was their first real incursion into the Lions territory. A Navy penalty allowed them to go in for their halftime refit 3-8 ahead.

In the second half, as the predominately young Lions side tired, the Navy raised the tempo of the game to "full ahead", but Rugby continued to maintain a high tackle count. Two more Navy tries brought the score up to 3-22, but the Lions did have the last word with a fine try from Colt David Clements. Glen Bond converted it to bring the final score to a more respectable 10-22.

Rugby: Glen Bond; Paul Bale (Wilf Barclay), Simon Edwards (Alex Taylor), David Birch, David Clements; Jon Boden (Phil Reed), Ricky Reed, Richard Tarrant (*Richard Mee temp*), Andy Morris, Simon Black (Richard Mee), Chris Valentini (Richard List), David Jones, Joel Stannard, James Fornoni (Karl Lawson), Daniel Facer.

Royal Navy: Spencer Brown; Chas Channing, Andy Crompton, Dave Jones, James Harsey; Jon Over, Owen Salmon; Nick Bartlett, Logie Baird, Dan Parkes, Glen Cavanagh, Del Cross, Marc Salama, Will Jerrold, Scott Williams,

Referee: Paul Smith.

With twenty league, one cup tie and three friendly defeats to their name a Lions game in the West Country was no longer a good enough excuse for the expense of a long weekend away, so those who did travel must have felt a little out of place among the almost 1400 crowd. The Rugby team was still showing the signs of an injury plague with a number of Colts filling gaps on the bench.

While they were fresh, the Lions made a game of it and Phil Reed in a second appearance at fullback opened the scoring for the visitors with a 30-metre drop goal. Penalty goals were then scored by each side; Jon Boden for Rugby and Tom Barlow for Plymouth to leave the Lions still three points ahead. It was not long, however, before the Plymouth pack began to dominate and Rugby's scrums provided rich pickings for Graham Dawe's scrummaging machine. What possession Rugby did get was distributed to good effect but even with Plymouth having to face

both wind and sun, their defence was sound and the Lions were denied.

As the first half wore on the Plymouth tries began to accumulate with Graham Dawe and Dan Ward-Smith (who had robbed the Lions of their first win back in October) scoring before fly half Barlow added a third. He converted his own and one of the others to make the Plymouth tally 22 at half time. Two more penalty goals for Boden brought Rugby's score up to 12.

Rob Hurrell, who had been the victim of a nasty looking high tackle toward the end of the first half returned to the fray after the break, but the Lions now had the now lower sun and wind to deal with in addition to a Plymouth side that was in total control of the game. As far as the scoring of points was concerned the second half was exclusively Plymouth's. Apart from an occasional attack the Lions spent the entire forty minutes in a largely unsuccessful defensive role.

Once Plymouth had got up to speed again they spent fifteen minutes ripping the Lions defence apart as they stacked up 19 points with a Barlow penalty and tries from Ward-Smith, Nigel Simpson and Danny Thomas; Barlow kicked two conversions. Richard List, a victim of collective responsibility, was sitting in the sin bin for a large part of this time, which made Plymouth's task even easier. Toward the end both sides brought on replacements, Rugby's included Colts Dave Clements and Danny Facer who were making league debuts. In this last period Plymouth scored tries number seven and eight, one for Andy Perry and a second for Barlow who converted both of them. The final score was Plymouth 56 Rugby 12.

Rugby: Phil Reed; James Baker, Jason Critchley (Andy McAdam), Alex Taylor, Paul Bale (Dave Clements); Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Richard List, Rhys Williams, Phil Greenbury (Richard Tarrant), Steve Smith, Rob Hurrell, Ben Harvey (Ryan Banks), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Ben Wheeler (Danny Facer).

Plymouth: Graeme Kiddie (Jon Fabian); Nigel Simpson, Graeme Kiddie (Ross Winney), Kenny Fisilau, Andy Matchett; Tom Barlow, Nigel Cane (Brett McCormack); Peter Risdon, Graham Dawe (Mark Harper), Danny Parkes (Wayne Reed), Will James (Jason Hart), Ollie Kohn, Andrew Perry, Danny Thomas (Chris Capaldi), Dan Ward-Smith.

Referee: Mark Wilson.

Four games were postponed as a result of the semi finals of the Powergen Challenge Shield competition. Exeter beat Worcester by two points at Sixways and Orrell beat Rotherham at Millmoor by the same narrow margin. The two National Division 1 leaders both lost long-standing unbeaten home records but were spared a duel just prior to their league shoot-out on the 12th April.

There was some good news for the Lions that weekend, as the U19 Colts beat Worcester Warriors by a magnificent 27-0. During the following week Ben Wheeler joined the Barbarian FC ranks with an off-the-bench appearance against Leicester at Welford Road.

On March 8th and 9th the Six Nations tournament was back in action and the only National Division 1 fixtures were rescheduled games that had been previously postponed. Rugby, unique for not having won a game were also unique in not having had one postponed, so their squad enjoyed another weekend off. Manchester won their rescheduled game against Wakefield and in so doing doomed Moseley to share relegation with the Lions.

In the Six Nations games Ireland pipped France in Dublin by a slender three points in a wet and windy match. Scotland, at Murrayfield compounded Wales' misfortune with a very positive win and England, as expected, beat Italy at HQ. That game was somewhat bizarre as England scored five immaculate tries in the first 20 minutes and then let Italy dominate possession for the rest of the game. Their defence held firm and they did score one more try, but Italy under John Kirwan were looking a much

more competitive prospect and did get through to score a well deserved try.

Rugby's U19 Colts maintained their momentum in the national Colts Challenge Plate competition with a 24-5 win against Chester at Webb Ellis Road, which took them into the quarterfinals. It was reported in The Coventry Telegraph Pink that former Rugby Lion, Mark R Ellis had been appointed as Head Coach at Coventry to succeed Peter Rossborough who had agreed to step down after a run of poor games. In National Division 2 Nuneaton, without a game, remained four points clear of Waterloo at the top of the table. Nuns had three games left to play and Waterloo had four, but the boys from Liberty Way seemed certain to gain promotion into National Division 2 for next season. If they succeeded it will pitch them against Rugby in league competition for the first time since 1988.

The Ides of March, for which William Shakespeare had Julius Caesar famously "beware", saw League competition resume at home with the visit of Wakefield. Facing Lions, hungry for a win, in the amphitheatre of Webb Ellis Road might Wakefield also be wary?

For the first time in a long time there was, on the day, only one change in the selected team with Steve Smith moving to the second row for the unavailable Tom Hayman; Jimmy Forni filled the vacant back row space. Young Loughborough Student, Gareth Collins made his league debut in the number eleven shirt, the ninth holder of its league tenancy this season.

The weather was perfect with wall-to-wall blue sky and a light northerly wind. The pitch was in top class condition for running rugby and there was a sense of expectation in the shed that this might be the long-awaited win, however, the early exchanges saw Wakefield taking all the possession. Ten minutes into the game the Lions did get their hands on the ball and their backs came to life. The first potential points were lost to Rugby as Jon Boden's penalty kick failed to make the 40-metre distance. Not long afterwards Jason Critchley and captain Steve Smith

managed to work the ball to Tristan Prosser-Shaw who touched down for the Lions opening score; Boden's kick went wide.

Rugby's try galvanised Wakefield whose quick restart caught Rugby cold and weak tackling allowed Gen Wilson to charge through to put John Skurr in for the equaliser. Casey Mee's conversion took Wakey into the lead. Further Wakefield scores followed with Wilson claiming a try from a catch-and-drive move (unconverted) that was repeated shortly afterwards with a try for ex-Leicester prop Derek Jelley (converted). Now 5-19 in arrears, Rugby raised their game and good passing saw James Baker with pace in space to peg the visitors back by five points with Boden's conversion deleting two more. As half time approached Casey Mee kicked a penalty to move Wakey further ahead and then converted Jon Feeley's try, to make the score 12-29 at the break.

In an attempt to stabilise the Lions scrummaging, Simon Black replaced Richard List and for a while there was a noticeable improvement. Rugby also had the wind at their backs and seemed to be more purposeful in their approach. Rewards were not slow in coming as a Steve Smith charge ended with Baker getting his second try, a gem straight from the Saunders collection; Boden's touchline conversion completed a magic moment. The momentum was maintained as, from a scrum deep in Wakefield territory, Baker almost got his third but fed Critchley out of the tackle and the Rugby centre touched down under the posts. With Boden's two points and another three from a 40-metre penalty kick the scores were now level at 29-29.

Not surprisingly Wakefield increased the tempo and it was not long before Mee's goal from a disputed penalty put them back in front. The visitors had now more than regained their scrummage superiority and disruption of a Rugby scrum led to another catch-and-drive lineout and a second try for Wilson, with Mee's kick taking Wakey ten points ahead at 29-39. It was now "all-change" time for the Lions but they continued to hunt for further scores. Baker just missed out where a pass might have succeeded and, as the final minutes ticked away Lions

pressure and Wakefield's continual infringements led referee Tim Miller to award the Lions a penalty try. Boden's simple conversion signalled the final whistle and Wakefield just made it by 36-39.

Rugby: Phil Reed; James Baker, Jason Critchley (Stuart Potter), Alex Taylor (Paul Bale), Gareth Collins; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Richard List (Simon Black), Rhys Williams, Phil Greenbury (Richard Tarrant), Steve Smith, Rob Hurrell, James Fornoni (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Ben Wheeler (Ben Harvey). *Man of the Match: Forwards: The back row. Backs: James Baker.*

Wakefield: Ryan Duckett; Jon Feeley, Neil Summers, Neil Murray, Andy Metcalfe; Casey Mee, Aaron Callaghan; Derek Jelley, John Lawn (Steve Worsley), Richard Harryman, Richard Hughes, Mick Watson (John Petteimerides), John Skurr (Mark Sowerby), Richard Wingham, Glen Wilson.

Referee: Tim Miller.

Rugby got two bonus points as they had also done from the home game against Plymouth. This of course had ended with the same scoreline after an equally fierce second half fight back; the Lions were, however, never in the lead on this occasion. Part of the baggage of being a team without a win is that all the opposing teams will fight tooth and nail to avoid the possibility of being the only one that lost to Rugby in 2002/03! Scores in the rest of the National Division 1 games were high this weekend with only Manchester failing to get into double figures. Coventry and Moseley, playing at Coundon Road shared 100 points 60/40. A record ten out of the fourteen teams collected try bonus points.

Resumption of the Six Nations tournament on the third weekend of March signalled yet another week off for the Lions who next game, on March 29th, would make their first visit to Rotherham United's Millmoor Stadium. Rotherham, remembering their

blanked second half at Webb Ellis Road in November were unlikely to be in forgiving mode.

The weather continued to be fine and sunny right through the international weekend, and it ended with the Ireland/England encounter on Sunday March 30th being set up as a Grand Slam decider, with both sides on an equal footing, but with Ireland having the advantage of Lansdowne Road.

The men in green only just made it, however, as victory in their meeting with Wales at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff looked to have been snatched away by a Stephen Jones drop goal in injury time, only for the lately arrived Ronan O'Gara to drop a winner for the Irish within seconds of the restart. In another bizarre game at Twickenham, England disposed of the snappy Scots terriers in a clinical second half. Three yellow cards, two to the Scots and one to the English, early in the game, upset the rhythm of the first half: Italy lost to France in Rome.

Three postponed National Division 1 games were played, one on the Saturday and two on the Sunday. The first of these provided the shock result as Rotherham lost their first league game of the season to Exeter at the County Ground, and they failed to take away any bonus points as well. While Rotherham had still to play Orrell and Worcester away from home, Worcester's most difficult encounter (apart from Rotherham) would be a home game against Birmingham. The odds for the one promotion place at last seemed to be stacked in Worcester's favour.

With Phil Reed and Ben Wheeler being drafted into the England Sevens squad for the Far East leg of the IRB competition, there were some gaps to be filled in the Lions squad that was sent "over the top" at Rotherham. The U19 Colts had an important Challenge Plate game (quarter-final) to play at Otley so their squad was left untouched on this occasion. Tom Hayman returned to the second row, so releasing Steve Smith to his back row role and Gareth Collins and Paul Bale as the two wingmen allowed Baker to go to full back.

Rotherham started off like a roller coaster and had two tries on the board before more than two Rugby men had been offered a feel of the ball. Roth's debut winger, Dave Strettle had two thirds of an eventual hat-trick with only a hand's worth of minutes gone by, but Jon Benson was off target with both conversions. As the game progressed some members of the Rugby side were occasionally in possession of the ball but Roth continued to dominate with further tries from Benson and Mike Schmid. The fly half settled his aim with the conversion of his own try and did likewise for Schmid's. Disrupted scrums were now producing grief for the Lions and with less than a quarter of the game gone they trailed 24-0. Their tackling was good, however, and they eventually worked a penalty out of a charged-down Rotherham kick; Jon Boden duly collected the three points. Normal service was not long in resuming and after Strettle finished off an opportunist move to complete his trio of tries, Matt Oliver scored another from Mike Umaga's perfect pass.

Halftime was approaching and Roth were now 38-3 ahead, but a normally dodgy Lions period proved for once not to be so, as some quality possession saw James Baker go on a "Saunders Excursion". He didn't quite make the line but new half-centurion Tristan Prosser-Shaw was on hand to take the tackle pass and score a try by the posts. Boden kicked the conversion and rounded off the half with another successful penalty kick from 40 metres. In comparative terms, 38-13 at mid-whistle was a lot better than it might have been.

In the second half there was no repeat of the "Rorke's Drift" defensive feat of the previous November. The Lions were still unable to secure their scrum ball and this soon gave Rotherham another scoring opportunity and a try for flanker Neil Spence. TPS had an exciting chip and chase that came to nought and then Umaga did an O'Driscoll to ratchet up Roth's score still further; with conversions it was now 52-13. The Lions never gave up, but neither did Rotherham and they scored another four tries before the last whistle, from Tim Foster (2), Dan Cook and Glen Remnant, two of them being converted. Time was finally called with the score at 76-13.

Rotherham: Michael Wood (Tim Foster); J Keyter, Matt Oliver, Mike Umaga, Dave Strettle; Jon Benson (M Rhodes), J Rauluni (Charlie Harrison); Nick Lloyd, Chris Johnson (Harry Toews), C Noon (Simon Bunting), Dan Cook, Glen Kenworthy, Leon Greef (Alfie Tooala), Neil Spence (Glen Remnant), Mike Schmid.

Rugby: James Baker; Paul Bale, Stuart Potter, Alex Taylor (Andy McAdam), Gareth Collins; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Phil Greenbury (Richard Tarrant), Richard List, Simon Black (Glen Carson), Tom Hayman, Rob Hurrell, James Fornoni (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw (Ben Harvey), Steve Smith. *Man of the Match: Nobody nominated.*

Referee: Tim Beddow.

In the last weekend of the Six Nations tournament Wales, having a poor game away in Paris secured the wooden spoon, with which they were likely to be stirring up more trouble, as the proposed changes in their domestic game continued to go round in circles. Italy went to Edinburgh looking for their first away win and they came quite close to getting it. Wales in Cardiff next season could well be their first one. All eyes were, however, firmly focussed on Dublin for Sunday's Ireland v England Grand Slam "shoot-out". For once the show justified its billing and men in white played with all the confidence of the men in green and yellow, self-belief seemed to have finally arrived. Victorious captain, Martin Johnson was a man of few words when interviewed by John Inverdale, but he didn't need words, he had the cup and the Grand Slam. Ireland had been good, but England were better. English rugby celebrated another victory that day, when they retained their position as Hong Kong Sevens champions with a win against New Zealand in the final.

There was disappointment for the U19 Colts who lost their National Plate quarterfinal game at Otley by 31-10.

Yet another blank weekend, three such in the last six, followed for the Lions. This had been set aside for the final of the

Powergen Cup competition at Twickenham. The finalists were Premiership sides, Gloucester and Northampton.

There were actually four Powergen finals at Twickenham, two of them involved junior sides and the third brought together National Division one Exeter and Orrell in the final of the Challenge Shield. It was a close game but Orrell managed to get their noses in front and won by 26-20. The Cup final was a very exciting encounter and the lead changed hands several times in the first half. With the wind at their backs in the second half Gloucester dominated possession and Northampton's backs were given few opportunities to stretch their legs. Glos won 40-22.

The weekend ended with Bath at the bottom of the Zurich Premiership, having lost their away game at Wasps. Two postponed games were played in National Division 1 with the improved Manchester taking a losing bonus point at London Welsh and Rotherham collecting maximum points at Wakefield. Rotherham's handful put them back in top place, two points in front of Worcester, with both clubs having played 23 games. The following Saturday, when Birmingham & Solihull would be making their second visit to Webb Ellis Road, Rotherham would be at Sixways trying to beat Worcester for the solitary promotion place. Rotherham would have yet another tough game a week later, with a trip to Edge Hall Road where Worcester had suffered their only other defeat after losing at Millmoor.

Allowing for the absence of long-term injured players and the ever-changing loan contingent that had passed silently in the night like ships used to do, the team was more or less at full strength. The sun was shining and, with only one small amount of rain in the last four weeks, the Webb Ellis pitch, though looking green enough for springtime, was something of a dustbowl once the game had begun.

Rugby's early play had nothing of the sharpness that the supporters had anticipated but nonetheless they had points on the board within the first minute, as Jon Boden made no

mistake with a penalty kick. However, it was not long before Birmingham took advantage of the Lions lethargy when, capitalising on an apparently overlooked knock-on, they took a quick tapped penalty to send Shaun Woof in for a try under the posts. Fullback, Leigh Hinton made light of the conversion and added three more points from a place kick, gift of another Rugby error. Steve Smith did not seem his usual efficient self in defending some of Birmingham's long kicks and, after taking a knock on the head late on in the first half, Ben Wheeler replaced him.

Before that point Jason Critchley's 22-dropout ploy misfired and Hinton quickly put the conceded penalty away. The Lions replied with another Boden penalty but, having caught up promptly fell further behind again, as the Bees quickly tapped yet another penalty and, catching Rugby dozing for the second time, sent Paul Knight in for try number two: Hinton converted. There was still time for Terry Sigley to miss a sitter and for Alex Taylor to speed on to a Boden pass after quality lineout ball. Boden converted to make the half time score a more respectable 13-20.

Young winger, Gareth Collins had taken a fearsome tackle at the end of the first half and was replaced by Stuart Potter, who started to batter the Bees defensive wall as Rugby resumed with greater urgency. They managed to keep the ball away from the visitor's heavier pack for a while thus enabling Phil Reed and James Baker to send in Peter Jenkins for a maiden try. This was promptly disallowed by the referee for a forward pass, but the supporter's dismay was only brief as Reed and Baker repeated the move with Baker weaving his way to the try line: Boden's conversion levelled the scores.

He then followed this with a successful long penalty goal to give Rugby the lead at 23-20. Unfortunately they did not hold it for long, as the Bees forwards regained control, with Nick Baxter eventually sending in scrum half Gavin Cattle to retake the lead with the visitors' third try. From then on Birmingham consolidated their win with a bonus point try from lock Alex Davidson and a conversion by Hinton who rounded off his

personal tally at 15 with a third penalty goal. Final score: Rugby 23 Birmingham & Solihull 35.

Rugby: Phil Reed; James Baker, Jason Critchley, Alex Taylor, Gareth Collins (Stuart Potter); Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Richard Tarrant (Richard List), Rhys Williams, Phil Greenbury (Glen Carson), Tom Hayman, Rob Hurrell, James Fornoni (Ben Smith), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Steve Smith (Ben Wheeler). *Man of the Match: Tom Hayman.*

Birmingham & Solihull: Leigh Hinton; Scott Read, Shaun Woof, Mike Davies (Anthony Meehan), Nick Baxter; Paul Knight, Gavin Cattle; Terry Sigley, Rob Merritt (Alan Hubbleday), Warwick Bullock (Andy Collins), Alex Davidson, Neil Fletcher (Mike Walton), Ed Orgee, Nathan Carter (Tom Jordan), Hesse Fatatou.

Referee: Tim Wigglesworth.

Sky Sports were providing live transmission of the big match at Sixways so the kick off had been delayed until 4.00pm. This meant that there was a long wait before the result was available on Teletext. Eventually it came through and Worcester had blown it yet again, going down by 9-21. Paul Bolton, reporting on the game for the Daily Telegraph, referred to Cecil Duckworth's 10-year backing of Worcester, with its ground being among the best in the country, but said that, "it has become a monument to underachievement." To guarantee promotion Rotherham were now required to win only one of their remaining two games. Bath's last minute win against London Irish and Newcastle's narrow defeat at Gloucester sent the Geordies into last place in the Premiership. In National Division 3 North Nuneaton finished as champions ahead of New Brighton and Rosslyn Park topped National Division 3 South above Lydney, both by two point margins.

On Sunday the Leicester v Munster Heineken Cup quarterfinal game at Welford Road was show live on BBC2. The Tigers were a disappointment and Munster won with something to spare,

thus avenging the “backhander” that lost them the final against Leicester in the previous season.

Rugby's last day of the season on the road required only a short drive to neighbouring Coventry for yet another edition of a long-running local derby. With Cov's removal to their new Butts stadium scheduled for the early part of next season this would almost certainly be the Lions last visit to Coundon Road. One of the long-term injured contingent, Tim Stannard returned to the second row and a backs reshuffle saw Reed at scrum half and Baker at fullback. Greenbury, Wheeler and List were on the bench with young colt Phil Thomas and old colt Eddie Saunders.

The pitch was in a sorry state with plenty of bare patches and mini tussocks of grass, definitely over-grazed and looking the worse for the unseasonable lack of rain. As the game got underway it was evident that the bounce of the ball would be unpredictable. Rugby contrived to offend at the kick-off and Coventry driving in from the tapped kick caught Lions offside: Luke Smith, last seen as a Bee at Sharmans Cross, neatly bisected the posts for a three point lead. It was soon apparent that the visitors' pack was in lacklustre mode as Cov's eight wheeled them at will and robbed them of their lineout ball. The situation was exacerbated by Tim Stannard's early spell in the sin-bin after a fracas that saw a damaged Mark Tinnock leave the field and be replaced by Lee Crofts.

Surprisingly, Coventry errors prevented them from capitalising until Phil Reed tapped and ran a penalty from Rugby's 22. On halfway with only Simon Brocklehurst to beat his attempted chip hit the defender in the chest who then, firmly clutching the ball, dodged round the Lions traffic cones to score the first try; Luke Smith converted with ease. Rugby were next to score following a Jon Boden corner penalty. The lineout ball was won well and Jason Critchley ultimately got the ball over the Coventry goal line; Boden's kick was wide. From then until half time Cov took the game over as, apart from some poorly supported Steve Smith drives, the Lions wilted. Tigger Dawson, Simon Martin and Jordan Hands added tries, all converted by Luke Smith. The score at half time was 31-5.

In the second half, in spite of the Lions replacing both props, Coventry's pack remained in the ascendant and their backs collected the spoils. Smith led the way with an early penalty that was followed by Dawson's second try. The Lions then interrupted the flow briefly as they used rare possession creatively with Alex Taylor's pass taken over the Cov line by James Baker for Rugby's second try; Boden's kick was again wide.

Coventry flanker, Danny Collins' waved to the crowd as he prepared to dive over for a try but was "Bakered" from behind, however, Luke Smith went in himself as Coventry recovered the position. Further scores came from Hands, Kurt Johnson and replacement Dave Campton. Luke Smith converted all but two of the second half tries. Both sides used all their replacements with Rugby's Phil Thomas making his debut as Eddie Saunders notched up appearance number 385. Coventry were not really as good as they looked and a more efficient side would have decimated the Rugby fifteen, even so the Lions lost 63-10.

Coventry: Simon Brocklehurst; Kurt Johnson, Simon Martin, Mick Curtis (Lee Rust), Jordan Hands (James Black); Luke Smith, Tigger Dawson (Toby Handley); Mike Mika, Dave Addleton (Trent McMurray), Richard Siviter (Jim Hadfield), Ben Gulliver, Mark Tinnock (Lee Crofts, Dave Campton), Danny Collins, Shaun Brady, Julian Horrobin.

Rugby: James Baker (Eddie Saunders); Jason Critchley, Stuart Potter, Alex Taylor, Andy McAdam; Jon Boden, Phil Reed (Phil Thomas); Richard Tarrant (Phil Greenbury), Rhys Williams (Richard List), Simon Black (Glen Carson), Tim Stannard (Ben Smith), Rob Hurrell, James Fornoni (Ben Wheeler), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Steve Smith. *Man of the Match: No award made*

Referee: Nigel Harrison..

The other National Division 1 games only produced one try bonus point between them but the four points from Rotherham's 10-36 win at Orrell were sufficient to make them champions. Worcester, trailing by six points had won two fewer games so

Roth could afford to lose their last home game to Coventry with no bonus points and still be on top. They would not therefore require the helping hand of a Rugby win against Worcester in a week's time! In the National Division 3 play off Lydney beat New Brighton to secure the third promotion place.

After the long spell of fine sunny weather, with the pitches becoming harder and dustier by the day, a gradual change began to take place and rain, unseen for over a week returned to soften up the surface for the last league game of the season. Regular readers of match previews on the Rugby Lions supporters website were given fresh hope with an upbeat message from "Comical Ali", the erstwhile Iraqi Minister of Information; the Lions first win of the season against Worcester, no less, was in the bag.

Apart from the return of scrum half Peter Jenkins, the Lions team was little changed from that which had performed so feebly at Coundon Road but this week they would be at home and there would be no tomorrow to think about. Worcester brought their usual large contingent of travelling supporters to record the biggest crowd since the visit of Bedford in February. Worcester's regular halfbacks were absent but the golden oldie Craigs, Chalmers and Quinell were on their bench. For the second time in the season a player from each side was stretchered off. Both suffered a leg injury, in separate incidents in the first and second halves of the game.

Not for the first time the Lions managed a perfect start with Jon Boden making no mistake with a penalty kick that resulted from an early Wuss offside spotted by the ever-vigilant David Sainsbury. Following the departure of Worcester's injured hooker, Chris Hall, the Lions resumed their pushy game and a well-won scrum allowed Jenkins to feed James Baker. Tristan Prosser-Shaw took the ball on to finally send Phil Reed in under the Worcester posts. No problem for Boden to convert, and the score was suddenly 10-0. It was too good to last, however, and the Lions attempts to run the ball away from the forwards came to grief as a lost ball found its way to Worcester fullback Duncan

Roke who brushed aside weak tackles to register the Warriors' first try; fly half James Brown kicked the conversion.

Rugby were not deterred and another flying run by Baker took him past a defender before he fed Jon Boden a perfect scoring pass. The Lions outside half was having a good day and added the other two points to put the home side 17-7 ahead. Worcester's response was immediate and their fast backs combined to send centre David Officer in for their second converted try. That was the turning point and, as the visitors' pack increased the pressure on their opposite numbers Worcester's score began an unstoppable climb. Officer, Roke and Chris Garrard scored three more tries before the whistle finally blew on 50 minutes. With six converted tries Worcester led 17-42.

Having lost Ben Wheeler to injury just before the break, both Stuart Potter and Steve Smith retired at half time and Simon Black was replaced. The loss of key players did not help the Lions cause but it made life even easier for Wuss. To make matters worse Rugby lost Phil Read with a knee dislocation after only eight minutes. Chalmers and Quinell joined the fray for the Warriors. The latter was soon on the score sheet but the former's kicking was off-song, and remained so until his fourth attempt. Tom Richardson, Quinell, Craig Gillies and Stewart Pearl added more Wuss tries; there was also a penalty try. James Baker had to depart as stoppage time began but the damaged Lions still had a shot left in their locker and Alex Taylor, having made the initial break completed a sparkling move to score a final try for the Lions. Jon Boden whose placekicking was immaculate converted to bring the final score to 24-76.

Rugby: Phil Reed (Andy McAdam); James Baker (Ben Smith), Stuart Potter (Eddie Saunders), Alex Taylor, Jason Critchley; Jon Boden, Peter Jenkins; Richard List (Richard Tarrant), Rhys Williams, Simon Black (Phil Greenbury), Tim Stannard, Rob Hurrell, Ben Wheeler (James Fornoni), Tristan Prosser-Shaw, Steve Smith (Glen Carson). *Man of the Match: No award made.*

Worcester: Duncan Roke; Tom Richardson, David Officer, Gary Trueman (James Ogilvie-Bull), Chris Garrard (Hugo Southwell); James Brown (Craig Chalmers), John O'Reilly; Tony Windo (Gareth Mason), Chris Hall (Stewart Pearl), Adrian Oliver, Dan Zaltzman (Craig Quinell), Craig Gillies, Mark Gabey, Chris Evans, Jim Jenner.

Referee: David Sainsbury.

So the last game had been played and a disastrous season had come to an end. Would a win against Plymouth that so nearly came Rugby's way back in October have turned the season round, who knows? Worcester's 76 points had broken Rugby's record number of points conceded in a home game. The previous record was the 72 registered by Richmond in 1996/97. By a strange coincidence Craig Quinell had played for the Lions opponents in both games.

Having played and lost 30 games this was undoubtedly the Lions worst season since the first recorded game in 1873/74. Afterwards the shock result of the day was revealed with initial disbelief. Coventry had beaten Rotherham at Millmoor by a single point. This did not, however, affect Roth's league position but it must have pleased Coventry's new coach, Mark Ellis. Unless the rules were changed before the start of 2003/04 Rotherham would be promoted into the Premier League, while Rugby and Moseley would be relegated into National Division 2 to be replaced by Penzance/Newlyn and returning Henley. The result of the enquiry into the Duckworth precipitated "Rotherham affair", begun at the end of 2002 was still awaited.

Launceston, Kendal and Fylde were the bottom three finishers in National Division 2 and they would be relegated to National Division 3, thus Rugby and Moseley would join Esher, Harrogate, Bracknell, Sedgley Park, Doncaster, Stourbridge, Newbury, Wharfedale, Nottingham, Rosslyn Park, Nuneaton and Lydney. In terms of travelling distance between clubs this promises to be a relatively compact division, unlike the new National Division 1 line-up, with teams as far apart as Orrell and Penzance.

Prior to the final Premiership league games, when there was still a chance that Bath might finish in the relegation spot, the joint committee (RFU and Premier Clubs) controlling promotion and relegation was split evenly for and against Rotherham's promotion. After Bath's last minute reprieve and Bristol's demise had been confirmed, Rotherham instantly became acceptable to all parties and their promotion was agreed. With a play-off for the promotion place in 2003/04 Rotherham's chance of survival, should they finish in last place, would be improved. Assuming Bristol survived under new financial management their large "parachute" fund would make them favourites to top National Division 1 and challenge for promotion again.

On Saturday 3rd May Rugby Lions Colts finished off an excellent season's work with a 13-8 defeat of visitors London Wasps. It gave the side great satisfaction to take the scalp of this leading Premiership club.

On the following Friday at the club's Annual Dinner, James Baker received the Players' Player of the year award in addition to the Supporters Best New Player award. Tristan Prosser-Shaw was the Supporters Club's Player of the year. By this time it had already been confirmed that James Baker would be playing for Coventry in 2003/04.