

John Stonehouse resigns

Three weeks before he was due in court on charges of theft, forgery, fraud and conspiracy, the MP John Stonehouse resigned his membership of the Labour Party, leaving the government in a minority of one

JOHN ROBINS

Revered rugby player and coach

John Robins was one of the hidden gems of Welsh rugby. As a player, he scaled the heights of the international game as a member of the 1950 Welsh Grand Slam side and as a Test player for the British & Irish Lions in New Zealand and Australia later that year. He also went on to become the first coach to the British Lions in 1966 and was one of those who first began to take seriously the theory of coaching in rugby union in the UK.

Yet he was a man whose name never really sprang to mind when the debate turned to the greatest of players or coaches. Nevertheless, his record both on and off the field bears comparison to many of the Welsh greats and he made a lasting impact on many future players and coaches through his work at Loughborough College, Sheffield University and the University of Wales, Cardiff.

Born in Cardiff, Robins attended Llandaff Cathedral School and Wellington School, Somerset, before joining the Royal Navy. His rugby prowess was good enough to earn him a place in the Anglo-Welsh Public Schools side that played the Wales Secondary Schools at Cardiff Arms Park in 1940, when the team was led by his future Wales and Lions team mate Bleddyn Williams, and in 1943 Robins was the Welsh junior long-jump, shot and discus champion.

As an ordinary seaman Robins played for the England Services against their Welsh and Scottish counterparts as a teenager. The same Williams scored three tries in the Welsh Services' 28-11 win at Swansea in November 1944 and the Scots triumphed 18-11 at Leicester in February 1945.

Robins was based in Glasgow for a short time with the Navy and actually

played for the Scottish Services on one occasion. He also turned out for Glasgow Academicals - one of many clubs he represented that included Coventry, Birkenhead Park, Bradford, Sale, London Welsh, Cardiff, Leicester and the Barbarians. He also played county rugby for Cheshire and Yorkshire and for the North Western Counties against both South Africa and Australia.

After the Second World War, he went to Carnegie College, Leeds, and then Loughborough College to qualify as a teacher majoring in physical education and geography. His first teaching post was at Birkenhead Institute, where he was one of three successive Welshmen in the PE department, ahead of Ray Williams and Cadfan Davies.

He joined Birkenhead Park and was given an England trial in 1948, but opted to play for Wales when the opportunity arose in 1950. Although not a large man - he was once described as having "the build of a bulldog and the mind of a mathematician" - he was extremely fit, fast and powerful. He was also an excellent goalkicker.

His Wales debut came at Twickenham in January 1950 when he was one of six new caps. Wales won at the home of English rugby for only the second time, and the first since 1933. Having made an immediate impact with that 11-5 win over England in front of a record 75,000 crowd, the new-look Welsh side beat Scotland in Swansea and then Ireland in Belfast. The latter earned them the Triple Crown for the first time in 39 years and set up a tilt at a first Grand Slam since 1911, against the French in Cardiff.

Victory was something of a formality and Wales duly ran out 21-0 victors. Their unbeaten championship cam-

paign led to 14 Welsh players touring Australasia with the Lions. The 23-year-old Robins was among them and was forced to take unpaid leave from his new teaching post at Liverpool College between Easter and September. It was a trip that saw him play in 16 of the 23 games and five of the six Tests.

The tour left a lasting impression on him. He helped to train the Lions during their three-week voyage to Auckland and was greatly impressed by the way in which the New Zealand teams prepared for their rugby. Their creed of "getting fit to play rugby, rather than playing rugby to get fit" became a major theme in his coaching and he became renowned as a hard but fair taskmaster.

He played for Wales throughout the 1951 championship and then won three more caps in 1953. Work took him from Liverpool to Bingley Grammar School, and a switch of clubs to Bradford. His goalkicking had proved useful for the Lions, for whom he kicked 36 points, although he notably missed four long-range kicks at goal for Wales in their defeat by the French in 1951. But it was his unerring boot that helped the North Western Counties beat the Australians 6-3 at Blundellsands in February 1958.

A year later, he joined the PE department at Loughborough College and took control of their rugby coaching. He remained there until 1968 before moving to Sheffield University to become director of physical education and recreation. He spent a decade in the post before returning to his hometown to take up the post of director of physical education at the University of Wales, Cardiff. He retired in 1988.

His success at Loughborough, where he influenced players such as Gerald Davies, John Taylor, Alun Pask, Keith Fielding, Colin Macfadyean, John Mantle and Dave Rollitt, earned him the chance to become the first coach to the British Lions in 1966.

"John was very much my mentor and was responsible for changing me from centre to the back row," the former Wales and Lions player John Taylor said:

He was revered by all the students and changed all our horizons. His attention to detail in preparation was fantastic and he could be an absolute



Robins: 'the build of a bulldog and the mind of a mathematician' EMPICS

slave driver in training. He was hard and tough without ever being a bully and every student he taught had the utmost respect for him.

Although nominally the assistant manager of the 1966 tour party, Robins was given the task of coaching the team. Highly successful in Australia, the Lions ran headlong into one of the greatest All Blacks sides of all-time and were completely outplayed in New Zealand.

Robins ruptured his Achilles tendon early in the tour and then had a battle with the skipper, Mike Campbell-Lamerton, over coaching duties. If it was a revolutionary move to appoint him, the results were not what had been hoped for.

He coached the UAU (Universities Athletics Union) side for many years and was instrumental in setting up the England Students rugby team.

Rob Cole

John Denning Robins, rugby player and coach: born Cardiff 17 May 1926; married 1952 Barbara Fryer (died 2003; one daughter); died Cardiff 21 February 2007.