

FOCUS ON WINNERS: BEN KAY

This time, in our section presenting the views on apparel and equipment developments of champion sports people, we focus on rugby and on twice Heineken Cup and once World Cup winner, Ben Kay of Leicester Tigers and England.

Gripping stuff in the world of rugby



The popularity of rugby union is growing all the time. At international level, the International Rugby Board claims the sport is now played by men and women in more than 100 countries on six continents. The final of the most prestigious men's competition, the Rugby World Cup, is now reckoned to be the third biggest sporting event on the planet, behind only association football's FIFA World Cup and the Summer Olympics. All three events attract total television audiences of billions.

Away from the international scene, the recent semi-final match in Dublin between Irish provincial sides Leinster and Munster in the Heineken Cup, the top trophy in European club

rugby, drew a world record crowd of 82,208. Never before had so many people paid, travelled and queued up to see a rugby club match. Leinster won and went through to face near-namesakes, English side Leicester Tigers in the final at the end of May; the Irish side won an exciting and tight match to take the trophy at its first attempt.

Among the most experienced players on the field that evening, and among a select band of stars who have played and won finals in both the Rugby World Cup and the Heineken Cup before, was the Tigers' and England's lock forward Ben Kay. After ten years in the Leicester team, and eight in the England squad, Ben Kay is now a seasoned professional rugby athlete and is in a good position to comment on the

Ben Kay, ball in hand, in a match between Leicester Tigers and Harlequins.

 Tiger Images



All white. Nike's lighter and tighter England rugby jersey (left) and the new adidas All Blacks change shirt (right) which weighs only 195 grammes.

 Nike/adidas

considerable developments that have taken place in rugby kit in recent years.

A wide range of sports brands are now active in the rugby market, with Nike, adidas, Under Armour and others coming into the picture alongside more traditional suppliers such as Canterbury of New Zealand. Cotton Traders, which supplies the official kit to the Leicester club, is a much smaller company, but it earns extra kudos for having been founded by two former England rugby captains, Fran Cotton and Steve Smith. This hasn't yet earned Cotton Traders a breakthrough as a supplier to the English national team, however, as that contract is firmly in the hands of Nike.

The rugby shirts Nike has been making for the England team since a successful launch at the 2003 World Cup in Australia (which England won, with Ben Kay in the side) have become progressively lighter and tighter. The idea from the outset was to reduce the measurements of a rugby top to make it harder for opponents to grab a player by the sleeve or back of his shirt, which is a legal tackle. As a follow-up for the 2007 competition in France (in which Ben Kay's team lost the final to South Africa), Nike reduced its measurements again, reduced the number of panels of which the shirt was composed and reduced the number of seams. The company used specially engineered Dri Fit Knit Fabric to make the earlier version stronger and more flexible, while still wicking away moisture very effectively (see *WSA*, September-October 2007).

Adidas closes the gap

Diplomatically, the lock forward says he believes that adidas has since done a lot of work to catch up and that the rugby shirts it is now producing—such as a new white-coloured change kit for the All Blacks, the New Zealand national team—are impressive. The new All Blacks tops are 35% lighter than the rugby shirts adidas was making in 2005, and have been specially engineered to move with an athlete's body during training and matches. The sleeves are longer and more muscle-hugging than before, which adidas claims will reduce irritation and muscle restriction. The sports brand has also employed ultrasonic bonding to make the shirts more resistant to ripping, and has applied its ClimaCool moisture management technology to meshing in strategic parts of the product.

Ben Kay has worn adidas kit playing for representative touring side the British and Irish Lions and says he believes its shirts are the best and most comfortable he has used. Advances in keeping weight down and using bonding technology will make them even better. A seamless shirt improves comfort, he says, but rugby players require strength; they don't want the garment to tear or even stretch when an opponent grabs hold of them.

"We are usually allowed to wear what we like under our shirts for training and on match-day," he explains, "so I do get to wear adidas compression garments, such as the TechFit Powerweb tops and tights. I really like the way the bands in the top act like a light strapping and help me keep my shoulders in the right position,

and I know that the shorts have been a great help to team-mates who have suffered from hamstring problems.”

Powerweb is a series of thermoplastic urethane (TPU) bands which are pressed onto the base layer of TechFit apparel. According to adidas, there is “no other technology like it”. The bands are anchored at key points, such as around the waist or above the knees, and are focused on key muscle groups (such up upper legs or, as in Ben Kay’s case, shoulders). The idea is precisely what the rugby athlete needs, to work in unison with muscles and function like springs.

When an athlete moves, one set of muscles contracts while an opposite set extends; the adidas concept is that the TPU bands should mimic this, stretching on the extension side to store elastic energy. When the process is reversed and the extended muscles contract, the bands snap back to their shorter length, providing an athlete with more power.

England’s contract with Nike has also brought Ben Kay into direct contact with the Nike Pro range of performance base-layer garments. He says his national team coaches have encouraged players to wear these products to aid the recovery process after the exertions of a hard-fought match (which in rugby means every match). “As soon as we’ve finished a game, or even a hard training session, we’re encouraged to wear Nike Pro Compression gear and a lot of the guys like it.”

Hand in glove

One of the key skills a lock must have is the ability to catch the ball, no matter the weather conditions or the amount of pressure applied by opponents. Since 2003, Ben Kay has been using specialist rugby gloves to help this part of his game. “I started wearing them in 2003 on a Lions tour and now I wear them all the time,” he explains. “They help because they’re designed to make the leather stickier in wet weather.”

The product in question is the Nomis rugby glove, which uses the same Control leather technology as the brand’s footwear. Control treats leather so that it absorbs less moisture, reducing what the company describes as the “aquaplane effect” of the ball making contact with the material in wet conditions.

Feet first

Nomis made its name as a brand for its footwear, with the rugby gloves as an interesting sideline. The company’s founder, Simon (Nomis is Simon backwards) Skirrow, made a name for himself by developing for adidas the first Predator football boots with ex-Liverpool FC striker Craig Johnston in 1994.

Footwear is a subject that has come to interest Ben Kay greatly. He explains that Leicester Tigers recently engaged the services of Anne-Marie

O’Connor, a London-based podiatrist specialising in sports. She works with top athletes across a range of sports and is an adviser to many clubs and national teams. He says: “Anne-Marie held a meeting with the players recently and made it clear to us that we have to get our footwear right. She thinks too many people in rugby are now wearing football boots, or adapted football boots. The soles of these boots are smaller and the leather shifts. I wear low-cut adidas boots myself, but at least the sole has six studs (rather than four) at the front for extra support. There’s no question that rugby players tend to be bigger, heavier men than footballers. Plus, rugby boots have to be able to support your feet when they change direction suddenly, as can easily happen in rugby, say when you hit a ruck. So Anne-Marie is right.”

He harbours concern that foot injuries to England team-mate David Strettle, who broke a metatarsal and missed out on the last World Cup, and to other top rugby players may owe something to their footwear. But he’s glad to note that adidas is widening its range of rugby-specific boots, bowing to the fact that “big men (he’s 1.96 metres and weighs 117 kilos) probably need something different”.



All Black player Dan Carter models adidas TechFit base-layer garments with Powerweb technology.

