



THE DECADE IN REVIEW
THE WALLABIES
2000-2009

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THE DECADE IN REVIEW – THE WALLABIES 2000-2009

Established in 2007, GreenAndGoldRugby (G&GR) is Australia's premier rugby blog and forum. From its inception, G&GR's aim has been to provide a place for those interested in any facet of Australian rugby to come together to share opinions, knowledge and their passion for the sport. It is a non-profit, independent venture run on the love of the game.



For content and tone, our guiding principle has always been "what would we want to read, watch, listen to or talk about?" This has led to a unique blend of opinion, analysis, humour and other forms of interactive multimedia, such as live match reports and videos – all delivered in a no-nonsense and sometimes irreverent manner, just as you'd find between mates in a rugby club. This site is for rugby fans and we always aim to take a different slant on how we look at the sport we love and what we like to do is try to talk rugby without the bullshit.

G&GR readers will have noticed the tremendous level of input and comment from Noddy both a Forum participant and as one of the Blog contributors. However, to end the decade Noddy has really stepped up another level by putting together what must surely be the most comprehensive Wallabies review in the modern era. During December there's been coverage of everything from the Games of the Decade, the Tries of the Decade and the Wallaby XV of the decade appearing on the G&GR site.

To celebrate the end of the decade, we've brought together all of Noddy's articles combined with some of your feedback in this E-Book. The culmination of the review was the Green & Gold Rugby Wallaby XV of the decade and the Green & Gold Rugby Wallaby of the decade. In a decade that saw 95 different players take the field as a starting player in a Wallaby side, over 3,000 votes were cast by G&GR readers to select the winners of these awards.

Enjoy the read and feel free to pass it on to your mates.

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G&GR REVIEW OF THE NOUGHTIES

The game against Wales in November 2009 was Australia's last rugby test of the Noughties. A decade ago we started our season with a 53-6 shellacking of Argentina at Ballymore and ten years later we finish with the win in Cardiff. The Argentina game saw the debut of some interesting names - Stirling Mortlock, Fletcher Dyson, David Lyons and Sam Cordingly. Unfortunately it would also be the last ever Wallaby appearance for the legend that remains, Tim Horan.



As for the game itself? As the score line suggests, it was a romp. In just his seventh test, fullback Chris Latham scored four tries. Back rower Jim Williams, now a Wallaby coach, scored a double in just his fifth test.

Australia was on top of the world, having just won the Rugby World Cup the year before. Move through the decade, in which we played 123 test matches, and things are different now. Whilst that team had legends such as Horan, Roff, Larkham, Gregan, Eales, Wilson and Little in it, the current side has only just started (and is perhaps some way away from) asserting itself on the global stage. But who is to say how the likes of Elsom, Genia, Pocock, Horwill, Alexander, Moore and Robinson will be remembered.

In this decade Australia managed to win just a little over 60% of its games. Compare this to the previous decade, the nineties which straddled the professionalism era, where the Wallabies won an impressive almost 75%, and it could be suggested that it has been a tough ten years for Wallaby fans. We ended up on the negative side of the ledger against both England and New Zealand, whilst only managed to break even with South Africa.

As for the stats? Matt Giteau ended the decade as the Wallaby's highest point scorer of the Noughties with Stirling Mortlock not too far behind but from there it was daylight to Matt Burke on 369. Chris Latham's four tries against the Pumas was a sign of things to come as he finished the decade as the leading try scorer. Some way behind were Lote Tuqiri, Mortlock and Giteau.

In celebration of the closing out of the decade, G&GR is going to look back on the decade that was.

We'll be looking at the best Wallabies in each position to come up with our Wallaby Team of the Decade as well as naming a Rest of the World XV of the decade. We'll also be looking at a few of the other key moments from 2000-2009 including the top tries, games and moments before naming the G&GR Wallaby XV of the Decade.

So stay tuned and get ready for a reliving of the great Wallaby moments of the last decade!

G&GR TOP 5 WALLABY MATCHES OF THE DECADE

What defines a “Top Wallaby Match”? Is it the spectacle? The Wallaby’s performance? The actual contest? The result? It’s tough to define, and I won’t do it here. Suffice to say I considered each of these aspects when trying to come up with this list. I think it’s unsurprising to say that most of these games came in the first half of the decade. Is that harsh on this current generation?



I certainly considered our performance against the Boks in 2007 when our pack really manned up in the face of adversity. Later that year I thought our game against the Welsh in the RWC, probably more so in the first half, had the potential to be a top one. Realistically there were probably a few more I could have gone with from the first half of the decade.

The Tri-Nations winning game at Durban in 2000 for one. Similarly another hoodoo breaking win against the All Blacks this time, in Wellington the following year. Even Ealesy’s last test a few weeks later. I could go on but let me get stuck in.

#5 - AUSTRALIA V ENGLAND, TELSTRA STADIUM (SYDNEY) 22 NOVEMBER, 2003 (RWC FINAL)

The things I do for G&GR. I actually sat down and re-watched this game purely for this article. The DVD has been sitting there since I was given it that Christmas of 2003. The game itself was not of the highest standard. It was pretty scrappy with not a great deal of attacking play shown by either side. If it was played at any other time, thus with no overtime, it wouldn’t make the list. But for the pure spectacle of it all!

In Australia that game, according to TV ratings alone, is the 2nd most watched sporting event of all time (behind the Hewitt v Safin Australian Open match in 2005). And that doesn’t count the tens of thousands who gathered in pubs and rugby clubs across the land to follow the drama. And what a drama it was. In the end it was effectively a shoot out between sharp shooters Jonny Wilkinson and Elton Flatley. The composure under pressure shown by both men was astounding and genuinely captured the imagination of a lot of new rugby fans. Wilko would win in the end with a field goal right at the end of extra time but it was enough to cement the Rugby World Cup as a genuine player on the world stage and brought the Wallabies as much, if not more, profile than the previous two World Cup wins.

Australia: Mat Rogers, Wendell Sailor, Stirling Mortlock, Elton Flatley, Lote Tuqiri, Steve Larkham, George Gregan [c], David Lyons, Phil Waugh, George Smith, Justin Harrison, Nathan Sharpe, Al Baxter, Brendan Cannon, Bill Young. **Replacements:** Jeremy Paul, Matt Dunning, David Giffin, Matt Cockbain, Joe Roff, Matt Giteau.



England: Josh Lewsey, Jason Robinson, Will Greenwood, Mike Tindall, Ben Cohen, Jonny Wilkinson, Matt Dawson, Lawrence Dallaglio, Neil Back, Richard Hill, Martin Johnson [c], Ben Kay, Phil Vickery, Steve Thompson, Trevor Woodman. **Replacements:** Jason Leonard, Iain Balshaw, Mike Catt, Lewis Moody.

England 20 (Jason Robinson try; Jonny Wilkinson 4 pg, dg) defeated **Australia 17** (Lote Tuqiri try; Elton Flatley 4 pg).

#4 - AUSTRALIA V NEW ZEALAND, WESTPAC TRUST STADIUM (WELLINGTON) 5 AUGUST, 2000

Now this match had a lot to live up to, coming three weeks after the widely acclaimed “Game of the Century”. Because of this I feel it’s often undervalued as a standalone match. Sure we remember the finish, the John Eales kick (more of that later), but the rest of the match wasn’t too bad either.

For starters it featured two cracking back line moves from set piece play, one from each team. The ultimate was the All Black try to Christian Cullen, which involved a series of loops and dummy runners and cut out passes that had seemingly everyone bemused. Except for the All Blacks. They knew exactly what was going on and it stands alone as one of the best back line moves that have resulted in a try I have ever seen at that level.

The other play, by the Wallabies, actually opened the scoring and was a shade more simple. A worked move from a scrum saw Dan Herbert in space before setting up winger Stirling Mortlock for the try. The fact that this try was scored within three minutes of kick off had people gasping as to whether we would have a replay of that frenetic opening in the previous encounter.

We wouldn’t, but it was still a wonderful test match. The All Blacks fought back from trailing to be winning by two seemingly with time up. Twice Steve Larkham got the ball and twice Wallaby supporters huddled around their televisions yelling for him to run it. But he must have known something we didn’t because each time he booted it down field. Twice the All Blacks had lineout throws that were snaffled by Mark Connors jumping at two. Eventually the pressure spilled over and Craig Dowd was penalised for being off-side at a ruck.

Captain Eales knew exactly what they would do. Before the whistle even left Jonathan Kaplan’s mouth, Eales had signalled to the posts. Looking around to find his kicker, Mortlock, he was handed the ball by Jeremy Paul. “He’s injured. You’re up”. But Eales never skipped a beat. The kick was never going to miss and the TV shot of Eales, arms raised, seemingly towering over the goal posts are indicative of the standing of the man as a player, as a leader and as a match winner.

Australia: Chris Latham, Stirling Mortlock, Daniel Herbert, Jason Little, Joe Roff, Stephen Larkham, George Gregan, Toutai Kefu, David Wilson, Jim Williams, John Eales [c], David Giffin, Fletcher Dyson, Michael Foley, Richard Harry.
Replacements: Ben Tune, Mark Connors, Jeremy Paul.

New Zealand: Christian Cullen, Tana Umaga, Alama Ileremia, Pita Alatini, Jonah Lomu, Andrew Mehrtens, Justin Marshall, Ron Cribb, Josh Kronfeld, Taine Randell, Norm Maxwell, Todd Blackadder [c], Kees Meeuws, Anton Oliver, Carl Hoelt. **Replacements:** Craig Dowd, Tony Brown, Byron Kelleher, Reuben Thorne, Mark Hammett.



Australia 24 (Joe Roff try; John Eales pg; Stirling Mortlock try, 1 conv, 3 pg) defeated **New Zealand 23** (Christian Cullen 2 Tries; Andrew Mehrtens 2 conv, 3 pg).

#3 - AUSTRALIA V NEW ZEALAND, TELSTRA STADIUM (SYDNEY) 15 NOVEMBER, 2003 (RWC SEMI FINAL)

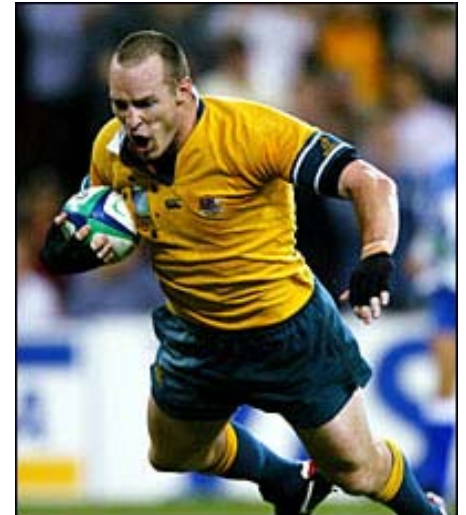
It's fair to say that not much was expected of Australia for this match. They had stumbled past Scotland in the quarterfinal and the last time they faced New Zealand at the same venue, they had 50 points run in against them. The All Blacks, on the other hand, looked almost unstoppable. The size and strength and speed of, not just their back line but their entire squad was awesome.

But as soon as Australia claimed the kick off it was all different. The Wallabies were, dare I say it, playing rugby. They maintained the ball in hand. They used the width of the field, ran strongly, secured and recycled possession and they made ground and looked dangerous. And this was all in the first five minutes of the game.

Finally this Wallaby team looked somewhat like the team we knew from two to four years earlier. But this was still a gun All Black team and the key would be to maintain pressure for the whole 80. And score points at any opportunity. Now we all know what happened. Stirling Mortlock latched onto a speculative Carlos Spencer pass and ran 80 odd metres to score under the posts. But this was only 10 minutes into the game. Rarely has an intercept pass had such an impact on the game when occurring so early in the match.

Sure the All Blacks fought back and scored just prior to half time, but that was pretty much it for them. Coach Eddie Jones had the Wallabies defending like demons and the tactic of maintain possession, rather than kicking to the dangerous All Black back three, proved a masterstroke. While the match will long be remembered for the Mortlock try, two other memories prove strong from the game. The first was the career ending injury to Wallaby tight head prop Ben Darwin.

The second was the terrific piece of sledging from the man opposition supporters (and referees?) loved to hate – George Gregan. With the clock winding down and the All Blacks yet again going from tournament favourites to big stage chokers, the broadcast picked up Gregan informing the All Blacks “Four more years boys. Four more years.” In fairness it was wrong for Greegs to suggest this. “Eight more years” being a more realistic statement.



Australia: Mat Rogers, Wendell Sailor, Stirling Mortlock, Elton Flatley, Lote Tuqiri, Steve Larkham, George Gregan [c], David Lyons, Phil Waugh, George Smith, Justin Harrison, Nathan Sharpe, Ben Darwin, Brendan Cannon, Bill Young. **Replacements:** Jeremy Paul, Al Baxter, David Giffin, Matt Cockbain, Joe Roff, Nathan Grey.

New Zealand: Mils Muliana, Doug Howlett, Leon MacDonald, Aaron Mauger, Joe Rokocoko, Carlos Spencer, Justin Marshall, Jerry Collins, Richard McCaw, Reuben Thorne [c], Ali Williams, Chris Jack, Greg Somerville, Keven Mealamu, Dave Hewett. **Replacements:** Byron Kelleher, Kees Meeuws, Brad Thorn, Marty Holah.

Australia 22 (Stirling Mortlock try; Elton Flatley conv, 5 pg) defeated **New Zealand 10** (Reuben Thorne try; Leon Macdonald conv, pg).

#2 - AUSTRALIA V BRITISH & IRISH LIONS, STADIUM AUSTRALIA (SYDNEY) 14 JULY, 2001

This was a defining tour for Australian Rugby. Firstly it was the crowning success for the masters of our rugby domination, coach Rod MacQueen and captain John Eales. Secondly, it was the first time the Wallabies had ever beaten the Lions in a test series. Finally it was a tour that made the Australian population stand up and realise the potential of the sport of rugby as a global sport and was most definitely a breeding ground for the amazing success that was the Rugby World Cup two years later.



The Wallabies were blown off the park in the first test at the Gabba in Brisbane. Jason Robinson skinning Chris Latham and then Brian O'Driscoll doing the same to Latham's replacement Matthew Burke were the stand out moments. The second test seemed to be going the same way at half time as the Lions enjoyed the lead. However a dazzling second half, which commenced almost immediately with Joe Roff intercepting a Jonny Wilkinson pass to race away and score, saw the Wallabies put on a record score (and margin) to tie up the series.

So we move to the third test. The Wallabies are forced to make two key changes with the experienced Steve Larkham and David Giffin injured and replaced by Elton Flatley and debutant Justin Harrison, respectively. The ARU meanwhile, spurred on by the embarrassment of seeing the sea of Red at the Gabba, have all but painted the Olympic Stadium in Sydney gold.

The support would be needed because the game would be a ding-dong battle. Up 16-13 at the break, thanks to a 40th minute converted try to Dan Herbert, the Wallabies would surrender the lead to the Lions via a converted Jonny Wilkinson try soon after. Australia bounced back through Dan Herbert and a Matt Burke conversion, but Wilkinson evened it all up soon after with a penalty. Australian pulled slightly ahead through penalties soon after but would it be enough?

If there was one consistent throughout this test, if not the series, it was the dominance of the Lions maul. It seemed to make ground at will and it was only through the resoluteness of the likes of Eales, Kefu and a young George Smith that the Lions didn't do more damage with it.

So with Burke's last penalty coming in the 80th minute, the Lions knew they had to use their best attacking weapon – the maul. From an attacking lineout to the Lions, well within 'rumbling' territory, the Lions in possession would be a dangerous proposition for the Wallabies. The throw would be to moneyman and skipper Martin Johnson and rookie Harrison knew it. He backed himself, snagged the throw and closed down the threat. The Wallabies would see out the match and secure their place as one of the top teams of all time.

Australia: Matthew Burke, Andrew Walker, Daniel Herbert, Nathan Grey, Joe Roff, Elton Flatley, George Gregan, Toutai Kefu, George Smith, Owen Finegan, John Eales [c], Justin Harrison, Rod Moore, Michael Foley, Nick Stiles. **Replacements:** James Holbeck, Matt Cockbain.

British Lions: Matt Perry, Daffyd James, Brian O'Driscoll, Rob Henderson, Jason Robinson, Jonny Wilkinson, Matt Dawson, Scott Quinnell, Neil Back, Matt Corry, Martin Johnson [c], Danny Grewcock, Phil Vickery, Keith Wood, Tom Smith. **Replacements:** Iain Balshaw, Darren Morris, Colin Charvis.

Australia 29 (Daniel Herbert 2 tries; Matt Burke 2 conv, 5 pg) defeated **British & Irish Lions 23** (Jason Robinson try; Jonny Wilkinson try, 2 conv, 3 pg).

#1 - AUSTRALIA V NEW ZEALAND, STADIUM AUSTRALIA (SYDNEY) 15 JULY, 2000

Ok, it's a little clichéd. I would've loved to come up with something different, something from left field to create some controversy. Get some chatter happening. But this game is everything it is proclaimed to be. Un-be-lievable. It has been dubbed the "Game of the Century" or the "Match Made in Heaven" and it's easy to see why. 39-25. Eleven tries. A searing 24-0 lead to the All Blacks after less than ten minutes. A seemingly incredible match-winning comeback by the Wallabies and then a try to New Zealand hero, Jonah Lomu, with minutes to go, to take back the lead and secure an amazing victory.

Sure, you can criticize the defence. But that is unfair to, firstly, the intensity and precision of the All Blacks and that opening stanza. And it is a discredit to the likes of Cullen and Larkham who dazzled. And if it's defence you want, watch George Gregan on Jonah Lomu, not once, not twice but three times in that first half. Brilliant stuff.



The game is one of those "Princess Di moments". Just like everyone has a story as to where they were when they heard the Princess of Wales had died, every true rugby fan has a story as to where they were when they watched this match. Me? I was at home alone, my flatmates at the game, as I saved my dollars for my wedding a month or two later. That first ten minutes had me charging and yelling around the house as that unheralded centre combo of Alama Ileremia and Pita Alatini made all that room for the likes of Cullen, Umaga and Lomu.

And then finally we got the ball and Larkham, typically, ghosted through before delivering a beautiful wide pass to Stirling Mortlock on the wing to score. Then Morty scored again, running a nice angle from Gregan this time. Then Latham powered through for a converted try and when Roff scored (dubiously using captain Eales as a blocker) the score was a remarkable 24 all with still ten minutes to play in the half.

It all settled down a little in the second half, the scoring that is, if not the intensity. We scored an early penalty, but then the All Blacks scored pretty much from the kick off to gain the lead again. More penalties were exchanged but it wasn't until just over five minutes to go that Australia scored through Jeremy Paul to seemingly...possibly... hopefully.... incredibly.... secure the win.

But it wasn't to be as the world record crowd of just under 110,000 people cheered or groaned in unity as Lomu scored the match-sealing try. And when it all settled down everyone – players, administrators, match officials, supporters – everyone, took a breath, looked around in bewilderment and enjoyed the glow of having just participated in one of the classic rugby matches ever played, between two of the greatest of traditional rivals.

Australia: Chris Latham, Stirling Mortlock, Daniel Herbert, Jason Little, Joe Roff, Stephen Larkham, George Gregan, Jim Williams, David Wilson, Mark Connors, John Eales [c], David Giffin, Fletcher Dyson, Michael Foley, Richard Harry. **Replacements:** Rod Kafer, Andrew Walker, Jeremy Paul, Toutai Kefu, Glen Panaho, Troy Jacques.

New Zealand: Christian Cullen, Tana Umaga, Alama Ileremia, Pita Alatini, Jonah Lomu, Andrew Mehrtens, Justin Marshall, Ron Cribb, Scott Robertson, Taine Randell, Norm Maxwell, Todd Blackadder [c], Kees Meeuws, Anton Oliver, Carl Hoefft. **Replacements:** Craig Dowd, Tony Brown, Byron Kelleher, Troy Flavell, Josh Kronfeld, Mark Hammett.

New Zealand 39 (Christian Cullen, Tana Umaga, Jonu Lomu, Pita Alatini, Justin Marshall tries; Andrew Mehrtens 4 conv, 2 pg) defeated **Australia 35** (Chris Latham, Joe Roff; Jeremy Paul tries; Stirling Mortlock 2 tries, 2 conv, 2 pg).

WALLABY FULLBACK OF THE DECADE

From the period 2000-2009, ten different men (perhaps nine men and a boy) have worn the Wallaby Number Fifteen jersey in a test match.

They are:

Chris Latham (57 starts at fullback); Adam Ashley-Cooper (17); Matt Burke (14); Matt Rogers (9); James O'Connor (7); Drew Mitchell (6); Julian Huxley (6); Joe Roff (4); Cameron Shepherd (2); Stirling Mortlock (1).

Now our task at G&GR was to come up with the three leading candidates for the Wallaby Team of the Decade. How do we do this? Well we did it as simply by looking at their performances in this position and how dominant it was. So now, our top three fullbacks of the decade:

MATTHEW BURKE



Surprisingly, arguably Australia's greatest ever fullback, played relatively little rugby in that position for the Wallabies in the Noughties. Injury deprived him of a full 2000, with three games at the end of the season on the wing his only game time. 2001 started slowly too, picked on the bench behind Chris Latham in the first test against the Lions. A bit of Jason Robinson magic soon saw Latho replaced and Burke would see out the rest of the year and scoring a massive 157 points.

2001 would be the last time that Burke had the gold 15 jersey pretty much to himself however as not only was he sharing it with the likes of Chris Latham, Matty Rogers and Joe Roff, but his versatility had him spending time at wing and at outside centre, as well as on the bench.

A subdued appearance off the bench in an away game against the Boks in 2004 would be his last Wallaby appearance, but the memories of his Lions series in particular would long remain.

Happy Hooker says:

Can't go past Burke, the guy was as a rock at the back and despite the fact he may not have played for as much of the decade as Latham, he was amazing.

CHRIS LATHAM



Looking purely at the stats, then Chris Latham had a fairly impressive decade. Four tries in the first test of the 2000's, against Argentina, set him on his way to 38 tries for the decade. More than any other Wallaby has scored in any decade. But it was far from easy for the NSW-born Queensland legend.

After a solid full season in the Wallaby jersey in 2000, Latho was dropped after a defensive error in the first Lions test of 2001. Such was his attacking value that he was recalled into the starting line-up, this time on the wing, before the season was out. Latham would score a Wallaby record five tries in a game against Namibia during the 2003 Rugby World Cup, but it was not enough to force him into the starting line-up come the business end of the tournament, with Matt Rogers preferred.

But Latham would soon turn all that around securing, not only a consistent spot in the number 15 jersey, but also the acclaim of the global rugby community as one of the premier players in the world.

Eddo says:

Unfortunate that Burke had his career split over 2 different decades for the sake of these surveys. But given that I don't make the rules, I don't see how anyone could not vote for Latham.

JOE ROFF



Now remember, this is for his time in the Wallaby fullback jersey. This does not take into account his Brumby form, nor his Wallaby games on the wing. Just the four lone games he wore the golden 15 jersey. Just two games against Scotland, one against England and then another, his final, against the Pacific Islanders.

But what those four games showed was perhaps how wasted Roff had been on the wing all career. This is not to dispute his contribution from the wing, nor the abilities of other first choice fullbacks such as Burke and Latham. It is just that Roff managed to show in his four 2004 appearances sublime timing and skills that should have been seen more on the international stage.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So they are our choices. But who are yours? Does Roff deserve his spot for just four tests? Are we discounting too readily the form of the current man for the job, Adam Ashley-Cooper? What about the undoubted brilliance of Matt Rogers? Should we be granting special consideration to Cameron Shepherd due to injury?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-fullback-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY WINGER OF THE DECADE

From the period 2000-2009, eighteen different men have worn either the Wallaby Number Eleven or Fourteen jerseys in a test match. Interestingly eight of these were also on the fullback list (Julian Huxley and James O'Connor being the only two fullbacks NOT to start a test on the wing).

So, our Noughty wingers were:

Lote Tuqiri (51 starts on the wing); Wendell Sailor (29); Joe Roff (28); Drew Mitchell (20); Mark Gerrard (17); Clyde Rathbone (16); Peter Hynes (15); Stirling Mortlock (14); Lachlan Turner (11); Ben Tune (6); Andrew Walker (5); Chris Latham (5); Digby Ione (4); Adam Ashley-Cooper (4); Matt Burke (3); Matt Rogers (3); Cameron Shepherd (3); Scott Staniforth (2).

Whereas previously we normally pick a top three for each position, we are not differentiating between right or left wing, so we are going to pick the top six wingers of the decade. Again this is based on their performance at test level, this decade, in the wing position.

And our top wingers (in no particular order, well in the particular order of the alphabet in fact):

PETER HYNES

Hynes has only featured for the Wallabies in the last two years of the decade, but already has more starts on the wing than the likes of Paul Carozza, Paddy Batch, Rob Egerton, Laurie Monaghan or Jeff McLean. It's a sign of the age of professionalism as much as anything, but also a sign of the type of player that Queensland flyer is.

Hynes is very much a Robbie Deans style player. Whilst not quite as speedy as his schoolboy sprinter days, he has the balance and composure required to be a finisher at the highest level. But it is his work off the ball, as much as with it, that is most impressive. Forever on the go, Hynes loves to get his hands dirty in the ruck and has no fear in charging into an oncoming pack. Just the four tries scored so far, but how much of that can be put down to a struggling inside backs is a reasonable question. The Wallaby Rookie of the Year in 2008, it is only fair to consider him one of the premier Wallaby wingers of the decade.



STIRLING MORTLOCK



It is easy to forget that Mortlock first burst onto the international rugby scene as a winger. It's not surprising when you consider that team he played in had the likes of Roff, Larkham, Gregan, Wilson and Eales in its line-up. Even less surprising when you realise that Daniel Herbert had the coveted 13 jersey to himself. But what a debut by Mortlock!

After not getting much of a shot in his first test, against the Pumas in Brisbane, Mortlock rectified things in the 2nd test with a try, a conversion and 5 penalties for 22 personal points. This would begin a run of point scoring which included 29 points against the Boks in Melbourne, 20 v the All Blacks in Sydney, 21 v the Boks in Sydney, 16 v the All Blacks in Wellington and 14 (including the trophy winning kick) against the Boks in Durban. This points spree would power Mortlock to reach the 100 point mark quicker than any Wallaby ever before.

JOE ROFF

Roff started the decade with 21 consecutive tests for the Wallabies on the wing. This included both the incredible Tri-Nations of 2000 as well as memorable British Lions tour of 2001. It was the Lions tour that would pretty much end up capping a wonderful career for Roff. He would go on to play just another seven more games on the wing after that 2001 season, playing off the bench in the Rugby World Cup finals of 2003 behind league recruits Wendell Sailor and Lote Tuqiri, before finishing his career at fullback in 2004.

But what a performance in the Lions series. His two tries in the second test in Melbourne not only won the match but pretty much put rugby on the map in Australia. The series win against the Lions provided rugby a tremendous profile boost in non-traditional areas, and Roff's performances were at the heart of it. A canny player, he knew the way to the try line, yet relied on his nous as much as his speed and size to get across the line.



WENDELL SAILOR



Wendell arrived in rugby as perhaps the biggest signing it had ever made. Having just finished the Rugby League World Cup as its best player Sailor, ever the shrinking violet saw rugby as a chance to take his game (and face) to the global market. Some will debate whether Dell was worth the money. Putting aside the pure marketing aspect of him (which is almost undeniable), Dell was a key player this decade.

Now it took Sailor a fair while to adjust to the finer points of rugby. He was never a naturally instinctive player and the increased analysis in rugby battled his natural desire to just bash and barge. He was probably thrown into the Wallaby team, prematurely, in 2002. Scott Staniforth for one being unlucky to be overlooked. But he worked hard, as he always has, and scored some ripper tries in 2003 against the likes of Wales, England and New Zealand.

His game against the All Blacks that same year, in the RWC semi-final in Sydney was perhaps his best ever in the code. His intensity was high and his work rate and ball retention fitted perfectly with the Eddie Jones chosen game plan. Unfortunately, a week later the same intensity wasn't there and the World Cup was lost.

Injury would curtail his 2004, memorably giving Clyde Rathbone an unbelievable opportunity against England in Brisbane. 2005 however was building as an impressive year, with a move from the Reds to the Waratahs providing more opportunities. However Dell would end his career with rugby, the same way he came in, on the front pages. How he will be remembered long term will unfortunately be more for his off-field exploits than his on field.

LOTE TUQIRI



Coming across to rugby a year after Sailor (and Matt Rogers) Tuqiri would find his feet seemingly a great deal quicker. Perhaps he was eased into it better, but come the business end of a big season, the 2003 RWC, Tuqiri had forced his way into the starting side and sent Australia into hysterics with a brilliant try in the final.

Ten tries the following year would set a Wallaby Record for the most tries in a single season. Harking back to the RWC final of the previous year, Tuqiri would twice score tries in four consecutive tests, an achievement only the great David Campese had previously managed.

His try scoring percentage would dry up however and the questions would begin to be raised as to his worth. Perhaps it was a clash between playing styles at provincial and international level? It seemed the Waratahs wanted his power game whereas the Wallabies wanted a finisher. In the end Lote's career, like Sailors', would end in controversy, which is a shame for a man who currently sits in equal 3rd spot on the Wallabies all time try scorers list.

ANDREW WALKER

Yet another league convert on the list of the best of the decade. Is it a sign of their quality or the ARU's pre-occupation with them? Either way it's hard to deny the sublime that was Andrew Walker. In yet another career that was cut short dramatically and, from a rugby perspective, unfortunately, Walker had it all. A Wallaby career of a little over 12 months was not enough to satisfy the appetites of his fans.

He debuted, off the bench, in "The Match of the Century" and would play his last test, also off the bench, in John Eales's last game "the one with Kef's try". Two more dramatic games you would struggle to find, and thus a fitting bookend to Walks' career. In between he played all three tests against the British Lions combining brilliantly with fellow Brumby Joe Roff to send Dan Herbert away on a crucial try in the third test. Walker scored one himself, an unbelievable effort, in the first test that lives long in the memory.



Still running around in Brisbane Club Rugby, Walker just loves playing rugby, which always seemed to come across in his play. It is just a shame other external pressures deprived us all from seeing more of him at the highest level.

FINAL THOUGHTS

And there we are. How'd we do? This one will cause some discussion I am sure. How could we leave out Ben Tune? Did we even consider Mark Gerrard and Clyde Rathbone? Do we not remember Drew Mitchell's try scoring feats at the 2007 RWC?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-winger-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY OUTSIDE CENTRE OF THE DECADE

Are we getting the hang of these now? Good, let's keep them coming. From the period 2000-2009, eleven different men have worn the Wallaby Number Thirteen jersey in a test match. They are:

Stirling Mortlock (52); Daniel Herbert (20); Matt Burke (11); Ryan Cross (9); Lote Tuqiri (8); Morgan Turinui (6); Adam Ashley-Cooper (6); Mat Rogers (4); Digby Ioane (3); Graeme Bond (2); Clyde Rathbone (2).

As we return to a specialist position, its back to picking the top three candidates for our Wallaby Team of the Decade.

MATTHEW BURKE



As the Wallaby selectors still tried to fill the gap left by Timmy Horan, and with the emergence of Chris Latham as a fullback option, Matty Burke found himself in the 13 Wallaby jersey come the start of the 2002 year. Dan Herbert had moved in one spot to inside centre allowing Burke to slide in next to him. There's no denying Burke had all the qualities of a top level 13. He was strong in defence, ran the angles well, was a good communicator and had a decent kick to boot.

He was capable enough to hold down the position for the first seven tests of the domestic season that year, including wins over France, South Africa and New Zealand. However he would end the season back in his preferred position at the back of the team.

With an injury to Stirling Mortlock, and neither Morgan Turinui nor Matt Rogers capable of making the position their own, Burke found his way back to Outside Centre during the Rugby World Cup year of 2003. Eventually Morty would come back, reclaim his

spot and that was effectively that for Matty Burke. His Wallaby career would finish off the bench in Durban, before moving to the UK and showing his legs still had a few more years in them.

DANIEL HERBERT

Herbert began the decade as the premier outside centre in global rugby, thanks to his performances at the 1999 RWC. He would hold onto that title, at least arguably, for another couple of years as the Wallabies continued to win trophy after trophy. Herbert was a key component of memorable wins against the Springboks, All Blacks and Lions over that period.

His resolute defence was often tested (as he marked Brian O'Driscoll in the 2001 Lions series) but it was his leadership and strong running game, as well as his ability to recycle ball, that were perhaps undervalued by Wallaby supporters. He was simply put, a dominant presence in the toughest of defensive channels.

Like Burke he would be shuffled around a bit by the Wallaby selectors, between inside centre and outside. Whilst many doubted his ability to handle to greater ball handling required at 12, he did so well enough to play most of his last season in that position. In fact his last test was as an inside centre against Italy in Genova. A relatively inconsequential match played in relative obscurity. Quite apart from the world stage that Herbert played most of his career.



STIRLING MORTLOCK



This picture just typifies Mortlock to me. He just looks unstoppable. I don't know what it is about him. Sure he has size, and at least used to have a little bit of speed. But why was (is?) he so good? He obviously has the commitment and motivation. He just seems 'up' for the big games. Any man that seems to always perform against the mighty All Blacks is worth recognition.

He seemed to have this innate ability to run the right line or angle. When he got the ball the Wallaby back line would look like someone had pressed the fast forward button. Mortlock would just barge it straight, pin-balling defenders as he went. There are so many memorable moments of him this decade. His kick against the Boks, albeit as a winger, was just the start. The two standouts are obvious. His intercept of the Carlos Spencer pass in the RWC03 Semi Final and the run to set up Scott Staniforth for a crucial try back in 2007 are regulars on any highlights reel.

Ed says:

Hard to go pass Mortlock, but I really did like Herbert, he was definitely one of my more favourite players.

Perhaps a spot on the bench for Herbert?

As a captain he led from the front, not as the Captain Insano his nickname would suggest. The results rarely came for him however, and his missed penalty against England at the 2007 RWC will long be etched in his memory. But hopefully, right at the back - behind all those wonderful charges, tackles, tries and kicks.

FINAL THOUGHTS

And so we come to the end of another position. How'd we do? Should have we considered a couple of the current lads in Ashley-Cooper or Ioane? What about Lote's time in 13? Was he worth consideration?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-outside-centre-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY INSIDE CENTRE OF THE DECADE

In trying to find the 'next Tim Horan', seventeen different men have worn the Wallaby Number Twelve jersey in a test match from 2000-2009. They are:

Matt Giteau (29), Berrick Barnes (14), Nathan Grey (11), Elton Flatley (11), Stirling Mortlock (9), Daniel Herbert (9), Morgan Turinui (9), , Adam Ashley-Cooper (5), Quade Cooper (5), Jason Little (4), Steve Kefu (4), Matt Rogers (4) Rod Kafer (2), Steve Larkham (2), Scott Staniforth (2), Timana Tahu (2), Tim Horan (1).

We lounge room experts from G&GR fought long and hard about this one, with a number of names considered. In the end, I am the one who ended up writing this piece, so I get final say. So, the top three inside centres of the decade are:

ELTON FLATLEY



Flats is an interesting footballer. Thrown into professional rugby straight from school in 1996, the man needed shoulders as broad as his chin to carry the weight of expectations. One golden haired flyhalf from QLD had retired in Michael Lynagh and the Reds wanted Flats to fill his shoes. Perhaps it was the experience of meeting these expectations that prepared Flatley for his grandest moment.

The Rugby World Cup has a tendency to throw forward some big names who star at their tournament. 87 had John Kirwin, 91 had Campo, 95 had Lomu and 99 had Timmy Horan. Now I am not suggested that Flats in 03 had the same impact as any of these players, but there is no denying his status grew through the tournament. In the final Flatley went toe-to-toe with the games kicking Heavy Weight in Jonny Wilkinson, and he didn't flinch. Rugby fans and non-fans alike could do nothing but admire his resilience and composure as he almost single handedly kept Australia in the game.

While he spent most of his Wallaby time as either and understudy, or apprentice, to the great Steve Larkham, Flatley's efforts in 2003 are a perfect example of seizing your moment whenever they arrive.

Chief says:

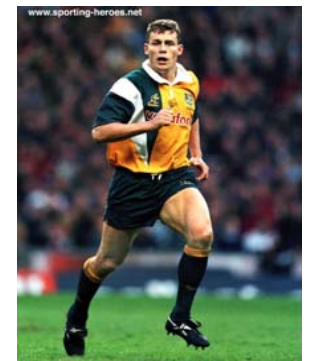
I think without a doubt it's Flatley. His composure ensured success in the game. No doubt Gits is a quality player but Flatley had the collection about him, and never and I mean never, cracked under pressure.

JASON LITTLE

Little only played four games at inside centre for the Wallabies during the decade, all in his last season of rugby – 2000. With his old buddy Tim Horan injured in the first test of the season, the Wallabies originally tried the tugboat, Rod Kafer, in this key position keeping Jason Little on the bench.

However the combination wasn't clicking and Little was promoted to the starting team to partner Dan Herbert. What would follow would be four of the most memorable Wallaby test matches to played consecutively. It started with the "Game of the Century" in Sydney and culminated in the last minute win over the Springboks in Durban. In between would be wins over New Zealand in Wellington and South Africa in Sydney with Jason Little providing invaluable experience and resoluteness in each game.

The Durban game would be a real end of an era with Little retiring alongside fellow 1999 World Cup alum Richard Harry and David Wilson. And while Little retired as one of our greatest outside centres, there was no doubting his contribution as an inside centre in Australia's trophy winning spree late in 2000.



NATHAN GREY



Grey had been there and thereabouts for the Wallabies for a couple of years since his debut in 1998. But being 'there' usually meant being on the bench and being a highly effective impact player. 2001 would be his watershed however. Exceptional Waratah form finally saw him a first choice player and, with Dan Herbert, he formed one of the most physically intimidating centre combinations ever to pull on the green and gold of Australia.

Some argue his physical intimidation bordered on the illegal as evidenced by his elbow on Lions forward leader Richard Hill. The incident is often considered a turning point of the series and Grey is held as a pariah in parts of the UK for it. But to label him as such from a single incident is unfair. There is no doubting Grey's intensity on the playing field and it was a characteristic that set him apart from many players. But to focus solely on his physical presence is to underplay his skill set. Whilst not a natural ball player like some, Grey had the skills to kick start his backline and a handy enough boot to match.

Ryan says:

Grey for me. Had just too many memories growing up where all I can remember is screaming his name in a fit of joy as he lit someone up or made a break or something...

Ozrugbynut says:

Horan and Giteau without doubt the two front-runners for top 12, although Grey personifies the attitude required in a Wallaby.

FINAL THOUGHTS

"But...but...but...where's Matt Giteau?" I hear you say. "Don't let his recent time at 10 dull your memories of his time at 12!" you insist. We haven't. We didn't. Well I didn't. But decisions have to be made, and they can't please everyone all the time. There were other able candidates too, none least being Berrick Barnes. Plus we tend to forget how ably Mortlock and Herbert filled in at 12 because of their domination of the 13 jersey. And yes, I know you're out there too, the Scott Staniforth supporters. I would have loved to see him in that jersey more for the Wallabies, but what can I do?

So let us have it. Who should have been there? Who shouldn't have? Why does Giteau deserve to be there? And tell us why.

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-inside-centre-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY FLYHALF OF THE DECADE

From the period 2000-2009, just nine different men have worn the Wallaby Ten jersey in a test match. They are:

Steve Larkham (69); Matt Giteau (31); Elton Flatley (6); Matt Rogers (6); Berrick Barnes (5); Rod Kafer (3); Nathan Grey (1); Sam Norton-Knight (1); Julian Huxley (1). Interestingly if you discount Bernie Larkham and Gits, then the cumulative starts of the rest of the players is just 23. It shows the dominance of Larkham for starters but also the reliance on Matt Giteau as his replacement.

Anyway, the team at G&GR didn't have too many dramas coming up with our three leading candidates this time around. They are:

ELTON FLATLEY



Picking the third man for this list was always going to be tough after the first two effectively picked themselves. What got Flats the mark? A big factor was his composure under pressure and pure dependability. Because he played in the era of Steve Larkham, when he played it was generally as a replacement for the injured Bernie. Because Larkham was such a crucial player, it was always such a blow to have out of the team, and conversely, Flatley in the team.

But many people forget that it was Elton who played 10 in that crucial 3rd test against the Lions in 01. And again in the upset win over England at Twickenham in 2004. The England win in particular was a credit to Flatley as he marshalled an injured impacted Wallaby outfit to their first win at English HQ against the Poms for six years.

As it would turn out the test would be the last start for Elton, a single appearance off the bench against the All Blacks in 2005 would be his last in Wallaby colours. Soon after, constant head injuries would force him to premature retirement and he left the scene how he played his footy. With minimal fuss and flair. Oh, except for the couple of months on celebrity survivor with the glamour models, actors and musicians. Other than that.... he just slipped into the shadows.

MATT GITEAU

Ever since he broke into the Wallaby team as a bolt from the blue in 2002 it seemed Giteau was the man to replace Steve Larkham in the Wallaby 10 shirt. Much of this was because we all wondered just how much longer Bernie's body would hold up. It is long forgotten that Gits first test start was as flyhalf. Sure it was against the major minnows of Namibia, but it was certainly a pointer of things to come.

An apprenticeship served outside Larkham at the Brumbies, and the Wallabies, was broken when Giteau decided to head West to the Force and spend some quality time as first receiver. Perhaps there was also frustration when he was thrown into the number 9 jersey for a number of tests. He handled the move well, but he craved the space out wider and the responsibility of being the chief play maker.

It is a battle that still remains. Is he better served drifting wider and running in the greater spaces, or do the Wallabies use him best as the key ball player. In form there is no doubting he is the Wallabies' best back, and if that's the case we need his hands on the ball as much as possible. His two full seasons at 10, in 2008 and 2009, have each seen him score in excess of 150 points for the season. A sign, perhaps, that whilst he is still adjusting to the role, he is a vital part of a firing Wallaby back line.



STEVE LARKHAM



Well, surely this is a case of put down the glasses? No competition right? But let's take a moment to recall the glory that was Steven Larkham. It is easy to forget that Larkham started the decade, having starred at the RWC in 1999, with just a tick over 30 caps. Less than Cliffy Palu, Adam Ashley-Cooper and Drew Mitchell have now. That was where he was it. Still pretty bloody green, I guess you could say. Even more remarkable is that he had less than 20 tests as a flyhalf.

But he was still such a dominant figure. Clichés tend to be run ragged in rugby circles but the one describing Larkham as 'ghosting' through the defence was always so accurate to me. At one time he'd be on his side of the defensive line and then, before you knew it and when it seemed least possible, he'd be on the other side as if magically appearing behind the opposition tacklers.

And then there was his kicking game, which improved remarkably over his career. He gained the distance and accuracy to rival most in world rugby. But where his game stood him apart from opposition 10's was his sheer physicality. His willingness to take on the advantage line, ball in hand, regardless of the size and ugliness of the forward pack in front of him. Likewise, his absolute enthusiasm for getting dirty in defence. He loved to get one over his opposition in a tackle, whenever he could. Put simply, a magical player, very much once in a generation.

Gumby says:

For me Larkham was the best fly since Ella. I even rate him over Noddy. The man was a freak really as was shown in the 99RWC semi against the Boks.

Chris says:

The greatest 'skill' of a flyhalf is to control the game, the pace of the game, the tempo etc. And Larkham is the only one who comes close this rare ability in world rugby.

FINAL THOUGHTS

And there we stand. I don't expect to see much argument as to the flyhalf of the decade. But who do you reckon should have been our top three? Does Flats deserve his spot? Has Berrick already proven to be more accomplished than Elton, or even Gits? And what about that man Matty Rogers. A freak for sure, did he ever really get to show it off at ten for the Wallabies?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-fly-half-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY SCRUMHALF OF THE DECADE

Unsurprisingly in a decade in which the Wallabies most capped player played scrumhalf, there were only six men who played at the base of the scrum for the Wallabies from 2000-2009. These players were:

George Gregan (81 starts), Luke Burgess (18), Sam Cordingly (8), Will Genia (7), Matt Giteau (6), Chris Whitaker (3).

Picking a top three scrumhalves of the decade has proven quite difficult.

Obviously the options are limited, but with one player starting in basically two thirds of the tests, the rest shared out amongst the remaining four players, there are limited opportunities to weigh up the challengers. We went to and fro with the final selections a bit, and it is fair to say it was somewhat influenced by the recent tour, but the top three scrumhalves of the decade are:

GEORGE GREGAN

Gregan was first choice halfback for pretty much the first eight years of the decade. He was first choice captain for a little over half the decade. He formed a brilliant combination with his Brumbies teammate Steve Larkham. But still, I don't expect this vote to be as clear-cut as it may seem it should be.

I don't think we as supporters, at least this decade, ever saw the true value of Gregan to the Wallabies. What we saw was his on field performances. We saw his courageous defence (go back and watch his tackling of Lomu in the 2000 Tri Nations as an example). We saw the pressure he could put his opposition number under. On the face of it both his running game and delivery from the forwards seemed to slow somewhat as the years went on.

But what we didn't see, and only occasionally would read about, was his utmost professionalism in terms of how he would prepare for a test match. The precision practise and care of his body that rookies would watch in awe of. We didn't necessarily see first hand the respect with which his teammates, and indeed the opposition, had for him. It is respect that seems to have gone missing in the Wallabies team for, gee I don't know, how long ago did Gregan retire?



Scarfman says:

For me, it's either GG or Gits, who was sensational in the position. I voted GG because Gits didn't play enough to test the theory as an all-round 9, rather than our best ever running 9, which he was.

Pedro says:

Even when he seemed slow at the end of his career, he was still irreplaceable, go Gregan!

Robson says:

If we judge Gregan at the top of his career he is incomparable.

WILL GENIA



It was a real battle for these final two spots in this top three. I have no doubt whatsoever that there is a bit of a 'recency factor' in the selection of Genia here. Genia has been somewhat of a revelation since his debut earlier this season. He has provided the Wallabies a dynamite pass from the pack to the backs. He has a dangerous running game that is well managed without being overplayed, and as we have seen on the Spring tour, his kicking game can be inch perfect.

There will always be comparisons made between Genia and Gregan. They start from the physical resemblances I guess, both being short of stature and dark of skin. Then there is the fact that both players got selected in the test team from relative obscurity. And both scrumhalves were picked as yet another attempt to fill the whole made by the retirement of a former Wallaby great.

Genia has made the position his own though, proving so valuable a player that he has played numerous 80-minute test matches, which is almost unheard of in the modern age. His maturity and composure seem to be the traits that set him apart, taking into account his obvious abilities and skills. How he manages the newfound attention and expectations? Well that might be where more comparisons with Gregan arise as Gregan struggled to maintain his Wallaby spot for the years after his debut season in 1994. Can Genia set himself apart and stake a claim for the next decade?

MATT GITEAU

Hmmm... Gits above Burgess? Gits above Cordingly? Gits above Whits? I reckon a definite yes for the last two, and a more than likely for the first. Knuckles Connolly copped some flack for playing Gits at 9, this despite the fact many 'experts' were calling for it to happen pre-Connolly's time as coach. I for one really enjoyed the experiment. Giteau was our most dangerous player at the time and just didn't seem to be getting his hands on the ball enough at inside centre. So why not get him back to a position he played at school in which he could handle the ball more than any other player.

He scored a great try against Wales in his first game there for that exact reason. Just because he was meant to be close to the ball he was close to the ball, took the quick tap, caught Wales napping and scored the try. His delivery was adequate and his kicking game better than most 9's. If we had a suitable inside centre to take over from Giteau I am sure the experiment would have been extended. Sure enough the best performance by the Wallabies whilst Gits played scrumhalf was when we had the experienced, and vastly underrated, Scott Staniforth at 12 against the Scots at Murrayfield.



FINAL THOUGHTS

So yes, Burgess would have been very close. I think we can forget how much he added to the Wallaby attacking game last year. He still has a lot to offer in my eyes, although his passing is just not up to scratch. As for Whits? Unfortunately I never thought he really grabbed his opportunities, however few they were, for the Wallabies. Only three starts is hard, particularly when one is against Namibia, one is in the torrential rain in Wellington and the other against a very week Samoan team.

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-scrumhalf-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY NUMBER 8 OF THE DECADE

Finally! On to the REAL men. The pigs. The pack. The piano movers. The forwards! Starting at the back of the scrum we consider the top Number 8 of the decade, and I reckon it is a bit of a battle.

There are, realistically, three stand out candidates and each have had moments of superb form. But each have also fallen off the pace and not been as consistent as we would have liked.

But to the list, in the 123 tests from 2000 to 2009 we have had the following ten players wear the Wallaby Number 8 jersey:

Toutai Kefu (31 starts), Wycliff Palu (30), David Lyons (28), George Smith (8), Richard Brown (8), Jim Williams (6), Rocky Elsom (4), John Roe (3), Stephen Hoiles (3), Scott Fava (2).

The Top 3, we here at G&GR came up with, are the top three on the capped list as well. So, starting at the top of the list we have...

TOUTAI KEFU



Like many of his World Cup teammates, Toutai Kefu started the decade on top of the world. In fact Kef was probably at the very top as the best 8-man in world rugby, and one of the best forwards. Unfortunately he had a slow start to rugby in 2000 and he had to play his way back into the Wallabies from the bench as Big Jim Williams demonstrated his skills in Kef's old jersey. Even when back to full fitness, coach MacQueen seemed to use the two on a horses for courses basis. Jimmy for the massive Bok pack whilst Kef would take on the more mobile All Blacks. Come season's end Kef was back in the starting pack and ready for anything.

Anything would come the following year in what would be one of Toutai's most memorable seasons. He was instrumental in the Wallabies' 2-1 series win over the British Lions forming a powerful back row combination with the rookie George Smith and the cunning Owen Finegan. A win over the All Blacks in Wellington was soon followed by that most famous of tries - Kefu's last minute, match winning, Bledisloe retaining, Tri-Nations securing, captain farewell try was phenomenal from every perspective and will go down as one of the most memorable moments of Australian rugby.

Unfortunately for Kef his Wallaby career ended prematurely. Whereas he had targeted finishing on the high of a home World Cup, instead he bowed out one match early when injury suffered in a Tri Nations match against South Africa ruled him out of the tournament.

Gumby says:

Kefu is probably the best 8 we have produced in the last quarter century if not longer. He was even better in my view than Willie-O.

El Dommo says:

Kefu is often regarded as a game breaker. The others aren't which has to make the decision simple.

WYCLIFF PALU



tour. When Palu has been injured or out of form the Wallabies of recent years have never looked as capable of winning as they are when he is on song and firing.

Cliffy Palu seems to have saved his best until last. At least the last few tests of the decade. Palu's form on the 2009 Spring Tour has been career best. For the first time since his debut in 2006 he has managed to string together a series (more than two) of high quality, high impact games in a row. His ball running was consistently damaging, his defence destructive and his work rate surprisingly high.

There have been glimpses of his abilities over the last four or so years in the green and gold. We've seen the barnstorming running game with the deft off loads. We've seen the occasional massive hit reminiscent of Willie O. We've seen flashes. But we never saw enough of it, and rarely with the high workload he brought to the table in the Grand Slam attempting

Bob Dwyer says:

Cliffy's ball running and off-loads are world class. He has the misfortune however to play in an era when we kick the ball much, much more than we run with it. If we ever decide to play more with the ball in hand, Cliffy will be even more effective. His skills in these areas remind me of Willie Ofahengaue – and that's a BIG rap.

DAVID LYONS



David Lyons debuted for Australia against Argentina in the very first match of this decade, just two days after his 20th birthday. This is quite the achievement when you recall that he had only made his Super 12 rugby debut that same year. It would be a full year, though, until his 2nd test. This time coming off the bench in the first test against the touring Lions team. What an initiation, but what an experience.

And so it would still be another 12 months after the Lions test that he would actually play his third test, against France. The following week he would get his run on debut against the same outfit. He still played most of his rugby from the bench, but at last he was a very real member of the squad. And the experience would prove invaluable come the Rugby World Cup in 2003. When injury ruled Kefu out of the World Cup squad, Lyons stood up exceptionally to lead the pack. He was a stand out in the very first

match of the tournament against the Argentineans, in just his 2nd test start in the position, and would continue his form all tournament to be Australia's most consistent player. His form continued the following year in which he won the John Eales medal, but his consistency began to be called into question and injuries began to arise more regularly. He managed to make it to the 2007 World Cup, starting in just the one game, and that was it for the Wallabies. His last game being a relatively low key affair against the Fijians. On his day he was a damaging wide running 8 with plenty of potential. I'm personally not convinced we ever saw him at his very best.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So how do we stand? Did we get it right this time from a top three perspective? Does King George's time at 8 deserve further consideration? Or have we undervalued the worth of Jimmy Williams?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-number-8-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY OPEN SIDE FLANKER OF THE DECADE

Wow. Only five players have worn the Number 7 Wallaby jersey in the last 123 tests. That's quite a record. It is the same sort of record as scrum half and in both scenarios the position is dominated by a test centurion.

The list of Open Side Flankers for the decade, and their starts, are: George Smith (70 starts), Phil Waugh (39), David Wilson (7), David Pocock (6), David Croft (1).

What a high quality list. The fact that David Croft only started in one test throughout this period is a fair indication as to the quality that was in front of him. Croft, more because of his lone start, was an obvious player to miss out on our top 3. The other player was more difficult to cut. So let's go to the G&GR's selections.

GEORGE SMITH



Smith's record is exceptional. He was a lay down misere for this top three list, which isn't shocking anyone. But he came very close to making the list for Number 8s and he is certainly in contention for the Blind Side Flanker short list.

His recognition this year by the readers of Green & Gold Rugby, as the Wallaby Player of the Year is the perfect example of why he is a stand out player. He, along with Stirling Mortlock, is the longest standing current Wallaby, having debuted in 2000. Whilst Mortlock remains injury prone and is weighing up his options overseas. Smith is firing on all cylinders. Perhaps it is because he has a player of the calibre of David Pocock on his tail. Or perhaps it's just a sign of his utmost commitment and professionalism.

Smith's test debut, against France at the end of the 2000 year, was purely a sign of things to come. World Champion David Wilson had just retired and Smith was a teenage selected after only a handful of performances for the Brumbies. He would go on to be named Man of the Match, whilst also being yellow carded. It was a typical action packed, yet eye opening, performance by the dread locked back rower.

Smith manages to mix the poaching skills of your typical open side flanker, with the strength and running ability of your typical number 8, plus the sleight of hand of your typical centre. Add to this a sometimes frustrating, sometimes amazing kicking game and we have a truly once in a generation player.

Piggies 7 says:

Waugh and Smith were the two of the decade...but even then, I guess Smith is a fair bit ahead of Waugh. The Smith and Waugh tandem of 2003 was strong, but we'll never see that again with Rocky and co.

Tixie says:

For my money, George Smith wins this title hands down – a lay-down misere!

PHIL WAUGH

Without discounting the career Waugh has had, you get the impression if it was for a few “if onlys” it could have been something very special. If only he wasn’t born at the same time as George Smith. If only we didn’t have greater forwards strength, in other positions, that would have allowed us to play both Smith and Waugh together more often and more effectively.

It is my belief that if Waugh had been able to cement a spot in the Wallaby starting team than not only would he have been one of our greatest Wallaby forwards, but perhaps one of our greatest all time captains. To me he seems the ideal captain for the Wallabies over the last five to six years. Passionate. Uncompromising. Inspirational. Dedicated. Motivated. Resilient. All qualities that perhaps lacked in the Wallaby set up after the retirement of John Eales. Waugh had (has) them all as a player and it would have been some watching as he brought them to the Wallabies. By no means as skilful as Smith, Waugh had the nous that made him a natural open side. He knew the angles to run, the tricks to pull and the plays to make. A massively built man, Waugh wasn’t the type to run in length of the field plays, throw 20 metre cut outs or opt for a chip n chase. But he was the one at the bottom of the ruck, or around the bootlaces, showing his teammates what he expected of them.



DAVID WILSON

Now this was a tough decision. For a lot of these ‘cusp’ players we had to make sure we were judging them on their contribution in the ‘Noughties’ rather than relying on their form in the 99 RWC and previous. For David Wilson, with the emergence of David Pocock, this was of particular relevance. But David Wilson won through. Because David Wilson won Bledisloes. David Wilson beat the Springboks in the Republic. Wilson didn’t have the size of Pocock or Waugh, or the freaky skills of Smith, or even the raw-boned aggression of David Croft. But he had guts, determination and a massive heart.

To see Wilson throwing his wiring body at the feet of opposition players as he fought for the ball, was undeniably inspiring. To see Wilson pick himself up off the floor after yet another ruck had moved on was to see Wilson at his best.

To fight his way to his feet, in those days of rucking, and then race off to the next maul or ruck was to truly appreciate the player that Wilson was. And then to see, on those rare occasions, Wilson actually get to run with the ball in space, utilising his much undervalued linking skills, was to share in this sense of thrill for Wilson himself as he was somehow rewarded for all the hard work he does, with a bit of fun every now and again. Wilson, along with Jason Little and Richard Harry, retired at the end of the 2000 Tri-Nations a winner, having retained both the Bledisloe and the Tri-Nations. It was an appropriate end to a selfless player who got little of the recognition his higher profile teammates did.

Mof says:

I had to go Wilson, an under-rated/spoken member of champion Wallaby/Queensland Rugby. The Ultimate Quiet Achiever in my opinion, his record speaks for itself.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So what do you think? Did we get this one right? Should Pocock have got the call up? Man of the Match in two tests on the Spring Tour is some achievement. Is Smith the certainty for the Team of the Decade I have suggested he is? Or does Wilson deserve more credit? Or Waugh even?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-open-side-flanker-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY BLIND SIDE FLANKER OF THE DECADE

The Blind Side Flanker position has been an interesting one for Australia, not only over the last decade but in the last few decades. Whereas we've usually gone for out and out poachers at Open Side; Strong running Number 8s; Ball playing inside centres, and big kicking fullbacks, we don't seem to have tied down a 'typical' Blind Side Flanker role.

Is it the 3rd (sometimes 4th) lineout option? The workhorse? The 2nd flyer? The ball runner? We've converted locks, open sides and number 8s. Even a centre. But the pure amount of players used might indicate that we haven't been entirely successful in filling the role adequately.

From 2000-2009 Australia has used 16 different players in this position, and there are examples of each of these types of players amongst them. They are:

Rocky Elsom (44 starts), Owen Finegan (17), George Smith (14), Matt Cockbain (8), Radike Samo (5), Phil Waugh (5), Dean Mumm (5), Mark Connors (4), David Lyons (4), John Roe (4), Mark Chisholm (4), Hugh McMeniman (3), Jim Williams (2), Richard Brown (2), Daniel Heenan (1), Peter Kimlin (1).

In the end we here at G&GR came up with three fairly hard-nosed players, each also particularly skilful with the ball in hand. Our top three are:

GEORGE SMITH

Now this was a tough decision. Smith was always somewhat of a reluctant Blind Side. Not verbally at least, but there was little doubt he always preferred his Open Side role. Ironically it is because of Smith's immense skills that probably saw him play Blind Side as much as he did. Because he was such a strong tackler, such a capable runner, such a smart player, that he was chosen to fill this troubled role more than other traditional Open Sides. The fact that he started eight times at the back of the scrum shows his true versatility.

I would suggest the reason that the 'dual flyer' role, in which Smith was usually partnered with Phil Waugh (in fact only once was he not partnered with Waugh - against Namibia at the 2003 RWC in which David Croft played his lone test wearing 7), was because Smith was such a brilliant player WHEREEVER he plays.

Smith first wore the 6 jersey in the 2003 World Cup year. 2002 incumbents, Owen Finegan and Matt Cockbain, were injured and coach Eddie Jones was looking for an answer. David Lyons was tried. Dan Heenan pushed through, too quickly in the end, before Smith ended up in the position in the 50-point thrashing at the hands of the All Blacks.

Whilst all the arguments were against the idea – it weakened both our scrum and our lineout, Smith (and indeed Waugh and Lyons) continued to perform exceptionally around the paddock. A few more games there in 2004 and then Smith was done. At blind side at least.





ROCKY ELSOM

By far and away the most capped blind side on our list, Rocky seems to fill most of the 'criteria' I have listed above. He has the size and bulk to be a set piece presence and is in fact an under-utilised jumper in the line out. His mobility is exceptional with surprising pace for his size. He has a level of aggression in defence and at the ruck that we haven't had since Matty Cockbain, and he is, as we are seeing, an impressive leader of men.

A standout schoolboy player, Elsom spent a couple of years after school developing his game at the Bulldogs in the NRL. On his return to rugby at the Waratahs, most pundits could see the answer to our Blindside flanker role solved. Despite a few games in which he was 'rotated' or 'rested' in his debut season of 2005, and then a few games at Number 8 at the start of 2006, Elsom made the 6 jersey his own. Ever since, whenever fit and available, the Wallaby 6 jersey has been synonymous with Rocky.

Until the end of 2008 when he was no longer available. A sabbatical in Ireland showcased his talents to most of Europe, but also demonstrated to the Australian Rugby hierarchy how much we needed him as we made eight different changes to the position in the ten tests we played in his absence. His return has seen him eventually take over the Wallaby leadership as well, where it is hoped that his uncompromising approach on the field begins to rub off on his somewhat green teammates.



OWEN FINEGAN

Finegan, like a lot of players mentioned in this series, returned from the 1999 RWC a World Champion. However Finegan was more renowned for his impact from the bench rather than his starting role. Who could forget his amazing try in that World Cup Final? So come the year 2000 he had a lot to prove.

Unfortunately for him, he didn't feature. For various reasons he failed to play a single test that year, as the likes of Jim Williams, Toutai Kefu and Mark Connors shared in that 'impact player' role. But that would all change in 2001 - the year of the Melon. His form for the Brumbies meant he HAD to be picked for the Wallabies. He was such a smart player, often (sometimes fairly?) considered lazy, but he was a real danger man that opposition coaches and players alike knew they had to consider. So when the Lions toured with the likes of Richard Hill, Lawrence Dallaglio, Neil Back, Scott Quinnell and Colin Charvis in their back row, Australia went looking for a physical presence. What they found was Owen Finegan. And what he provided was, not just a series, but a season of quality. Whilst Finegan's deftness remained, as evidenced in his set up of Matt Burke's try in the 2nd test, it was his aggression and work in tight that was really of immense value to the Wallabies. The Lions form continued into the Tri-Nations and Bledisloe Cup so much so that Finegan finished the year as the Wallaby Player of the Year. Just two years later, however, he was somewhat controversially omitted from the Rugby World Cup squad and would not play another test.

Chief says:

I voted Finegan, he was a class lineout jumper. He didn't have the same ruck work as Rocky but his lineout work ensured we would remain competitive.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So they are our three. It was very close between Cockbain and Smith in the end, but in my eyes Smith did more to make the position his, this decade, than Cockbain was able to do. But what do you think? Are there any other realistic contenders?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-blind-side-flanker-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY LOCK OF THE DECADE

We now take the step into the unknown, somewhat. The tight forwards. Now for many of you this will be a scary place. Going into the unknown often is. For those backs out there we are going to be discussing some fairly foreign concepts from now one in. Things like “aggression”, “work rate”, “physicality” and “toughness”. Just keep breathing. We will start with the locks, who are those tall guys you often see jumping in the line outs and at kick offs.

Over the decade Australia has used twelve players in the starting team at lock. Interestingly less than who have played Blind Side Flanker or Inside Centre. The locks of the decade are:

Nathan Sharpe (75), Dan Vickerman (36), Justin Harrison (31), David Giffin (28), James Horwill (24), Mark Chisholm (23), John Eales (17), Hugh McMeniman (6), Dean Mumm (2), Matt Cockbain (1), Owen Finegan (1), Al Campbell (1).

As with the wingers. We are not discriminating between left and right locks (or tight and loose locks) here. I trust you will forgive us. Accordingly instead of just a top three, we have chosen the top six locks of the decade. A top four probably could have done it, but we snuck in two more. Whether they deserve it, we'll let you decide. You can also work out who the 5th and 6th lock are. But in the end, G&GR came up with the below top 6 locks of the decade.

NATHAN SHARPE



It may surprise some people to know that Sharpe has had the second most starts in the one position all decade, behind George Gregan who 81 times started at scrum half. Sharpe's 75 starts also include two as captain.

Sharpe seems an intriguing character. He is extremely highly rated by his peers whereas many Wallaby fans are frustrated by his work rate and impact on the field. Whilst many fans have been calling for his removal from the Wallaby team for the last year or two, many of those same fans are now acknowledging what he brings to the team having seen the Wallabies compete without him.

So what does he bring to the team? Leadership is an obvious one. At a time when the Wallaby jersey seems to be tinged with more green than gold, Sharpe has been playing for the Wallabies since 2002. He's played with the likes of Matthew Burke, Dan Herbert, Justin Harrison, Toutai Kefu, Patricio Noriega and Bill Young. So he brings a great deal of knowledge to the party.

His lineout work was sorely missed as well. Whilst the Wallaby lineout failed to gel, Sharpe's experience at running a lineout as well as his own jumping abilities have been very much missed. His impact around the field would also have been handy. Sure he ran with the ball a lot but he does invariably get beyond the advantage line and presents the ball for recycling. A few of those charges close to the ruck against the likes of Ireland and Scotland could have been very important.

Where to now for Sharpie? It will be interesting to watch. The attitude of both the Aussie selectors and Sharpe himself will be intriguing. The selectors have shown a tendency to go with youth, but only when the quality is there. The question has to be asked, is it there at the moment though?

DAN VICKERMAN



Unlike Nathan Sharpe, I think everyone knew we'd miss Dan when he was no longer in the Australian team. Vickerman made his test debut, one test after Sharpe, against the French waaaaay back in 2002. Ever since he played colts for Queensland University, Vickerman was destined to play for Australia. Ok, sure he went back 'home' to South Africa to feature in some of their age teams, but he came back again, and found his way to Canberra.

His time spend at the Brumbies learning the lineout trade from both David Giffin and Justin Harrison would see Vickerman develop into one of the leading lineout forwards in the game. Of course he had the added advantage of being 204cm tall, and being able to speak Afrikaans for when we played the Boks. However we mustn't discount his rugby smarts. At the Brumbies, and then the Tahs, he dominated lineout play and became a master at reading the opposition throw. The current day Wallaby lineout would love to have his intel.

But it wasn't just his lineout play. Vickerman's aggression at the breakdown is a massively missed aspect lacking in the current Australian team. The impact he made at rucks and mauls was significant and just the type of hard-nosed style of play that would balance the current pack.

From 2002, it took Vickerman a couple of years to really secure his spot locking the Australian scrum. It wasn't really until 2006 that he really got some continuity in his appearances for the Wallabies, starting in all the domestic tests. However a shoulder reconstruction would prevent him from touring the UK that Spring and threaten his World Cup the following year. He did make it back however and featured in all tests, bar one against Fiji, including the quarter final in which he seemed to let the English pack niggle him out of the contest.

Injury would again rule him out of the 2008 season, and soon after he was off to Cambridge and, ultimately, Northampton. Will we see him back in Wallaby colours? Let's bloody well hope so!

JUSTIN HARRISON

Harrison really came to prominence when he was labelled a plank by British Lion Austin Healy after they met during a Lions v Brumbies encounter. Healy scored a try, and Harrison heckled him saying that he'd "only scored one try". The Brumbies were winning at the time. Healy would go on to score the match-winning try and give it right back to Harrison.

Justin would have his revenge. When David Giffin was ruled out of the third and deciding Lions test, Harrison was called in. In classic Hollywood mode, Harrison stole a late and crucial line out ball, out of the hands of Lions legend and captain Martin Johnson, to effectively save the game for Australia.

Some, me possibly, would suggest that Harrison possibly lived off this moment for quite some time. Regardless it was perfect timing for Googy. And I don't mean the line-out steal. No, with Wallaby legend John Eales about to retire, the Wallaby selectors would be on the look out for a 2m lineout wiz. Step forward Mr Harrison.



And so he did, playing another six tests that season before playing every test in 2002. He played a minor role for the Wallabies at the start of their 2003 World Cup campaign, but ended up starting in all the big matches. His last year for the Wallabies was 2004 in which he would start every test. But that was it. He then headed north to play rugby in the UK, having played his last game for the Wallabies. Or has he? He's back for the Brumbies next year, so who knows what will happen?

DAVID GIFFIN



It must be hard to stand out in a pack of forwards including players like Eales, Foley, Kefu and Wilson. Accordingly David Giffin was a much undervalued, if not under appreciated, Wallaby lock. He made his debut under Greg Smith, almost by default as the last player standing. The Wallabies on tour of the UK in 1996 suffered a glut of injuries before the last test. So Giffin was thrown in the deep end, and produced a masterful game belying his inexperience.

Soon enough though the likes of John Eales and Garrick Morgan were back in the picture and the young Tom Bowman had arrived and Giffin was back playing a minor role. By the World Cup of 1999 though he was back in the team and a vital member of it.

Accordingly, come the new decade, Giffin was a mainstay of the Wallaby pack. Giffin was a hard grafter, rarely sighted with the ball in hand, unless he was plucking it from the skies in the line-out or from the kick off. Giff provided important size and physical presence to a pack that had a number of runners, particularly in the 2001 Lions series.

Despite a mixed 2002 season, Giffin fought his way back into the Wallaby starting team by the 2003 season providing much needed steal and experienced to the Wallaby pack. In the first World Cup game of the tournament however, against Argentina, Giffin was dropped by team mates attempting to take a kick off and suffered a worrying shoulder injury. He would come back to play three more games in the tournament, two off the bench (including the final) but that would be it for Giff, from a Wallaby perspective.

JAMES HORWILL



Horwill burst onto the world rugby stage in 2008 with a series of high impact test matches for the Wallabies. Big Kev's debut would actually take place a year earlier, against Fiji in Perth, and his omission from the World Cup squad later that year would be one of a number of talking points.

Horwill's 2008 form would further question the non-selection. With Vickerman gone (injured and then overseas), the Wallabies needed a pack leader. An aggressor capable of enforcing his presence on the opposition. Someone with enough bulk to throw their weight around. In the 2m tall, 117kg James Horwill they found him.

Whilst Horwill didn't have the lineout skills of Vickerman, he definitely had the size. Horwill was an aggressive presence around the field, whether it be hitting mauls, clearing rucks, running the ball or making tackles. Even scoring the odd try (three for the season – more than John Eales in his entire Wallaby career!).

Horwill missed the Spring Tour because of ligament damage in his foot. Perhaps the delay start to the 2009 season, because of recuperation from surgery, impacted his form because he failed to live up to the same expectations as the previous year. It wasn't a Tom Bowman fall from grace, but it was significant. In saying that, Horwill still managed to start in every test this year, the only Wallaby to do so.

The Wallaby selectors (and fans) will be hoping James can recapture his form of 2008 because his physicality will be an important element of the Wallaby pack as they enter the next decade.

JOHN EALES



What do you say about John Eales that hasn't already been said a thousand times? It is an interesting perspective on the man in that we are trying to refine his career to just this decade. But it was still pretty bloody amazing.

In this decade, in which he played 'only' 17 tests he managed to captain Australia to two Bledisloe Cup wins, two Tri-Nations Trophy wins, win a series against the British Lions, win a test through his own boot, take part in one of the most celebrated games in rugby history, and then leave the game with the team scoring a last minute win against the All Blacks in Sydney via a try by one of your best mates. Nice.

It is interesting to note that Eales played every game he was available in his last two years in Wallaby colours - seventeen tests in a row. And he came up against some pretty decent opposition locks too. Martin Johnson, Mark Andrews, Victor Matfield, Norm Maxwell, Chris Jack, Fabien Pelous, Scott Murray.

His was a great career, John Eales, which never dipped at any stage. His retirement, like that kick in Wellington in 2000, was timed to perfection.

Joe Blow says:

Eales-Vickerman in the second row would be a match made in heaven.

Hats off to Sharpe who has toiled hard and has improved as his career has gone on. He will play a big part in the Wallaby RWC 2011 campaign, particularly if Vicks doesn't make it back in time.

FINAL THOUGHTS

A nice way to finish - on a legend. I would suggest that Eales's selection is a given despite playing less than two years of the decade? Or am I way off? If not, who joins him in the locking spot? Googy for his lineout abilities? Does Giffin come in under the radar as he did most of his career? Or is Vickers the man. What about Sharpie? He has the numbers (of caps at least)? Will anyone go into bat for Big Kev?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-lock-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY TIGHT HEAD PROP OF THE DECADE

As we step slowly into the unknown, please spare a thought for our back friends. In fact, let me assist. Why don't you lads stare lovingly into this mirror, as the rest of us real men discuss some of the more important elements of the game? Ok? Ok...good. I think they're gone now.

This has been an interesting period for Australian propping. The 1990s started and ended with two of our greats – Tony Daly and Ewen McKenzie in 1990 and then Andrew Blades and Richard Harry in 1999. From a Tight Head Prop perspective, Blades's retirement after the World Cup in 99, left us on the lookout for new blood. We found it in Fletcher Dyson, who would start every test of 2000. Come 2001 though, Ben Darwin and Rod Moore were the new men on the block (despite Moore debuting v the US at the 99 RWC). Then we tried Noriega in 2002, whilst 2003 saw us burn through four tight heads in Pato, Panaho, Darwin and Al Baxter.



Baxter provided some solidarity, but we did experiment with Matt Dunning there, and then Dave Fitter for a couple of tests. 2006 was the time for Rodney Blake and Guy Shepherdson to take the stage, with moments of success. Since this time, we've stuck with the tried and tested. Until this year, however, when Ben Alexander has come into his own. So all in all we have used eleven men in the Wallaby Number 3 jersey this decade. They are:

Al Baxter (42), Patricio Noriega (15), Guy Shepherdson (15), Fletcher Dyson (10), Ben Darwin (9), Ben Alexander (9), Rodney Blake (7), Rod Moore (6), Matt Dunning (6), Glen Panaho (2), David Fitter (2).

The top three, as decided by G&GR, are:



AL BAXTER

Sometimes Al Baxter must just sit back and shake his head. What a career. Whilst he debuted for the Waratahs in the 2000 season, it wasn't really until the 2003 year that he cemented his spot in the starting team. From there it was a rapid rise.

The Wallabies started the season with Patricio Noriega as their Tight Head Prop before injury ended his career in the second last Tri-Nations test against South Africa. For the next match, against New Zealand, the veteran Glenn Panaho was recalled into the team. And promptly discarded. Baxter would make his test debut from the bench this match as Australia's propping depth was stretched to the limit.

To his credit though, Baxter was named in the Wallaby squad for the home Rugby World Cup. Further he would start the first two games against Argentina and Romania. It would seem, though, that that would be it for his RWC. Ben Darwin reclaimed the starting berth and Baxter was set to ride the pine for the rest of the

tournament. That was, until, the famous semi-final against New Zealand. When Darwin severely damaged his spine in a scrum, all of a sudden Baxter was playing in the biggest match of his career. Australia would win and all of a sudden Baxter was PLAYING IN THE BIGGEST MATCH OF HIS CAREER!

That is some rise. And it is testimony to Baxter's resilience and perseverance that he would go on to become the most capped Wallaby prop of all time. Baxter would also play most of his career under an intense microscope and constant questioning of his abilities. To his credit all Baxter ever did was put his head down, work harder and focus on his game.



PATRICIO NORIEGA

This is a decision I don't necessarily agree with. I believe Noriega was selected on reputation, both for the Wallabies and for this top three. I will be interested to see others' perspective. Remembering this is focussed on Noriega's form in the Noughties. Having been injured prior to the 1999 RWC, and being forced to pull out, Noriega headed to France to play for Stade Francais for the 2000 season. He returned to Australia the next year, this time for the Waratahs having played for the Brumbies previously.

Noriega would finally get back in the Wallaby shirt in 2002, starting every match at Tight Head Prop, except for one against South Africa he missed with a middle ear infection. It was a similar story the next year, as Pato was first choice Tight Head Prop for the start of the 2003 season. Unfortunately, the match against South Africa in Brisbane (also the game Toutai Kefu was king hit from behind that would lead to his premature retirement) would be Noriega's last. A degenerative back injury starting to take its toll. Remembering that he debuted for Argentina all the way back in 1991 – so that's a hell of a lot of scrummaging! When Noriega was with the Brumbies, his scrummaging was uncompromising, his work rate was high and his work with the ball was strong. Come the new decade, even Pato couldn't anchor the Wallaby scrum, and his work rate seemed to decline. He did bring aggression to the pack however, and a great deal of experience, and if it contributed to him being the Wallaby scrum coach now? Then I am all for it.

Sandpit Fan says:

Difficult call, but I went for Noriega. Hard man and a good scrummager. Foley laid a good foundation and I reckon Pato's putting a good edge on our scrum at the moment.

BEN DARWIN

Ben Darwin could be described as the James Dean of Tight Head Props. His career was relatively short and sharp and we seem to remember it more fondly because of that. Darwin debuted for the Wallabies, off the bench, against the British Lions in the first test of the 2001 series. He wouldn't get another run until the Tri-Nations however and his first start wouldn't come until the 92-10 shellacking of Spain later that year. But this would be enough for the selectors as he retained his spot in the team for the rest of the tour.

This would prove tremendous experience as he scrummed against the likes of Rowntree and Vickery (England) as well as De Villiers and Crenca (France). Darwin's apprenticeship would continue the following year, playing most of the season off the bench behind Patricio Noriega. One start would come against the South Africans in Jo-Burg, the match made famous for Werner Greef's last minute match winning try, two minutes after Brendan Cannon's match winning try. Darwin's opportunity would come though, the next year. When Noriega again pulled out of the World Cup squad injured (as he did in 1999), Darwin took over the position as the number one Tight Head Prop in the squad. Near-disastrously however, a collapsed scrum in the semi-final against New Zealand would end his career. It is interesting to note that three Tight Head Props played their last game of rugby for Australia, due to injury, that year – Darwin, Noriega and Panaho. No wonder Baxter was left to hold the fort for so long. There was no one left?



FINAL THOUGHTS

So there you go, our three best Tight Head Props of the decade. What do you reckon? Are these the three? Who's our best? Is Al the man? Am I way off with my judging of Noriega? Shouldn't Guy Shepherdson be considered? I reckon he was our best forward just three years ago! I've also got a soft spot for Fletcher Dyson.

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-tight-head-prop-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY HOOKER OF THE DECADE

Ok, some folk have suggested there are too many 'givens' in this series. Larkham. Gregan. Kefu. So what about this one? I reckon it's pretty damn difficult to come up with the best hooker of the decade. I tell you what, it was hard enough to come up with the top three. And I know I will cop some flak for some of the decisions made. Well one of them.

Looking past that for the time being, there is some very decent quality in this list. The four at the top of the caps list all have strong claims for the title, but there is quality further down as well. Adam Freier's career would have benefited from a prolonged run in the starting team enabling him to feel comfortable with his position, as opposed to the once off tests which must have put him under immense pressure. Meanwhile Tatafu Polota-Nau has shown in his limited starts that he is odds on favourite to take this title in ten years time.

So to the list, in which we have only seven names. Seven players who have started at hooker for Australia this decade. They were:

Stephen Moore (34), Jeremy Paul (28), Brendan Cannon (25), Michael Foley (20), Adam Freier (6), Tai Mclsaacs (6), Tatafu Polota-Nau (4).

As we have all series, G&GR have come up with a top three. There is probably one glaring omission, but that's likely when you have a quality top four. The top three are:



STEPHEN MOORE

Stephen Moore has been identified as a future Wallaby hooker ever since his Reds debut back in 2003. The 110 kg plus hooker, with impressive mobility and skills, was seen as the heir apparent to Phil Kearns, one of our greatest Wallaby hookers of all time.

It wasn't until 2005 that Moore would break into the Wallabies team, debuting alongside the likes of Hugh McMeniman and Rocky Elsom in a 74-7 smashing of Samoa. He spent the year in an out of the Wallaby squad, mostly playing behind Jeremy Paul and Brendan Cannon, or sharing bench duties with Adam Freier and Tatafu Polota-Nau.

Moore's run on debut would not come to the very last test of 2006, when he stared, and scored a try, against Scotland at Murrayfield. The next year, a World Cup year, he would become the Wallabies' first choice hooker starting in all but a few tests. His career reached its pinnacle, so far at least, in 2008 when he lead a dominant scrum performance against Australia's arch nemesis, England. Moore would be named Man of the Match and started to receive the acclaim that he was the premier hooker in the game!

This year, Moore has not been of the same level for Moore. He shared the hooking position with Polota-Nau, in fact giving up his starting jersey to Tatafu at the end of the Tri-Nations. But come the Spring tour Moore reclaimed the 2 jersey and wouldn't relinquish it again. In top form Moore is a strong scrummager, a damaging runner and a legitimate team leader.

BRENDAN CANNON



Brendan Cannon is as tough a player as they come. Surviving a being hit by a truck is proof of this, but watching his play was all the evidence you need. Cannon was yet another tight forward to debut in the 2001 Lions Series, coming into the squad after Jeremy Paul was injured in the first test. A few more appearances off the bench that year, behind the experienced Michael Foley, was a great breeding ground for the relatively inexperienced rake. In fact his form on the Spring Tour at the end of that 2001 season was exceptional and he was unlucky not to get a test start.

That opportunity would come early the next season in the second test against France, again after Paul was injured in the first test. His next appearance on the field though would be a few tests later when, as a replacement, he shadowed an amazing George Smith break down field to grab the final pass and score in the corner to seemingly secure the Wallabies a rare, late, victory against the Springboks at Ellis Park. Perhaps the Wallabies lost focus, because just a minute or two later,

Bok fullback Werner Greef would charge over to score to win the game for the Boks.

But 2003 would be some sort of watershed for Cannon. His Super 12 form for the Waratahs was tremendous. Paul would still have the two jersey for the first few tests, before Cannon forced his way into the starting jersey against South Africa in the Republic. And, other than one test against Namibia, Cannon would remain in the jersey for the year. Cannon brought a style of play the Wallabies hadn't seen in the 2 jersey for some time. Full of aggressive and uncompromising running, physicality at the break down and set piece solidarity. Come the end of the World Cup he was considered alongside his hero, Keith Wood, as the best hookers in the game. The next few years would be a battle on the field for Cannon as he and Jeremy Paul competed for the starting jersey. This would continue up until his retirement from the game due to spinal injury, going out in relative anonymity against Italy in Rome in 2006.

MICHAEL FOLEY

Michael Foley was an unfashionable player who never seemed to get the acclaim he deserved. He started the 99 World Cup as, supposedly, third choice hooker. But when Phil Kearns went home injured, Foley leapt over Jeremy Paul and became an integral part of the winning side. In 2000 he managed to hold on to both his form and jersey starting in every test, but come 2001 things had changed. Jeremy Paul was back in the starter's jersey, but an injury in the first Lions test would see Foley called up for the rest of the year. He would retire in the last game of the year, against Wales in Cardiff, having received his 50th cap.

Foley was old school. I don't know if he ever touched the ball in his Wallaby career outside of having to throw it into the lineout. Well, he scored a try against Spain in 2001, so he must have touched it at least once. For it was his set piece that he was acclaimed. His lineout throwing was impeccable and he led a scrum succeeded both with experienced props (Harry and Blades in 99) and rookies (Stiles and Moore in 01).



Axel has been one of those players, alongside Matt Cockbain, who never really got the recognition he deserved whilst playing, but once he left we struggled to find a suitable replacement. In Foley we had someone who would get his job done. He wouldn't be standing out wide ready for the flashy runs, nor was he likely to ever put his boot to ball. He was a hardnosed pack leader who liked the fire and brimstone side of rugby. For him it was about getting a physical advantage over your opposition. If you did that, and if each of your teammates did it, then you were likely to end up ahead on the scoreboard as well.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Ok. They are our hookers. There is an elephant in the room, which I guess I should refer to - Jeremy Paul. He is mentioned constantly in this article, yet not as a leading candidate. In my eye, he never produced consistently at Wallaby level. 72 caps is an amazing statistic, but he only started in 34 tests. In my opinion, despite his constant chances, he never made the Wallaby jersey his own either. He had a great year in 2005, but again most of his acclaim was for his play in the loose, which was brilliant. If he were able to combine this with the more traditional roles of the hooker, more often, he probably would have featured.

So what do you think? Am I made to exclude Paul? If so, who does he replace? Has Moore done enough at this level yet to make the grade? Was Cannon just a flash in the pan? Does Foley's short span work against him?



Epi says:

I like Cannon over Paul just for that right cross on Mealamu.

Scrumblue says:

I went with Foley. Bread and butter is key at hooker, and he was the one bloke who smashed it.

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-hooker-of-the-decade/>

WALLABY LOOSE HEAD PROP OF THE DECADE

We finally reach the last position in the team, if only because of its numerical allocation. For mine, this will be one of the most interesting 'battles' of the series. Now I expect most people to jump on the current incumbent (tautology?) but I think that is unfair on the other options proposed.

Because, in the end, we've come up with three fairly decent candidates who were all highly regarded during their playing days. And actually there is some half decent talent amongst the none loose head props we've picked this decade. Promising too that four of them are still playing and young enough to be playing for a few more years yet. The Loose Head Props from 2000-2009 have been:

Bill Young (46), Benn Robinson (28), Matt Dunning (14), Nick Stiles (12), Greg Holmes (10), Richard Harry (7), Al Baxter (3), Ben Alexander (2), Pek Cowan (1).

We here at G&GR have come up with the following three has our top performers for the decade:



BILL YOUNG

The first thing to note about Bill Young's career is that he started at loose head prop in every test he was involved in. Never did he come off the bench, which is quite a record for a prop, especially one only just breaking into the side.

And break into the side he did, back in 2000 against France. In the same game that George Smith debuted. Whilst Smith was replacing the retired World Champion David Wilson, Young was replacing the retired World Champion Richard Harry. Young would go on and play each of the tests, against France, Scotland and England.

Young wouldn't feature in 2001 with Nick Stiles preferred for most of the season, but Young was back again in 2002, playing all but one test. Young was somewhat unique for test props, being reasonably tall at almost 1.9 metres tall, nor was he a particular heavy weight. He used his height though to great effect as he managed to manoeuvre his opposing props out of their comfort zone.

Young would be the scorn of many opposing team fans for what they called illegal scrummaging. In reality though, Young was doing what all props do – finding a way to get over their opposite man. For Young he suffered because the rest of the Wallaby scrum was generally not pulling their weight up front.



Come the 2003 RWC, Young had established himself as our premier Loose Head Prop. Some suggest he gained a leg up by the refereeing in the World Cup final as England were penalised for scrum infringements perhaps caused by Young's actions. This was somewhat of a turning point for Young as he often became targeted by the referee who seemed to be hunting for a reason to penalise him.

Eventually, however, it was injury that brought about the premature decline of Bill Young. Like others before him, a degenerative bone disorder in his neck would mean that he had to make the decision to stop playing. His last game for Australia was against the All Blacks in 2005. Just two games later the Wallaby scrum suffered their worst ever moment as they were decimated by a powerful English pack. How they would have fared had Bill Young been there is somewhat of a moot point. But at least one worth considering.

BENN ROBINSON



Whether it was because of Young's retirement, or perhaps just the shambles that was the Wallaby scrum against England at the end of 2005, but 2006 was somewhat of a changing of the guard for the Wallaby front row.

It began in the first test where Tight Head Rodney Blake and Hooker Tai Mclsaacs debuted along side 4 cap rookie Loose Head Prop, Greg Holmes. Two tests later a new Tight Head Prop was debuting in Guy Shepherdson. Soon we would see the last tests of veteran hookers Jeremy Paul and Brendan Cannon. In amongst all these changes, was the emergence of a little nugget of a prop from the Waratahs, Benn Robinson.

At 22 Robinson would make his test debut in the most intense of environments. Against the Springboks at Ellis Park. He performed admirably and toured with the Wallabies to the UK. However it was not until the last test on tour, Stephen Moore's run on debut as well, that he received his next cap. Promise was shown as the Wallaby forwards finally stood up and the backs enjoyed the extra space to run out 44-15 victors.

Robinson shared the 1 jersey with Matt Dunning during the start of the 2007 World Cup year, but his tournament hopes would be shattered when he was ruled out of the RWC after injuring his foot in the

Australian Rugby Championship. Perhaps the doctor inserted a bionic pin or something, but from thereon in Robinson's career has boomed since. And so to the Australian scrum.

Finally Fat Cat, unlike the original TV character, had friends and plenty of them! He was our first choice Loose Head Prop. In fact our first choice prop. Eventually, come 2009, he would be our first choice player.

For the first time in years, the Wallabies have a legitimate weapon in the scrum and it starts with the man in the binary coded jersey – Robinson.

For Robinson, scrummaging is the reason to play rugby as a prop. It is the physical challenge at its most tribal. And he is a master of it. But the rest of his game is just as masterful. He must have one of the best long passes in the team. Ball in hand, particularly close to the line, he is highly dangerous. He is a strong defender and a handy runner. Robinson stands alone now as probably the only Wallaby capable of being named in a World XV at this current time.

Scrumblue says

Went with Benn. I'd still like to see another test season from him, but he's shown he's got the goods in both the fundamentals and around the park. A man who impacts a game, in many varied forms, like not many LH's of the last decade.

RICHARD HARRY

Richard Harry just played the 7 games for the Wallabies this decade, and this may count against him when it comes to voting. But you can't discount him too quickly, because these 7 games were as high a quality games from a loose head prop as you will see.

Two tests against Argentina and then the closest and most compelling Tri-Nations competition ever seen are a pretty good way to finish your career. Particularly when the only game lost is arguably the most talked about game ever, a 39-35 point loss to the mighty All Blacks. And during this time Harry's form was as high as it had ever been.

A former high level club flanker, Harry was moved to the front row in a wonderful piece of forward thinking. Harry would go on to be a vital part of the 99 RWC winning team, in which is toughness and commitment were key features of his play. He was a strong scrummager, using his bull like body to great effect, and was a contributor in general play, his days as a flanker giving him greater awareness in the loose. Bullocking runs were a strong feature of his play, as exemplified in this great Wallaby try from the 2000 season.



Harry would retire alongside more acclaimed teammates David Wilson and Jason Little in that memorable final Tri-Nations game against the Boks in Durban. Stirling Mortlock's late penalty would give Australia the game and the Tri-Nations trophy. A suitably relevant trophy winning departure for a trio of trophy winning players. Harry's departure would usher in the career of our next loose head prop custodian in Bill Young. And from Young we would eventually reach Benn Robinson. Three wonderful loose head props, for which Australian rugby fans can forever be proud of.

FINAL THOUGHTS

And with that we draw to a close a look at each of the players of the Noughties. How did we do with this one? I'm guessing the 'recency factor', will again come into play and Robinson will come out on top. But just stop to consider the impact of the likes of Harry and Young on their Wallaby team. I also want to recall Matt Dunning's exceptional game in the 1 jersey against the Boks in Cape Town, in 2007. If it weren't for a couple of Francois Steyn drop goals and a dodgy ref's call on a disallowed Matt Giteau try, it would have been a wonderful Wallaby victory.

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/wallaby-loose-head-prop-of-the-decade/>

REST OF THE WORLD TEAM OF THE DECADE


Ok so we've picked, or almost picked, the official Green & Gold Rugby Wallaby Team of the Decade? What the hell do we do now? Who are they going to play? Perhaps an 'Alien XV'? But I could only think of Gareth "Alf" Thomas and Tana "Predator" Umaga as potential players. Fine, I'm happy to throw in Ma'a Nonu as some sort of replicant, but still it is still not enough to build a team on.

So naturally we opt for a Rest of the World XV. But this is no ordinary Rest of the World XV. This is the Rest of the Word XV of players who played well against the Wallabies. So whilst Rupeni Caucaunibuca would be the first name selected by me, he never played the Wallabies so is ruled ineligible.


How do you go about picking such a team? Well, it's really quite complicated. Firstly I proposed a team to a few of my trusted G&GR colleagues, asked for feedback, received feedback and then promptly ignored most of the feedback. In the end all these teams are pretty subjective, so why not have a go yourself?




Let us know whom we missed, and who shouldn't be there. Then once you've seen the G&GR Wallaby XV of the Decade, tell us who would win?

#15 - JASON ROBINSON (ENGLAND / B&I LIONS)

v Australia: 9 tests	Won: 6	Lost: 3	Points: 20 (4 tries)
 <p>Picked for: being part of a dominant English side that had the wood over us this decade. And that try he put on us in the first Lions test making Latham look like a traffic cop.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Mils Muliaina for consistency; Werner Greif for constantly giving us trouble; Christian Cullen for those tries in 2000.</p>			

#14 - BRYAN HABANA (SOUTH AFRICA)

v Australia: 10 tests	Won: 5	Lost: 5	Points: 25 (5 tries)
 <p>Picked for: being the consummate finisher, showing us the value of sheer pace (and massive shoulder pads) and tearing us apart in Perth that time.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Doug Howlett is the obvious one. Leading try scorer v Oz in the decade with 8 from 11 appearances. Might chuck Breyton Paulse here too for his 7 meaties as well. Sitivini Sivivatu for his performances for the All Blacks, oh and the Pacific Islanders.</p>			

#13 - BRIAN O'DRISCOLL (IRELAND / B&I LIONS)				
v Australia: 9 tests	Won: 3	Lost: 5	Drew: 1	Points: 23 points (4 tries, 1 drop goal)
	<p>Picked for: Being a fabulous leader and defensively matching up to our 'star' outside backs. Oh, and scoring that amazing try for the Lions making Burke look like a traffic cop.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Tana Umaga must rate a mention. Marius Joubert always seemed to enjoy playing the Aussies. Will Greenwood for being the direction the Poms needed in the backline.</p>			
#12 - DAN CARTER (NEW ZEALAND)				
V Australia: 16 tests	Won: 13	Lost: 3		Points: 207 points (2 tries, 25 conv, 48 pg, 1 drop goal)
	<p>Picked for: being a point-scoring maestro. Being a play-making maestro. Being an unfair continuation in the long line of quality All Black 10s (although picked at 12 here).</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Jean de Villiers from the Boks; De Wet Barry for his tender approach to tackling. Mike Tindall for babysitting Jonny!</p>			
#11 - SHANE WILLIAMS (WALES)				
V Australia: 5 tests	Won: 2	Lost: 2	Drew: 1	Points: 20 (4 tries)
	<p>Picked for: Being at the heart of any win the Welsh had over the Wallabies. Being at the heart of any come back the Welsh had against the Wallabies. Being a hard little prick to tackle, showing up in his scoring rate.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: The original Neo from Matrix, Joe Rokococko. Ben Cohen is worth a shout here as well. Jonah for that try in 2000?</p>			

#10 - JONNY WILKINSON (ENGLAND / B&I LIONS)

V Australia: 10 tests	Won: 7	Lost: 3		Points: 142 (1 try, 10 conv, 34 pg, 5 dg)
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Picked for: being the one who pretty much won those 7 games for the Poms (and the Lions. Well, once). For bouncing back from that 1998 shellacking and proving his ability to control a game.

Close but no cigar: Andrew Mehrtens, even if for a few tests. Ronan O’Gara for orchestrating those Irish wins. Carlos Spencer for his passing game (hee hee hee).

#9 - FOURIE DU PREEZ (SOUTH AFRICA)

v Australia: 13 tests	Won: 7	Lost: 6		Points: 10 (2 tries)
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Picked for: being the best scrum half in the world over this period. For combining the brutality of the Bok pack with the pace and precision of their backline.

Close but no cigar: Agustin Pichot, despite never really taking it to the Aussies. Moses Rauluni for his combativeness. Justin Marshall for his role in When Harry met Sally; Rob Howley for being a constant threat.

#8 - SCOTT QUINNELL (WALES / B&I LIONS)


v Australia: 4 tests	Won: 1	Lost: 3		Points: 5 (1 try)
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Picked for: man handling us back in 2001, primarily, and being the heart of any forward rush by that powerful Lions pack.

Close but no cigar: Imanol Harinordoquy for his all round game; Larry Dallaglio for being such an annoying bugger; Pierre Spies for being an absolute freak of nature.


#7 - RICHIE MCCAWE (NEW ZEALAND)

V Australia: 19 tests	Won: 16	Lost: 3		Points: 30 (6 tries)
 <p>Picked for: for living up to his nickname of McAwe! For just forever being there, on the ball, stealing the ball. For that tackle on Mark Gerrard at Suncorp.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Neil Back for being a hardened gnome. Juan Smith for sheer athleticism. Olivier Magne for versatility and longevity. Martyn Williams for being the tough little nugget Aussies love.</p>				


#6 - RICHARD HILL (ENGLAND / B&I LIONS)

v Australia: 8 tests	Won: 6	Lost: 2		Points: 5 (1 try)
 <p>Picked for: being the turning point of the 01 Lions series. When he was knocked out, the Aussies began to dominate. For being the 'invisible man', but so very good, with the World Champion Poms.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Jerry Collins for the intimidation factor. Joe Van Neikerk for being just another brilliant Bok backrower, Schalk Burger for that massive head. "Head. Ball. Now"</p>				


#5 - MARTIN JOHNSON (ENGLAND / B&I LIONS)

v Australia: 7	Won: 5	Lost: 2		Points: 0
 <p>Picked for: intimidating the hell out of the Aussies, if not the players then the supporters and the press. For being a completely dominant pack leader.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Bakkies Bottha for intimidation; Mark Andrew for holding on for a few more years. Donncha O'Callaghan for being the uncompromising lock whenever the Paddies played the Aussies.</p>				


#4 - VICTOR MATFIELD (SOUTH AFRICA)

V Australia: 19 tests	Won: 10	Lost: 8	Drew: 1	Points: 15 (3 tries)
	<p>Picked for: ruling the South African lineout and then, every once in a while, producing an amazing piece of athleticism reminding us all of his freakish talents.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Brad Thorn for sheer professionalism; Fabien Pelous for toughness; Paul O'Connell for doing the hard grafting work and loving the tight stuff.</p>			


#3 - PHIL VICKERY (ENGLAND / B&I LIONS)

V Australia: 11 tests	Won: 8	Lost: 3		Points: 0
	<p>Picked for: being the Bull. Being the cornerstone of a dominant England (and Lions) pack. For those BULLlocking runs in close whilst we were just looking for props to hold up a scrum.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Carl Hayman for the beard. Sylvian Marconnet, for hard-core toughness; Martin Castrogiavanni for standing out in an average side.</p>			

#2 - KEITH WOOD (IRELAND / B&I LIONS)

v Australia: 4 tests	Won: 1	Lost: 3		Points: 0
	<p>Picked for: just never stopping and being an inspiration to every front row forward that played with him, against him, saw him play, heard about him.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: John Smit for inspiring leadership; Keven Mealamu for always lifting the tempo when he played us; Anton Oliver for being the smartest sounding hooker ever.</p>			

#1 - TONY WOODCOCK (NEW ZEALAND)

V Australia: 15 tests	Won: 13	Lost: 2		Points: 25 (5 tries)
	<p>Picked for: being a 'myth' apparently. Scoring way too many tries against us that any player (let alone prop) should have. Being the quiet achiever and giving all our 3's a hard time.</p> <p>Close but no cigar: Andy Sheridan for destroying careers; Tom Smith for being the pocket battleship; Trevor Woodman for coaching young Aussie props after tearing the old ones apart; Os du Randt for sheer weight of numbers.</p>			

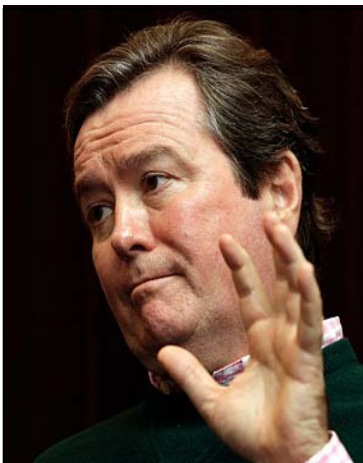
G&GR TOP FIVE WALLABY MOMENTS OF THE DECADE

So we've talked about the players. We've talked about the games. Next week we will be getting into the top tries of the decade. But now? Now we're going to look at some of the off-field moments of the decade. Ok, so not all specifically take place off the field, but the implications of them are more significant off the field than they are on.

The premise of these list is that these are the tent pole moments for Australian Rugby over the decade. Those moments that shaped our sport in our country most significantly. It has been a massive decade for all involved, one filled with turmoil and change, challenges and opportunities. We started the year as World Champions and one of the most memorable series of test matches in history, and finished with a failed re-enactment of the 1984 Grand Slam.

But what were THE biggest moments. The ones that got people talking. That had the press circling. That had ours (and others') chat rooms spinning. This will take the form of three posts over the next three days, so take your time taking it all in.

5. JOHN O'NEILL'S DEPARTURE POST 2003 RWC



"... then put the other testicle in this hand and simply squeeze!"

John O'Neill was as much Australian Rugby as the Wallaby jersey at the time. In fact he'd seen half a dozen different versions of the jersey in his time as CEO of the ARU. O'Neill oversaw the progression of the ARU from amateur organisation to one of the most forward thinking and well regarded sporting organisations in the country, with some of Australia's highest paid athletes. In the recent past the Wallabies had become the first nation to win two World Cups, winning the 1999 title. The Wallabies won an incredible 2000 Tri-Nations series and then backed up to beat the British Lions in a series for the first time on Australian soil the next year.

Off the field things were firing. The Wallabies were recognised on a par with the Australian Cricket Team as the premier national team in the country. Sponsorships and profile were soaring, and to top it off O'Neill had snuck in and secured sole hosting rights of the 2003 Rugby World Cup, from New Zealand. The move was a huge success with the tournament being a triumph across the board. Crowd numbers, profile, profit, TV ratings – it all went through the roof. Australian Rugby was on a high.

So What Happened?

"The World Game? It will be mine!"

Following the World Cup O'Neill apparently decided he wouldn't renew his contract with the ARU. Stories insist that he had put Board Members off-side with his ego, and that he was trying to run sporting body like his only little fiefdom. A period of head-butting (figuratively, not literally – although that would have been funny) with Wallaby skipper George Gregan was also proving troubling.

How Did It Change Things?

Well two things happened. Firstly, O'Neill jumped ship and moved to soccer. The Socceroos qualified for the World Cup and all of a sudden O'Neill had the Midas touch again. A Government enforced restructure of the 'global game' was called for and John was the man to deliver it. New sponsorships were signed, a new domestic league was established and top ARU staff were poached.

Meanwhile the ARU would soon appoint lawyer Gary Flowers to wear O'Neill's shoes (if not his red pants). Now whether it was coincidence or a sign of their respective management skills, but whilst soccer was booming under O'Neill, rugby was fading away under Flowers. A 'rainy day' fund of approximately \$45million earned during the 2003 RWC evaporated, sponsors left, the Wallabies (more often than not) lost.

Implications For The Future?

O'Neill's back, but we are yet to see any of his magic touch. The Wallabies are still losing the big games. Big sponsors have left. The Australian Rugby Challenge was axed, as was the Australia A program and other development initiatives. Despite his alleged need for control, it was a shame that O'Neill wasn't left to look after the World Cup nest egg. There is a hell of a lot of ground to catch up on. Rugby Union was probably the 2nd most popular footy code back in 2003, and pushing AFL. The Wallabies were the premier national sporting team, behind only cricket on a year round basis. Now the Wallabies are close to a laughing stock and rugby is trailing well behind league and AFL and will drop further behind soccer as next year's World Cup in South Africa gets closer.

Can O'Neill turn things around again? How long does he have to do it? And if he can't, who can?



"Eddie's coaching raised many an eyebrow"

4. ROBBIE DEAN'S SIGNING

Since the 2003 World Cup, the Wallabies had been struggling. From the heights of the McQueen/Eales/O'Neill era to the lows of the Jones/Gregan/Flowers era. The Wallabies could no longer pull off the big match win. They were no longer recognised as the innovators we once were. Elements of our game were downright embarrassing.

A seven-game losing streak in 2006 was pretty much the final straw. Wallaby coach Eddie Jones was sacked and, in a move that always seemed temporary, John Connolly (who hadn't coached in Australia for a little over half a decade) was appointed, along with a bevy of wannabe head coaches as his assistants.

Connolly would have the ultimate challenge. Success would ONLY be gauged on a World Cup win in 2007. He had to turn around a weak scrum and soft forward presence, along with an ageing back line, to win back the World Cup we had lost so dramatically four years prior.

He didn't, and he was sacked.

So What Happened?

With John O'Neill back at the ARU he replicated his appointment of Guus Hiddink as Socceroos coach by naming former All Black Robbie Deans as the Wallaby coach. The coach of the highly successful Crusaders Super 12/14 team had missed out on the All Black head coach spot, with Graham Henry somewhat controversially reappointed. So O'Neill, much like he did with the 2003 RWC, swooped.

How Did It Change Things?

Deans' appointment, regardless of his qualifications, over the likes of Ewen McKenzie and David Nucifora – highly credentialed Australia coaches (and former Wallabies) was promoted by the ARU as a sign of the times.

It graphically displayed two things. First, the impact of professionalism on sport. Whereas previously the Wallabies were a representative team made up of the best players selected by the best coach, they were now a team of people fulfilling 'contractual obligations'. Sure, Deans was (and probably still is) the best man for the job, but appointing an 'outsider' to the Wallabies in my opinion devalued the meaning of the Wallaby jersey, if only just a little.

"Can I tell you what DC would have done?"

Secondly it showed that the development path for Australian coaches just isn't there. Whether it is because our accreditation programs are not efficient enough, or the respective club competitions aren't of high enough standard, or that the Super 14 tournament was irrelevant as a judging platform, something within the system failed us in producing a home grown candidate to be the best coach.

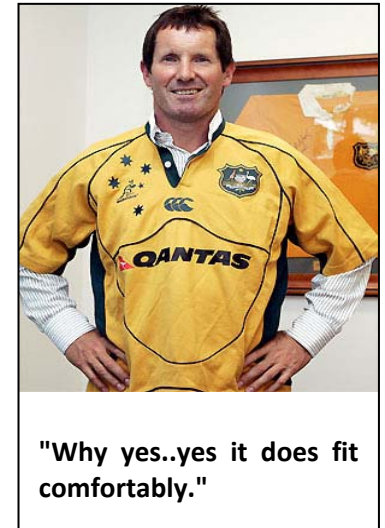
Implications For The Future?

Robbie needs to prove himself. I say his appointment has devalued the jersey, but he has the ability to put some added value back into it. By creating a Wallaby team that can win away, that can win the big trophies, that a country can be proud of.

On a bigger picture, it means rugby in Australia is now open slather - purely professional. We now have imports playing for our 'state' teams, players are moving between sides like they are nightclubs. I fully expect we will see a player start the season with one team, and finish with another in the next year or two.

Not that Robbie Deans caused this, but his appointment was the turning point for the change. It is about "KPIs" now and getting the best person for the job, regardless of their background, is now the way forward. The sporting industry in Australia is a competitive market place and only the strong will survive.

To keep the clichés coming, to be the best you have to get the best. And Robbie Deans is one of the best. The ARU pretty much had to sign him, and that will be their strategy for years to come. Even when it comes to finding that next CEO, one would assume.



3. STIRLO'S INTERCEPT & THE RWC FINAL

The 2003 Rugby World Cup was a coup for Australian Rugby. It was meant to be a shared event with our neighbours across the ditch. But when the NZRU wouldn't toe the IRB party line, the ARU jumped at the chance of taking on a solo host. To snag all games, including the big-ticket items (all finals) was a terrific result for Australia. Plus it meant it was all under our control and, more importantly, the profits would remain in Australia.

As to the Wallabies? Well the news wasn't quite as rosy. They had looked poor prior to the tournament, looking decidedly average against both England and New Zealand in Sydney. Come the RWC it was hoped we would step it up a gear, but we didn't. A couple of thrashings v Namibia and Romania was bookended by some fairly unimpressive play against Argentina and Ireland. Then in the quarter final against Scotland it was 9 all at half time and things were looking bleak. We managed to down the Scots, but in comparison to the way that the All Blacks and, to a lesser extent, the English were playing, our demise looked imminent. And so to the Semi Final at the Olympic Stadium where a massive crowd awaited the inevitable...

So What Happened?

Not long after Lote Tuqiri's try saving tackle on Mils Muliaina, Stirling Mortlock snatched a long Carlos Spencer pass and ran the length of the field to score under the posts. It gave Australia the lead they thought they deserved having come out firing from the kick off. Whilst the All Blacks fought on, it was all too much for them and the seemingly unbelievable was about to happen again, the high performing All Blacks would crash out from the World Cup against unrated underdogs.

And so Australia would play in a home World Cup final against the clinical English team. The attention the match brought the Wallabies and indeed the code in Australia was insurmountable. The crowd of just under 83,000 was a World Cup record for a final. The TV ratings were incredible. The match is still the 2nd most watched television program in Australian recording history with over 4,000,000 watching. In fact almost 2,000,000 people actually attended a match throughout the tournament.

Rugby Union was fairly and squarely front of mind in Australia. The Wallabies, despite losing an epic final in overtime, were feted far and wide for their performance. More tangibly the ARU walked away with in excess of \$40 million to do with what they pleased.



Great pass Carlos!

How Did It Change Things?

Rugby had a profile. And money to spend! The 1991 and 1999 World Cups were great, but the 03 event captured the nation's imagination. I mean they got 15,000 at York Park in Launceston to see Romania take on Namibia! The success of the event was a boon to the Australian Government as well, which is handy for the ARU in times of future negotiation. The event apparently:

- Generate \$494 million in additional industry sales in the Australian economy.
- Create an additional 4,476 full and part time jobs in Australia during 2003.
- Provide the Commonwealth Government an additional \$55 million in revenue.

- Contribute \$289 million in additional Gross Domestic Product to the Australian Economy.
- Provide an additional \$27.3 million in longer-term tourism sales in 2004 and 2005.

For the Wallabies it proved the place at the top of the tree as the most popular winter national team. As a brand they once again showcased their abilities to pull it out when needed and competing to the end.

Implications For The Future?

Unfortunately, it would seem, we dropped the ball big time. The repercussions were huge. The Wallabies were loved, the main stream press were all over them. They were on everything from Sunrise to Celebrity Survivor – a sure sign of pop culture success.



"\$45 million? Gone? But how?"

And then there was the money. Ohhhhh the money! \$40 million? \$45 million? Whatever, there was plenty. Even after distributions to the states there was going to be a legacy set aside to secure the future of Australian rugby. So, excuse my French, what the fuck happened?

Within a year and a half of the World Cup the Wallabies had lost a record seven tests in a row. Our scrum was a laughing stock and no one seemed to know what our game plan was, let alone Plan B or C.

And then there was the money. Ohhhhh the mon...what? IT'S GONE????? Where does \$45 million go? Now, this is dramatising the events a little, but this legacy for Australian Rugby was being eaten away fast! A combination of the start of the Global Financial Crisis, some poor business models and just a lack of awareness saw the sports future, slipping away.

It was a reality check in the shape of a rotten big backhand to the face and is we are still feeling the after affects some seven years later. Our National Competition, once a priority, seems so far off the agenda it's not funny. Australia A were ditches as well. Staffing numbers were slashed. And with it all saw the sport reach the lowest ebb it has seen since the amateur days. In the scheme of things it is simply a bit player. The Wallabies are still losing. The free to air content is extremely limited and of questionable quality. The players come across as overpaid and under performing. And we don't have our 'rainy day' money to rely on anymore.

2. WENDELL SAILOR'S SIGNING

Rugby League had a strong history of cherry picking some of rugby's brightest talents. In fact the code gained a foothold in Australia when the majority of the incumbent Wallaby team switched to gain compensation for their time. Over the ensuing 90 odd years, until rugby went professional in 1996, the Wallabies lost some great young talent who would go on to make names of themselves in league. Dally Messenger, Trevor Allen, Ken Thornett, John Brass, Rex Mossop, Ray Price, Michael O'Connor, Ricky Stuart. The converts were regular and plentiful.

Then after 1996 it seemed to dry up. Players realised they could remain in the game they preferred and be paid to do so. And then....

So What Happened?

Wendell Sailor tells the story of coming home from the 2000 Rugby League World Cup in England. Australia had won the trophy and big Dell was named Player of the Tournament. He'd scored the most tries including a couple in the final against the kiwis. He had watched as the Wallabies had been celebrated with ticket tape parades and audiences with the Prime Minister the year before when they had won their World Cup. It looked forward to the celebrations.

But they never happened. The event seemed to simply pass in the night. It was around this time that Wendell made his decision that it was time to challenge himself at a new level. Within a couple of months he had signed a four-year deal with the ARU and talking up his game big time. A couple of years later he was playing in the most watched sporting event ever in Australia - the World Cup final.

How Did It Change Things?

This was big for Australian Rugby. Wendell was the first big name league convert. It was a massive blow to league as their recently named best player in the world was leaving to play rugby. It was the type of announcement that had become stable in the league fraternity in the past; as yet another Wallaby would switch to league. But finally it would happen the other way.

The questions were always asked about whether Dell did it just for the money. Or whether the ARU did it just for the profile. In the end, both parties probably got out of it what they wanted. The amount of column inches the ARU got from the switch would have cost in the millions of dollars. And that was just in those first few months of 2001.

Soon after another star of that World Cup tournament would sign with the ARU, in Matt Rogers. As the son of a league legend in Steve Rogers, this was another coup for the Wallabies. Lote Tuqiri a year or two later would come as well. And then bit players like Nathan Blacklock, Peter Ryan, Ryan Cross, Clinton Shifcofske and Timana Tahu would follow. It was a clear about face on what had happened in the past, and Australian Rugby folk were revelling in it.



Dally M - A Wallaby great before becoming a league award.

Implications For The Future?

It definitely has taken the NRL aback. All of a sudden the global rugby market was looking at the NRL as a possible source of players. Mark Gasnier and Sonny Bill Williams went to France, whilst others used the threat of a switch as a contract building exercise.

For the ARU, it probably created a rod for their own back. The salary figures being thrown around in the press when Dell, and then Lote, signed and re-signed would create pressure at the negotiation table with other established stars. Meanwhile the more honest toiler, Scott Staniforth, would relocate overseas seeing their opportunities in Australia as limited.

It seemed to cheapen the Wallaby jersey as these players came across with a seeming expectation that they had 'signed with the Wallabies'. Including incentive money, such as test match fees, in the salary package would not help either. "Dell Sells" and "Costa Lote" became only ever so slightly tongue in cheek sayings around the Wallaby camp.

Whilst the converts would bring their share of publicity and profile to the game, not always positive, the results never really came. It may be pure coincidence but our darkest period in rugby for a number of years corresponded with the seeming preoccupation with league signings.

As the NRL have gone from strength to strength the Wallabies have now had four high profile signings (Sailor, Rogers, Tuqiri and Tahu) all end in metaphorical tears. Three have returned to league, with the fourth reportedly likely to.

Dell's signing sure caused a shit fight with the NRL and a wave of 'publicity' for the ARU and the Wallabies, but the true worth of the switch some eight years later are not readily evident.

1. FIRST LIONS TEST 2001

What could be bigger than the others? Well, in my eyes, there is one event that preceded each of these.

This event laid the groundwork for each and every one of the above four to happen. If this one didn't happen, I am declaring that the World Cup would not have been the success it was. I don't think we would have had the influx of league players and I don't think John O'Neill would have been forced out of his position as ARU CEO. If that was the case, who knows what would have happened with Robbie? Perhaps he would have signed earlier, or perhaps we wouldn't have needed him at all.

Regardless, this event set in motion all the others. And guess what, it is about to happen again in about three and a half years time. I wonder what impact it will have on Australian Rugby then?

Rugby was a somewhat attractive little sport, attracting pretty decent profile in Australia because of the recent success of the Wallabies. They won the 1999 Rugby World Cup in England, and got a ticker tape parade when they got home. Bravo! Still...it was a little out of sight out of mind. The team was highly regarded and admired, but the sport really hadn't captured the imagination, nor the heart, of the greater public. I mean, the World Cup win happened in the middle of the night! Whilst most sane people were asleep.



"I never thought you could get so dirty sitting on the bench."



"It's a home game lads"

2000 was interesting. There was that amazing game at Olympic Stadium when 100,000 people turned up and saw the All Blacks tear us apart. And then us tear them apart. And then both teams fight it out in a tough second half. But that was a once off.

And apparently the British and Irish Lions were touring in 2001? They would be nice. No one was entirely sure about them, except the diehard rugby fans. They hadn't been sighted on our shores since 1989. Remember? Campo's pass? Farr-Jones's bloody lip? The 2001 tour was odd. They would play in Perth first. Perth, Western Australia? Strange. But arriving in the west, the Lions effectively slipped into the country somewhat unannounced.

So What Happened?

Well the footy stuff was pretty standard. Big wins by the Lions against the likes of Western Australia and the QLD President's XV, plus a loss to Australia A. But then, in the lead up to the first test in Brisbane, people started to notice something. "Who the hell are all these people in red jerseys?" The Lions supporter numbers had been exponentially growing as we got closer and closer to the first test. So much so that the Queen Street Mall in Brisbane was a sea of red in the lead up to the first test (which was a sign of things to come). It came at a time too when the English pound was buying A LOT of Aussie dollars, so these red jersey wearing tourists were spending up. Big time.

And then it came to the test. Personally I remember turning the corner inside the Gabba to enter the main seating section of the stadium, and it just hit me. The noise was incredible and there was red everywhere. It was like that scene from Stephen King's "The Shining" where all that blood comes flowing down the hallway and just covers everything. The Gabba was awash with Red. It is rumoured that Martin Johnson returned to the change rooms from doing the toss and said to his team mates "It's a home game tonight lads" such was the show of support.



**I see Red. I see Red.
I see Red!**



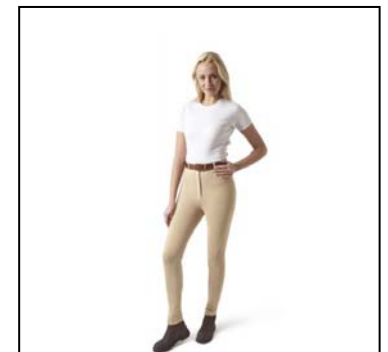
A sea of gold?

How Did It Change Things?

Now traditionally rugby crowds in Australia are on the conservative side. They like to wear their nice going out clothes. In Queensland at least it was jeans and polo shirts for the lads and jodhpurs and polo shirts (mmmmmm jodhpurs....) for the gals. Rarely, if ever, did someone wear gold. It just didn't go! And noise? We might sing the anthem quietly under our breath, and clap the odd good run, but other than that, we were there for the game.

But the Lions fans showed us how to be just that. Fans! True supporters! The 16th man! The Lions always knew they had the support. The red apparel was everywhere. The singing, the chanting, the constant Lions presence was never ending and...just so foreign to us.

The size of the travelling supporter groups gave big business, and the government, a true understanding of the value of the rugby dollar. It would have played a big part in the private and public sector getting behind the 2003 RWC. The economic benefit statements were amazing. Small businesses were making money. Big business were making money. The ARU, the government, the sponsors. They were all making money.



**Any excuse to post a pic
of jodhpurs!**

It was an eye-opener for the ARU. They were embarrassed by what happened in Brisbane, and who knows the impact it had on the players (who were blown out of the water by the Lions going down 29-13). Come the 2nd test in Melbourne the ARU decided to fight fire with fire and were giving away gold stuff (mostly scarfs and caps, and the occasional shirt) by the stadium load to try and gain some sort of equality in the stands. It may well have worked as this time it was the Wallabies who were blowing the Lions out of the park on their way to a record 35-14 win.

So it all came down to the third test, much to the delight of the ARU. The stadium was once again saturated with gold and the crowd even managed to make some noise as the Wallabies wrapped up a series win.

Implications For The Future?

The tour did massive things for Wallaby revenue. The win gave an obvious boost to the value of the team which saw increased crowd numbers, TV ratings and sponsorships. More so it highlighted the brand of rugby and its value to the corporate market. The Government recognised it as well and the success of the Tour, economically, smoothed the way for greater governmental support (at all levels) come the 2003 RWC, which in turn went on to ensure the success of that event.

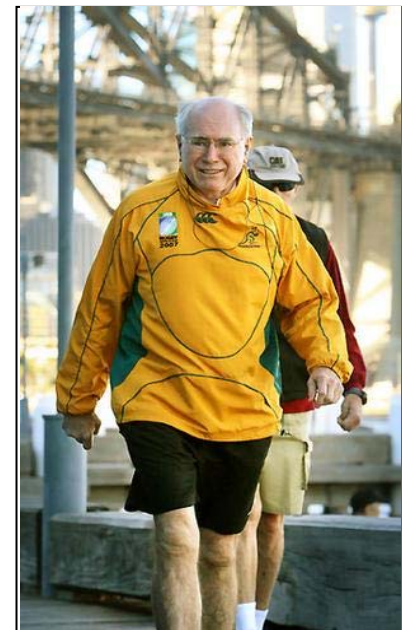
Merchandising also came very much into play. Prior to this, you'd struggle to find any Wallaby gear anywhere but at the stadium on game day. Anyone actually wearing a jersey was even rarer. Now the Wallaby jersey seems to be everywhere and evident at all supporting events (featuring Australians) across the globe. It's fair to say that the ARU still lags behind a few sports in terms of merchandising (and the pricing of it!!), but it must now be a decent little income earner it hadn't, prior to 2001, really factored on.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So the Lions tour, and more specifically the eye-opening first test the most significant moment of the decade. Fair call? Am I overstating it? What did I miss? Can the 2013 Lions tour to Australia, two years after the RWC in New Zealand, once again boost the sport in this country, or is the Lions concept dead in the water?

HAVE YOUR SAY

To see all our readers comments and add your own go to <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/ggr-top-five-wallaby-moments-of-the-decade-final/>



A handy fan to have!

G&GR WALLABY TRIES OF THE DECADE

Coming up with a list of the top tries of the decade was a tough one. What makes one try stand out from another? Is it individual brilliance we are gauging it on, or is it whole of team involvement? Rehearsed tries from a set piece or instinctive brilliance? Does a try against the All Blacks or in a final count for more than one against a touring nations' third XV?

Well frankly, for this list there is no hard and fast answer. There is definitely a case of tries in big matches being a big factor. Players standing up to the occasion so to speak. There's a couple of match winners, that's for sure. Set piece majesty? Hmmm ...there is a couple, as it is something I love to see. All those hours on the training paddock paying off on the actual field. But it doesn't take from my love of that piece of individual brilliance, brought upon by natural instinctiveness and awareness of the opportunity.

And so to the list which includes, thanks to some of the champions at G&GR, video footage of each try. And awaaaaayyy, we go:

G&GR WALLABY TRIES OF THE DECADE #5

Lote Tuqiri v England. Telstra Stadium, Sydney (22 November, 2003) – Rugby World Cup Final

There is something about this try that both delights me and disappoints me. It delights me from the sheer execution of it all. Remembering this was the biggest test in Australian rugby ever! Sure we'd been in World Cup finals before, one a couple, but this was the big one. This was at home and it seemed like EVERYONE was watching. We'd blown the kiwis off the park the week before, and now was our chance for the Poms.

We were only five minutes into the game, and the chance was on. A pin point Steve Larkham cross field kick where the athletic Lote Tuqiri monstered the diminutive Jason Robinson. It was the perfect tactic. Not only was Lote twice the size as Billy Wizz but he was superb in the air as well. It all played out to sheer perfection and there we were, leading early with a planned move coming up trumps. And then....and then it was put in the back pocket and we never saw it again.

Why didn't we try it at least once more? Was it as a result of Larkham's head knock? Did we get complacent? Did we choke? Michael Lynagh showed in the 91 RWC quarter final against Ireland that if something works once in a game of rugby, there's no reason to stop using it. But the 03 Wallabies did stop. And we didn't look like cross the line for the remaining 75 minutes plus injury time.

But in the moment? It was a brilliantly taken try, planned and executed to near perfection.

See the video here - <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/ggr-wallaby-tries-of-the-decade-5/>



G&GR WALLABY TRIES OF THE DECADE #4

I am a bit of a believer in the Recency Factor when it comes to many things, but particularly when it comes to sporting memories. The Recency Factor is basically that you (or is it just I?) tend to overlook events or players that have happened more recently than others. So players that are long retired are remembered more favourably than current players. Maybe it is because that we tend to forget the retired player's bad games, and the current player is under constant watch.

Which brings us to our next try in the list. I will cop to the fact that I had Andrew Walker's try against the British Lions at the Gabba at number 4 in the list. I had memories of this beautiful swerving run by Walks in which he ran through half a dozen Lions players giving the Wallabies a breath of hope in the game. When I re-watched it however, I realised the try was fine. There actually weren't many defenders around and he wasn't really challenged. Beautiful balance sure, but not much more. And the Wallabies had long lost the test. So I was forced to reconsider, and in the end came up with a piece of back line magic (one of not many) from this year. Can you guess which one it is?



Ahhh memories ...



Adam Ashley-Cooper v South Africa. Suncorp Stadium, Brisbane (5 September, 2009)

Ok, so this is one of those set piece masters classes I mentioned yesterday. You can just see the Wallaby backs doing this move over and over again (whilst the pack are doing proper training) under the eager eye of coach Deans. If we start by where we are at in the match, nay the season. The Wallabies just aren't performing. We have a young team with, it would seem, plenty of potential, but we've just been blown away by the Boks in Perth having already lost the first three Tri-Nations games of the season.

Finally, in this game, we were looking the goods. Our pack was superb and, with a few changes in the backs, we looked confident and somewhat dangerous. But the points weren't coming. In fact with just 20 minutes left we were only up by 3 points. A couple of try scoring chances had gone amiss, so we are yet to dot down. And that's where we stand now.

A dominant Aussie scrum gave the backs confidence that they could make something of their good position, 25 metres out with two thirds of the field to play with. Barnes has been moved into first receiver and the players are in motion outside him. Gits is looping wide, Drew Mitchell has the inside channel, whilst Adam Ashley-Cooper is running in the traditional outside centre line.

Now the best part of this try, if you believe the press, is that it was totally up to Barnes as to who would receive the ball. Each of Gits, Mitchell and AAC were expecting the ball and knew what their play was should they get it. But it was up to Barnes, in the moment, to decide who would get it. Now if the attackers don't know what they are doing with the ball, what hope do the defenders have? In

the end Barnes provides an inch perfect ball to AAC, threaded across the face of Mitchell and the Bok defence. Ashley-Cooper then does what he does best and just charges for the line to score the try and ignite both his teammates and the crowd. From there, there was only ever going to be one winner.

Can I mention the celebration too? Wasn't it great to see such celebration? To see the Wallabies actually connect with the crowd? I think AAC made a lot of fans from his letting his passion out. Long may we see more.

See the video here - <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/ggr-wallaby-tries-of-the-decade-4/>

G&GR WALLABY TRIES OF THE DECADE #3

There are so many elements to this next try that make it stand out. Firstly, it was a match-winning try. Secondly, it was a match-winning try against the All Blacks and, thirdly, it was a match-winning try against the All Blacks in which Stirling Mortlock was the man!

There is something about that combination that we Aussie fans love. Perhaps it is because Stirlo is our go to man. He is the one who has done it for us in the past. Perhaps it is because he is our only real link to a day when we used to pull off last minute victories pretty damn regularly? And there's something about last minute tries that seem to make them more special.

Now this next try is hardly last minute. More last ten minutes. But the tension was still there, as it is in any Bledisloe encounter. The knowledge that ANY slip up, by either side, could win or lose that game is unbearable at times. Which makes the celebrations when something like the below happens, all the more special.

Scott Staniforth v New Zealand. Melbourne Cricket Ground, Melbourne. (30 June, 2007)

Shees, just re-watching this and I'm asking myself why is it only 3rd! It is a cracker. A set piece move I guess you would say. The set up was great. Aussie lineout about 45 metres out, two points down and less than ten minutes to go. The forwards do the job with the perfect ball, thanks to replacements Adam Freier and Mark Chisholm.

Get a load of the back line at the time though. Matt Giteau has moved from inside centre to scrumhalf. Larkham is still at flyhalf and catches the pass with blindside winger Adam Ashley-Cooper hovering on his inside and replacement inside centre Scott Staniforth outside.



Bernie throws a beauty of a cut out pass to Mortlock on the charge and he just starts to rampage! Inside McAlister, inside McCaw and then he's like an All Black magnet. They're having flashbacks to 03 and watching this green 13 run away from them with their dreams and they WON'T let it happen again.

So they converge. Mealamu, Mauger, Weepu, Mils. And then perhaps in the greatest piece of timing seen on a rugby field since John Eales announced his retirement, Mortlock bowls the ball over the top to Stani still supporting on the inside (with AAC there as well).

We're up by three, make it five with the kick. And that's the final score! Our first win over the kiwis since 2004! And it was that man Mortlock that did it. Again!



The evil wizard Mortlock!

Grandmaster Flash says:

Wow I never realised how much Morty did to create this try, always thought it was just an inside step to beat McAlister. Looks like half the team was chasing him!

See the video here - <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/ggr-wallaby-tries-of-the-decade-3/>

G&GR WALLABY TRIES OF THE DECADE #2

I reckon there's a fair bet that this next try, number two on the list, would have probably been most people's choice for the try of the decade. Correct? Then why the hell have I not appointed it as such!!! All the elements are there. Beautiful set piece play, last minute try that wins just about every trophy available. It is an amazing piece of individual brilliance that combines with some bang on team elements. Hell, it's even scored by a Queenslander!

Hang on, I'm starting to question myself now, so must stop before I have to completely redo this series. The McQueen era of Wallaby success was somewhat typified by our ability to snatch last minute defeats. It was positioned as our never say die attitude, or constant belief in our selves.

Either way we did it v the Boks at the 99 World Cup, we did it against the Black and the Boks the following year in the Tri-Nations, and went bloody close in the 'Game of the Century'. And then...we did it against the All Blacks again in 2001. But the only one of these games we won the match with a try was the last one, which must mean....

Toutai Kefu v New Zealand. Stadium Australia, Sydney (1 September, 2001)

I think most people will agree that it deserves to be on the top five list. And for so many reasons. It was really about the players performing under the most intense pressure. From that perfect throw from Foley – and I mean perfect. Watch how the ref calls up the lineout the first time after Foley has already thrown it to Cockbain. So the All Blacks already know where it's going! The Wallabies hold their steal and it goes to Cockbain again. Perfectly timed.

And then Kef takes over. I still don't know how he gets through. It's much like Larkham and all those times he inexplicitly 'ghosted' through the defence. And what a match for Kef to do it in. It won Australia the Tri-Nations trophy, and the Bledisloe, and it farewellled one of his best mates and the Wallaby legend in John Eales.

See the video here - <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/ggr-wallaby-tries-of-the-decade-2/>



Ben says:

What about Kef's change of direction just as he receives the ball ... just brilliant ... running into and finding the space.

G&GR WALLABY TRIES OF THE DECADE #1

Well that was bloody tough I tells ya'! Nailing down the top five tries of the decade! I pride myself on my Wallaby recall, so I hope I didn't forget any glaring ones. I tell you what, there were plenty I considered.

Stirling Mortlock's in 2000 against the All Blacks in Wellington was a superb move only minutes into the game bringing back memories of that great game a couple of weeks prior. There was a beauty by Ben Tune v the Springboks at the Gabba in 2002. Another brilliantly executed team try – from training paddock to the field!

Brendan Cannon's effort a couple of games later against the Boks in J-Burg, when George Smith took the ball at the back of the lineout and ran about 60m on his own before dishing off to the hooker. It was a game winner.... except we let the Boks back into score (Werner Greef anyone?) a few minutes later.

Wendell scored a couple of crackers against the Boks and All Blacks, from lineouts, in 2003 which if anyone else had scored, would have gained him massive acclaim. Almost any of Clyde Rathbone's three against England at Lang Park in 2004. Drew Mitchell's first try v the All Blacks, in his run on debut was pretty bloody impressive. Brushing off Dan Carter along the way.



What about Greg Holme's v Ireland in 2006? Just remarkable. Adam Ashley-Cooper scored a strong try v the All Blacks in the same game as Staniforth's try. James Horwill's meat pie v France in Brisbane in 2008 came from some magical work by Matt Giteau. And if I list Greg Holmes, I need to have Mark Chisholm's one from the back of the lineout against Wales as well.

Even this year has produced some worthy of consideration. Berrick Barnes' try, on the back of some wonderful team work, against the All Blacks in Auckland was a great start, and I see has been nominated by the IRB as one of their tries of the year.

I reckon Jimmy Horwill's try against Wales in the last game of the decade was also something worth remembering, if not just because of the work of the two props – Robinson and Alexander, in making it all happen.

But what actually won? What was the try of the decade? Well....it's probably not the one you thought...

Chris Latham v Wales. Millennium Stadium, Cardiff (4 November, 2006)

I'm guessing you didn't think we'd go with this one right? I get the impression that because it was played in the middle of the night against Wales, in a game we only drew, the year before the Rugby World Cup, it is somewhat forgotten. Not by me though. This try is just beautiful to watch and shows so many of the skills that make rugby at its best so unique.



With a little over 15 minutes to go, Wales are leading Australia by two points. After snatching some turn over ball Wales hoof it down field to relieve the pressure. Unfortunately they kick it open and it's just inviting Chris Latham to take them on. But watch the pressure Latho is under when he gets the ball. The ball is running quickly, as are the two Welsh defenders closing in on him. Plus there is the added confusion of a Wallaby wing Cameron Shepherd also running towards Latho as support.

But Latho, showing the composure he perhaps lacked early on his career but became a showpiece in his later years, timed his run perfectly and waiting for the right bounce. And! He! Was! Off! Around the Welsh winger Gareth Thomas. Watch how he uses the sideline to perfection.

It's at this stage you can just see it all ticking through his head "ok, ok. I love my chip 'n' chase. Do I pull that out? Oh wait. There's Hoilsey, can I set him up? Nup, here comes the cover and ...a wahoooo, got around him. Ahhhhhh! Through this guy. Line's just there....OH YEAH!!!!!!"

It is just superb skill, speed, balance, strength, awareness and commitment. And it put Australia in front! A lead they'd eventually give up and the game would end up 29-all. But still. A brilliant opportunist try. Showing all the skills. Putting Australia in the lead. Scored by one of the best Wallabies of the decade.

Wonderful try.

You still with me? You haven't thrown the computer across the room in disgust? "What the hell are you thinking Noddy?" RWC03? Semi-final v New Zealand? Spencer passes out wide and finds???? MORTLOCK?

But...but...it was an intercept. Wonderful moment. Brilliant memories. But, it was an intercept. And for that, I just can't convince myself it deserves a place in the top 5.

This was a mighty hard list to make! But what do you think? Any I miss? What would you change?

See all our reader's comments and the video here - <http://www.greenandgoldrugby.com/ggr-wallaby-tries-of-the-decade-1/>

Reddy! says:

Latho magic!

All I can say is great try and the Wallabies are definitely lacking a game-winning player such as Latham right now.

G&GR WALLABY XV OF THE DECADE

Well, the people have spoken. The votes are in and we have our official Green & Gold Rugby Wallaby Team of the Decade!

As many people suggested throughout the series, many of the positions were fairly cut and dried. Scrum Half and Flyhalf, for example. There were some tough decisions, however, such as balancing the player's overall career compared to what he put on this decade.

This was probably most relevant in the fullback position in which many people were split between Matthew Burke and Chris Latham. A special mention to Timmy Horan too who still managed to get 20 odd votes, despite playing less than one whole game of footy this decade. What a player!

But we didn't get it always right. Most notably at inside centre where we opted for Flats, Grey and Jason Little. The voters, however, were keener on Matt Giteau and we here at G&GR have listened - he's in the team. That's how we roll! So, without any further delay, we have our Team of the Decade:



And for interests sake, our Wallaby A Team of the Decade would be (Gits has to double up)!

15 Matt Burke;	8 Wycliff Palu;
14 Ben Tune;	7 David Wilson;
13 Dan Herbert;	6 Owen Finegan;
12 Elton Flatley;	5 Nathan Sharpe;
11 Clyde Rathbone;	4 David Giffen;
10 Matt Giteau;	3 Al Baxter;
9 Will Genia;	2 Jeremy Paul;
	1 Bill Young.

So what do you think? A handy side? I must say, that's an interesting front row. How would we go against that Rest of the World Side we picked? In fact, screw that, how would we go against that Wallaby A side? That'd be a tough one I reckon. Look at the match-ups.

Burke v Latham	Wilson v Smith
Tune v Roff	Young v Noriega
Herbert v Mortlock	Paul v Cannon
Palu v Kefu	Finegan v Elsom

The battles are awesome and across the park. So who do you reckon would win and where would they win it?

Scarfman says:

Benn Robbo would have Al popping and dropping all over the place. And I reckon Noriega could handle Bill Young. Probably slap him for boring in when the ref's not looking.

The Brumbie Ball combo from 9 to 10 to 12 to 13 to 14 would score tries against any team any day.

I'm backing the first XV by a fair margin.

Scotty says:

That's a great team!!! Couldn't pick a better one really.

G&GR WALLABY OF THE DECADE

Despite a decade in which we probably didn't win as many trophies as we would have liked, and probably had our longest period of disappointment since, ummmm, the 70s, we've had some great players feature for the Wallabies in the Noughties. The likes of John Eales, Jason Little, Dan Herbert, Matthew Burke, Richard Harry, David Wilson and Tim Horan will go down as legends of our game. However, who can lay claim to being the Wallaby of the Decade?

For mine, Eales and Horan are the best players to have played featured in the green and gold since 2000 until now. However I wouldn't consider either for this acclaim, due solely to their lack of games. Horan unfortunately featured in less than one game, whereas Eales played for a season and a half. So in discussing the Player of the Decade there are a number of areas that need to be considered. Durability/longevity, international acclaim, consistency of performance, importance to the Wallabies and probably much, much, more. So let's get to it, we here at G&GR have come up with a short list of five players we think are the standouts.



GEORGE GREGAN

2000-2009 Stats

First game:	v ARG (Brisbane on 17/6/00) won 53-6
Last game:	v ENG (Marseille on 6/10/07) lost 12-10 (RWC QF)
Number of Tests:	85
Number of Points:	44 (7 tries, 3 drop goals)
Tests as captain:	59



STEVE LARKHAM

2000-2009 Stats

First game:	v ARG (Brisbane on 17/6/00) won 53-6
Last game:	v JAP (Marseille on 8/9/07) won 91-3 (RWC pool game)
Number of Tests:	71
Number of Points:	63 (12 tries, 1 drop goal)
Tests as captain:	0



CHRIS LATHAM

2000-2009 Stats

First game:	v ARG (Brisbane on 17/6/00) won 53-6
Last game:	v ENG (Marseille on 6/10/07) lost 12-10 (RWC QF)
Number of Tests:	72
Number of Points:	190 (38 tries)
Tests as captain:	0



STIRLING MORTLOCK

2000-2009 Stats

First game:	v ARG (Brisbane on 17/6/00) won 53-6
Last game:	v SAF (Cape Town on 8/9/09) lost 29-17
Number of Tests:	80
Number of Points:	514 (30 tries, 71 conversions, 74 penalties)
Tests as captain:	29



GEORGE SMITH

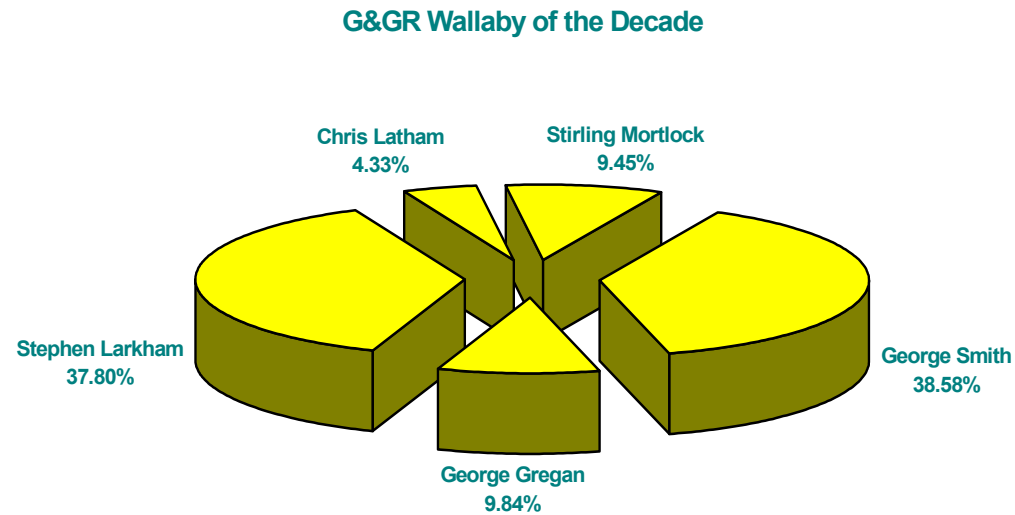
2000-2009 Stats

First game:	v FRA (Paris on 4/11/00) won 18-13 (Test Debut)
Last game:	v WAL (Cardiff on 28/11/09) won 33-12
Number of Tests:	110
Number of Points:	45 (9 tries)
Tests as captain:	7



There are our Famous Five. Who is the best player of the decade?

Well according to G&GR readers, it's George Smith by just two votes from Steve Larkham.



Thanks for participating in the G&GR Review of the Noughties. We hope you look back on this E-Book from time to time to relive the great memories.

Feel free to pass the E-Book along to your mates and we look forward to seeing you again at www.GreenAndGoldRugby.com to view more of the analysis, humour and other forms of interactive multimedia, such as live match reports and videos – everything to do with Australian rugby.



THE DECADE IN REVIEW

THE WALLABIES

2000-2009

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