

THE SECRET PLAYER

THIS FORMER INTERNATIONAL GIVES US A UNIQUE INSIGHT INTO THE PRO GAME



“Pros jump at the chance to get blotto”

W RUGGER players do love a drink. Often enjoyed – popular folklore pretty much has it bang on here – from unusual vessels, such as a standard issue boat shoe. And conspicuous consumption is not just limited to the grass-roots game. The majority of professionals, even the properly athletic, talented ones rather than those who somehow ended up being paid for being outsized and good at lifting heavy things, jump at any chance to get blotto. This is a great surprise to the civilians you encounter on a night out as the sight of their hero puking in a nightclub toilet somehow doesn't tally with the day job of modern-day gladiator, risking life and gym-honed limb for a beer-fuelled audience's amusement.

The culture of getting boozed after a match dies hard, and most professional sides will have a decent blowout a few times a year, with or without the imprimatur of the bosses. Rugby may be at the extreme end of the spectrum but plenty of other sports are at it too: Wayne Rooney dribbling at a provincial wedding; Ryan Lochte smashing up a Brazilian service station; Freddie Flintoff slurring at Number 10. Win or lose, once the tiresome chore of competition is out of the way, many sportsmen just can't wait to get their hands on a blue WKD.

Why do we do it? Arguments can be made for alcohol's effectiveness as a tool for team bonding, or as a release valve after the build-up of pressure going into a big game. So a very shaky case could be put for it being some sort of psychological aid in a group's development.

But, performance-wise, there is not one positive to be had from getting steamboats. Nietzsche (I know, check me out) argued against alcohol as he reckoned it numbs pain and reassures us things are fine as they are and we don't have to change anything about our lives. Speaking as a mediocre, journeyman pro sportsman, that sounds like a pretty good sales pitch – temporary respite from the knowledge you'll always be average in your chosen field. And that leads us to a fact which is uncomfortable for most professionals. For a true great, being the best is enough, and your Wilkinsons, McCaws, Ronaldos, Murrays etc, either don't drink or hardly touch the stuff.

Cod psychology aside, how does a drinking culture in a professional side manifest itself? There are two types of boozing: sanctioned and illicit. A coach may have various reasons to call for his team to have “a couple of beers” (it's always a couple). He may want the boys to let off some steam and get to know each other, or to control



▲ **Under fire**
Wayne Rooney was criticised last month for a drunken night

how much is taken. Either way, these gatherings usually have the distinct whiff of ‘forced fun’, especially when the habitually psychotic head coach circulates like the host of a Mike Leigh cocktail party trying to show he is just a bloody good bloke. In any event, while the most diligent players will have their shandy and head to bed, there will always be a hardcore who use a team beer as a springboard to a night of full-on debauchery.

The demographic of this hardcore is not fixed. It will contain the obvious cohort of very young, very fit men with above-average disposable income, but the drinkers in a club may also come from the seasoned, sometimes jaded, older pros frustrated with the mundanity of their sporting life and keen to jump on any passing funwagon. Those with families may also grab any mandatory team night or day out as another opportunity for a bit of ‘home avoidance’. Charming concept, I know.

I'm a slight outlier and do most of my drinking during the week, working my way through a bottle of wine a night Sunday through Wednesday. This is partly due to deep angst at my place in the sporting world and partly because I can't think of anything better to do with my evenings than get tipsy while looking at autotrader.com.

That is why Eddie Jones's approach, which seems to be doing the trick in reforming previously wayward characters in the England squad, is such a gossamer-thin tightrope for a head coach to tread. Apparently, he relies on the players to regulate themselves and “treats men like men” (ooh, I get a tingle just writing that). The problem with this is that most men, like me, are idiots. 🍷

NEWS

Prison service

Rugby is rehabilitating inmates from Venezuela's jails

RUGBY IS not a prominent sport in Venezuela, writes Stefano Pozzebon. The national team is ranked 62nd in the world and the game is mostly played in wealthy areas of the big cities, with baseball or football more popular elsewhere. Yet rugby is part of a programme in the country's prisons and last month Venezuela's first inter-jail sevens tournament took place. The event, organised by rum distillery Santa Teresa, was the culmination of a two-year project in which inmates from six prisons play the game as part of their rehabilitation process.

Three jails were amongst those competing at the tournament and the title went to Fenix, who beat Rodeo II 24-5 in the final.

“Thanks to rugby I have learnt values like camaraderie, team spirit, discipline and humility,” says Romeo Salas, an inmate serving a ten-year sentence for murder at Tocoron – the third prison to take part.

The project offers hope amid Venezuela's violence. The capital, Caracas, was named ‘the world's most dangerous place outside a warzone’ this year with a murder rate of more than 300 per month.

Jails in Venezuela are often over-crowded and poorly funded, and are used as a base for criminal activities. Clashes between inmates and guards are common as well.



Gold moment
Alberto Vollmer with the Fenix team

Salas first saw a rugby ball when the coaches from the project visited the prison and he adds: “Rugby helps me to let the steam off, and has given me a family of team-mates who look after each other.”

The project is the brainchild of Alberto Vollmer, the owner of Santa Teresa who learnt the game while studying in France. When he returned home to work in the family business, he saw a chance to use rugby to transmit positive values.

After working with former gang members in the distillery, he started teaching rugby in prisons in 2014 and now dreams of creating an inter-jail league with more teams involved.

Vollmer says: “It was a fantastic occasion to see these three teams playing with respect, discipline and humility, and showing the power of transformation that rugby has in these people's lives.” 🍷



PIGS: GETTY IMAGES; STEFANO POZZEBON & ROM SANTA TERESA

▲ **At full stretch** An Alcatraz A attacker tries to evade a tackle at the sevens tournament in Venezuela

BONUS POINTS



Abi Chamberlain

The Richmond and former England playmaker on highlights and heroes

FUNNIEST TEAM-MATE

► There are a lot who think they're really funny. It's probably Claire Allan. She's a great character and there's a lot of humour involved in her Snapchat videos.



BEST RUGBY MOMENT

▲ Qualifying for the Olympics – knowing Great Britain had made the Olympics was pretty good! Also winning the Premiership with Richmond (above) – we worked pretty hard to get there.



CHILDHOOD HERO

▲ I didn't have a childhood one but my rugby inspiration was Jo Yapp. She was at the first club, Worcester. I went to and she gave me belief. More than that, her values are something I aspired to.

FAVOURITE STADIUM

▼ Hong Kong. There's just an incredible atmosphere. The people are having such a great time. It's a brilliant setting and I can't put into words how incredible it is to play there.



BEST HOLIDAY

◀ I went to the US for three months and did Camp America. I lived on the beach in Cape Cod. I've never been back but it was great.