

# RUGBY IN MY TIME

BY  
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## (16) HOW BIG WERE THE GIANTS?

WERE the players of the past as good as the players of today? How would, say, the 1924 All Blacks have got on against the 1956 team? Well, I don't think you can really answer those questions. Looking at the game through the rose-hued glasses of youth, people will always go for the team they felt was greatest at their particular time. All the same, I have my own opinion, and I would say that a pack of 30 years ago could no more stand up to an All Black pack of today than a primary school team could stand up to a team from a secondary school. I'll explain why.

I have a good memory for certain things, and I can remember when I was a boy at school watching football matches at Athletic Park. I remember watching one of the 1924 trials from the Western Bank. Bert Cooke made a magnificent break through the field, as he could, and as he got to the full-back he unloaded to a forward. It was Cyril Brownlie, and he dropped the ball right in front of the posts. Everyone was in an uproar, standing up, cheering this great move of Cookie's, and when Cyril dropped the ball down they sat and just went "oooer." But they all said the one thing: "Oh, well, he's only a forward, anyhow." Can you see the implication? His job was to get stuck in in the forwards, and when that was done his job was finished. Now a forward of today not only has to ruck, to scrummage—if he starts dropping passes when he should

be up the centre of the field taking them he's out of the team. And every forward in that team has a job to do of cover defence. New Zealanders, of course, are the greatest cover defenders in the world. It's just something that has emerged, and it has been taught in the schools, and automatically these young people take it up into big football.

Then we must take account of the size of players. That 1924 pack had players of 12 and a-half stone in the forwards—under 12 stone in the forwards, in the front row. Goodness gracious me, unless a man in a front row today is at least 15 stone he'll just buckle up—he couldn't take the weight. Just imagine a man of 12 stone giving everything he has for 80 minutes against a man of 15 or 16 stone. He might have the biggest heart in the world, but by the end of 80 minutes, by the end of 70 minutes, he'd be just ground into the ground and couldn't move. I remember talking to W. H. (Boy) Morkel on our first day in Cape Town in 1949. Boy Morkel was vice-captain of the 1921 Springboks in New Zealand and a famous Springbok. When he saw our players—mind you, many of them overweight—he said, "You've got some big men." I said, "Yes, there are some 16-stoners, Boy." He said, "No good." I asked him, "Why is that?" He said, "I will not have a forward over 14 and a-half stone, because for any pound he carries over that he loses mobility." That

sounded very reasonable to me at the time.

But look at the players we have today. Take Peter Jones, fighting fit at 16 stone three, as fast as any forward who ever went on a paddock. See how big Tiny White, at 16 stone, could run and last out a game. Look at Bob Duff and at Dann Retief, the brilliant South African of 1956, look at all your forwards. These men are faster than any forwards we've seen in the past, except for isolated cases like Jim Parker of 1924, or Nev Thornton. And not only are they faster, they're fitter than players used to be, and they have to be fit. Because they have to go not only for 80 minutes as a forward, but as I said before they have to be up there—the flankers and the Number 8 men—for the passes from the backs; they have to be across for cover defence, to be over to that dropped ball the moment it gets there. In fact, they're flat out for 80 minutes.

And they have to be flat out for 80 minutes—that was the secret of the great Otago team that held the Ranfurly Shield for so long. When they went out for training they used to train for 80 minutes, for 90 minutes. And I



said to Vic Cavanagh one day when I was watching him down there and Roy Nieper was helping him slam the boys through: "Boy, oh, boy, you're tough, aren't you?" He had them flat out for an hour and a-half. Over to the rucks, the first man there he'd blow his whistle. "Where are you?" "I'm here." "Where should you be?" "There." "Well, get there." And off they'd go again. I said, "An hour and a-half, Vicky!" He said, "Look Mac, if they can't do an hour and a-half here, how can they last 80 minutes flat out in a real match?" That's what they had to do—and what a modern forward has to do. And I'd say a modern pack would absolutely bury the teams of 30 years ago.

I know that occasionally you'll get a player of 13 stone who will play up to the 15 stone mark, but not a whole pack of them. You'll get a man like Maurice Brownlie who could stand out in any pack even though he was only a 14-stoner when he was really at his peak. Or you could take the great man, Charlie Seeling, of the 1905 team. I didn't see him play, but from what players at the time tell me he must have been a magnificent forward. Well, those sort of men could fit into a modern team. But a pack that averages 13 stone against one that averages 15 stone has no show in the world. And if they can't do it and are buried, I don't care if they have all the Mark Nicholls and A. E. Cookes in the world, they can't win.

How do the backs of the past compare with the backs of today? Well, we must remember that this game has changed considerably. When we had the 2-3-2 scrum and didn't have the number 8 lurking right out in the paddock at the end of a lineup to crash into you, we had an entirely different style of back play. I remember saying to Mark Nicholls just a few years ago: "Mark, tell me, would you be able to play the same type of five-eighth game today as you did in your prime, with the changes in the scrum and so on?" Mark said, "No, of course I couldn't—not the same type of game." But of course Mark knew his ability, he was a great footballer, and he said he would have thought something out to be a wee bit different—which I will grant he would



J. B. SMITH (left) and M. P. GODDARD—brilliant individualists who could have fitted into any of the great teams of the past