



**Season 2003/04**

**Back to Square One**

The early departure of the Players' Player of The Year, James Baker was followed, toward the end of May, by the defection of Supporters Club's Player of the year, Tristan Prosser-Shaw. Tris, who had served the lions well over two seasons, joined Baker at Coventry. Not long afterwards Cov also captured the popular Tim "Stomper" Stannard. He would not, however, be available for the first six weeks of their season, as he had to serve out a suspension for punching lock Mark Tinnock during the April league game at Coundon Road. Ironically Stannard, in competition with the released/returned Rob Hurrell, would be aiming to fill the gap left by the departed Tinnock. During June it was confirmed that another of the Shed favourites, Phil Reed, had joined Exeter.

There was some good news for the Lions' cubs at the end of May 2003 with the appearance of the Minis U10s in the Gullivers' National Festival Plate Finals at Twickenham. They had earned their place at HQ following an excellent performance at a two-day qualifying event in mid-April. They failed to win but their efforts placed them fourth overall in England and Wales.

Also at the end of May Rugby Lions announced their new schools' project. This was scheduled to commence in September. In the wider world of rugby union the results of the enquiry into the "Rotherhamgate" affair by Anthony Arlidge QC were published by the RFU. There was some initial confusion over the interpretation of the findings by the RFU and Premier Rugby Ltd, but there was no doubt that the owners of Worcester, Rotherham and Northampton had all sustained rapped knuckles.

Rotherham's Premiership comfort also suffered a jolt when it was decreed that at the end of the 2003/04 season there would be an automatic promotion/relegation rather than the previously agreed play-off.

In June, fresh from their successful Six Nations grand slam, Clive Woodward's England squad embarked on their attempt to complete the away legs of an Antipodean double over the New Zealand All Blacks and the Australian Wallabies. To the unreserved joy of their supporters both games were won and the England machine rolled on toward the ultimate challenge of the World Cup later in the year.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> July, as promised, Rugby's preliminary squad for the new season was announced. This included a number of existing 1<sup>st</sup> XV players, a large group of U19 Colts and an assortment of new signings. Among the new boys were: -

**Forwards:** Rhidian Booth (Welsh U21 prop), Alex Wilson (Wasps U21 prop), Jamie Tyers (Leicester Lions hooker), Phil Skillen (ex Kendal flanker).

**Backs:** Robert Jonker (SA Leopards halfback), Kyoto Inoue (Japan A/Esher wing), Sam Stoop (Wasps U21 Utility), Sam Rees (Swansea Uni scrum half), Lloyd Warner (Bridgend utility).

Also included were the (nearly) new signings of Chris Jones, Jason “Pig” Brittin, Matt Davies and Pete Roberts

A number of pre-season trial games were scheduled. Among them was a short mid-week tour to the northwest to play New Brighton and Preston with a Saturday game away to Broadstreet. That plan failed to materialise and in the event Rugby travelled to Preston on the Saturday, having played Bedford at Goldington Road a week earlier. Home games against Birmingham/Solihull on the following Wednesday and Barking on the succeeding Saturday would complete the series.

In addition to its First XV, competing in National Division 2, Rugby would be running a Second XV, playing in the National Clubs Midland Division, as well as the Tailenders, U19 Colts and U17 Colts.

On Saturday July 5<sup>th</sup> 180 rugby players and others took part in a sponsored one or two-circuit run around Draycote Water in order to raise money to assist Rugby’s former hooker, Tom Woolrich. Tom, having moved to play for Nottingham, suffered a spinal fracture as a result of a collapsed scrum during the 2002/03 season and, though since recovering some upper body control, is now wheelchair bound. A panoply of Lions past and present was assembled for the event.

In the Rugby Advertiser of 31<sup>st</sup> July it was reported that Paul “Judge” Rendall would be overseeing the coaching of the club’s four senior teams for the coming season. He would have control of all playing matters including the crucial one of team selection. Further team information appeared in the paper a week later, just before the first trial game at Bedford. French flanker Jimmy Fornoni had returned to France for business reasons and was unlikely to be back in the UK for five months. News of Lions rivals in National 2 included the appointment of former England international Steve Ojomoh as chief coach for fellow relegatees Moseley and the return to Nuneaton of the 25 times capped Darren Garforth, whose Leicester career was now at an end. Nuneaton had also signed up Rugby’s second row Matt Hunter and former wing Jordan Hands. Jordan had apparently left Coventry for Quins and then been farmed out to Nuns.

In the Rugby Advertiser of 7<sup>th</sup> August there was speculation as to who would figure in the forthcoming trial games. Two new signings were announced, both of them former Coventry players; Eddie Simkiss, a back five forward and Eliot Blundell a scrum half.

As the end of the month approached the international warm-up games for the forthcoming Rugby World Cup in Australia began. In the first of England's games, Wales's first choice team was completely outplayed by England's second choice fifteen at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff, but a similar group of Anglo-possibles then lost by a single point to the French first team in Marseilles. Woodward's premier fifteen turned the tables on a French set of "Bassetts" at Twickenham a week later.

The pre-season trials finally got underway on Saturday 9<sup>th</sup> August at Goldington Road, Bedford. It was a very hot afternoon and player dehydration was an ever-present hazard. The game was played in two halves with frequent drinks breaks and rolling substitutions. After 32 minutes the home side led by 36-0. The Lions had found some useable ball from Chris Jones lineout skills but the Blues defence was solid. For the next 44 minutes Bedford suffered the same fate. During the latter part of that period fullback, Lloyd Warner got a try in the corner that was followed five minutes later with another. Fly half, Sam Stoop touched down after a 70 metre dash and still had enough puff left to kick the conversion. Bedford, no doubt feeling the indignity, then exerted themselves to score their seventh try and ran out 43-12 winners.

Not all of Rugby's squad had been available for the game but even so it was generally agreed that Rugby probably still needed to sign four big strong experienced forwards.

A week later the squad was on the road again for trial number two. This took them up the M6 to Lightfoot Green, home of Preston Grasshoppers. The Hoppers, like Rugby, had been relegated and were back in Division 3 North. Once again the Lions were not at full strength, though both Steve Smith and Glen Carson had returned. The resolution of the previous Saturday seemed to have deserted the Lions and they allowed Preston to carve them up with relative ease. The final score was 44-17 with Rugby's points coming from a Lloyd Warner try and dropped goal, an Eddie Simkiss try and two Jon Boden conversions.

Rugby's third opponents, for the first home trial on the following Wednesday, were Birmingham and Solihull, now rejoicing under the name of Pertemps Bees in deference to their new main sponsor. Bees had collected three players from Worcester's discards, Jim Jenner, Tom Richardson and Craig Chalmers in addition to Moseley's Geoff Gregory.

This game was played in four twenty-minute periods with wholesale changes after each one. Bees were off to a quick start with two tries, one converted, to the Lions blank scoreline, but the home team rallied in the second quarter

with tries from two returnees, Chris Jones (a first touchdown in Lions colours) and Matt Davies. Bees' reply was just a single converted try to give them a 10-19 lead after 40 minutes. The second half was one-way traffic. Bees opened with their strongest fifteen who collected three unconverted tries, before wrapping the game up with a converted try in the final period. Considering the Bees strength, a 10-41 defeat was not that bad, as the Birmingham team's early league results later proved.

Barking, Jaques Steyn's new club in Division 3 South provided Rugby's final trial opposition at Webb Ellis Road on Saturday 23<sup>rd</sup> August. This time the first half was played in two quarters but the second half was played straight through. The Lions squad, complete but for Chris Jones and Glen Carson, saw the return of Pete Roberts and Jason Brittin: also included was Doun Du Preez, a newly arrived South African back row. Barking took charge straight from the kick-off, scoring a converted try from a forward drive with little over ten minutes gone. The Lions did not put any points on to the board until the second quarter when Jon Boden was sent over by Alex Taylor, with Sam Stoop converting. At half time the scores were level at 7-7 but on 60 minutes poor defence let Barking through to take a 7-12 lead. Superior fitness edged Rugby into the lead during the last twenty minutes with tries from Eliot Blundell and Gareth Collins, both of them converted by Jon Boden.

The Lions 21-12 victory, albeit in a trial, was their first since defeating Nuneaton in the final trial of the previous season and it was Paul Rendall's first since his arrival at the club. It now remained to be seen how long the Judge would have to wait for his first win in a proper game.

With only a week to go until the first league game Rugby Lions announced another signing. Spencer Brown, with two full and several England A Caps, who had recently left the Royal Marines was a long sought-after addition to Rugby's back line, but there was no sign of any of the big, strong, experienced forwards that would also have been welcomed. With all the trials completed the Lions were better prepared than they had been twelve months earlier but, if there was an Achilles heel, it was once again the front five of the pack. The Rugby World Cup, due to begin in Australia in October, had caused the Zurich Premiership clubs to suck in extra players to cover for international absentees, and this produced a knock-on effect down the leagues, especially for the late shoppers, amongst whom Rugby inevitably seemed to feature.

This season the first and second league encounters, on 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> September, would be away from Webb Ellis Road, starting with a visit to Judge Rendall's previous club Bracknell. The Berkshire club had been promoted with Rugby at the end of the 2000/01 season, but had been

relegated at the season's end and had lost out to Henley and Penzance/Newlyn in the tussle for promotion places last season.

Rugby were able to field a full-strength team with nine players (including two off the bench) making debut appearances.

Rugby 's season suffered an early blow when Steve Smith was forced to retire with a torn groin muscle after barely two minutes of play. Steve had been tackled into touch when making a thirty-metre dash in the direction of Bracknell's line after taking a pass from Sam Stoop. He was replaced by debutant Damien Taylor. In spite of Bracknell's ball domination, Rugby were the first to register a score with a Jon Boden penalty on seven minutes. Bracknell's Nick Hallett, who had missed an opportunity for an instant reply in kind, equalised the scores with a penalty six minutes later.

Bracknell's frequent attacks and Rugby's stern defence resulted in several penalties. One of these incidents persuaded referee, Gareth Copsey to send Eddie Simkiss to the sin-bin. The Stags chose to kick the penalty to touch where, from the lineout, their hooker, Scott Hodson drove over to notch up his side's first try of the season; Hallett secured the extra two points. It was now the Lions turn for some possession but they were unable to penetrate Bracknell's defensive wall and, having been awarded a scrum, proceeded to lose the ball as they were driven backwards.

Bracknell, regaining the initiative, moved the ball into Lions territory and it was one of three ex-Lions in the Stags' side, player-coach Jason Critchley, who squeezed in for a score by the corner; Hallett was again accurate with the kick. With half time upon them Rugby redoubled their efforts and exerted enough pressure for Boden to ease the returned Eddie Simkiss over for a try to which Boden added two extra points. The score, now 17-10, left Rugby poised to take charge in the second period.

Bracknell had other ideas and restarted with aggression, but good defence then saw Lions' Spencer Brown just fail to regain a chipped ball after a downfield charge. Bracknell then once again found Rugby's Achilles heel as, from a penalty they kicked for the corner and hooker Scott Hodson was again driven over for an easy try: Hallett's conversion was wide of the mark. An incident involving Sam Stoop's taking of a high kick then resulted in Bracknell's Jay King being sent to the sin-bin. Rugby attempted to work the corner kick penalty ploy, but after Bracknell were again penalised, the Lions second lineout came to grief.

Still down to 14, the Stags still managed to put pressure on Rugby and from a lineout drive the ball was slipped to ex-Lion, James Ogilvie-Bull (replacing Critchley) who crashed over to score: Hallett's conversion took Bracknell to

29-10. Rugby were still not inclined to roll over and their forwards managed to exert enough cohesive power to produce a try for Alex Taylor. Jon Boden, who had contrived the opening for the centre, added the conversion that took the score to 29-17. Bracknell's last effort was ended with an interception by Gareth Collins, but Rugby's produced an unconverted try for Sam Stoop. The final score of 29-22 was at least respectable.

This first result was not what the club and its supporters desired as it had not brought to an end the run of lost league games, but it suggested that the end could be in sight

**Bracknell:** Phil Friel; Kieran O'Rourke, Jason Critchley (James Ogilvie-Bull), Ben Nowak, Chris Perkins; Neal Hallett, Craig Turvey; Matt Johnson, Scott Hodson (Matt Williams), Giles Wallis, Alan Leishman (C), Jason Borchers, Mike Blakeburn (Chris Shipway), Jay King, Jeff Pickthall (? Bosley).

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Alex Taylor, Spencer Brown (Lloyd Warner); Jon Boden (C), William Jonker; Phil Greenbury (Simon Black), Jason Brittin, Rhidian Booth, Steve Stewart, Chris Jones, Eddie Simkiss, Phil Skillen, Steve Smith (Damien Taylor/Andy Morris). *Man of The Match:* Alex Taylor

**Referee:** Gareth Copsey.

The RFU fixture arranger had gifted Rugby two consecutive away fixtures with which to open their season, and the second of these was a first ever encounter with Doncaster RFC, a club with a foundation date of 1875 making it almost as old as the Lions. Doncaster was a club that was aiming for the top (their match day programme contained a statement of intent complete with timescale) and they had recruited strongly for their second season in National 1, doubtless intending it to be their last. They had, however, gone down 16-6 away to Stourbridge in the first game and a tough game appeared to be in prospect. Steve Smith was injured and the returned Ben Smith filled the gap. Damien Taylor, also injured was replaced on the bench by South African newcomer Doun Du Preez.

Rugby were brisk starters as they blocked an early Dons attack and then, from a scrum set up one of their own. Number 8, Eddie Simkiss picked up a good heel and released Jon Boden on the short side. The fly half flicked the ball to fullback Sam Stoop who executed a perfect touchdown, but Boden's conversion drifted wide. Rugby spurned further chances until by the second quarter Doncaster had organised themselves enough to be constructive at last.

James Mortimer crossed for a try under the posts, shortly followed by centre Nick Wakeley who got in at the corner. Jon Boden's enthusiastic, but high, tackle earned him a spell in the sin-bin and, with superior numbers, Doncaster's forwards drove wing Richard Briggs over for try number three. Fly half and captain, Rob Liley converted all three tries and added a penalty for a halftime score of 24-5.

Rugby began the second half positively and pressure eventually produced a kickable penalty for Jon Boden. The brisk wind that was now blowing toward the Doncaster try line was being well exploited by Boden with some useful high kicks. One of these, taken in isolation by a Dons fielder was repossessed and a try was subsequently manufactured for wing Gareth Collins; Boden's touchline conversion was perfect and by now the score had crept up to 24-15.

With three replacements, Greenbury, Du Preez and Warner on the field, the Lions pressed on and a yellow card for Doncaster's Nick Wakley gave Boden another successful penalty kick. Rugby's confidence continued to build and, after a Pete Roberts near miss, another Dons offence allowed Boden to kick penalty number three: 24-21. It all became rather frantic for a while until Wimpie Jonker decided to tap a penalty in front of the Dons posts. The ensuing drive was stopped but the ball was swung left to Sam Stoop. He flung out a long pass in the direction of Spencer Brown who handed off the defence to put the ball down in the corner. It was still can't miss day for Boden and Rugby were ahead at 24-28, the final whistle blew and Rugby had broken their losing spell at last. There was much jubilation!

**Doncaster.** Deakins; Richard Briggs, James Mortimer (Ellis twice), Nick Wakley, Williams; Rob Liley, Garry Lock; Ngalu Tau, Price, Neil Hennessy, Paul Clapham, Ed Norris, Rob Ward, Kingsley Jones, Mike Brookes.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Alex Taylor (Lloyd Warner), Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), William Jonker; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin, Simon Black (Phil Greenbury), Steve Stewart, Chris Jones, Ben Smith (Doun du Preez), Phil Skillen, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: The whole Lions team.*

**Referee:** Mark Wilson

On Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> September the Annual General Meeting took place. This was held even later than in the previous season, and was something of a non-event as there was little additional information imparted about new players, to add to that which had already been revealed by the first two games. Chairman David Owen did say that he was keen to talk to anyone who would like to invest in the club.

The following Saturday provided the local supporters with their first Webb Ellis Road game of the season. The good fortune of receiving a home draw in the second round of the Powergen Cup had saved the club from a third away game in a row before the first scheduled home league game. Sedgley Park, a new league opponent for this season, would be travelling south a little earlier than expected. On the day that they came it was rumoured that they had sent their 2<sup>nd</sup> XV as they wanted to keep their best players under wraps, and had no real desire to proceed into the next round of the competition, which would give the winners a home tie against National Division 1 Exeter.

Rugby's second row was under strain as, in addition to Steve Smith's injury, Chris Jones was found to have cracked a bone in his wrist during the Bracknell game, and would be out of action for several weeks. Eddie Simkiss moved into the middle with Steve Stewart and new boy, Dan Southern started at No8. Japanese A player, Kyoto Inoue also made his debut in place of Spencer Brown.

The early play was rather scrappy with handling errors from both sides and a missed penalty kick from Jon Boden, but a Park fumble as the ball landed gave Rugby a five-metre scrum. From this Boden made amends by taking a quick heel at pace and slicing through to touch the ball down, but he missed the conversion. Park's kicker, another Pete Roberts also failed with his first penalty attempt, while not long afterwards his team squandered a three-man overlap with a forward pass. With 20 minutes gone the Lions produced a classic try as Lloyd Warner released a rocket-propelled Gareth Collins into Park territory. The winger cleverly chipped the defender to regather and deposit the ball under the posts. Boden's addition of two points made it 12-0.

Park were nearer with their next penalty attempt, but still off the mark, and it was not until a well-timed pass from Jim Naylor, that started a crisp movement of the ball to end with No.8 Andy Taylor's try, that the visitors got points on the board. However, this persuaded the Lions to change gear. Warner ran out of defence and fed Roberts who got to within 20 metres of the try line before Naylor's unconventional tackle, earned him a yellow card. Boden found a good touch and a good lineout move saw Simkiss go over for try number two; Boden's kick was pure magic, and half time was taken with a 19-7 Lions lead.

Danny Facer replaced Dan Southern after the break, but Rugby's improved play continued unabated, with another cross-field move finally producing a try for Phil Skillen. Sedgley Park replied to that one as their Pete Roberts just made it in the corner, but the conversion he had presented himself with was too difficult. Cue for more home efforts that ultimately provided Collins with

another blistering run for his second try. It was a real birthday treat for the just 20-year old.

Replacement scrum half, Elliot Blundell was the next Lion to score as he finished off a Warner/Boden move. Boden, who had failed to convert the Collins try, made no mistake with this one, and the score leapt up to 36-12. More Rugby replacements took the field, including Eddie Saunders (who was being tried out – again) and it was not long before Kyoto Inoue (christened “Dave” by announcer Don Townend) collected a debut try. Alex Taylor, now playing as a flanker applied the sugar coating with Rugby’s seventh try. Boden’s kicking success rate was well below 50% but a 46-12 win was good enough against what was mostly a Sedgley Park second selection.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Alex Taylor, Kyoto, Inoue; Jon Boden (C), William Jonker (Elliot Blundell); Phil Greenbury, Jason Brittin (Andrew Morris), Simon Black (James Tyers), Eddie Simkiss, Steve Stewart, Ben Smith (Eddie Saunders), Phil Skillen, Dan Southern (Danny Facer). *Man of The Match: Gareth Collins.*

**Sedgley Park:** Pete Roberts (Carlos Hassan); Stuart Campbell, David Mold, Jim Naylor, John Lowden (Jason Roach); Richard Mooney, Chris Wilkinson; Matt Collie, John Geddis, Matt Pinnick (Chris Leader), Andy Clegg, Dave Livesey (Mark Fryer), Johan Goosen, Gareth Somers, Andy Taylor.

**Referee:** Paul Dix

With two wins on the trot the Lions win-starved supporters were looking forward to the season’s first league visitors. Rugby, with seven straight wins, had not lost a game to Harrogate, at home or away since October 1994, and a respectable crowd, just topping the 400 mark, gathered for an anticipated treat. With Chris Jones and Steve Smith still out of action, Ben Smith moved into the second row as Eddie Simkiss returned to No.8 and Danny Facer made his first start in the back row.

Any anticipation of a relaxed afternoon was banished within not more than a few minutes of the start as a penalty, conceded by Rugby, was touch-kicked by Gate, who wrapped and rolled the lineout over the Lions line to give lock, Paul Clarke, a rather easy try. The Gate forwards then emphasised their superiority from the kick off with a 30-metre rolling maul. That one petered out but it was not long before their fly half, with another penalty kick at his disposal, repeated the earlier scenario. Textbook precision produced a try for Steve Hobson that, this time, was converted by the move’s instigator, Lee Cholewa.

Following the second repeat of this classic move, a try for hooker, Mark Erven that was also converted, dismay began to permeate the shed as the home crowd began to realise that their team had no answer to Harrogate's forward power when the visitors had possession of the ball. When Rugby did occasionally have the ball they failed to gain any advantage over their opponents, as ill fortune and error ruled against them. Gate's score continued to mount as centre, Matt Duncombe collected a mis-cued Lions clearance kick and sliced through some weak defence for try number four: Cholewa had no difficulty in converting it.

Before half time arrived there was ample opportunity for Gate to play their now familiar eight-man trick for the fourth time and for Erven to double his try count. After a series of Harrogate penalties, one was given in a kickable position and Jon Boden at last put some home points on the scoreboard. The visitors were not finished yet and were more than happy to see the referee award them a dubious penalty try. In the fading minutes Rugby managed to punish Gate using the visitor's ploy, from which Danny Facer scored the Lions first try. At half time the score was 8-38.

The second half was pointless, as although the Lions had several good chances none of them produced a score. Both sides used all four substitutes, but nothing succeeded in breaking the deadlock. Rugby also failed to capitalise on a one-man advantage when Gate No.5, Paul Clarke was sin-binned. The result set up Harrogate's promotion challenge and exposed the Lions forward limitations.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Alex Taylor (Lloyd Warner), Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), William Jonker; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Matt Davies), Simon Black (Phil Greenbury), Steve Stewart, Ben Smith, Danny Facer (Doun du Preez), Phil Skillen, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: Phil Skillen/Eddie Simkiss.*

**Harrogate:** Ed Smithies; Adam Thornton, Jamie Barker, Matt Duncombe (Johannes Visser), James Tapster; Lee Cholewa, Rhys Morgan (C); Paul Gabriel, Mark Erven (Craig Chapman), David Hall (Rob Vickers), Andy Boyle, Paul Clarke, Mike Worden, Steve Hobson, Oliver Cook (Matt Boyle).

**Referee:** Richard Parker-Sedgemore

After three games Sedgley Park were leading the division with Wharfedale and Bracknell close behind, all with three wins; Rugby were fifth from bottom. In National Division 1, where four games had been played, Pertemps Bees (Birmingham & Solihull's new appellation) were leading Worcester by a bonus point, with Orrell in third place.

The supporters' reaction to the summary demolition of their rejuvenated team was mixed, but there were some who feared a reprise of the previous season's gloomy run of lost games, however, there would be an intermission courtesy of the next round of the Powergen Cup. The win against Sedgley Park had presented the Lions fans with a third successive home game on 4<sup>th</sup> October.

It was hoped that the visitors, Exeter, might select ex-Lion Phil Reed for their cup team as he had, heretofore, made only fleeting appearances for his new club. The Devonians had not made a good start to their campaign and were, unusually, below the median line, but that was not expected to make them vulnerable to the Lions current line-up.

The game provided an opportunity for trying out more new players, though the selection of prop Glen Carson in the second row was enforced by Steve Stewart's injury. Glen was actually retraining, as a flanker but necessity was, as ever, the mother of invention. Alex Wilson made his first appearance in place of Simon Black, as did Sam Rees in place of Wimpie Jonker. Matt Davies started in place of "Pig" Brittin, Sam Stoop started in place of Alex Taylor and newcomers; Alex Nash, Dan South and John-Paul Filler found seats on the bench. Phil Reed started at scrum half for the Chiefs but was replaced in the second half by their first choice, Richard John.

Rugby made a promising start with Jon Boden dropping a goal after a clean lineout take by the Lions that followed Exeter's fumble from the first kick-off. The Chiefs were quick to reply as they made better use of their kick off, with fly half Tony Yapp feeding a flying Ben Thompson after Ed Lewsey's initial break had been stopped. Yapp had no problem with the conversion. Boden's second kick off failed to make the required 10 metres and Exeter's resultant scrum started a move that culminated in a try for flanker Ben Cole. Yapp's second conversion made the score 3-14.

It was Cole who failed to tackle Boden moments later, allowing Jon to make a lot of ground before sending Sam Stoop in by the posts for Lions first try. Boden converted to bring Rugby back to 10-14. The upbeat mood continued with a nearly move by Spencer Brown and a Rees/Roberts effort that gained Rugby another successful Boden penalty goal. Good heavens only one point adrift! It couldn't last could it? Unfortunately not as Exeter, for the first time, applied Harrogate's favourite stratagem with prop Danny Porte claiming the inevitable touchdown. Before half time the success of this ploy persuaded the visitors to repeat it and give Danny Porte his brace. With Yapp having retained his accuracy throughout, the score at the break was 13-28.

In the second half Taylor replaced Stoop when John replaced Reed but it was Exe who scored first when their rolling maul travelled 20 metres from a

lineout and second row, Ian Brown was credited with the touchdown, but Yapp missed his first kick. Next came the games only "incident" when Spencer Brown appeared to be the victim of an airborne tackle by Chiefs winger Dermot Kelly. The Rugby winger left the pitch but Kelly, though spoken to by the referee, was not sin-binned. Exeter continued to press and scored two more tries through Ben Thompson and Adam Staniforth but Rugby got the last word with Pete Roberts' opportunist pick up and touchdown after a Lions scrum. Boden added the two points to make the final score 20-45. Exeter used all seven of their subs but the Lions used only five, giving debuts to Nash, Filler and South.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Sam Stoop (Alex Taylor), Peter Roberts, Spencer Brown (Dan South); Jon Boden (C), Sam Rees; Rhidian Booth, Matt Davies (Jason Brittin), Alex Wilson, Glen Carson (John-Paul Filler), Ben Smith, Doun du Preez, Phil Skillen (Alex Nash), Eddie Simkiss.  
*Man of The Match: Jon Boden.*

**Exeter.** Gary Kingdom; Dermot Kelly, Ed Lewsey (Jimmy Tucker), Ben Thompson (Stephen Ward), Adam Staniforth; Tony Yapp, Phil Reed (Richard John); George Davis, Sam Blythe (Altan Ozdemir), Danny Porte (Keith Brooking), Ian Brown, Rob Baxter (C), Gary Willis (Dave Sims), Ben Cole (Simon Etheridge), Richard Baxter.

**Referee:** Geraint Ashton Jones

Rugby's next league game had been moved to the Friday evening and although it was an away match this would not inconvenience travelling supporters as the Lions opponents were neighbours Nuneaton. One time fierce local rivals with a tradition for hard-fought Boxing Day battles, Rugby and Nuneaton had not had a serious game for a very long time, not in fact since the second season of league competition. While the Lions had been relegated the Nuns had been promoted. With a number of ex-Lions in the Nuneaton camp, there would inevitably be scores to settle.

That particular Friday (October 10<sup>th</sup>) also saw the beginning of the Rugby World Cup (RWC) competition in Australia. After the opening ceremony the crowd at the Telstra Stadium in Sydney saw the opening game between the hosts and Argentina with Australia winning by 24-8.

Rugby were still without any genuine second rows but Steve Smith made a return to the back row. Alex Wilson, who had looked promising against Exeter, retained his place in the front row. Ominously, four of the Nuneaton pack had played one or more (mostly more) games for the Lions.

The Nuns quickly sussed out the Lions weaknesses that had been cruelly exposed by Harrogate two weeks earlier and were unlucky to have an early catch-and-drive try ruled out a forward pass. No matter, their next penalty award was scrummaged and Chris Tarbuck completed his classic peel to score under the posts, with Jody Peacock adding the extra points. Rugby were not without opportunities, but though nothing came of them, other than at the lineout, they were not squeezed out of the game during the first half. Rugby's backs were disorganised and continually fell prey to Nuns defenders whenever possession was theirs to use. Just into the second quarter Nuneaton lock, Lee Morley (seen in Rugby colours at Sharmans Cross last season) scored from a lineout. His try was not converted and half time was taken with the score at 12-0.

Whatever was said to the teams at half time, Nuneaton's recipe for success appears to have been more efficacious as they romped through the next twenty minutes, as their pack drove all before them in scrums and mauls alike. Four tries were garnered in this harvest with two from lock Andy Goodall and one each from hooker Marek Kwisiuk and fly half Peter Glackin. With the end of the game in sight and 40-0 adrift, Rugby finally chose to move the ball around, but it was too little too late and Nuneaton were the beneficiaries with an interception that gave Alistair Baron a long run in to collect try number seven. The final score was 45-0 and it was the first blanking since the home game with Rotherham (a totally different class of opponent) during the previous November. A number of travelling Lions supporters claimed this as the worst ever performance.

**Nuneaton:** Jody Peacock; Wayne Holmes, Phil Littlehales, Craig Dutton, Alistair Baron; Pete Glackin (Lee Cassell), Jamie Hamilton (Dan Bailey); Steve Evans, Marek Kwisiuk (Stuart Gibson), Darren Garforth, Andy Goodall (Matt Hunter), Lee Morley, Gez Clough, Glenn Southwell, Chris Tarbuck.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Sam Stoop (Alex Taylor), Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Wimpie Jonker; Rhidian Booth, Matt Davies (Jason Brittin), Alex Wilson, Ben Smith, Eddie Simkiss, Doun du Preez (Glen Carson), Phil Skillen (Alex Nash), Steve Smith (Danny Facer).  
*Man of The Match: No award.*

**Referee:** Eric Woodmason

Following the Lions exit from the Powergen Cup competition, the following weekend, 18/19<sup>th</sup> October was now a vacant date that would allow the injured contingent some extra recovery time.

In the early group matches of the RWC England had beaten a pugnacious Georgian team by a substantial margin with successes for all of the other

home nations. France had beaten Fiji easily and New Zealand disposed of Italy with equal lack of effort.

Rugby Lions supporters are not unfamiliar with “low points” as there had been more than enough in recent times, but most felt that in view of the preceding season having been one gigantic low, there was a pressing need for some genuine high points. On the basis of their performance so far, a win against the as yet winless Lydney, the next visitors to Webb Ellis Road, could not really be claimed as a high point, but a loss could not be contemplated.

During the week that followed there was some speculation with regard to the appointment of a new Rugby Lions Chief Executive. Mal Malik had relinquished that post during the previous season and, in his new role as Hon Secretary, had said that it was his intention to scale down his workload. There was also a rumour circulating that former Moseley stalwart, John White might be about to join the board of directors. A Rugby Advertiser report said that the club confirmed that this was just a rumour, though Mal also confirmed that administrative help for the club management team was being sort and that the club was looking to strengthen the board of directors and investors.

In Australia the Rugby World Cup had been in progress for almost a fortnight and in the first of England’s “big” games they had beaten group members, South Africa 26-6 after a very hard match

Steve Stewart returned to partner Steve Smith in the second row for the Lydney game on 25<sup>th</sup> October, but it was the return of some confidence and purpose to the play that the home crowd noticed. Lydney took the lead after an opening spell of pressure presented them with a kickable penalty duly converted by fullback, Adam Westall. From then on the Lions applied the pressure and, though their scrum was still a little fragile their lineout was definitely back in business. Lydney began to concede penalties and after some desperate defence Lloyd Warner broke through to score Rugby’s first try that Jon Boden converted. Later in the half Boden added a penalty and Warner’s versatility came through with his neat drop goal. Lions were 13-3 ahead at the break and looking potential winners.

John-Paul Filler replaced an injured Phil Skillen at the restart and in the next twenty minutes the home side put the result beyond doubt with tries from Warner, after a five-metre scrum, from Ed Simkiss after recapturing a charge-down and from Pete Roberts after shunning plenteous support. Jon Boden managed to convert two of them. Rugby’s other three replacements, Jason Brittin, Alex Wilson and Dan South (a debut league appearance at number nine), came on during the half. Lydney did likewise, but it was not until the dying minutes that the visitors had any success when their No.8 Regan Turoa

crashed over for their one and only try, converted by Westall. Final score: Rugby 32 Lydney 10.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Alex Taylor, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Wimpie Jonker (Dan South); Rhidian Booth, Matt Davies (Jason Brittin), Phil Greenbury (Alex Wilson), Steve Stewart, Steve Smith, Doun du Preez (Glen Carson), Phil Skillen (John-Paul Filler), Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: Lloyd Warner.*

**Lydney:** Adam Westall; Warren Betty, Lee Johnson, Rob Sargent, Charles Vine; Julian Hill (Leon Meek), Julian Davies; Paul Price, Nicholas Nelmes (Andy Wright), Nicholas Bartlett Alan Chapman), James Roberts, Paul Kiely, Gavin Groves, Dean Jenkins (Adrian Knox), Regan Turoa.

**Referee:** Andrew Small

The Lions win put them two places higher in the league table, just out of the relegation zone, safe but still uncomfortable.

On the Sunday all England was glued to the TV watching their team play yet another tough group game, this time against Samoa. The Pacific islanders had promised to give their all and did just that, however, after a torrid time Clive Woodward's men won 35-22. With only Uruguay left to play England were more or less guaranteed their sought-after quarterfinal place against Wales.

On the road again for the first day of November, Rugby journeyed to Rosslyn Park at Priory Lane. On the occasion of their last visit there they had obtained a precious point that kept them just ahead of Park in a promotion challenge. Had Simon Amor's kicking been on song that day it would have been two points, and several weeks of nail biting would have been avoided. Steve

Stewart's shoulder injury had worsened so Ben Smith returned to the second row, John-Paul Filler came in for the injured Phil Skillen and Dan South took over at scrum half. Gareth Collins was also absent for the first time, his place being filled by Sam Stoop. An additional worry was the news that Chris Jones' cracked wrist bone was not healing (reminiscent of James Baker's similar injury last season).

Park started well and had most of the early territorial advantage, during which Sam Howard, their usually metronomic kicker, missed an early penalty. Rugby had one or two chances but their best, a run by Dan South taken on by Lloyd Warner was lost to a well-covered chip ahead. Jon Boden also missed his first penalty kick at goal and it was not long afterwards that Park finally managed to cut through the Rugby defence, at that moment short of an

injured Alex Taylor, for Sam Howard to get the first try of the game; once again his kick was wide of the posts.

Park's next try was under the posts and Howard could not miss from there. It came from a scrum when Mike Friday took a quick feed and sliced through the visitor's stationary defence to put Richard Jackson over. The Lions then had a good spell of play but chose not to kick for goal from successive penalties, but rather to tap and run at the Park wall. There was no way through and a wayward Boden pass was intercepted to move play to the opposite end. A penalty was conceded, kicked to the corner.... and the rest can be found in any of this season's match reports. With Howard adding the conversion points to his own try, the interval score was 19-0 and Rugby were once more in a catch-up game.

Rugby began the second half well, with a Boden penalty goal getting their first points of the day, but then another of his risky passes was intercepted. Dan South saved the day but only momentarily, as Rugby's lineout from a penalty kick was stolen, and Park's backs wove through the loose defence for Jackson to get try number two; Howard was now into metronomic and Rugby were 23 points adrift. The Lions then brought on Danny Facer and Wimpie Jonker but lost Rhidian Booth, accompanied by Park's James Hayes, to a yellow card shortly afterwards. From the resultant penalty, awarded to the Lions they managed to get across the Park try line with Glen Carson claiming the touchdown; Boden converted.

The travelling support (not a lot) was then treated to a Spencer Brown special. The ball was run out of the Lions 22 and the speedy winger made 50 metres before floating the ball to Jon Boden who then converted his own try. Rugby were up to 26-17 but time was now running out. Boden missed two penalty goal kicks, one bouncing back off a post, and two penalty lineouts were lost. At the death, an ambitious chip out of defence by Boden was charged down. Park's Matt Pitt retrieved it and drove through to score an unconverted try that brought the final score to 31-17.

**Rosslyn Park:** Richard Jackson; James Justice, Mark Ireland, Matt Pitt, Nick Marsh; Sam Howard, Mike Friday; Jon Cooke (Tom Wells), Paul Byford (Steve Kearns), James Cure, James Hayes, Shaun Justice, Graham Boardman, Ollie Hankey (Jim Ryan).

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Sam Stoop, Alex Taylor (Wimpie Jonker), Peter Roberts, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Dan South; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Jamie Tyers), Phil Greenbury, Steve Smith, Ben Smith, Glen Carson, John-Paul Filler (Danny Facer), Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: No award.*

**Referee:** Tim Wigglesworth

By Monday the RWC quarterfinal pairings had been settled with all of the home countries getting a place. England, having beaten Uruguay by 111-13, were to meet a newly inspired Wales, who had given the All Blacks a rare fright in their last group game, though the New Zealanders eventually won by 53-37.

The first two RWC quarterfinals, New Zealand v South Africa and Australia v Scotland took place on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> November, the day of Rugby's next home game against visitors Newbury. The Lions had won comfortably on the occasion of Newbury's last appearance at Webb Ellis Road, but as things stood, the result was harder to predict this time round. The two Smiths continued in the middle of the pack, but the major change was Jon Boden's switch to centre with Sam Stoop going to fly half; Gareth Collins returned on the wing.

If ever there was a game of catch-up this was it, but it was Newbury who were attempting to close the gap. From the visitor's kick-off Sam Stoop's clearance kick was put in touch by a Newbury hand. Rugby's lineout was perfect and the ball was duly driven over Newbury's line for Jason Brittin to touch it down. Jon Boden converted and the Lions were 7-0 ahead. Newbury were soon to reply with a Fraser Jones Penalty goal, but it was their infringement that presented Rugby with a first penalty opportunity. From a tapped move Rhidian Booth ultimately opened up the visitor's defence, managing to find Eddie Simkiss on hand as the opposition finally brought him down. Boden missed the conversion but as before Newbury converted another penalty almost immediately. Some indifferent lineout work allowed ex-Lion, Jo Czerpak to make a lot of ground and collect a penalty at the eventual tackle. A touch kick/lineout move was in the process of being snuffed out by Rugby when slipshod tackling allowed Mark Foster to escape and secure the visitor's first try. Jones conversion put the Lions 12-13 down.

Rugby quickly took up the challenge as Dan South broke through and Pete Roberts was there to take the ball on from the tackle and score try number three; Boden's kick was wide again. It was not long before the pendulum swung back yet again as two kickable penalties were conceded by the Lions and Fraser Jones got three points from each of them to edge Newbury back in front. With five minutes to go to half time another long pass from Sam Stoop found Steve Smith playing outside centre. His good hands sent the ball to Spencer Brown in space. The wing made ground before chipping over the last line of defence and winning the race to the touchdown: this time Boden's kick bisected the posts to regain the lead at 24-19.

The first 25 minutes of the second half belonged to Rugby. It started with a try, converted by Boden, after Spencer Brown's mazy run to the Newbury

goal line. It was Brown who scored the next try as well. Newbury's wing, Tom Holloway was sin binned following a brawl. Redoubling their efforts, they made ground but lost the ball in Rugby's 22. The rescued ball was quickly shipped to the wingman who disappeared into the distance to register his hat-trick try. With Boden's conversion Rugby were now 38-19 ahead. Shortly afterwards, in a replay of the previous incident, it was Spencer Brown who sent Gareth Collins away to score the Lions sixth try. Boden missed the conversion but at 43-19 the game looked won anyway... or was it?

Newbury had other ideas that were aided by Sam Stoop's spell in the sin bin as a result of some more fisticuffs. Matt Davies had earlier replaced Jason Brittin and now Spencer Brown was replaced by Kyoto (Dave) Inoue, a move that surprised most of the supporters. With about 15 minutes to go and a huge 9 minutes of added time the visitors proceeded to erode the Lions 24-point lead. In the process of carving up the Lions wilting defence they scored three spectacular tries, one of them converted, to bring the final score to 43-36.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins Jon Boden (C), Peter Roberts, Spencer Brown (Kyoto Inoue); Sam Stoop, Dan South; Rhidian Booth (Simon Black), Jason Brittin (Matt Davies), Phil Greenbury, Steve Smith, Ben Smith (John-Paul Filler), Glen Carson, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match:* *Spencer Brown.*

**Newbury:** Fraser Jones; Gary Leadbeater, Mark Foster, Morgan Davis, Tom Holloway; Joe Czerpak, Will Green; Rob Faulkner, Simon Jenkins, Bernie Williams (Roy Davies), Pete Taylor (Andy Duke), Chris Hart, Simon Gully (Rob Scothern), Matt Cornish, Dave Thorpe.

**Referee:** David Sainsbury

On Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> November Wales, in spite of their newfound confidence gained in the game against the All Blacks, were unable to overcome England in their quarterfinal. England, still missing some key players eventually won the game 28-17. The other Q/F winners were, New Zealand, Australia and France, so the semi finals were New Zealand v Australia and England v France.

The first mid week friendly game of the season took place on Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> November. The visitors were the RAF who were returning to Rugby for the first time since February 1997. The match was classed as a 1<sup>st</sup> XV game, but the team was mainly composed of Lions Colts and others who were normally the mainstay of the 2<sup>nd</sup> XV.

The game was a fairly dour one with both sides successfully defending their try lines for most of the game. The first half yielded a solitary try for Rugby scored by Matt Davies from a forward drive and converted by Danny Pope. The second half was not a great deal different and there was a lot of player replacement from both sides. The RAF side did not visibly tire toward the end of the game, although Rugby stepped up the pressure. One of the substitutes, Eddie Saunders scored the Lions second try. This was also converted, but by replacement fly half Tom Turner, son of the Lions former coach. The final score was 14-0

**Rugby:** Andy Bayliss (Eddie Saunders); Dave Clements, Sascha Mielczarek, Alex Ackerley (Matt Dymek), Johnny Fletcher; Danny Pope (Tom Turner), Phil Thomas; Matt Davies (John Cameron, Matt Richards), Andy Morris (Glen Wallace), Karl Chaplow (Chris King), Ben Everton, Tom Curtis, Karl Lawson, Glenn Todd (Phil Skillen), Danny Facer.

**RAF:** M Ramshall; G Wilmott, K Potts, R Jones, K Baker; S Harman, C French; N Griffiths, R Craig, N Evans, ? McLaughlin, M Minter, L Davies, F Young, S Hez. (Replacements: C Hodgson, ? Barton, A Yeats, G Sharpe, ? Williamson, R Wadmure).

**Referee:** Paul Smith.

Three days later the Lions were off to Esher, famous for its flock of wild parakeets and BBC Sport presenter John Inverdale. On this occasion only the parakeets were at home as John was in Australia on RWC duty. The Rugby team welcomed back Tim Stannard, on loan from Coventry. He replaced Ben Smith in an attempt to get over the prevailing problems in the second row. Jon Boden remained in the centre, but switched positions with Pete Roberts; Sam Stoop remained at fly half.

Rugby conceded a penalty from the kick off but Kevin Fisher's goal attempt failed to reach the posts. Jon Boden did exactly the same from his end, when Esher were penalised for stopping Stannard's charge illegally, a few moments later. In the early part of the game Esher enjoyed more possession but Rugby's tackling prevented them from turning it into points. Sam Stoop was put into space and ran down the line but Alex Nash failed to take the inside scoring pass. The Lions forwards were now looking much stronger, driving their counterparts backwards and regularly winning lineout.

One such drive was pulled down and Esher No.8, Chris Wilkins was shown the yellow card. Jon Boden's goal kick was perfect and it gave Rugby the lead. Though a man short, Esher managed to pressurise their visitors and secured a free kick at a scrum. It was quickly taken and moved across to centre Piers Gregory, who powered through a large gap to score the first try

of the game, but the conversion was missed. Boden's tactical kicking was effective and from one of these kicks the forwards drove to the Esher try line. With a Lions penalty signalled, the ball shot out of the maul and the vigilant Pete Roberts picked it up to score an unconverted try. The score at halftime was 5-8.

Not long after the restart an adventurous Esher chip over the Lions defence went straight into the hands of Dan South who quickly found Lloyd Warner who made the required 50 metres to Esher's try line with a sweeping unstoppable curving run; Boden's conversion was again off target. Just after Matt Davies had replaced "Pig" Brittin, Esher pressure set up a touch penalty. After a drive and a scrum prop Andrew Alexander managed to get the ball over Rugby's line. Esher maintained the pressure but this time the Lions tackles were more effective and a spilled ball was seized on by Spencer Brown shot off on a characteristic 80-metre run to notch up Rugby's third try. This time Boden added the extra points.

Rugby's forwards were still susceptible to the lineout drive and the home side successfully utilised a penalty kick to set one up and drive the ball over for hooker Fergus Gallagher to score, but the conversion missed, leaving the score at 15-20. The Lions bounced back almost immediately with a good run by Dan South, then good forward play, until Boden kicked the ball into Gareth Collins' corner. The speedy wing shot past the defender to touch the ball down and increase Rugby's lead. More Esher attacks were fought off and the ball was moved into their 22 where Tim Stannard eventually score the Lions fifth try. Boden again missed a fairly easy conversion. In the dying minutes Esher, not to be denied any longer, at last got the ball down under Rugby's posts; Toby Clouston was the scorer and Sam Barnett converted it bringing the final score to 22-30.

This hard- worked-for win had a dramatic effect on the league table as it moved Rugby up into eighth place.

**Esher:** John Elford; Kevin Fisher, Piers Gregory, Toby Clouston, Sam Barnett; Ed Jennings, Dan Taylor; Andrew Alexander, Fergus Gallagher (Mark Bennett), Ian Critchley (Jeff Smith), Mark Butterworth, Ed Mallett, Jack Davison, Glyn Dewhurst (C), Chris Wilkins.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins Peter Roberts, Jon Boden (C), Spencer Brown; Sam Stoop, Dan South; Rhidian Booth (John-Paul Filler), Jason Brittin (Matt Davies), Phil Greenbury, Tim Stannard, Steve Smith, Glen Carson, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match:* Alex Nash.

**Referee:** Richard Parker-Sedgemore.

In Australia that weekend the RWC semi finals were played,. On Saturday, much against a lot of prediction Australia beat the All Blacks with relative ease for a final score of 10-22. A disallowed New Zealand try in the first half that was followed shortly afterwards by an interception just outside their 22, that led to an Australian try, effectively finished off the game. On Sunday it was the turn of England and France. Once again the favoured-by-many French team was kept firmly under control by the England fifteen and it was England who went through to the final with Australia, scheduled for Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> November at the Telstra Stadium in Sydney. In the third place play-off on Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> November a weak French selection lost by 40-13 to New Zealand.

Fortunately Rugby had a home league fixture on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> November with nearby Nottingham so the club laid on a breakfast and lunch programme with big-screen TV for home and away supporters. This was well attended and a photograph of the jubilant fans with arms raised aloft appeared in that week's Rugby Advertiser. A more exciting game could hardly have been contemplated especially with a triumphant England at the finish as Jonny Wilkinson's drop goal sealed their 20-17 victory. Among the visitors was ex-Lion, Tom Woolrich, still confined to a wheelchair after his serious neck injury of the previous season, but as chirpy as ever,

Their common goal achieved at last, and still feeling decidedly euphoric, the supporters divided and prepared themselves to cheer on their own particular sides. Smiths, Steve and Ben were not available for Rugby and Glen Carson, only recently converted to back row found himself in the second row, with Danny Facer taking his place. Jon Boden continued at centre. Two ex-lions, Neil Underhill and Paul Thompson were in the Nottingham pack.

Play was evenly distributed during the early minutes but it was Nottingham who took the lead when centre, Neil Starling followed up a chipped kick from fly half Neil Stenhouse and scored the visitor's first try; Stenhouse converted. Rugby then had some attacking chances, including a drop goal attempt from Jon Boden that were all fruitless.

As time went on most of the Lions players, both forwards and backs seemed to withdraw from the game and their play became less and less effective. In the run up to half time Rugby presented the visitors with three successive penalty kicks, all of which were put between the posts by the accurate Stenhouse. At half time the score was 0-16 and the Lion's supporters were now consoling themselves with the recent memories of the England's victory.

Nottingham resumed as might a shark, having smelt blood. Winger David Jackson fielded a Rugby kick and running hard linked with Stenhouse who sliced through the stationary defence to put his other winger, Warren Coles

through for his club's second try, Stenhouse converted. Notts then stole the ball from a Rugby scrum 10 metres from their own line and it was not long before Neil Starling, having the same influence on the Lions defence as Moses had on the Red Sea, scored under the posts; no problem for Stenhouse once again.

Both teams were reduced to 14 as Eddie Simkiss and Neil Stenhouse were yellow carded. Nottingham kicked for the corner and in no time Hooker Jo Duffey was driven over for try number four: Jackson, in Stenhouse's absence, failed to convert. Nottingham repeated this move five minutes later with a try for Mark Easter with success for Jackson this time. Gareth Collins scored a consolation try for Rugby at the very end, but by then quite a few Lions supporters had departed for the clubhouse or home. The final score was 5-42, but England had still won the Rugby World Cup.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Jon Boden (C), Peter Roberts, Spencer Brown; Sam Stoop, Dan South; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Matt Davies), Phil Greenbury, Glen Carson (John-Paul Filler), Tim Stannard, Danny Facer, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: No award.*

**Nottingham:** Ben Murphy; David Jackson, Neil Starling, Alan Royer, Warren Coles; Neil Stenhouse (Alan Cook), Jun Shaw; Neil Fowkes, Joseph Duffey (Rob Harding), Sam Moore, Craig Hammond (C), Neil Underhill, Paul Thompson, Mark Easter, Gareth Evan (Adam Corcoran *temp*).

**Referee:** Richard Parker-Sedgemore (late change from Dean Richards)

Sometime on the Saturday the statue of William Webb Ellis on the Rugby School side of the gyratory was to be seen draped with a flag of St George and wearing an England rugby shirt and woolly hat. A photograph of the statue appeared on the Sunday Telegraph the following morning together with a report on the match time atmosphere in the nearby Walkabout, Australian theme bar.

A report in the Rugby Observer of November 27<sup>th</sup> put some detail into some Coventry/Rugby rumours that had been going around. The main rumour concerned the possibility of Rugby playing their 4<sup>th</sup> XV games at Coventry RFC's new £12 million Butts Stadium. When questioned, Coventry's CE, Ian Carvell said that he had talked to Lions chairman David Owen about it.

Rugby were at the dreaded Birmingham University's Bournbrook ground on 29<sup>th</sup> November (though Moseley's programme said it was the 19<sup>th</sup> November). It had rained well beforehand but on this occasion there was no danger of a last minute postponement. The Lions team contained two new players, both on loan from Coventry. Second row, Dave Campton, whose

alma mater club was Leamington, had already played in a Lions Nighthawks side some seasons earlier, but centre Tim O'Shea was entirely unknown. Jon Boden returned to fly half and Sam Stoop dropped on to the bench. Steve Smith was back from holiday, but Tim Stannard was away on a business trip.

For the second week running the nominated referee, Chris Sharp, was unavailable and was replaced at short notice by Llyr ap Geraint-Roberts, a relatively new referee of unknown provenance. By the end of the game Rugby would be ruing the non-appearance of Chris Sharp.

Moseley put the Lions under pressure straight from the kick-off but their poor handling compensated for some soft Rugby tackling and it was not until the visitors went offside that Mose took the lead with a penalty goal kicked by fly half, Ollie Thomas. It was not long, however, before Rugby were on terms by the same route as Jon Boden Kicked a penalty goal awarded for Moseley's territorial indiscretion. New second row Dave Campton was both strong in defence and a winner in the lineout and joined the pack in pushing Mose back some distance, before a run by Gareth Collins was just held up. Former Lions, Ben Buxton was sin-binned as he tried to rescue his side from a Rugby Lineout steal; Boden's kick from the penalty took his side into a 3-6 lead.

A period of play then ensued where the ball went several times from end to end and back again until the Lions were penalised and Thomas once more levelled the scores. Dan South wasted a splendid chance; having sold a dummy, he needlessly passed the ball to Boden, who collected man and ball together. Another lost chance (ominously) saw Rugby's forwards drive over the Mose line and concede a scrum for a knock-on. Moseley also had chances that were lost to poor handling or good defence. It was Rugby who were denied a perfectly good try as Tim O'Shea ran through a gap in the defence and touched down unopposed, only for the referee to disallow it. Boden then missed a 40-metre penalty goal, so half time arrived with the score still tied at 6-6.

The Lions faced the wind in the second half and it held up an early clearance kick from Jon Boden that fullback Stephen Nutt returned to Rugby's in-goal area. Moseley's wing James Aston, anticipating the move, ran through and touched down for a rather soft and unexpected try, but it was not converted. Spencer Brown retaliated with a powerful run but was swallowed up short of the line, before Mose came back again and increased their score with a penalty for offside. Sam Stoop replaced O'Shea with a consequent reshuffle. Lloyd Warner, now at centre, took the ball at pace and parted the Mose defence to release Spencer Brown on the outside, but the winger was once more hauled down just short of heaven.

Matt Davies exchanged places with Pig Brittin just before Gareth Collins set off on a run. He managed to stay on his feet when tackled and be driven over by the Lions forwards. The referee's verdict was "not grounded." Rugby increased the pressure at that point as they strove to equalise and kept the ball in the opposition half for a long period, but eventually Moseley broke out and were unlucky not to increase their lead when a corner penalty was not capitalised on. There was yet another Collins run that almost made it before Boden's successful penalty kick at goal reduced the deficit. The Lions camped on the Moseley line for the last five minutes but attempts to score were frustrated and Moseley ran out winners at 14-9.

**Moseley:** Stephen Nutt; Nathan Parker, Simon Brading, Paul Cox, James Aston; Ollie Thomas, Gareth Taylor; Mannie Samra (Kevin Wirachowski), Dean Bick, Ben Buxton, Alex Hadley (Kevin Wirachowski *temp*), Charlie Daniell, Mark Evans, Thomas Warren (Jason Mellors), Steve Ojomoh.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Tim O'Shea (Sam Stoop), Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Dan South; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Matt Davies), Phil Greenbury, Dave Campton, Tim Stannard, Glen Carson, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match:* No award.

**Referee:** Llyr ap Geraint-Roberts.

During the week Rugby FC had announced the appointment of Roger Beresford of Suffolk Clinic (a sports clinic now with a facility at Rugby Lions) as a new director of the club. He remained a committee member at Barkers Butts but took over the role of chief executive at Rugby Lions. Gordon Plumb was to assist him in this role. Roger was keen to reinvigorate links between Rugby FC and the local junior clubs. This was reported in the Coventry Telegraph Pink (November 29<sup>th</sup>), which also reiterated the information that Coventry and Rugby were talking about the Lions playing first-team games at the new Butts Stadium.

The executive changes at Webb Ellis Road were covered in greater depth in the Rugby Advertiser of December 4<sup>th</sup>, which also announced the appointment of specialist backs coach, Brett Taylor who was the current backs and team play coach of the US Eagles. Paul Rendall was to remain as Director of Coaching. Former Club Secretary Mal Malik was to continue as honorary secretary at the request of club chairman David Owen.

As things stood, the next visitors to Webb Ellis Road on 6<sup>th</sup> December, Wharfedale, would be the toughest opposition the Lions had faced at home since Nottingham. Rugby, in tenth place, were in need of some more points to keep them clear of the bottom four teams, so a win against the Dalesmen

would not only be a confidence booster but would also consolidate their league position.

The team news on the day was not good as both Steve Smith and Tim Stannard were flu victims, so Glen Carson found himself in the second row again partnering Dave Campton, who had played well at Bournbrook. In the backs, Gareth Collins was out injured so Dan South moved to the wing and Sam Rees linked up with Jon Boden at halfback, and with Lloyd Warner in the centre Sam Stoop was at fullback. New signing, former Coventry back row, Lee Crofts took Carson's place. Crofts, who had given the Lions some hammer in the past, had gone to Stourbridge initially but moved to Rugby to reduce his travel time.

Former England international David Pears had been Dale's fly half the last time Rugby met them up at Threshfield, since when he had been to Bracknell and back again. He was as mercurial as ever when, with his sniping run from the off, he engineered for himself a kickable penalty that took his team into an early lead. In the first exchanges Rugby's pack looked light but did not lose possession in the scrums. Spencer Brown ran well out of defence and the ball was recycled to maintain the move and allow Warner to find a scoring gap. Lions were 5-3 ahead but Boden's kick drifted wide in the breeze. Dale conceded two penalties after strong first-up tackling, but Jon Boden's long distance kicks both missed the target. Wharfedale pressure continued and the Lions defence was ultimately breached at close range by flanker Anthony Jackson.

Pears converted the try to move Dale ahead to 5-10. Rugby replied almost immediately with another long run from Spencer Brown. He shipped the ball to Alex Nash who released the flying Boden to score in the clubhouse corner, but the conversion was too difficult. That levelled the scores at 10-10, and they continued to mount symmetrically to 13 -13 with penalty goals kicked by both sides, until Boden took the Lions in front again with yet another one. It was then that Pears, in trying to duck through a gap at pace, collided with Eddie Simkiss' knee and lay spark out for a while until recovering sufficiently to stagger off and be replaced by Adam Oldfield. Centre Johnathan Davies, who took over Dale's kicking duties, soon levelled the scores again with a penalty kick for offside, so it was 16-16 at half time.

Eddie Simkiss, his knee still suffering from its fruity close encounter with Pears' head, was replaced by John-paul Filler from the restart, with Lee Crofts moving to No.8. Jon Boden got things moving again with a smart drop goal, now only needing a conversion for a "full-house". Johnathan Davies missed a chance to equalise again as his penalty kick drifted wide. From the ensuing dropout Rugby secured the ball and Dan South took it down the wing. Alex Nash took it back infield and recycled it at the tackle for Lloyd

Warner to cut through the Dale cover and score. Boden missed the first opportunity for his “full-house”.

Wharfedale attacked again but Rugby defended fiercely, during which encounter Ben Wade was shown a yellow card for a punch, but the Dale pressure was maintained until the Lions eventually burst out and won a penalty kick that Boden added to his success list. With the score at 27-16 Rugby nerves were beginning to settle down, but memories of the Newbury game were still too recent, so complacency was not an option. Phil Greenbury and Pig Brittin went off with blood injuries and Danny Facer, who had replaced Greenbury, stayed on to replace Alex Nash. Dale kept up the pressure, ever more frantically, until they conceded another penalty that Jon Boden kicked between the posts to give his side victory by 30-16.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Dan South, Peter Roberts, Lloyd Warner, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Sam Rees; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Matt Davies *temp*), Phil Greenbury (Danny Facer *temp*), Glen Carson, Dave Campton, Lee Crofts, Alex Nash (Danny Facer), Eddie Simkiss (Johnpaul Filler). *Man of The Match:* Alex Nash.

**Wharfedale:** Andrew Hodgson (C); Pedram Salashouri, Johnathan Davies, Andrew Baggett, Gareth Johnson; David Pears (Adam Oldfield), Sam Cottrell; Philip Peel (Craig Ingram), James Ogden, Neil Dickenson, David Lister, Anthony Capstick, Anthony Jackson (Paul Evans), Hedley Verity, Ben Wade.

**Referee:** Richard Philips.

Rugby's disputed Tim O'Shea try at Bournbrook received some special coverage in the Coventry Telegraph Pink of 6<sup>th</sup> December, complete with a picture of the crucial frame from Dave Rushton's video footage, clearly showing a try being scored. More club news in this report mentioned that the new assistant coach, Brett Taylor had formerly made over 100 appearances at scrum half for Northampton Saints. Winger Spencer Brown had now taken over the duties of fitness coach, formerly the role of the departed Clive “Cranky” Brewer.

On the back page of the Rugby Advertiser of 11<sup>th</sup> December there was an article that reported on the rumoured link-up between Rugby and Coventry's rugby clubs. It highlighted to fact that a poll on the Rugby Supporters website at rugbylions.net had resulted in 82% being against any move to play games in Coventry. Various people associated with the Supporters Club were asked for their opinions and all were agreed that any move would not be in the interests of the club's current supporters.

There were two more games left before the Christmas break and the completion of the first half of the scheduled 26 league games. The first of these was an away fixture in Manchester against the league leaders Sedgley Park, the first ever league game between the two clubs. In common with recent games there was another new face in the Lions side; centre Scott Read who was on loan from Pertemps Bees. He took over Gareth Collins' wing duties from Dan South who moved to the bench. Tim Stannard also returned with Glen Carson joining the bench four that included a returning Steve Smith.

The Rugby supporters' coach arrived a few minutes late, and missed the first score, a goal for the home side, kicked by their fly half, Ryno Ueckermann following Tim Stannard's infringement at the kick-off. Park were very lively and Rugby found them difficult to contain, but this was exacerbated by the Lions tendency to needlessly lose rare possession. There was also a swirling crosswind blowing in Rugby's faces that the home side were used to coping with. Park scored two tries in fairly quick succession, rounded up by Ueckermann's accurate kicking. Both of them being scored by hefty lock Paul Arnold who took a lot of stopping.

His next attempt, after some positive play from Rugby, was arrested but Jim Naylor took the ball on and did the necessary, as did Ueckermann so the score had already to 24-0 in as many minutes. As half time approached Alex Nash wriggled through the Park defence but was illegally stopped. When the penalty lineout was taken he then caught the ball but it was Eddie Simkiss who was driven over for a try. Jon Boden missed the difficult kick. Park attacked again and Rugby eventually gave away a kickable penalty under their posts that was grist to Ueckermann's mill. Thus at the mid point of the game the score was 27-5.

With some wind assistance Rugby started well with Rhidian Booth scoring his first Lions try, but once again the conversion kick was missed. More strong play by Rugby won another penalty and, though Park kept them out it was at the price of a sin-binning for Jon Lowden. In his absence interplay between Lee Crofts and Simkiss resulted in a second try for the No.8; this time Boden's kick was a good one. Rugby were enjoying a good spell of play and were unlucky not to collect another score after a Dan South run, but it was Sedgley Park who collected the next five points after a powerful charge by Richard Senior.

Steve Smith came on in place of Simkiss and shortly afterwards the Lions scored again. Stoop and Brown did the running and Alex Nash finished it off, but Boden's conversion was wide of the mark. It seemed as though Rugby might make a fight of it, but just after Stannard's replacement by Carson, Park's scrum half, with brilliant anticipation, intercepted a Lions pass on half

way and skated through to score under the posts, giving Ueckermann an easy conversion. Rugby kept up their challenge and Spencer Brown sent Stoop in for try number five, but the conversion went begging. As time ran out, and Rugby threw caution to the winds, they gifted Park a last try with an unnecessary attempt to run out of their 22. The kick was from wide out but Ueckermann directed it perfectly. Sedgley Park won by 46-27 but had conceded a season's maximum five tries on their home patch.

Goal kicking apart, the Lions were at last looking as though they could be competitive against any team in the division and their supporters began to lose that long-term feeling of being second-class citizens.

**Sedgley Park:** Pete Roberts; Ross Bullough, Jim Naylor, Carlos Hassan, John Lowden; Ryno Ueckermann, Dave McCormack (Chris Wilkinson); Gareth Roberts, Richard Oxley, Huw Thomas, Paul Arnold, Willie Stockdale, Mark Lloyd (Tim Fourie), Ken Yates, Richard Senior.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Scott Read, Peter Roberts, Lloyd Warner, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Sam Rees; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin, Phil Greenbury (Matt Davies *temp*), Dave Campton, Tim Stannard (Glen Carson), Lee Crofts, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss (Steve Smith). *Man of The Match: Not awarded.*

**Referee:** Andrew Vertigan.

On Monday 15<sup>th</sup> December Lions Hon Secretary, Mal Malik was suspended from being involved with the administration of a club for 18 months, having admitted a charge of conduct prejudicial to the interests of the RFU and the game, by failing to ensure that the rules of a Sportsmatch scheme were carried out in accordance with the conditions and regulations. He would be appealing against the judgment of the RFU disciplinary panel that met in Coventry on that day. The club said that no official statement would be made until the appeal had been heard.

With the annual Boxing Day charity friendly game between Rugby and Coventry having been postponed, there would be only one more game before Christmas. That was the visit of Stourbridge to Webb Ellis Road on 20<sup>th</sup> December. Stourbridge were in the same division as Rugby in the very first year of league competition and were the only club to beat them in that first promotion season. It was also Stourbridge's first visit to Rugby FC since 20<sup>th</sup> December 1879.

The Lions had another new back on view; this time Scott Read, a loan player from Pertemps Bees. Read started at centre with Pete Roberts filling in for the unfit Gareth Collins. Steve Smith started at No.8 with Eddie Simkiss

moving into the second row and Tim Stannard sitting on the bench. After the impressive display in Manchester, the Rugby fans were hoping for an early Christmas present.

Rugby played into the wind at the start and some early kicks for position failed to find touch. Stourbridge nicknamed 'Dourbridge' by website match reporter Don Townend, were intent on spoiling Rugby's possession by any means possible and, although they gave away penalties, it still curbed the flow of the Lions game. To make matters worse Jon Boden had to leave the field early on with a muscle strain and was replaced by Tim O'Shea. In the subsequent reshuffle Lloyd Warner went to fullback and Sam Stoop to fly half. Eventually Rugby were awarded a kickable penalty that was converted by Stoop. After 20 minutes of uninspiring play Spencer Brown lit things up with a blistering run that sent Warner in for a try, but Stoop's conversion was wide of the mark.

Stour pressure then forced Rugby into conceding penalties, one of which the visitors decided to kick for goal. Ex-Rugby fly half Craig Jones had no difficulty in securing the three points. Phil Greenbury, also with a back problem, came off and Matt Davies took his place. Stour raised the pressure again and collected another series of penalties, this time culminating in a try for lock Neil Mitchell. Jones' conversion kick was remarkable in that it hit a post, bounced down just in front of the posts, bounced up again above the crossbar, landed on the bar and then dropped over. Fortunately the touch judges had been watching carefully and declared it void. Just before half time Neil Mitchell was sin-binned for persistent illegal spoiling. A score of 8-8 was just a little disappointing for the home support.

As Rugby returned with a following wind, Pete Roberts went very close to scoring, and it was not long before they had kicked a penalty to touch and, with a perfect catch and drive, Pig Brittin was able to touch down. Stoop's kick drifted badly in the gusty wind. Stourbridge replied without much delay when the Lions conceded a penalty from a kickable position and Craig Jones needed no further invitation to register three points. Just after that Rugby's pattern of play seemed to suddenly disintegrate with poor positioning, feeble set piece play and the frequent taking of wrong options. Maybe they all suddenly had Christmas shopping on their minds. Not that Stour were any better, and the game finally petered out with no further additions to the Lions winning score of 13-11.

The fans had got their Christmas present but the wrapping paper was a little torn and there were no ribbons or bows attached.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Peter Roberts, Scott Read, Lloyd Warner, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C) (Tim O'Shea), Sam Rees; Rhidian Booth, Jason

Brittin, Phil Greenbury (Matt Davies), Dave Campton, Eddie Simkiss (Tim Stannard), Lee Crofts, Alex Nash, Steve Smith. *Man of The Match: Not awarded.*

**Stourbridge:** John Bressington; Toby Wilson (Peter Shaw), Cameron Mitchell, Marcus Cook (C), John Hall; Craig Jones, Sam Viggers; Adam Sturdy (Jim Hadfield), Carl Southwell, Virgil Hartland, Paul Baker, Neil Mitchell (James Tideswell), Gareth Taylor, Paul Meadow, Julian Horrobin.

**Referee:** Tim Wigglesworth.

Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> December was a rest day for National Division 2 clubs, but some of their players were part of an England Counties team that lost 18-27 to France Amateurs at Henley RFC's ground. Some of Rugby's players had been part of the original squad but none were in the final team, however, former Lion, Dave Muckalt, now playing for Macclesfield, was selected at No.8.

There was some big news in the Christmas week Rugby Advertiser and the Coventry Telegraph Pink that followed it. Paul "Judge" Rendall had resigned as the Lions Director of Coaching after his 14-month tenure of the position, citing personal reasons for his resignation. The club management said that Assistant coach, Brett Taylor would take charge until a successor was appointed. The Cov Pink reported a rumour that former All Black captain, Wayne Shelford was in the running for the post. There was also a suggestion that the very popular Ben Wheeler, recently a new Cambridge Blue, might return to the Lions in the New Year.

After a shaky start, with injury problems creating trouble for an already wobbly pack of forwards, the Lions turned things round and finished the first half of their league programme with an almost balanced account. With six games won and seven lost they were in tenth place in the table, but neither Esher, Newbury nor Rosslyn Park, below them, were looking doomed, as were the bottom club Lydney. At the top end Sedgley Park were six points clear of Wharfedale with Harrogate and Nottingham snapping at Dale's heels.

Rugby's first game of the second half, away to Wharfedale, was definitely classed as a difficult encounter as the Dalesmen were still a promotion possibility. What is more they were smarting from their recent defeat in Rugby and they were still looking for their first win against the Midlanders

In the Zurich Premiership Bath were at the top with 12 wins out of 13 and Rotherham were bottom with 13 games lost and a solitary bonus point; Leicester were fourth from bottom. In National Division 1 Worcester were

three points ahead of Orrell at the top with Penzance & Newlyn and Manchester in the bottom two places.

Both Jon Boden and Phil Greenbury were still sidelined with their back injuries and were replaced by Sam Stoop and Matt Davies. Tim Stannard returned to the second row and Eddie Simkiss went to the bench, where Simon Black, now recovered from glandular fever, joined him. In Boden's absence Lee Crofts was captain. Wharfedale were at full strength. There had been snow and frost warnings and Dale had covered their pitch with tarpaulin overnight and this had produced a surface with a greasy, shallow top on a hard base; it was far from ideal.

Foothold problems were demonstrated early on as Tim O'Shea, Lions goal kicker for the day, missed a straightforward penalty within five minutes of the start. Dale's first try was somewhat fortuitous as, having defended their line from corner to corner, a deflected clearance kick dropped in goal and Johnathan Davies was able to pounce on it; David Pears had no difficulty with the conversion.

Rugby had to defend for most of the first half but they got the occasional break and one such raiding party ended with Matt Davies being driven over for a try, albeit without Steve Smith's bulk as he was in the sin bin. The conversion was missed but the next kick, a penalty for Dale, went over. Johnathan Davies took this as the collision prone Pears was recovering from a late flattening by Sam Stoop, who consequently changed places with Smith in the sin bin. The score after 40 minutes was 10-5 and the Lions were still in touch.

In the second half the struggle for supremacy resumed but the Lions were again handicapped by missed opportunity. A penalty kick at goal was wide and an attacking lineout was lost. Ben Wade, who collected a yellow card for his effort, thereby making it one for each game with Rugby this season, prevented Gareth Collins from following up his fly kick. Lions' replacements had been used for injury purposes fairly early in the game and with fifty minutes gone all four had been called upon.

David Lister was Dale's second yellow cardholder, but Rugby failed to capitalise on the advantage and after 74 minutes had elapsed they conceded a penalty that Davies kicked to increase Dale's lead. Jason Brittin's sin bin offence was, like Stoop's, a high tackle and that did not help Rugby's cause. With time disappearing Rugby committed defensive errors and presented Dale with try opportunities that were snapped up by Jim Ogden and Paul Evans, neither of which was converted. The final score of 23-5 flattered the home side: the Lions won the yellow card game 3-2.

**Wharfedale:** Andrew Hodgson (C); Chris Malherbe, Johnathan Davies, Andrew Baggett, Gareth Johnson (Pedram Salashouri); David Pears, Sam Cottrell; Philip Peel (Fraser Lovatt), James Ogden, Neil Dickenson (Craig Ingram), David Lister, Anthony Capstick, Anthony Jackson (Paul Evans), Hedley Verity, Ben Wade.

**Rugby:** Lloyd Warner; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts, Tim O'Shea, Spencer Brown (Eddie Simkiss *temp*); Sam Stoop, Sam Rees (Dan South); Rhidian Booth (Simon Black), Jason Brittin, Matt Davies, Dave Campton, Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts (C) (Glen Carson then Eddie Simkiss), Alex Nash, Steve Smith. *Man of The Match: Not awarded.*

**Referee:** Alan Hughes.

In the week before the first home game of the New Year the Lions announced the name of their new Director of Coaching, who would be taking charge with immediate effect. It was of course, none other than Wayne "Buck" Shelford, the man who had been part of the All Blacks side that won the inaugural Rugby World Cup at Eden Park back in 1987. He had played one game at Webb Ellis Road in February 1993 while playing for Northampton, when his team were fortunate to scrape a 7-13 win.

Moseley were the New Year's beginners in Rugby and, in view of what had happened at Bournbrook in November, the Lions were looking for a payback day. There was always the added incentive of impressing the new boss on his first day at the office. Apart from the long term injured, the Lions were only missing Phil Greenbury, but there was a new man on the bench. Toby Handley, a former Coventry scrum half had joined the Rugby squad. One surprise selection was Spencer Brown at fullback with Scott Read on the wing.

Rugby scored a try almost from the kick-off as Steve Smith ran back with the Moseley clearance and, from the ensuing ruck, Lloyd Warner danced his way through the Mose defence to make 35 metres to the touchdown. Jon Boden, resuming the kicking duties, failed to convert the try. Rugby kept up the pressure and more chances were missed before a disrupted Moseley scrum allowed Alex Nash to feed the eager Warner who split the visitor's defence for try number two. It was under the posts and Boden's kick was a good one. From their restart Moseley capitalised on Lions errors but to no great effect, until a high corner kick eluded everybody except for Stephen Nutt, the Moseley fullback, who took the five points, adding two more with his conversion.

The next Moseley penalty concession set up another scoring kick for Boden and not long afterwards he pocketed another, after Mose offended again. It

was all going swimmingly now with Tim Stannard's lineout take quickly transferred into Sam Rees' hands and a perfect pass to Boden, moving at a speed that left the defence standing still. His conversion was wide but Rugby were 23-7 ahead with only 25 minutes gone. At that point Rugby seemed to lose their grip, and before half time arrived Moseley had scored three more tries from Andy Gray, Paul Cox and Alex Hadley. Nutt only converted one try, but Moseley were now a point ahead at 23-24.

After the break the Lions tightened up their play and put the squeeze on Moseley as the game tended to slow down. During one close encounter at Moseley's end Jason Mellors was despatched to the sin bin and Rugby made changes; Eddie Simkiss for the injured Steve Smith and Toby Handley for Sam Rees. Handley was soon impressing as he sold a perfect dummy before collecting a very quick debut try, thereby restoring Rugby's lead.

More Lions team changes brought on Simon Black and Glen Carson for Matt Davies and Dave Campton. Between then and the final whistle Spencer Brown made a heart-stopping run but it failed to produce a score. His perfect crossfield kick almost saw Gareth Collins in the points but, from the tackle, the ball was whipped away and across the Moseley line by Warner to complete his hat trick; Boden's kick was again wide. Moseley pressed for an equalising score but the Lions held on for a deserved win at 35-24.

**Rugby:** Spencer Brown; Gareth Collins, Lloyd Warner, Peter Roberts, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Sam Rees (Toby Handley); Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin, Matt Davies (Simon Black), Dave Campton (Glen Carson), Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts, Alex Nash, Steve Smith (Eddie Simkiss). *Man of The Match: Backs: Lloyd Warner - Forwards: Dave Campton.*

**Moseley:** Stephen Nutt; Andy Gray (Simon Brading), Byron Vivien, Paul Cox, James Aston; Ollie Thomas, Gareth Taylor; Paul Coles (Dean Bick), Adam Caves, Alan Low (Mammanoir Samra), Alex Hadley, Charlie Daniell, David Hunt, Jason Mellors (C), Mark Evans.

**Referee:** Tim Wigglesworth

It was interesting to note that Shelford's appointment as Director of Coaching at Rugby and a report on the game took up most of the National League column of the following Monday's Daily Telegraph. A rare mention in a national paper, and it was good news rather than bad.

That Monday was also the date fixed for Mal Malik's appeal, which duly took place. The appeal was disallowed and the original judgement remained unaltered. The club now issued the following statement: -

“The board of Directors of the Rugby Lions Football Club would like to put on record their deep disappointment at the disciplinary action taken against Mal Malik, Rugby Lions Secretary, and total dismay at the Rugby Football Union over the handling of this case.

The facts are that the project did get off to a fractured start in early 2002, because of administrative delays by Sportsmatch and problems experienced by the main sponsor. The Rugby lions contacted designated players approved by the RFU put them through coaching schemes and child protection courses in readiness for the scheme. In early part of 2002, various schools in Rugby were contacted and aspects of the programme delivered, up to the summer term. The season 2002/03, started poorly for the Lions with virtually a new squad, but poor results and financial constraints put severe pressure on the club’s resources, resulting in the schools project not being delivered satisfactorily, by the contracted officers.”

The Lions offered to re-launch and continue the original scheme at their own cost at the start of the rugby season, 2003/4. Indeed, in the autumn of 2003, schools coaching took place under the auspices of the then Director of Coaching, Paul Rendall. It is a great shame that this episode and the way it has been handled will deprive Rugby schoolchildren of continuing rugby coaching in England’s World Cup winning season.

The Director’s would like to point out that at the behest of the Rugby Football union and after certain assurances, Sportsmatch were repaid in full, the £35,000 they originally put into the project. We concede that the original scheme was not delivered to the high standards we would normally aspire to, but there were a number of mitigating circumstances.

Mal Malik, as Lions Chief executive at the time, and a co-signatory to the original application has been unfairly singled out, and made a scapegoat to appease Sportsmatch. It is to his great credit, that he has not apportioned any blame or pointed a finger to the many others who were paid to oversee, deliver and administer the project.

Rugby saw its first real snow of the winter during the week but it soon became slushy and a day later it had disappeared. There was overnight frost on the Friday but the sun was shining the next morning when the Lions set off for Beeston and the return game with Nottingham. Steve Smith had a calf injury from the previous game and was replaced by Eddie Simkiss. Spencer Brown was not available (it was rumoured that he was going back to Bedford) so Scott Read took his place and Sam Stoop was fullback. Greenbury was still not fit. Returnees, Phil Reed, back from Exeter, and Rhys Williams, back from Llanelli, were on the bench with Glen Carson and Phil Skillen.

There was a stiff wind blowing and it was blowing in the Lions faces for the first half, but they made a good start in setting up a lineout near Nottingham's 22. The ball was won but as it was moved infield it was dropped and Nottingham eventually cleared. That signalled the beginning of a long period of defensive operations for the visitors with possession being hard to come by. Numerous attacks were battled to a standstill, but on four occasions before half time Rugby conceded penalties in kickable positions. David Jackson, standing in for the injured Neil Stenhouse, missed the first but the other three were made to count. What little ball came Lions way was spilled or turned over and lost, so at half time the score was 9-0 against them.

Rugby would have the wind in their favour for the second half, so now they could surely put some points on the board, and get ahead of Nottingham. Or so their supporters thought. However, although the Lions had more ball Nottingham were dogged in their defence. Matt Davies was unlucky when his try was disallowed for his having bumped into a fellow player. There was one long period where Rugby, within the 22 moved the ball from side to side across the Nottingham line only to finally knock on. In retrospect early movement of the ball to Collins in space on his wing might have done the trick.

As seems inevitable in these situations, Nottingham picked up a loose ball in the next attack and their No.8, Mark Easter eventually crashed over for the game's first try, neatly converted by Jackson. It was the reserve fly half who, benefiting from another Lions handling error was able to cross for Notts' second try, which he also converted. That completed the scoring, leaving Nottingham with a 23-0 win; 18 of the points being contributed by Jackson. Unusually, the Lions took no penalty kicks at goal, but Nottingham did not give many away either.

**Nottingham:** Will Logan; Josh Kay (Warren Coles), Neil Starling, Alan Cook, Ben Murphy; David Jackson, Jun Shaw; Neil Fowkes (Sam Moore), Jo Duffey, Jim Fallon (Nick King), Craig Hammond (C), Ben Blackwall, Paul Thompson, Richard Lloyd, Mark Easter.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts (Phil Reed), Lloyd Warner, Scott Read; Jon Boden (C), Toby Handley; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Rhys Williams), Matt Davies (Glen Carson), Dave Campton, Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss (Phil Skillen). *Man of The Match: Tim Stannard - Mentions for Lee Crofts and the other forwards.*

**Referee:** Eric Woodmason.

With only Newbury winning, out of the clubs below Rugby in the league table, the Lions position was unchanged, but the fact that Newbury beat Harrogate

at Monks Lane was an advance warning signal in for the Lions' visit there on 31<sup>st</sup> January.

The big news this weekend was the announcement by England captain Martin Johnson that he was to retire from international rugby. Saturday's visitors were Esher who were out to avenge their home defeat by Rugby in November, while at the same time attempting to get away from the relegation zone. There were a few new arrivals to the squad who, it was hoped, could be tried out in a mid-week 2<sup>nd</sup> XV game against Nottingham Corsairs at Webb Ellis Road. Unfortunately Nottingham had to cancel, having sustained too many injuries to their Academy team in its weekend game with Harlequins.

It was confirmed during the week that Lloyd Warner would be returning to Wales. The main reason for his departure was his father's ill health. Rumours about Spencer Brown's departure were put on hold, as he was selected in his usual position, but Gareth Collins was left out with Pete Roberts moving to the other wing, to let newcomer Alan Mitchell take up a centre pairing with Scott Read. Lloyd Warner benched with Phil Reed. Steve Smith returned to No.8 at Eddie Simkiss' expense.

Rugby were quickly on the attack but could not find a way through and, when the ball was lost, their defence was too thin. Esher broke through, but Nash Shumba, their hefty winger, knocked on over the Lions' line when he tried to gather a grubber kick. The let-off was only temporary as, from a scrum Esher moved the ball crossfield for wing Piers Gregory to touch down; brother John's conversion bounced back off the post. Jon Boden's opportunity to give Rugby some penalty points veered right of the posts, but his conversion of Steve Smith's try was good. For a few minutes at 7-5, the Lions led for the only time in the game before Toby Clouston, replacing the injured Luke Smith at number ten, crashed through to score Esher's try number two: John Gregory made no mistake with this kick.

It was not long before Rugby clawed back three points with another Boden penalty kick but, as ever, Esher also bounced back to greater effect. This time a forward surge and fast back play saw Shumba score the try he had threatened earlier; Gregory, J, now on target, duly added the extra points. Rugby's attempts to break through the Esher defence were thwarted each time and in the process Gregory kicked another penalty. It was Esher's loss of a ball in attack that sent Dave Campton on a charge and from the resulting tapped penalty, Toby Handley chipped over the defensive wall to regather and score Rugby's second try. Boden converted but his drop goal attempt, just prior to the break, flew lower than the Wright brothers' first attempt at powered flight. Rugby were still in touch at 17-22, but Esher looked more like winners. Smith hobbled off and Simkiss took over for the rest of the game.

Esher took little time to emphasise their superiority in the second half, as they attacked from the kick-off. The mighty Shumba led the way and Jon Gregory was the try scorer, but this time his conversion evaded the space between the posts. The attacks continued and so did the Lions defence. Then a turnover following from a Boden hit was lost to a penalty award for a Matt Davies misdemeanour, and Jon Gregory's kick racked the visitor's score up to 30. Davies sinned again as he attempted to stop Esher's tapped penalty at source, and was yellow carded for his audacity. At the next scrum Simon Black came on and Alex Nash departed to restore the front row. A classic Spencer Brown move saw him cut through, but he was held a metre short, but Esher's offside under the posts gave Lions a penalty that Boden converted with ease.

Phil Reed replaced Pete Roberts, and it was not long before Davies returned, with Black and Nash going back to square one. Having kept Esher out and added three points whilst down to 14 men, the Lions 15 were unable to prevent a concerted attack. This ended with Paddy Seymour's try and, adding Gregory's conversion that put Esher way ahead at 20-37. With not long to go Simon Black came on for Rhidian Booth and Lloyd Warner made his final bow courtesy of Scott Read. Rugby mounted some late pressure and Davies got over from short range; Boden's kick made it 27-37. Late in stoppage time popular flanker, Alex Nash's 40-metre run got him in at the corner, but the conversion was too difficult and when the whistle came the score was 32-37.

It had been an exciting game that had lasted 98 minutes with eight extra in the first half and ten in the second. Rugby's failure to win made the next few games more important, as Moseley picked up two points at Sedgley Park and Rosslyn Park picked up one at Harrogate. Lydney, whose only victory had been in the Forest of Dean at the expense of Nuneaton, were duly punished when they lost 91-0 at Liberty Way .

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Peter Roberts (Phil Reed), Scott Read (Lloyd Warner), Alan Mitchell, Spencer Brown; Jon Boden (C), Toby Handley; Rhidian Booth (Simon Black), Jason Brittin, Matt Davies (Simon Black *temp*), Dave Campton, Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts, Alex Nash, Steve Smith (Eddie Simkiss). *Man of The Match:* Toby Handley –backs; Alex Nash – forwards.

**Esher:** Jon Gregory; Nash Shumba, Ed Jennings, Ross Jennings, Piers Gregory; Luke Smith (Toby Clouston), John Paul O'Reilly (Graham Barr); Duncan Cormack, Mark Bennett (Fergus Gallagher), Jeff Smith (Paddy Seymour), Ed Mallett, Mark Butterworth, Jack Davison, Glyn Dewhurst (C), Chris Wilkins.

**Referee:** Nick Williams

In the run up to the last weekend in January, the whole country experienced the coldest spell of weather all winter. Snow fell in most places on Wednesday and Thursday, but it was the Wednesday snow that created chaos in the Midlands, with some journey home times increased by a factor of ten or more. Training was badly affected as well, but by Friday evening the temperature had shot up again, and by Saturday morning it was pouring with rain and blowing a gale. The rain and wind had also taken up residence at Newbury and the supporters endured a wet afternoon. The teams had the mud to contend with as well. There were several changes in the Lions line-up with five of the previous starters missing. Spencer Brown had finally departed for Bedford and, apart from Mitchell (unavailable) the others were injured. Phil Reed made his first start and new signing from Leicester, former Lions Colt Roman Piotrowski was on the bench. Glen Carson replaced Matt Davies and Gareth Collins returned on the wing.

Newbury had the benefit of the strong wind in the first half and for most of it they pressurised Rugby in and around their own 22, but with only five minutes gone, on what turned out to be a rare break in the opposite direction, the Lions new scrum half scored a try, his third in four games: Jon Boden added the two points. Newbury were quick to reply with a penalty goal from Mal Roberts. Rugby then defended well and kept Newbury out for long periods, but failed to turn them over. Ironically it was the loss of Rugby's own scrum that led to the Blues first try from Dave Lubans and Roberts' conversion put Newbury ahead by 10-7. The visitors had one more chance but lost out to a penalty that moved Newbury back to Rugby's end, where a further infringement provided Mal Roberts with his second penalty goal. Then it was half time, the score was 13-7 and the players were given ten minutes to clean up.

Everyone expected that with the wind at their backs, Rugby would use it to pressurise Newbury, but that is not how it worked out. The Lions first attack stuttered and though they did win a penalty, successfully kicked by Boden, Newbury soon regained possession and held on to it. Steadily making ground by pick and drive, mixed with close passing, the Blues pushed the Lions back and won themselves a penalty kick that Mal Roberts converted for 16-10. Whenever Rugby did secure the ball it was soon lost by kicks failing to find touch or by poor passing, so that Newbury were able to resume their "keep-ball" ploy. An injured Gareth Collins was replaced by Roman Piotrowski and Simon Black took over from Glen Carson. Rhys Williams for Jason Brittin and Phil Skillen for Tim Stannard completed the replacements toward the end but, in spite of a late concerted effort, Newbury's citadel remained intact and they earned two valuable points.

**Newbury:** Joe Czerpak; Tom Holloway, Gary Leadbeater (Phil Price), Mal Roberts, Damien Laven; Fraser Jones, Marcus Macluggage; Rob Faulkner (Simon Carver), Rob Scothern, Neil Collins (Roy Davies), Chris Hart, Tom Radbourne, Luke Waters (Simon Jenkins), Richard Wood, Dave Lubans.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins (Roman Piotrowski), Peter Roberts, Alex Taylor, Phil Reed; Jon Boden (C), Toby Handley; Rhidian Booth, Jason Brittin (Rhys Williams), Glen Carson (Simon Black), Dave Campton, Tim Stannard (Phil Skillen), Lee Crofts, Alex Nash, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Referee:** Paul Dix.

Rugby's second half performance was a great disappointment and it did not augur well for the new Shelford/Taylor coaching team whose record was now, played 4, won 1 and lost 3.

Moseley beat Wharfedale at Bournbrook and, surprisingly, Lydney got their second win of the season at the expense of Harrogate, whose fall from grace continued. At the top of the table Nottingham defeated Sedgley Park to reinforce their challenge for first place. Esher's game against Stourbridge was postponed but Newbury's win moved them above Rugby on points difference.

Other rugby news included the resignation of Dean Richards as Leicester's Coaching Director. The Tigers had suffered more than most with the loss of international players to the RWC and with added injury problems they were in the bottom half of the Zurich Premiership. The final nail in Richards' coffin was when they were eliminated from the Heineken Cup for the first time at the group stage. As had been widely predicted, Sir Clive Woodward, in company with Bill Beaumont, was chosen as the manager of the squad for the forthcoming British Lions tour of New Zealand. He would, of course, be facing as his opposite number the previous tour manager, Graham Henry, the new manager of the All Blacks.

Another intriguing story was news that a South African consortium was talking to Wimbledon RFC, a founder member of the RFU with a view to purchase. Wimbledon, lying third in London 2 South, would ultimately become a South African London exiles club in the Premiership, a position facilitated by South Africans now being treated as EU-qualified employees. It later emerged that former England, Harlequins and London Irish coach, Dick Best (now a player agent) was acting for them as a consultant. In a press interview he suggested that the South Africans might realise their goal more quickly by buying a higher placed club such as Birmingham & Solihull, and moving it to London.

The weather continued its change over the weekend so by the middle of the week it was more like springtime, but the downside was a deluge of rain with attendant flooding of the River Severn and many rivers in Wales. Saturday saw the temperature falling again but the sun returned.

The Lions team selected to face visitors Rosslyn Park exhibited several changes, notably the absence of the excellent Dave Campton who had been recalled from loan by the new coaching management at Coventry. He was replaced by ex-Bedford newcomer Steve Halsey. Phil Greenbury returned from injury for his first start since December and Alan Mitchell was back in the centre.

Rugby were looking to win this game to ease their relegation worries but they made an ominously poor start. After a period of early possession when Park conceded a number of penalties a bad pass put the ball in Park's hands and within a short while Richard Jackson was put over for the opening try, converted by the skilful boot of Sam Howard. The visitor's pack was getting the upper hand and it played a large part in preventing forward movement by the Lions.

Both sides missed penalty goal kicks then, after a Park attacking lineout had been thwarted, Tim Stannard was sin-binned for punching. Park set up another lineout from the penalty kick and this time Russell King (Stannard's prior target) was driven over for try number two: Howard's kick drifted wide. Park were penalised shortly after the restart and this time Jon Boden's kick bisected the posts. Half time arrived with the score on 3-12 with work to do for the home team.

Apart from the temporary loss of Crofts to a cut and a kick off into touch from Boden, Rugby made a promising start after the break. A free kick awarded for a scrum offence was tapped by Sam Stoop to break through Park's defence where Boden was on hand to take the ball over for a try, but he was too far out to secure the extra two points. Not long afterwards Phil Reed was almost in for try number two, but the referee penalised him for accidental offside. The fractious wind now moved round to favour Rugby and assisted Boden's next two penalty goal kicks that took the score to 14-12 and gave Rugby the lead.

Rugby's pack, with Steve Halsey now run-in, had begun to dominate and as time progressed Rugby's attacks increased in number, but the tries did not come. Gareth Collins came closest as he was caught just a metre short of the line. From another drive by Eddie Simkiss Park went offside and Boden's kick increased Lions lead to 17-12. At the end of the third quarter, Rugby brought on Simon Black, Rhidian Booth, Phil Skillen and new signing Brendan

McIlraith for Greenbury, Davies, Nash and Roberts. The game looked to be secure but into stoppage time the Lions inexplicably continued to play a very open game and the inevitable happened, with Boden's long pass being intercepted by a Park player, who streaked off and, though tackled, was able to feed Neil Wardingley who touched down with ease to tie the scores. Howard's kick was not an easy one, but it was successful and Rosslyn Park won by 17-19.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins, Peter Roberts (Brendan McIlraith), Alan Mitchell, Phil Reed; Jon Boden (C), Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury (Rhidian Booth), Jason Brittin, Matt Davies (Simon Black), Steve Halsey, Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts (Phil Skillen *temp*), Alex Nash (Phil Skillen), Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Rosslyn Park:** Richard Jackson; James Justice, Ross Coul, Martin Ridley, Neil Wardingley; Sam Howard, Mike Friday; Jon Cooke (Richard Cable *temp*), Russell King (Paul Byford), Tom Wells, James Cure, Lee Gibson, Shaun Justice (Oliver Hankey), Graham Boardman (Richard Cable), Robert Sedman.

**Referee:** Richard Philips

This result was a bitter disappointment to the Lions supporters and players alike and would make Wayne Shelford's job of turning round the Lions fortunes a lot more difficult (*in retrospect it was the fatal turning point that led to ultimate relegation*). To make matters worse there were wins for Moseley at Bracknell, and Newbury at Stourbridge.

The day of the Rosslyn Park game marked the presentation of two framed photographs of former Rugby FC 1<sup>st</sup> XV's to the club. These were the two sides (1955/56 and 1956/57) that had been captained by TK Vivien: they had been titled and framed by former Lions official, Roy Batchelor. The 1955/56 team still remains the most successful in the club's history. Both photos are dedicated to the memory of Brian England, a prominent member of both teams, who had died in 2003. His widow Marion with daughters Libby and Vicky joined Roy for lunch before the game.

During the following week that ended with the first round of the Six Nations Championship competition, the daily newspapers once more temporarily turned their attention to rugby union matters, with the usual speculation. England, now minus Martin Johnson (permanently) and Jonny Wilkinson (temporarily) had appointed Lawrence Dallaglio as captain and had recalled Paul Grayson as fly half. Neil Back was discarded and there was only one Leicester player, Ben Kay, in the 22-man squad.

While Ireland travelled to France and Scotland to Wales, the Lions made their way to the Forest of Dean, a pleasure that they had been denied three seasons previously due to foot and mouth disease. Lydney, still with only two wins, languished in bottom place so a Rugby win was mandatory, both to add much needed points and to restore some confidence. As is so frequently the case these days there was yet another new starter in the Lions' ranks. Terry Rahui, a New Zealand fly half with the provenance of Auckland, North Harbour and Munster, was introduced by Wayne Shelford to lessen the burden of multitudinous leadership on the shoulders of Jon Boden. Boden moved to centre and Pete Roberts was benched. Phil Skillen replaced Alex Nash and Matt Davies made his 50<sup>th</sup> appearance.

Rugby's pack dominated early in the match and this feature of the game won them two penalty kicks at goal, Terry Rahui may have been ring rusty but, whatever was the cause, both of his kicks failed to add the points that might well have made the latter part of the game more carefree. Gareth Collins made good two kicks ahead when he outpaced the opposition to register Rugby's first try but its conversion failed. Further attacking moves by the Lions were countered by Lydney tackles, as inaccurate passing slowed them down. By contrast Lydney's (rarer) attacks gained them more ground, though the game was into its second quarter before this was actually in Rugby territory.

After thirty minutes play Rugby lost Matt Davies. Five minutes from the end of the half Rugby executed a backs move. Jon Boden's athleticism redeemed a poor pass and, with Phil Reed as decoy duck, Sam Stoop took the ball and cut through to score his first try of the day. Rahui's conversion kick became his fourth miss of the day. Just before the interval whistle Rugby conceded a kickable penalty and Adam Westall scooped up the points to leave his side trailing by 3-10 at half time.

Rugby resumed where they had left off, and it was Stoop who was in the van. Having failed to secure his chip ahead with clear space to the Lydney try line, he made amends by joining Boden in a neat loop move to score his second try. Rahui gave way to Boden for the conversion kick but misfortune remained hooked to the Lions and no more points accrued. Just before the hour, by which time the Lions' pack was being put under pressure, Lydney were afforded the opportunity to be creative and winger Andy Macrea collected their first try. Westall was unable to secure the conversion from his outlying position and the score remained at 8-15.

As both sides replaced players, Lydney made a concerted effort and dominated play, keeping the visitors penned in their own 22 for the last quarter of an hour. Rugby defended vigorously but not without conceding penalties. With their pack in the driving seat, Lydney chose the lineout route

each time, but Rugby repeatedly kept them at bay. A disrupted Lions scrum occasioned Lydney to scrummage their next penalty, but Rugby mastered that challenge as well, however, with two minutes of normal time to go, Lydney's effort was rewarded. Yet another drive ended with No.8 Brett Scriven diving on the ball for a home try, but it was once more too far out for the conversion to tie the scores. Lydney pressure was maintained and Lions managed to avoid conceding the penalty Lydney were seeking. Rugby won 13-15 but it was another game where the successful kicking of points would have avoided the close finish.

**Lydney:** Adam Westall; Andy Macrea, Lee Johnson, Julian Davies, Charles Vine; Dave Croudace, David Arnott (Tryffan Edwards); Alan Chapman (Duncan Raynor), Nicholas Nelmes, Nicholas Bartlett, James Roberts, Paul Kiely, Regan Turoa, Dean Jenkins (Gavin Groves), Brett Scriven.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop; Gareth Collins, Jon Boden (C), Alan Mitchell, Phil Reed (Peter Roberts); Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury, Jason Brittin (Rhys Williams), Matt Davies (Rhidian Booth), Steve Halsey, Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts, Phil Skillen, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Referee:** Eric Woodmason.

In the Saturday internationals, a stuttering France comfortably despatched an Irish team that, like England, had lost its legendary captain (Keith Wood) and was without its star player (Brian O'Driscoll). While Wales saw off Scotland in the Millennium Stadium. The best game was reserved for Sunday when a further improved Italian team, playing at home, made England work hard initially but never surrendered. Jason Robinson in the centre with Greenwood was pure quality and Paul Grayson kicked to perfection.

The following weekend, when England were away to Scotland, there were no league fixtures so the Lions had a welcome break in which to plan their survival strategy. On Saturday Italy travelled to Paris and held the still-fancied France to 25-0 in the Stade de France, while in the early evening England and Scotland did battle for the Calcutta Cup at Murrayfield. The Scots promoters of the match opened it with a rather intimidating battery of pipers, fireworks and flags followed by a cloudburst of chopped metal foil but, though Scotland's performance was an order of magnitude better than their previous game at Cardiff, England still won comfortably by 13-35.

The much vaunted Welsh were shredded in Dublin on the Sunday afternoon, conceding six tries and losing by 35-15. The new Irish centre pairing of O'Driscoll and D'Arcy was very effective. More bad news for the Lions was the result of the postponed Esher v Stourbridge game that Esher won 23-17, to push Rugby into the third relegation place of Division Two. In the

Premiership Rotherham's lost game against Gloucester confirmed their relegation at the end of the season.

The last week in February saw the return of winter conditions with more snow in many parts of the country accompanied by some penetrating night frosts. Rugby's league game against Nuneaton at Webb Ellis Road was, like the earlier game at Liberty Way, scheduled for the Friday evening, and a pitch inspection on Thursday evening by former Lion Guy Steele Bodger, acting in his role as Panel Referee, deemed it unplayable. With unremitting cold forecast into Saturday the game was called off. The next weekend was reserved for round three of the Six Nations competition so, with Nuneaton unwilling to play on the Friday evening, the game was initially rescheduled for a 2.15pm kick-off on Saturday March 6<sup>th</sup>. This was no good for the original match sponsor, and loss of use of the ground also meant that Rugby Town FC would have to rearrange its Saturday fixture date. After some persuasion Nuneaton did finally agree to play the game on the Friday evening, with a 7.30pm kick-off.

Of the other National Division 2 games scheduled for Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> February, all were played except for Wharfedale v Newbury, which was also rescheduled for 6<sup>th</sup> March. With Park (Rosslyn) losing to Park (Sedgley) in Manchester, Rugby's league position remained unchanged, but Esher's win against Moseley at Bournbrook moved them further away from the Lions.

It was also quarter finals weekend for the Powergen Cup with only Pertemps Bees having made it from the National Division 1 contingent. Sale beat Saracens on Friday evening while on the Saturday, Leeds beat Bath at Headingley and Newcastle won their home game against London Irish. Former Lion Mark Mapletoft was once again playing fly half for the Exiles but his longevity was overshadowed by that of his No.8, Chris Sheasby. On Sunday Wasps entertained Pertemps Bees at High Wycombe and made the classic error of resting some of their big guns, including the new England skipper Lawrence Dallaglio. They paid the price by losing 24-28. When a bee stings its sting is supposed to be torn out and it consequently dies. With Newcastle Falcons away next up, that would probably be the Bees' ultimate fate.

There was no problem with the weather on the Friday evening and at 560, Webb Ellis Road had its largest crowd of the season. There was naturally a big contingent of Nuneaton supporters but there were quite a few spectators from some of the local clubs as well. Rugby's line up was unchanged from that selected for the original date. New fly half, Terri Rahui was in for his first home game and, with Alex Nash returning to the back row, Lee Crofts moved to No.8 with Ed Simkiss going to the bench. Nuneaton's scrum half, Jamie Hamilton was not available and was replaced by newcomer Alex Stajka.

Nuneaton started in fast and furious mode, soon collecting a kickable penalty that Peter Glackin pushed past the posts. This was a minor setback and it was not long before crisp passing put John Munro through Lions defence to feed ex-Lion Jordan Hands who scored the first try of the game. The conversion attempt by Jody Peacock went well wide. A few minutes later, after Nuns had dispossessed the Lions at their own scrum, Hands was in position again to take a scoring pass from another ex Lion, Tristan Prosser-Shaw, but Nuneaton's third kicker, Wayne Holmes was no more fortunate than his predecessors.

Nuneaton's superiority continued and five minutes later after a Prosser-Shaw run had been stopped, the visiting forwards drove Munro over to score try number three. It was Glackin's turn to kick again and this time it went between the posts. As half time approached and Rugby finally began to work their way into the game, they were awarded a kickable penalty but Terri Rahui's kick rebounded back off the upright into Nuneaton hands. At the break Nuns led comfortably by 0-17.

Sam Stoop, who had received a cut eyebrow during the first half, and who had been off twice for repairs was permanently replaced by Roman Piotrowski and it was not long before Glen Carson went on for Phil Greenbury. Rugby began more confidently but still conceded the first points of the half as Nuns Richard Hyslop successfully chased a ball over the Rugby line and, reaching it before it went dead, notched up his side's fourth try; Glackin was off target again with the conversion. Midway through the half Nuneaton lost Darren Garforth and Alex Stajka in quick succession to yellow cards and, after some concerted pressure Eddie Simkiss, who had replaced an injured Alex Nash, scored the Lions first points of the season against the visitors after 140 minutes of trying. Jon Boden's conversion attempt failed.

Rugby lock Steve Halsey also invited the referee's displeasure, and departed for the statutory ten minutes, thus nullifying Rugby's number advantage. Simon Black replaced Rugby's Matt Davies and Nuns gradually slipped on their subs; Director of Rugby, Chris Tarbuck bringing up the rear. With fifteen minutes to go Munro scored his second try for Nuneaton and their fourth kicker, scrum half Stajka added to the lengthening list of missed kicks. The Lions pressed strongly at the end and Lee Crofts got their second try to which Boden added the two points, but the result was by then already decided. Nuns won by 12-27.

**Rugby:** Sam Stoop (Roman Piotrowski); Gareth Collins, Jon Boden (C), Alan Mitchell, Phil Reed; Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury (Glen Carson), Jason Brittin, Matt Davies (Simon Black), Steve Halsey, Tim

Stannard, Alex Nash (Eddie Simkiss), Phil Skillen, Lee Crofts. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Nuneaton:** Jody Peacock (Phil Littlehales); Wayne Holmes, Jason Minshull, Richard Hyslop, Jordan Hands; Pete Glackin, Alex Stajka; Steve Evans, Marek Kwisiuk (Paul Kendrick), Darren Garforth, Andy Goodall, Lee Morley, Tristan Prosser-Shaw (Nicholas Hill), John Munro, Glenn Southwell (Chris Tarbuck).

**Referee:** Trevor Fisher.

Rugby's performance was a definite improvement on their disaster at Liberty Way and they did actually win the second half by 12-10, but it was Nuneaton that played some of the best rugby of the evening, especially during the first half. On the Saturday Wharfedale played their postponed game against Newbury and won 29-16 thereby preventing the Berkshire club from getting further away from the relegation zone.

Round three of the Six Nations saw Scotland experience extreme déjà vu at Stadio Flaminio as they lost to Italy for the second time by 20-14.

The second match on the Saturday brought England back to Twickenham for the first time (proper) since their World Cup win. Their opponents were a fired-up Ireland fresh from the demolition of Wales, and if the new world champions were going to lose a game this was the most likely one. In the event the sweet chariot was overturned, by 13-19, and England clearly missed retired Martin Johnson more than Ireland missed retired Keith Wood. Their lineup was worse than Rugby's on a bad day, and shortage of possession put them right on Ireland's plate. O'Driscoll disappointed but D'Arcy more than made up for that.

On Sunday, France went to Cardiff but the Welsh failed to overcome a French side who, continuing with their current lacklustre style, won 22-29. In so doing they now have only Scotland (Edinburgh) and England (Paris) to beat for a Grand Slam.

Rugby's second game in March took them away to Harrogate at Claro Road. Harrogate had been vying for the leadership of National 2 earlier in the season but had fallen away after Christmas. Nonetheless they were expected to be strong on their home territory. There were a number of changes to the Lions line-up, two of them brought about by injuries incurred against Nuneaton. Sam Stoop had not recovered from a bad facial cut and Alex Nash was out for the rest of the season with a broken collar bone. Alan Mitchell moved to fullback and Brendan McIlraith came in at centre and Eddie Simkiss came into the back row.

Rugby had a stiff breeze at their backs in the first half and managed to make it pay by turning round 820 in the lead, having played with noticeable determination. Fortunately a penalty conceded by Rugby at the kick off, and kicked through the posts by Lee Cholewa for a 3-0 home lead, was unrepresentative of what followed. Terry Rahui began to use the wind to advantage and from one such kick Gate held on and provided Rahui with a chance to level, which he duly accepted. Rugby's first try came from an attacking scrum, whence Alan Mitchell, taking the ball at pace, placed it under the Gate posts; Rahui made it seven. With the Lions pack emulating what they had suffered from their opponents eight at home in September, a dropped rolling maul gave Rahui another successful kick at goal for 3-13.

Gate then got a try, as following a knock-on from the kick off, they drove the scrum to the Rugby posts and then moved the ball out for James Tapster to pick up from a tackle and score, but Cholewa was unable to convert it. The Lions replied immediately as Gate lost the ball in a Simkiss tackle and Glen Carson set the backs on a run. Rahui found Phil Reed in space who ultimately provided Toby Handley with a scoring pass. Rahui's day got better still with a neat conversion before the whistle blew.

For Rugby, with the breeze in their faces, it was all about defence in the second half so they took the field with two new props. They had a bad start, however, and were reminded of their opponent's successful ploys at Webb Ellis Road with Gate's classic touch kick, lineout, drive and try. Peter Taylor was the scorer but Cholewa again failed to convert. This was followed by the concession of a kickable penalty, but Cholewa was still out of luck as it bounced off the post for Stomper Stannard to clear. The Lions now made inroads, and with Gate prop Craig Chapman binned for illegal play, Rugby worked the lineout catch and drive for a Matt Davies touch-down, but Rahui then registered his only missed goal kick.

Harrogate now turned the screw but the Lions stood firm until an unseen obstruction allowed Gate's Jamie Barker through for a try; Cholewa managed to convert this one. An unconventional restart by Rahui allowed Rugby to make several runs at the Gate defence and having conceded a scrum they stole the ball and Eddie Simkiss forced himself over; Rahui converted to bring the score to 20-32. There were other Lions chances but a return to defence was obliged when Matt Davies was yellow carded. Gate eventually got through in the person of Johann Visser whose try was converted by Cholewa. Another penalty goal for Rahui succeeded by another for Cholewa completed the scoring and Rugby held out to win 30-35.

**Rugby:** Alan Mitchell; Peter Roberts (Wilf Barclay), Jon Boden (C), Brendan McIlraith (Matt Richards), Phil Reed; Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Glen

Carson (Phil Greenbury), Jason Brittin, Simon Black (Matt Davies), Steve Halsey, Tim Stannard, Lee Crofts Phil Skillen, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: Terry Rahui.*

**Harrogate:** Ed Smithies; Graeme Sarjeant, Jamie Barker, Matt Duncombe (Johannes Visser), James Tapster; Lee Cholewa, Johann Visser; Paul Gabriel, Mark Erven (Rob Vickers), Craig Chapman (Rob Wilson), Pete Taylor (Nick Beaumont), Johnny Marston, Mike Worden, Steve Hobson, Oliver Cook.

**Referee:** Andrew Vertigan.

Moseley's lost game at Newbury brought Rugby up to their total of 18 points but Rosslyn Park's home win against Wharfedale kept them within one point below the Lions.

On the Wednesday evening Rugby were visited by the Royal Navy team. This, like the other fixtures against the armed forces sides, was classified as a 1<sup>st</sup> XV game but the side contained a mixture of old and new players. Helping out in the second row was the ever-youthful Mark Griffin (debut November 1980) who is normally to be found amongst the Nomads/Tailenders XV. The visitors also included a player of senior years, Bob Armstrong, who had played in the Plymouth side encountered by the Lions in the 1988/89 season.

The two touch judges were visitors from Natal in South Africa.

The visitors outplayed the Lions fifteen with a solid forward effort and some sparkling backs play, notably by their Fijian winger Josh Drawiniu. There was the usual surfeit of replacements, particularly from the Rugby bench. The score at half time was 12-21 with Rugby tries from Roman Piotrowski and Brendan McIlraith, one of them converted by fly half Eric Fransella.

In the second half the Navy sank the Lions with another 28 points to Rugby's solitary try from Danny Facer that Fransella also converted. The Navy scored seven tries. In all, six of them collected by numbers 12, 13 and 14. Their scrum half, Dave Pascoe, converted all seven. The final score was Rugby 19 Royal Navy 49.

**Rugby:** Andy Regan (Tom Turner); Gareth Collins (Chris Murphy), Roman Piotrowski, Brendan McIlraith (Peter Roberts), Matt Richards (Justin Erasmus); Eric Fransella, Ben Williams; Chris King (Eddie Simkiss), Matt Davies (Jamie Tyers), Simon Black, Phil Greenbury, Mark Griffin (Chris King), Alan Screen (Darren Deans), Danny Facer, Tim Stannard.

**Royal Navy:** Dave Jones; Josh Drawiniu, Jamie Caruana, Tom Ryall, Gareth Fear; Dave Sibson, Dave Pascoe; Nick Bartlett (C), Jan Laity, Leighton Yapp (Jason Wallace-Smith), Frazor Pearson (Dom O'Connor), Marsh Cormack, Bob Armstrong (Will Blackett), Matt Packer, Justin Doney (Ben Slatter).

**Referee:** Rob Barber

League games resumed on the following Saturday, this time coinciding with the penultimate round of the Six Nations competition. The Lions visitors were Doncaster, making their first trip to Rugby. The only personnel change to the Rugby fifteen from that which took on Harrogate, was Phil Greenbury's return to the front row, though there were some positional changes in the back five as Lee Crofts moved into the second row and Tim Stannard dropped back to No.8. The weekend was notable for very strong winds that caused some havoc in the southern half of the country. Friday saw them peak in the Midlands but they had lessened only slightly by Saturday afternoon and the game was very much affected as the powerful gusts drove diagonally across the pitch..

Doncaster played with wind advantage in the first half and were soon to have the Lions under pressure in their 22. Eddie Simkiss was a mite unfortunate to be yellow carded for handling in the ruck after barely two minutes and Doncaster opted to scrum the penalty. Lions held the push but in the ensuing play failed to clear the ball and a Donny lineout take sent the ball crossfield for Chris Yates gather it and touch down under the posts. Rob Liley's conversion was declared good. Rugby managed to make ground from the restart and tapped a penalty awarded at a scrum to collect another under Doncaster's posts. Terry Rahui had no problem in kicking the points.

Simkiss returned but even with the extra man the Lions were finding Doncaster more than a handful and their attacks increased in intensity. From one such, the inevitable offside gave Liley his second goal kick which he put between the posts with consummate ease. It was not long before Donny got a second try with wing Richard Briggs finishing off some crisp passing play. A touchline conversion from Liley was just a matter of course. The Lions had a late chance with a determined attack but it was in vain and half time arrived with the score at 3-17.

Rugby now had the elements in their favour and a new set of props, but got themselves into a mix-up at the kick off. Doncaster took the lineout route for a penalty and Simon Greenslade collected the five points. The wind dealt with Liley's kick which bounced back off a post. Matt Richards came on for Brendan McIlraith and Danny Facer replaced Simkiss as the Lions increased the pressure for points. Rugby took the lineout route for their next penalty and Jason Brittin got the ball over from the driven maul, but Rahui's kick blew

away in the wind. There were several other good Lions plays but most of them came to grief, until a run by Richards saw the ball taken by Alan Mitchell who crossed in the corner; the conversion was again missed. Rugby kept up the pressure but the whistle beat them in the end as Doncaster won 13-22.

**Rugby:** Alan Mitchell; Peter Roberts, Jon Boden (C), Brendan McIlraith (Matt Richards), Phil Reed; Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury (Glen Carson, Phil Greenbury), Jason Brittin, Simon Black (Matt Davies), Steve Halsey, Lee Crofts, Eddie Simkiss (Danny Facer), Phil Skillen (Danny Facer *temp*), Tim Stannard. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Doncaster:** Nicholas Wakley; Bradley Hunt, Richard Poskitt (Edward Burrell), Christian Yates, Richard Briggs; Rob Liley, Simon Greenslade; Simon Bunting, Harry Toews, Tau Nealu (Neil Hennessey), Paul Clapham, Edward Norris, Robert Ward, John Carter, Mike Brooks (Mark Loneworth).

**Referee:** Dean Richards.

Esher's game at Bracknell was postponed, but Rosslyn Park lost at Moseley and Newbury lost at Nottingham, so Rugby's position in the league table remained unchanged. In the Six Nations games Ireland beat Italy 19-3 in Dublin and France continued their run of wins by beating Scotland 0-31 in Edinburgh, the first time the Scots had been blanked for a very long time. England took on the revived Wales at Twickenham with a need to get back to winning ways while the Welsh were keen to emulate the Irish and to avenge their RWC semi-final defeat. England turned round at half time with a reasonable lead, but conceded two early tries to fall behind for a while before finally getting their act together in the last quarter and winning 31-21.

Apart from Bracknell and Esher playing their postponed game from the previous weekend (a win for Esher that moved them further away from Rugby) there were no games played in National Division 2 on the last weekend of the Six Nations competition, when all three games were played on the Saturday. Italy were noticeably subdued against Wales in Cardiff and the home side won easily by 44-10. Scotland fought fast and furiously against Ireland at Lansdowne Road but, with O'Driscoll and D'Arcy flourishing, Ireland had no trouble in securing a well-deserved Triple Crown with a 37-16 win.

The scheduled grand finale, France v England in Paris, was left until 9.00pm (2000 hrs GMT) and it proved to be a titanic struggle with France taking the first half by 21-3 with a powerful performance. England were but a pale shadow of the 2002/03 team, conceding the sort of tries that they previously inflicted on others. They made a better fist of it in the second half and got to

24-21 before the final whistle ended their attempts to level the scores. Had England won it would hardly have been a just result. So as England were sent home to think again by Scotland's ancient ally, Les Bleus celebrated their fourth Grand Slam in eight seasons.

The Lions returned to work on Saturday April 3<sup>rd</sup> after their weekend off with another must-win home game. Bracknell were the visitors, whose hooker, ex-Lions Colt Andrew Morris, having moved to the Berkshire club in December, had come on as a replacement for Rugby during the game at Lily Hill Park back in September. The Lions fielded a side with only three changes from the one that played against Doncaster. Long term injury victim, Steve Stewart returned to the second row, Matt Davies replaced Simon Black in the front row and Matt Richards made his first start on the wing, with Pete Roberts replacing Brendan McIlraith in the centre. Eddie Simkiss dropped to the bench with Gareth Collins. Unusually the referee for this game was Dean Richards who had refereed Rugby's last (home) game against Doncaster.

Rugby had the benefit of an increasingly gusty wind in the first half but the side were starved of possession. Bracknell made progress with good ball retention and frequent use of rolling mauls, a ploy that they used throughout the game. After 14 minutes had passed Rugby got a chance to be creative and a sublime passage of play took place. The ball was swiftly moved through their backs to end with a try for Phil Reed, his first since returning from Exeter. Terry Rahui added the conversion and Rugby were in the lead.

Nevertheless, the Stags continued to pressurise the Lions and force errors with concomitant penalties or free kicks. It was from one such incident that Bracknell's Craig Turvey broke through a loose defence to score under the posts; Neil Hallett converted with ease to level the scores. Well into the second quarter Rahui's attempted long distance penalty kick went wide and with a similar attempt by the usually accurate Hallett also going off course the score remained tied 7-7 at half time.

After the restart Rugby began to increase their influence on the game, but without ultimate success. A penalty for crossing allowed Bracknell to get back into the Lions half and it was during the process of moving the ball back out of their territory that a loose pass was intercepted by the Stags' No.8 Chris Shipway. From that position he was able to stroll under the Lions posts and place it neatly between them. Hallett added the two points to put Bracknell in front by 7-14.

Three quarters of the way through the game Reed finished off another crisp passing move to get the Lions second try, but Rahui's kick against the wind drifted out. Eddie Simkiss replaced Steve Stewart and Gareth Collins came on for a bloodied Pete Roberts, who did not return. The Lions deficit was now

just two points and it was not long before a Bracknell illegality gave Rahui a chance to bridge the gap. The kick was good and Rugby moved ahead by 15-14. Hallett had two goal kicks before the end of the game and unfortunately for Rugby he succeeded with the second one. Rugby pressed very hard at the end and a winning try was twice just denied. Ironically they had been awarded a scrum on Bracknell's goal line when the final whistle denied them the chance to drive over, and Bracknell won a close game by 15-17.

**Rugby:** Alan Mitchell; Matt Richards, Jon Boden (C), Peter Roberts (Gareth Collins), Phil Reed; Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury (Glen Carson), Jason Brittin, Matt Davies, Steve Stewart (Eddie Simkiss), Steve Halsey, Lee Crofts, Phil Skillen (Danny Facer), Tim Stannard. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Bracknell:** Phil Friel; Andrew Banks, James Ogilvie-Bull, Ben Nowak, Chris Perkins; Neal Hallett, Craig Turvey; Giles Wallis, Andrew Morris, Greg Anstead (C), Kenny Barry, Lee Appleby (Jason Borchers), Mike Blackburn, Ladislav Vondrasek, Chris Shipway (Jay King).

**Referee:** Dean Richards

Having lost this game, Rugby were to all intents and purposes relegated. With two games still to be played they could survive mathematically if they won against Stourbridge (A) and Sedgley Park (H) and Esher lost against Rosslyn Park (H) and Lydney (A). Such an eventuality, though not impossible, would have obtained very long odds from a bookmaker. The other results in the division, with wins for both Sedgley Park and Nottingham, left each of them needing only one more win to guarantee joint promotion.

In National Division 1 Coventry lost badly at London Welsh, with an impressive game for the Exiles by ex-Lion Tim Collier. As Henley beat Orrell, Coventry ended the day six points behind them in the second relegation place. Worcester at the other end of the table trounced Bristol to be champions for the first time and to secure promotion to the Zurich Premiership, subject to a final facilities audit.

On the following Tuesday the last of the three Armed Services teams, The Army, were the next visitors to Webb Ellis Road. They had just returned from a South African tour and were soon to play the Royal Navy in the annual inter-services competition, so their team was at full strength. In view of this a larger number of the Lions 1<sup>st</sup> XV regulars featured in the Rugby side. The replacements bench was well-stocked with 12 set to come on during the game. The Army side contained one familiar name, that of Paul Littlehailes currently playing for Nuneaton.

It was clear from the very start of the game that the Army side was very much up for it and they collected their first try after only a few minutes. It was their flanker Satala, one of the Fijians who wriggled through the Rugby defence. Fullback Mal Roberts kicked the conversion. Rugby were not starved of possession but all too often contrived to lose it by poor ball protection at rucks or by allowing opposition players to rip it off them. The Lions solitary try of the evening was scored by Jon Boden midway through the first half when the Army were 0-15 ahead, but Terri Rahui missed the conversion. At half time the score was 5-22.

The second half continued in much the same vein as the first, but as the time wore on and the rate of change of Lions staff on the pitch gathered pace, the Army's play burgeoned, so that by the end they had scored seven tries in all, with four of them converted. With one penalty goal added the final score was 5-46. It was an entertaining game and post match opinion was generally agreed that the Army would probably see off the Navy at Twickenham.

**Rugby:** Andy Regan (John Fletcher); Gareth Collins (Alan Mitchell), Jon Boden (C), Brendan McIlraith (Tim Douglas), Roman Piotrowski (Matt Richards); Terri Rahui, Phil Reed (Ben Williams); Glen Carson (Darren Deans), Matt Davies, Phil Greenbury (Jason Brittin), Marcus Reilly (Lee Crofts), Steve Stewart (Steve Halsey), Ben Smith (Joel Stannard), Wilf Barclay (Phil Skillen), Eddie Simkiss.

**The Army:** Mal Roberts: J Roko (Bruno Green), Paul Littlehales, Ed Smith, M Lacey; H Graham, G Slade-Jones; Simon Trewethey, C Bentley, M Stewart (Chris Budgen), A Smith, D Ball, A Satala (B Hughes), A Dawling, C Scarf.

**Referee:** Leo Burton

Half a century ago the team, with a few newcomers, some second team journeymen and the occasional up-and-coming schoolboy would have been heading for Yorkshire or the south west peninsula for an Easter tour, but this Easter weekend, Saturday April 10<sup>th</sup> 2004 was the day of the last away league game of the season. It was though, only a relatively short journey across the Midlands to Stourton Park, home of Stourbridge RFC, and it was the Lions first visit there since 1987.

After a series of wind-affected games the weather at Stourbridge was quite benign with no wind no rain and not much sun either, but it was good weather for playing rugby football. The Lions team showed two enforced changes with Lee Crofts and Pete Roberts (injured) being replaced by Ben Smith and Gareth Collins. Apart from his appearance in the recent game against the

Army, it was Ben's first 1<sup>st</sup> XV game since he played at Newbury the previous November.

Rugby hearts were warmed by an early try as Stour dropped the kick-off ball and, from the scrum, Toby Handley scooted down the blindside to score a try within the first minute. Terry Rahui's kick came back off the post but his 35 metre penalty kick not long afterwards was a beauty. Stour had not been idle and had looked threatening during the early exchanges without actually getting a score, but their luck did change and a penalty kick by Ben Harvey eventually got them points on the board.

The Lions came back again as, following a jinking run by Gareth Collins, a kick ahead bounced into Phil Reed's welcoming hands and he ran in Rugby's second try, with Rahui's second conversion kick being successful. At 3-15 a Lions win looked possible but Stour did not subscribe to that scenario and they began to lean on the Lions forwards. A penalty was kicked to the 22 touch, and the usual take and drive saw Julian Horrobin with the touchdown. Ben Harvey's conversion drifted wide. Danny Facer was forced to retire with an ankle injury, and Phil Skillen took his place before Terry Rahui's boot enlarged Lions' points tally with a 40 metres penalty. Half time was looming but Stour were not yet done and having won another penalty they repeated their earlier ploy with Paul Meadows being the scorer from the resultant drive; this time Harvey's kick was a good one, as was his score tying penalty kick on the whistle.

Resuming at 18-18, Stour were soon into the lead with Harvey's third penalty kick and they went further ahead with his fourth after Phil Skillen was sin-binned for an alleged high tackle. Stour's impressive winger, Nathan Bressington evaded Phil Reed and regathered a chip kick to score his side's third try but, although the conversion was missed, Stour were now 29-18 ahead. Glen Carson replaced Matt Davies and Eddie Simkiss came on for Ben Smith, however, this failed to turn the game and Harvey put over another penalty kick.

Fourth bench man, Roman Piotrowski, took the place of Brendan McIlraith with Gareth Collins going to the centre position. The two of them combined with some astute kicking, to send Collins in for Rugby's third try, but Rahui's kick was wide of the posts. Rugby raised the pressure and Stour's Virgil Hartland was sin-binned, but Stour's grip on the game was not to be prised open and with the final whistle the score was Stourbridge 32 Rugby 23. The result finally confirmed Rugby's relegation.

**Stourbridge:** Jon Hall; Nathan Bressington, Toby Wilson, Ally McLaughlin (Craig Jones), Ross Yiend; Duncan Hughes, Ben Harvey; James Hadfield

(Adam Sturdy), Carl Southwell (Daniel James), Virgil Hartland, Paul Barker, Gareth Taylor (Nick Tisdale), Sam Viggers, Paul Meadows, Julian Horrobin.

**Rugby:** Alan Mitchell; Gareth Collins, Jon Boden (C), Brendan McIlraith (Roman Piotrowski), Phil Reed; Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury, Jason Brittin, Matt Davies (Glen Carson), Steve Halsey, Steve Stewart, Lee Crofts, Ben Smith (Eddie Simkiss), Danny Facer (Phil Skillen), Tim Stannard.  
*Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Referee:** Nigel Higginson.

When the other results were known, the fact that Esher had beaten Rosslyn Park made the Lions result immaterial. It also confirmed Park's relegation with Lydney, who lost to Nottingham. The Midlander's win, together with that of Sedgley Park, ensured promotion for both clubs: Nottingham would be returning to National Division 1 after a seven-year absence. In that division, Coventry lost to Worcester so they remained in threat of relegation.

Rugby Lions chairman, David Owen issued a press statement that appeared in the local papers on April 15<sup>th</sup>. He said supporters can accuse the directors of making mistakes over the past few years, by changing coaches midstream, choosing the wrong players or losing match-winning players during the season. But he said that most of these were not of the directors own making and, of course, finance has to play its part.. "I have since the professional era began, felt that we have been "fire fighting" and perhaps making panic decisions to retain a position in the higher leagues, but to our cost realised that we do not have the proper structure in place to consolidate or retain our position, even by throwing money at it," he added. He continued by asking for voluntary help from club members and supporters to rebuild the club by making better use of its home-grown players with provision of financial and administrative support for all of its teams.

There were no games in National 2 on April 17<sup>th</sup> but in the National 1 games, Coventry beat Manchester in the last league match at Coundon Road; Henley also lost. Coventry, who were to play their last game, away against Wakefield at College Grove on April 24<sup>th</sup>, had to win to avoid relegation.

In the Powergen Cup Final at Twickenham Newcastle Falcons beat Sale Sharks by 37-33 in a pulsating game where the lead changed hands numerous times. The head-to-head of England fly halves did not take place as, though Charlie Hodgson was fit and playing for Sale Jonny Wilkinson was absent with his slowly mending shoulder.

The Rugby Lions U12 squad completed their performance of the season over two days of rugby and seven matches to reach the final of the Plate

Competition at the Gulliver's Nottingham Rugby Festival. The Lions were pitted against club sides from across the length and breadth of England. In the pool stages of the competition the Lions won victories against Doncaster, Northampton Old Scouts and Salisbury, but were defeated by Blackheath and by Brighton. In the quarter finals they beat Ormskirk and in the semi final they beat Salisbury for a second time.

The reward for this outstanding effort would be a final to be played at Twickenham as a curtain-raiser match to England v The Barbarians in the traditional end of season international fixture. With this achievement they emulated the Lions U10s of the previous season

Rugby's U19 Colts played Earlsdon in the semi-final of the Warwickshire Colts Cup at Webb Ellis Road on the Sunday and won a tight game by 10-8. They would face Leamington at Coundon Road in the Final on April 25<sup>th</sup>.

Clubhouse manager, Tracy Garrett left the Lions after a successful five year stint when her partner's change of employment took them away from the area.

The last league game and the last actual game were one in the same and it was the current league leaders, Sedgley Park, who returned to Webb Ellis Road for the second time this season, however, on this occasion they brought with them a full strength fifteen. There was nothing left for Rugby to play for other than pride, but the visitors needed to win to be certain of becoming champions of National Division 2, at their first attempt. That they would be promoted was already beyond doubt and by a curious irony they would be replacing their one time big brothers, Manchester FC in National Division 1.

The teams assembled on a warm sunny afternoon that was more akin to summer than spring. Lee Crofts and Peter Roberts returned from injury but Tim Stannard was unfit and his place was taken by Ben Smith. Matt Richards replaced Gareth Collins. Sedgley Park were at full strength.

All the early possession went the way of Sedgley hands but firm tackling by the Lions prevented any capitalisation by the visitors. Lions first turn with the ball was very promising and came within a pass of a reward. The first penalty, conceded by Rugby after fully 11 minutes, was kicked by Ryno Ueckermann but the ball was wide of the mark. Rugby gradually saw more of the ball, but promising backs moves failed to bear fruit. On 20 minutes Park's efforts were rewarded when Ross Bullough finished off a slick move to score the first try, but Ueckermann's kick was again wide. Not long afterwards Rugby lost Ben Smith to a shoulder injury and he was replaced by Glen Carson.

In the latter part of the half the amount of Lions useful possession increased and they were more creative, with one spell of perfect handling sending Terri Rahui in for a try by the posts, that he also converted. This put Lions into an unexpected 7-5 lead, but Jason Brittin then conceded a penalty for Ueckermann to kick and put Park back into the lead. In the last minute Rugby's bad positioning and Park's skilful reading of the game allowed Park's Arno de Jager to collect a Lions clearance, chip the defence and send Ian Voortman in for another Sedgley try. Ueckermann's conversion made it 7-15 at the break.

The visitors must have had their ears bent by their coach at half time as the came back with all guns blazing. A good position was conceded by Rugby after a long kick went dead and from the scrum Park number nine, Dave McCormack, looped round to score an early try to which the reliable Ueckermann added two more points. Hardly had the game been restarted than Voortman was over for his second try, so that with another conversion Park had racked up fourteen points in just four minutes. They did not let up and six minutes later Paul Arnold sent Bullough in for his second try. With another conversion the score had leapt up to 7-36.

The away support were now thinking cricket scores but the Lions revealed some sterner stuff as, led by Greenbury's bullocking charge, Toby Handley recovered the ball and placed it over the Park goal line; Rahui's conversion made it 14-36. Roman Piotrowski had not long replaced Pete Roberts when, after harrying the Park line, the ball returned to Lions territory and Rugby's tap-down from their own corner lineout was caught by Park's Tim Fourie who thought it was his birthday; Ueckermann's kick made it 14-43.

Undeterred the Lions came straight back with a powerful drive that, having stopped at the Park 22, released the ball to Handley who, with a classic dummy, went over by the posts, making the conversion easy for his New Zealand partner. Then it got better. A quick tapped penalty saw Piotrowski away and a few hands later Phil Reed was standing in Handley's footprints beneath the Park crossbar; it was grist to Rahui's kicking mill and the score was 28-43. Park composure began to fray a little as Rugby, in the form of Alan Mitchell underlined their threat. His run and chip over the defence was blatantly obstructed and referee David Grashoff immediately awarded a penalty try that provided Rahui with a third kick in front of the posts to make it 35-43.

There was a note of panic in Sedgley ranks as whistle time approached, with shouts of "kick it out." However, Rugby's eagerness was their undoing and a hurried run out of a Park kick was lost and Arno de Jager/Ryno Ueckermann added another seven points to wrap things up at 35-50.

It had been a cracking game, full of entertainment, and not a lot different from the game up north just before Christmas. The aggregate score for the two matches was 62-96 in Sedgley Park's favour with 10 tries for the Lions and 13 for Park. After it was over Sedgley's team, now confirmed as National Division 2 champions, formed up on the pitch, amid spraying champagne, for photos. Home supporters with long enough memories were taken back to 1991 when the Lions had celebrated on the same spot after beating Gosforth to be champions of Courage Division 2 and thereby to confirm promotion to what 13 years later had become the Zurich Premier League. Relegation had already been accepted and the fact that Rosslyn Park's victory over Newbury had pushed Rugby into 13<sup>th</sup> place almost went unnoticed.

**Rugby:** Alan Mitchell; Matt Richards (Brendan McIlraith), Jon Boden (C), Peter Roberts (Roman Piotrowski), Phil Reed; Terry Rahui, Toby Handley; Phil Greenbury, Jason Brittin, Matt Davies, Ben Smith (Glen Carson), Steve Stewart, Lee Crofts, Ben Smith, Phil Skillen, Eddie Simkiss. *Man of The Match: No award made.*

**Sedgley Park:** Arno de Jager; Ross Bullough, Carlos Hassan (Chris Wilkinson), Ian Voortman; Chris Glynn; Ryno Ueckermann, Dave McCormack; Gareth Roberts, Richard Oxley (Matt Collie), Huw Thomas (Mark Lloyd), Paul Arnold, Erik Lund, Richard Senior (Paul Keys), Ken Yates, Tim Fourie.

**Referee:** David Grashoff.

On the following day at Coundon Road, Rugby Lions U19 Colts won the Warwickshire Cup for the second time in three years by beating Leamington 22-20. Tries were scored by Wilf Barclay [2] and Man of the Match Tim Douglas. Tom Turner added 2 conversions and 1 penalty. Despite Rugby twice pulling ahead by nine points, Leamington refused to give up and played a huge part in a thrilling final. This completed a successful three years for the team's manager Keith Lawson, ably assisted by Coach Dean Watson.

**Rugby U19 Colts:** John Fletcher; Roberts (Bryan), Mudd, Boswell, Tim Douglas (Dave Clements); Tom Turner, Phil Thomas (Parker); Jones, Price, (M Todd), Oliver (Darren Deans), Gurjit Rupal (Edge), Pails, Wilf Barclay (Glen Wallace), Glen Todd, Danny Facer.

Rugby Lions U12s continued their successful run at Worcester RFC's Minis Festival. Hereford, Altrincham and Cleve were all dispatched with seven tries scored and not a single try conceded. However, after lunch they lost to Cheltenham by one try to nil. This did Moseley no favours as they suffered the inevitable backlash with an overwhelming defeat by four tries to nil..

Their last match that would determine the tournament winners was against their hosts, Worcester. The Lions went into the lead with an early try, and held on until two minutes from full time when Worcester equalised. The draw was enough to see Worcester take the title with the Lions as runners-up. The team's performance augured well for their approaching appearance at Twickenham.

In an end of season comment Wayne Shelford implied that, had he had a longer time in the job, he might have saved the Lions from relegation, but he emphasised that the club's future lay in fostering its own up and coming players. Wayne would be returning to New Zealand at the end of the summer.

Brett Taylor was appointed as Director of Coaching for 2004/05 and, at a meeting on Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> April all of the players were given detailed training manuals for the summer period. Three "touch sessions" were planned at St Andrews RFC ground on May 18<sup>th</sup>, June 3<sup>d</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup>, with pre-season training to commence on July 6<sup>th</sup>. Training would be for two nights a week in July extending to three nights in August, with first team and Colts training together. A new forwards coach is to be sought after.

This would have been the end of the Lions season but for England's Rugby World Cup win the previous November. The Cup, which had been paraded around the country, came to Rugby town on May 3<sup>d</sup>. Besides giving the England team the freedom of the borough, there were other festivities in and around the town that were added to the traditional Bank Holiday Monday programme. There was a national U15s Festival on Rugby School Close.

At Webb Ellis Road the Rugby Lions organised a Veterans Tournament in which a number of local clubs or unions were represented. A crowd of around 1000 saw some entertaining play. In the round robin games, Rugby Lions, Daventry, Newbold, and South Warwickshire battled it out in one league, whilst Old Laurentians, Rugby St. Andrews, and a combined Rugby Welsh and AEI team contested the other league. Rugby Lions and Old Laurentians won through to the final, both being unbeaten in their respective leagues.

South Warwickshire and Rugby St. Andrews earned the right to contest the 3rd and 4th place playoff. The South Warwickshire outfit proved too strong for the Rugby team to claim 3rd spot.

The final was a no holds barred contest, as you would expect from a Lions and OL's confrontation. Mark Palmer in the OL's team faced several old faces that he recognised from his playing days at Lions. Evergreen Eddie

Saunders was in the squad, as were Trevor Revan, "Little Ella", aka Mark Ellis, David Bishop and Rob Milner. A certain Wayne Shelford also made an appearance in a Lions' jersey in one of the league games. Despite having two players sin binned for 2 minutes each, Lions eventually ground down a dogged OL's to claim the title. The trophy was presented by Albert Williams, president of Rugby and District RFU, to end an excellent day's rugby.

Prior to the weekend it was learned via the [rugbylions.net](http://rugbylions.net) message board that Jason Brittin, Peter Roberts, Phil Skillen and Eddie Simkiss had all been released by the club.

On the following Saturday the new Rugby Raiders RLFC played its first home Rugby League Conference game against Wolverhampton Wizards on the Rugby School Close. This was the first ever competitive Rugby League match to be played on the Close, though there had been an exhibition match played there in 1999. The Raiders lost a close game by a couple of points.

The Annual Dinner took place on the evening of Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> May and the 2003/04 season was finally brought to a close. The players' Player of the Season was Jon Boden.

The bad feeling that had for some time existed between Rotherham and Worcester, concerning promotion to the Zurich Premiership, re-surfaced in the middle of May, when Rotherham's owner, Mike Yarlett, claimed that Worcester had missed the March 31<sup>st</sup> 2004 deadline for satisfying all of the Premiership entry criteria. (ERL) English Rugby Ltd sought legal advice on the matter and as a result confirmed Worcester's promotion, in place of Rotherham, on Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> May.