

## Ashton must sharpen up when it comes to wielding the axe

By Paul Ackford, Sunday Telegraph

Last Updated: 11:43pm GMT 13/01/2007

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True story: In 1994 Nigel Redman was voted player of the year at his club Bath. That summer he toured South Africa with England under coach Jack Rowell and played in both Tests. "I thought my prospects for the autumn internationals later in the year were relatively rosy," Redman said. "England seemed to be going for a blend of youth and experience. I was 30 and considered that I had a couple of good games against the Springboks. Then just before the squad was due out, the phone rang. 'Nigel. I've not picked you,' Jack said. 'Why's that?' I replied. 'Because I've decided to go with the team that went well in South Africa,' Jack continued. 'But I played in that team, Jack.' 'Ah, yes,' he said. And put the phone down."

True story, II: This autumn Sale lock Chris Jones played for England against South Africa in both internationals. In the first he replaced Leicester second-row Ben Kay on the hour. The second, he started from the off. Last week Brian Ashton, who replaced Andy Robinson as England head coach, named the first squads of his tenure. Jones was selected in the Saxons outfit, the ludicrously named England junior squad. Any phone call? Any explanation to soften the blow?

"Not really," Jones revealed. "I was told by my fitness coach, Nick Johnston, at Sale. He asked if I had heard the announcement, I said I hadn't and he said I wasn't involved with the seniors. It wasn't a great way of finding out." But an experience Jones was used to. "Something similar happened during last season's Six Nations. I was in with the England doctor who required a blood test. He gave me the option of having it done there and then or waiting till I got back to my club when the club doctor could take the sample.

"The team was due to be revealed the next day and I joked that if I was in the side he should do it now. If not, I'd wait to get back to my club. 'Alright,' he said. 'I'll call Sale and make the appointment'." Is this the way to run an international rugby team? Should it matter whether or how people are informed that they are in or out of squads? Jones wasn't the only player to hear the bad news vicariously. Andy Goode, who, like Jones, started England's last international, was devastated to hear he had not made either squad, had dropped out of the reckoning altogether. "A mate phoned me up and told me," Goode said. "I didn't get a phone call or a text or anything but I haven't a problem with that. Brian phoned me to discuss my omission two days later. That's his decision. [Sir] Clive [Woodward] used to email players. Whether that's the right thing or not, I don't know. It's up to the people involved. Brian's a great coach and I respect how he coaches and does things."

You wouldn't expect Goode to say anything else. He and Jones are keen not to rock the boat because they want to get back into the England set-up but some believe

that [Ashton's first attempts at man-management as head coach](#) are shoddy, to say the least. Humphrey Walters, who helped draw up the principles underpinning Woodward's successful World Cup campaign, insists that how these interactions are handled goes to the heart of a team's success. "If you're getting rid of someone, it's got to be done face to face," Walters said. "If that can't happen, have a conversation. Don't leave messages. If you're an international coach, you've plenty of time and it's part of the job.

"That's what you inherit. That's the arena you're in. If you can't say it face to face, then it can't be that important for you. Players never forget how they were left out of sides. It haunts them for the rest of their lives.

"Winning teams have what I call 'managerial honesty' that says you don't bullshit and you don't bluff. The most important thing is managing disappointment. Great leaders have managerial honesty. They will say this is the situation but they will always set aspirations and indicate a way in which the individual can get back.

"The worst thing you can do is not to have the conversation. That doesn't just affect the bloke who is dropped, it impacts on the rest of the squad who start wondering if they're going to be next."

Redman, who at one stage held the dubious record of being the most dropped English rugby player (nine times in a 20-cap career), takes a different view. "It's important to agree the procedures," Redman said, "but this was a new squad. Brian Ashton was drawing a line under Andy Robinson. In any case, where do you stop? How far down do you go? To the player who was only called up for a couple of sessions because three guys in his position were all injured? And if you get the call, what then? I remember waiting for the publication of the 1995 World Cup squad. It was due to come out at noon and I got a call at 11.58am from Jack Rowell telling me I wasn't going. You could say that was just as cruel."

I tried to speak to Ashton and Rob Andrew, the Rugby Football Union's director of elite rugby but neither wanted to go on the record on the subject. Instead, a spokesman said it was a policy decision, that it was a fresh start under Ashton, that it was impractical to talk to 60 or 65 players, that Phil Vickery and Martin Corry were the only individuals spoken to personally before the announcement, blah, blah, blah.

I'm with Walters on this one. I think that trust and respect and decency are the building blocks of tough, tight teams and that Ashton and his fellow coaches need to sharpen up if they want to be taken seriously. Let's put it this way: just say England have a poor Six Nations and the RFU want to get rid of their head coach. How would Ashton feel if, on the Monday after the final match, he picked up a newspaper, turned on the radio or took a call from a friend... and found out he had been fired?

## **PS**

The most interesting aspect of David Beckham's forthcoming move to the US was the etymological debate it generated over 'soccer' versus 'football' as the word of choice to describe the round-ball game. We say football, they say soccer. I couldn't believe how incensed football people in this country were getting over the predilection of American commentators for 'soccer' until I recalled a trip to Twickenham recently where I met a Rugby Football Union receptionist who insisted on calling rugby "rugger". No, no, no. It's not 'rugger'. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever. It's rugby.