

“THE VERY BEST PLAYERS HAVE GOT THE MENTAL STRENGTH TO PERFORM UNDER SEVERE PRESSURE”

INTERVIEW

When the so-called “granddad’s army” retired after winning the Rugby World Cup in 2003, England suddenly found themselves having to enlist several new recruits. The rebuilding process – which continues against

Australia, New Zealand and Samoa this November – has not been easy. But in former army officer Josh Lewsey they have an experienced man to help lead the charge.

Lewsey has always led by example. A fearless player with blistering speed and strength, he is renowned for his explosive attacking and ferocious tackling. For example, his wince-inducing hit on Wallaby fullback Mat Rogers, shortly before the World Cup, left the Australian with ribs that protrude so much he can no longer lie on a surfboard.

But for all the game’s obvious physicality, supreme mental toughness is apparently what really makes Lewsey a winner. As the sport becomes ever more technically advanced, so players like Lewsey look for any ideas or innovations that might give them an edge over the opponents...

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE PSYCHOLOGICAL SIDE OF THE GAME THESE DAYS?

Hugely so. At the top level all the players are highly skilled. But the very best players are the ones who have got the mental strength to perform, especially when under severe pressure.

HOW DO YOU MENTALLY PREPARE FOR A MATCH?

I prepare the same mentally for every game, whether it is for my club or country. As I have grown older I have realised the importance of remaining relaxed in the build up to a game, from a few days before right up to kick off. If I remain relaxed, mentally, prior to the game I make better decisions on the pitch during it.

WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES THE DIFFERENCE AT THE TOP LEVEL?

All sorts of things – even down to putting on a fresh kit at half-time, which is something we started with England a long time ago and now everyone copies. In the England team, we call them the “one-percenters”. These are things that on their own don’t make much impact, but added together, they really help.

IS IT REALLY THAT CRUCIAL TO WEAR THE RIGHT KIT?

I think so. Whatever happens, you want to make sure that you are wearing something comfortable and functional so that you can get on with the job of performing to the best of your ability. I’ve recently been using a new range of performance gear called Nike Pro that you wear underneath your kit when you’re training and playing. I took a lot of it on the Lions tour last summer. It’s really comfortable stuff because it draws moisture away from the skin, keeps your temperature regular and doesn’t chafe like other gear I’ve used before. I lent some tops to the lads on tour and never saw the gear again so they must have liked it.

DOES IT ALL HAVE TO BE SO SKIN-TIGHT?

The tighter kit makes you harder to tackle for one thing, as there is less material to grab hold of. But the main idea is that it keeps your muscles slightly compressed and the theory is that it helps muscles recover and not get injured in the first place. After we’ve come out of the ice bath after a game of rugby, we’ll wear recovery pants that just look like a middle-aged woman’s aerobics leggings. Nike Pro is just taking that idea on to the next level. And if it is in any way beneficial and gives you an edge over your opponent, it is worth a try.

IS IT GOOD FOR OTHER SPORTS TOO?

It’s for anyone and any sport: football, hockey, boxing, running, the gym... If it helps keep you comfortable and aids recovery, it’s worth it. I’ve tried out pretty much everything on the market in terms of sports kit and this range from Nike is easily as good if not better than anything I’ve used before.



LEWSEY IN THE NEW ENGLAND KIT