

Captain of England

After a tiring six-hour journey, I finally reached Cardiff early on a Thursday Evening (1962). I was met at the station and taken to a big hotel where we were to assemble as a team before being sent off with our hosts.

The following day we met again at the Queen's Hotel and walked up to Blackweir through the Castle grounds for a training session. For an hour and a half we worked together as a team for the first time. It was my job, as captain, to get to know everybody, and as the day went by I was very happy to feel the development of a wonderful team spirit.

Lunch was arranged for us at a local school, after which we were scheduled for a tour of the Rhondda Valley; however, the smallpox outbreak precluded this. Instead, we visited Llandaff Cathedral, where we saw Epstein's famous 'Christ', and afterwards we were turned loose on Barry sands to play football. Back in Cardiff, we went to the famous Empire Pool, were shown all round the building, and spent a few minutes in the water.

We had tea in the Grand Hotel, where we were both surprised and pleased to see Mr. Acker Bilk booking in. One of the team asked him for his autograph, and we chatted to him for a few minutes. Now I began to fear that I might have to make a speech after tea, but our guide, Mr. Risdale, spared me this. We dispersed with our hosts; mine was the Welsh second-row Ian Myhre, and I was treated with generous hospitality.

Friday night : early to bed, ready for the big day.

The day of the match arrived and we assembled with our kit at the Queen's Hotel. Everybody was very nervous. We were taken down to the famous Cardiff Arms Park to leave our kit and look around for about half an hour. It was fabulous. Lunch with the Lord Mayor of Cardiff followed, though because of the game I ate little. Nervous and excited, we returned to the ground to strip before going out on to the cricket field behind the stands to be photographed. We all looked very smart as we lined up to march out.

When I got out of the tunnel leading the England team, a cold shiver ran down my spine. This was the biggest thrill of my life; even the crowd of 14,000 was dwarfed by the vast ground. After lining up in the middle of the field for the two National Anthems we prepared ourselves for 70 minutes' hard rugby. From the kick-off the pace was very fast, and never changed.

In the early stages of a good hard game neither team got the better of the other. Then, quite out of the blue, the Welsh swung into the attack and never looked back in the first half. They deservedly led at the interval, five points to nil. After a tactics talk from our trainer, we started the second half determined to win back those five points. We pressed and pressed the Welsh, but they defended magnificently, stopping us twice about a yard from the line. We tried everything, but failed to score, and when the final whistle went the crowd clapped us off the field. This, we were told, was a great honour, not accorded to every English team.

The presentation of the International Caps took place at the Queen's Hotel. This was the first chance I had of seeing my parents, though I had little time to speak to them after the presentation as we had to dash to the big dinner. There I heard the bad news- I had to make a speech. However, I was saved by Mr. Tate who wrote one out for me.

So, the great match was over. We dispersed with our hosts for the last time, and prepared for the journey home.

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