

UTTLEY ON RUGBY

with
ROGER
UTTLEY

Experience is key factor for Falcons

NEWCASTLE Falcons are now three wins from three in the RFU Championship after beating Doncaster last weekend, and I am delighted with the progress they are making.

It is great news, on top of the very positive results this season for both Tynedale and Blaydon. Seeing the region's top sides holding their own on the national stage must be immensely pleasing for all North East rugby fans.

This period up until the end of October is always a good time with plenty of grass and relatively dry grounds to play on. November though, when the weather begins to change, is the time when teams start to earn their crust.

One of the fascinations of rugby is the different tactics you have to employ to win in bad weather against different opposition. The side that can be more adaptable is the side that will be most successful.

As a coach of any team, the job is not only to make sure you have got the best squad of players, you also have to make sure that they can cope with the weather, the different referees' interpretations from week to week and all the rest of it. It is always fascinating to see the effect these factors can have on a team's performance.

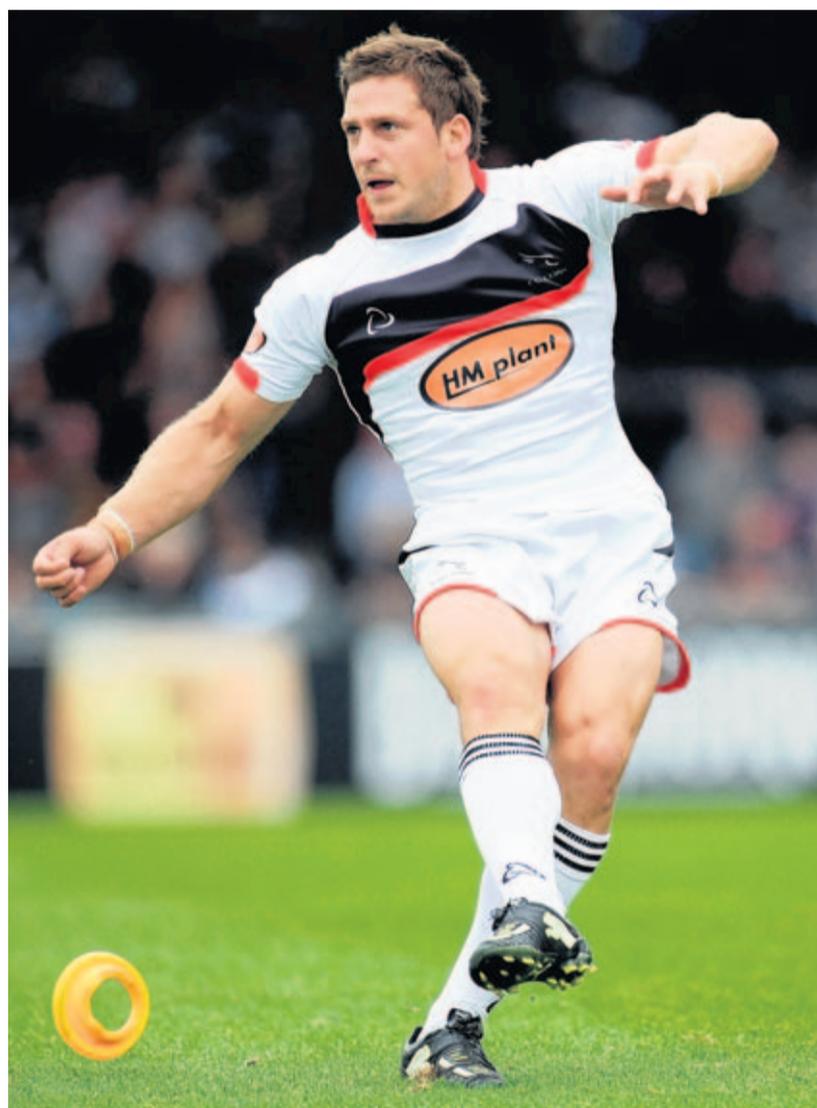
Experience will be a key factor for the Falcons. The trick is to make sure that the experience is married to some youthful exuberance. It was always said that you need young legs to go with old heads, and getting that mix right is vitally important.

A club in the Falcons' position needs those experienced players to make sure that all the noses are kept pointed in the right direction on and off the field to keep getting the results they need. It is a business at the end of the day now, and the results are more crucial than they were when I played.

Results were important back then, but essentially it was simply a matter of pride. The current imperative to win to be considered successful is one of the great distinctions between the game now and then.

In their game against Doncaster, I hear the Falcons started Jimmy Gopperth at full-back rather than his more accustomed position of fly-half.

A squad that has players who can hold



FLEXIBLE FRIEND Jimmy Gopperth is a key player for the Falcons

their own in more than one position is going to gain an advantage over other teams that may not have so much flexibility.

There are certain positions, like hooker, where it is difficult to be anything other than a real specialist. But the full-back and wings should be interchangeable and any forward playing in the back five of the scrum should also be able to show an ability (and willingness) to play anywhere in that five.

At the very least a player will gain a greater appreciation of the different

demands and requirements of the other positions.

Without having seen the game in person it is difficult to comment on how Jimmy specifically fared at full-back, but if you have got a guy like that who can play both roles it gives you much greater flexibility as a coach.

He has been a key player since he joined the club, especially with his consistent goal-kicking - such an important ingredient for any team.

He also seems to be developing into quite a tactician. Playing full-back, even if

BIG SCREEN TEST

A POTENTIALLY acrimonious and damaging issue at the moment is the current controversy over the TV deal to show English club teams playing in European competitions, with Premiership Rugby having agreed a new deal with BT and ERC having set up a separate deal with Sky.

The money and politicking involved is enormous, but it comes as no great surprise that the English clubs are unhappy when you look at how the current arrangement is split up between the nations involved.

It is hard not to sympathise with them, and there needs to be a more equitable position taken by all parties so that everybody can have a fair deal.

it just occasionally, will give him the chance to see the game from a different perspective.

And it appears to me to be an eminently sensible approach.

After the game Dean also spoke in the Press about Ally Hogg and Jon Golding, with regards to them being considered for international honours.

The two players in question are already well-known, with Hogg a vastly-experienced international and Golding having been touted around the international scene for a number of years.

Decent props are short on the ground, and although it might be difficult to get into that white shirt of England from the Championship another Saxons cap may well be on the cards.

I certainly think a return to Scotland recognition is not beyond the realms of possibility for someone of Hogg's proven quality.

Any player who harbours ambitions of playing international rugby needs to be playing in a successful team. If you are you can concentrate on developing your own game, rather than in a struggling side where the tendency is to try to not only do your own job but also cover for your team-mates.

Dean is a shrewd guy who knows what's what, and he will not just be saying this for effect.

There is quality in this team, which is why they are producing the results they are at the moment.

Farrell is waiting to ride next wave

THE big Premiership game last weekend was Saracens against Leicester at Wembley, and it is interesting seeing Owen Farrell now in his second season for Sarries.

He is obviously a very tidy player, but having ridden the crest of a wave last season that metaphorical wave has now died and he is waiting for the next big one to come along and pick him up again.

Some of the kicks he missed were sitters by his standards, but I can remember Toby Flood going through the same sort of anguish.

These young guys have got to serve their apprenticeship, and how quickly he recovers from this setback will be indicative of his true qualities.

The problem for any English-qualified player, especially when the coaches have got a few good ones to pick from, is that they burst on to the scene one season and then struggle the following year.

To maintain an upward curve of form in a second season is desperately difficult. Opponents watch you and work out how to play you. Lots of big games increase the risk of injury and loss of form.

It happened to Ben Youngs at scrum-half. These situations become a real test of character and Farrell just has to be allowed to get back into his stride. He has a great pedigree and will overcome this setback.

This sort of situation is going to provide Stuart Lancaster and his coaching staff with their first real test. Stuart did exceptionally well last year to pick England up from a low base, a relatively easy task compared to the challenges this autumn.

Having established a level of performance it is how they replicate that - particularly with injuries to key men like Tom Croft and Alex Corbisiero.

Also on the international theme, it is great to see Argentina at long last being given a chance to play consistently on a big stage following their inclusion into the newly-expanded Tri-Nations with Australia, New Zealand and South Africa.

It is not like when Italy joined to make the Five Nations into the Six Nations, and they were the whipping boys in the early days.

Argentina can really put the pressure on their southern hemisphere opponents, and losing by just one score in Australia last weekend was a great performance.

It will be good for rugby as a whole, and the onus is on the northern hemisphere now to make sure our house is in order.

Over four weekends in November England will play Fiji, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand.

At the end of that we should all know where England stand in the world pecking order, and I for one cannot wait to see the outcome.

Why I'm fascinated by the appliance of science

I WAS interested to read an article over the weekend by the former England international Paul Ackford about the introduction of the Watt-Bike to rugby.

This is a piece of kit which professional clubs are now using as part of their talent identification programmes and strength and conditioning training. What struck

me was that the watt-bike is marketed by the same company who make the indoor rowing machines I introduced into the England squad back in 1987 - the machine which Dean Richards famously never used!

It is all well and good identifying the physical attributes that make good po-

tential rugby players, but the key thing is how these qualities are then moulded and adapted to deal with the particular requirements needed to be a first-class player.

It is fascinating stuff as far as I am concerned, and something that my generation of players just never had. Lots of

us had a physical education background, but it wasn't in the sort of detail and with the amount of science and support that is available to the current generation.

I would love to have been around as a young bloke now with all this stuff going on in sports science. I could have been a very good player indeed!