

## ONE MORE FRIENDLY, THEN IT GETS SERIOUS (26/08/13)

The nights are closing in, the autumn leaves are preparing to fall and our coaches are preparing their players. A sunny evening at Nantyglo drew a sizeable crowd to watch a game of intensity, the home players were intent on showing why they did not lose a League match last season and ours were intent on getting to know each other. As expected there was a strong forward challenge and many changes were made on a quite excellent pitch which was much better than others we could mention but being polite will not. We met former Steelmen among whom the most vociferous were Nantyglo coaches Nigel Meek and Jason Williams still putting a lot back into the game. Standing within earshot of them along the touchline was enjoyable and educational. The friendly served its purpose and we wish Nantyglo more success in the coming season.

Carmarthen 'Quins travelled far on Friday which we appreciated and as a Premier Club that finished in the top six last season were expected to present a formidable challenge. After 35 minutes of the second half what no one expected was a 'Quins win because Ebbw had dominated the game up to then. Pre-season "friendlies" are useful to coaches and players especially newcomers to the squad and while the result was disappointing the aim of the game was achieved. The officials officiated seriously and for them too it was a warm up for the season to come but the spirit of both teams was correct which made the brandishing of a yellow card rather surprising. To quote an age old saying, the better team lost.

The game seemed in the bag but changes were made as they should be in such matches and that contributed to the late charge by the 'Quins who for the second year running travelled east and were the first visitors to play under our new lights. Was our try scored by Chunky? As unofficial president of his fan club I say it was for as usual he was here, there, everywhere and all over the place. The West Walians will always be welcome to Ebbw Vale and we wish them well in the Premiership which is our sole aim this season. The coaches will take encouragement from what they saw and so will the supporters many of whom queued to purchase their season tickets. Looking at it as a game, forgetting for a moment that it was a friendly warm-up, it was the manner of losing that briefly disappointed but normal service was soon continued aided by a new beer named after the Steelmen which is worth further investigation. .

Builth Wells consider themselves the strongest team in Powys which is saying a lot because all teams in the County are packed with big, burly men of the soil. Their badge is of a bull charging beneath rugby posts, something our pack regularly does as a party piece. The Bulls of Builth are clad in black and amber which to Steelmen is, wait for it, a red rag to a bull. Bull can mean a lot of things, a papal edict or trivial and insincere talk but in the context of rugby football it means power, physicality and taking opposing bulls by the horns. And that's the last you'll hear of the b's in this edition.

Builth won Division 2 West last season but the town is always in the news for the Royal Welsh Show which draws huge crowds of humans and over sized cattle. Some of Britain's tastiest main courses were first seen in Builth and so were two Welsh rugby internationals. Winger Mark Jones was born there, played for the Youth team, joined Llandoverly, then Scarlets and played 47 times for Wales.

There is no need to inspire forwards of any age but the senior careers of Builth Wells props the brothers Pugh, are examples of how locals can make it to the big time. Jeremy won three caps and was heavily involved in the 1987 USA Eagles tour. He captained (as a Neath player) Breconshire who beat the Eagles at Brecon 15-9 and in same side were Brian Thomas, Des Parry and Robert Stephens along with Nick Hunt who represented

Brynmawr which used to be in Breconshire.

After losing their opening games the Eagles were not expected to do well at The Gnoll but they won 15-6 watched by Jeremy Pugh who made his debut for Wales against the USA a few days later, an easy 46-0 win. His other two caps were against Scotland, as a replacement for Pontypool's Steve Jones in 1988 (won 25-20) and he started the 1990 game which we lost 13-9. There were seven Neath players in the latter game. The Welsh coach was Ron Waldron - of Neath.

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NANTYGLO, ROMANIA, CARMARTHEN – THE WORLD IS OVAL (170813)

Our head coach doesn't find it all strange to act as a consultant for other teams. Recently his linguistic qualities were stretched when he went to Romania to support Kingsley Jones, once Baird of Blaina now a Tsar, in a four team competition between the host country and the A teams of Russia, Italy and Argentina. It was a high standard affair and a challenge to a couple of lads from Brynmawr and Blaina in coaching and communicating.

It's not a small world after all for to Jason's surprise when he told a Romanian coach he was at Ebbw Vale the man said he had played for his country against us in September 1979, a special game in many ways. It was our Centenary and the first game of the first tour to Britain by Romania. Jason's new rugby mate gave him the programme for the game which the tourists won 12-0 followed by a dinner in the Lever Hall when the bar ran out of Scotch by 9 o'clock!

The theme beloved by lay preachers "I lifteth up mine eyes unto the hills from whence cometh my help" also applies to rugby because it was North Monmouthshire where a lot of internationals made their mark before fame but not fortune followed. Our visit to Nantyglo reminds us it was one of several breeding grounds surrounded by rugby playing Grammar Schools in what is now Blaenau Gwent. When Youth rugby emerged in the late 40s that too prospered as a means of providing rugby for boys who left school early.

Nantyglo can boast one directly capped player, a "redoubtable" forward Tom Clapp who played fourteen times for Wales between 1882 and 1888, captaining the team three times as a Newport player. In Tom's first two games for Wales he represented Nantyglo so there must be a photograph of him in their clubhouse. If there is it will not be an action shot, not even Kodak Brownies were around in the 1880s.

In our clubhouse there is a super photograph of a scrum-half diving over the All-Black line in the Gwent-NZ epic of 1972 played on our ground. He was, still is of course, Glyn Turner born and bred in Nantyglo who joined Ebbw Vale and was a player everyone flocked in large numbers to see. Opponents invariably failed to tame him, catch him or even find him and they included Sid Going who was left standing when Glyn scored "that" try 41 years ago. The photograph is in a book to be published (in time for Christmas) by Roger Penn of Whitland called "Three Feathers & A Silver Fern," a totally different and highly entertaining history of Wales/New Zealand since 1905. Glyn played twice for Wales in 1968 but the games in Argentina were "unofficial" and caps were not awarded. Hopes might yet be realised that they will be officially recognised for it's never too late to do a good deed.

Business is business as we say in the City and it is a pleasure to report that while the props were dominating the bouncy castle on Fun Day and the scrum-halves were failing miserably in getting a ball into Brian Moore's plywood mouth, the back room was busy taking orders for season tickets. Many loyalists bought them and those not yet enrolled are advised to get theirs soon.

Since we began our temporary existence outside the Premier Division we have played two friendlies with Carmarthen 'Quins, the first in August 2011 at their ground which we lost 31-19, one of only four defeats that season, and the second at home a year ago which we won 14-11. As a result we have a good link with the 'Quins and will welcome them again on Friday. There can be no better warm-up for what will be a very important season than a home game against a Premier club.

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#### FAMILY FUN & FAMILY FIRST FOR FALETAU (110813)

Opening day last season kept the Wanderers scoreboard operator busy to the point of despair. We expected to win but the final score of 76-13 was a pleasant shock and a sign of things to come. Once again we will begin a new season away from home and this time the opposition is new to us. It will be déjà vu in the second fixture home to Bargoed the club that challenged us more than any other in the past three campaigns.

We have lost to them twice since 2010/11 before which we had never even played them. In the last seventy League games we won 63 and lost seven, two at the hands of Bargoed (one at home), three to Newbridge and one each to Merthyr and Whitland. It is a record few will match, a 90% win/loss ratio and the home record is even better, two League defeats for a return of 94%.

We face unknown opposition in the opener but so what? In our first Div One East season only Newbridge were known to us, in the second Wanderers re-appeared and last season we played Pontypool again. Teams change, so do their coaches but familiarity of the opposition while useful is not vital as our success against Premier teams in the Cup showed.

Qualification for Premier Division status includes cover for five hundred spectators on what we mature types still call the tanner bank. Premier clubs are closely involved with their regions and operate under the same umbrella, speaking of which a bright spark has suggested an alternative cover. A photograph of a 1990 Cup tie with Pontypool at a packed ECP shows hundreds of golf umbrellas on the terrace warding off heavy rain. So on a rainy day why not provide brollies?

We should be thankful we can see every Ebbw Vale game, our exiled followers from British Columbia to the wilds of Surrey have to keep in touch by website, a modern invention which replaces talking and joined up writing. Exiles enjoy the ration of nostalgia we indulge in, a pleasant and harmless exercise while accepting the fact that times and attitudes have changed and are very often better. To quote from the classic film 'On The Waterfront' if we don't move with the times, while keeping our traditions, "We'll be on a one-way ticket to Palookaville."

The past is done and dusted, history is remembered for its ups and downs and "if only" scenarios but it's what is happening here and now that matters and last Saturday what happened was a fun day for families which means the whole club. It followed the announcement by Toby Faletau that he has signed again for the Dragons because he wished to remain close to his family. His father Kuli also influenced his decision as good fathers do. Toby also said "off the field stuff is as important as on the field." To which we say amen because the family element is what has sustained us in the last three years.

The sun shone on Pontygof last Saturday when we held our annual Fun Day, a sort of garden party without the garden. I offered to host it but I'm not sure where my garden is so ECP opened its gates for all to meet, sup a few and view the new floodlights which one

eminent personage of the club had told us were literally brilliant; mind you he had seen them in the afternoon.

It was a good prelude to the season with the players looking disgustingly fit and healthy and an example to the more rotund camp followers without whose practical support our new brewers would go out of business. Jason & Co expressed justifiable confidence over the prospects ahead and looked forward to other games besides those in the Championship including schools, development and hopefully LV Cup the latter they feel being a major boost.

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OWAIN GLYNDWR WOULD TURN IN HIS GRAVE (040813)

Rugby took off in South Wales in the late 19th Century and it didn't take long to flourish. Oxbridge graduates brought it home and it suited the temperament of colliers, iron workers and farmers who worked hard and played harder. Rugby at the highest level has been the main sport in South Wales over three centuries but is not as popular in the north which is why the WRU has invested in fostering it in a football dominated region.

It centres on one team, Rygbi Gogledd Cymru aka Rugby North Wales popularly known as RGC 1404, the numbers marking the year when Owain Glyndwr became Prince of Wales. What that has to do with rugby is beyond me for he would turn in his grave if he knew an English game had been adopted by his countrymen. Adding a date is a novel idea so we should be known as Glynebwy 1879 to remind everyone we were formed in that year and by our own efforts have contributed to the national game ever since.

Our first League game of the season is at Colwyn Bay against RGC 1404. Having beaten Ystrad Rhondda to win Division One East they are the youngest club in the Championship. Tondy who were promoted from Division One West were formed in 1860. Our last long journey was in 2008-9 when we won a Cup tie in Llandudno 79-3, our first fixture in North Wales.

After intensive and very demanding training involving most of last season's Steelmen there are recruits about to enjoy a new experience. They are being turned into Steelmen and the new intake already show the quality demanded by a very experienced coaching staff. Jason Strange recently declared, "The boys from last season know what to expect and the new players have adapted very quickly." Of equal interest and comfort is the opinion of one who has watched training closely and has never seen such a quick return to top fitness levels after the summer break. The supporters' fitness will be on view when we hold our version of a Buckingham Palace Garden Party on Saturday the 10th.

We have to jump 26 hurdles in a very important season, none insurmountable for players who can't wait for the off. Also ready are the new floodlights to shine not only on our matches but hopefully on others. The last non-club major match on our ground was in 1992 when the Wallabies played Gwent, not a great game but a special occasion and there are hopes it will not be the last. Time changes everything, like our playing kit, the away version of which is in the colours of Ebbw Fawr Learning Community. That is a good idea which illustrates our links with the youngsters in our midst. You can't get too much good news can you?

Before the real show starts there will be trial runs and a diversion with the new Foster's Sevens at the Arms Park on Sunday August 25th. There are three Championship teams in the competition: Bargoed whose first round game is against Llandovery, RGC face Swansea and we end the round against Llanelli at 1240. Pontypridd guided by Welsh

Sevens coach Paul John open with Neath under Neil Edwards and early losers will enter a Plate competition, a different Sevens to the old knockout system which meant quick exits in the first round and quicker entrances to the bar to discuss why we lost and whose round it was.

Things are warming up but while we wait we can do something practical and absolutely crucial – buy season tickets and get balls, games and the whole club sponsored. Everything from travel costs to buying bandages is getting more expensive and our transport bill this season will be bigger than usual. Hard cash is needed - voluntary work also - because it's our club after all.

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#### OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS FOR THE YOUNG (280713)

An incentive for boys sitting the entrance exam to the County Grammar School was that rugby was played there. The Tech and the elementary schools were football and they turned out players good enough to be signed up by First Division clubs and go on to play for Wales. Where the Festival Shops now stand was Park Gardens and it was there that three former Victoria School boys began their climb to the top. Eugene O'Callaghan, Cuthbert Phillips and Billy Evans played in the same Welsh team against England at Ninian Park in the Thirties.

I hope to be corrected but I believe only two former Grammar School boys went on to play rugby for Wales, Arthur Edwards in 1955 and Graham Powell in 1957, the former from London Welsh and Graham from Ebbw. Playing on the mud heap that was Frenchy's field without even a sports master was a change from Latin but did not help our rugby. What we now call coaching often depended on one man's enthusiasm but today's pupils are better cared for and very soon will have a "School of Rugby" on their doorstep. It is a brilliant concept and our Chairman describes it as "a great step forward for young player development in Ebbw Vale." The Welsh Rugby Union has approved this "flagship school of rugby" which wasn't even dreamed of just a few years ago. The young will benefit and so will the game. To those responsible, many thanks.

Developing young rugby talent is nothing new, we have been doing it for years without realising it. When Graham Powell, a Waunlwyd boy, played for Ebbw Vale Grammar School he was developed as a matter of course but rugby, and life itself, was simpler when he played for Cwm then made the big jump into the Ebbw Vale team. It was easier to become a member of Parliament than get into the Ebbw side, which admittedly doesn't say much.

Last week I referred to Jersey which claims to be the sunniest part of the United Kingdom and so it proved, but that is not the only attraction. The island is full of history and interesting, often mysterious, places to seek out; from relics of the Neolithic Age, when rugby football was not even invented, to quaint inns with even quainter names like the Dog and Sausage which, despite several visits, still didn't make sense. It was a pilgrimage but it had to be done, and the highlight was a visit to Jersey Rugby Football Club, like ourselves in its nation's Championship.

It was there in October 1979 that Ebbw Vale played to mark the centenaries of both clubs. Teams from many countries were invited and we represented Wales, winning 26-3 and leaving not just a plaque but a joint team photograph on their much adorned clubhouse walls.

While admiring the facilities we (it needs more than one missionary to spread the good

word in Jersey), were told of a youth project that will take some beating. Leicester Tigers hold summer rugby camps in many parts of the Midlands and also the Netherlands, Guernsey and Jersey, which provide experience and top quality rugby coaching in a professional environment. Core skills are “filtered” down from the Tigers Academy and all the coaching is by Tigers community coaching teams. No wonder Leicester is such a great club. Not many clubs have the funding and backing to do that, but it’s food for thought. If more details are required I am quite prepared to return to Jersey to get it, having been there, done that, got the Centenary tee shirt. While there I might even delve into the history of the Dog and Sausage.

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#### MEMORIES ARE MADE OF THIS (220713)

The coming season will be our most important for some years. The road to the Premier Division is open at last, the fixture list is almost the same as before with two newcomers, RGC 1404 and Tondu. In September we are home to Bargoed and away to Cardiff Met, the second and third placed clubs in last season’s Championship. We got the double over both of them but with only one winning bonus point, home to the Met. It will be a challenging start but we are ready for it.

Planning the trip to the North Wales Riviera for the opening game is a little different to finding the way to Blackwood but plans are already in hand and the turnstiles at Parc Eirias are being oiled in readiness for the invasion. Journeys to and from Colwyn Bay are long and expensive but do not compare with a similar scenario in the English Championship. Jersey just survived last season and its airport was never busier in winter when visiting clubs landed eager to win, have a good time and go home with the same number that came. I doubt if visiting clubs complained, except their treasurers, because a week-end in the sunniest place in Britain is a mini-tour.

In view of the journeys Welsh Championship clubs have to make this season it would be interesting to know what financial support the RFU gives to Jersey and clubs visiting them. If by chance I enter licensed premises in St. Helier this month and meet a Jersey addict I will make enquiries, business is business after all and I’m not going there to enjoy myself.

Speaking of tours we have heard from a Californian who played for Santa Barbara on our ground in 1974, and he has fond memories of the visit. Paul Rainey was reminded of it when he and his wife were looking at holiday photographs taken by her brother who had gone to London, Paris, Rome and other uninteresting places. That led Paul to say that the only place in Europe he was interested in visiting was Ebbw Vale! In return, and I speak for those who toured California, the only place I want to re-visit is Santa Barbara for if ever there was a Shangri La that was it.

Mal Gough who has passed away was a big man on and off the field who joined us in 1963 after a distinguished eight years with Cardiff when he made 223 1st XV appearances 62% of which were in a winning side. Allan Foster who played with him recalls, “I always remember him as being a great reader of the game, besides being an outstanding short lineout player as he could always spot weaknesses in opponents and would call the forwards around him to make suggestions on how we should play the game. His experience was huge to the Ebbw Vale pack when he joined us. He was a great personality to have around the club and was very popular. In today’s game he would be converted into a prop for sure.”

Every pack needs such a player like that and through the years we have been blessed with them, right up to the present moment. Characters like Mal Gough would relish the

modern game and would be comfortable with it. We have played some exciting running rugby in the past few seasons but it is the pack that has laid the platform. So it was in Mal Gough's day and he will be remembered by those who played with him, and those who watched him, with great affection and respect.

RTB Rugby Club's work for the young needs no advertising but their recent announcement reminds everyone that Toby Faletau's career began in their mini section. He and Ian Watkins are RT products who became internationals and the opportunities remain for others to follow in their footsteps. In two years Toby was capped by Wales and the Lions because talent is no longer stifled, youngsters can burst on to the big scene without undue delay. Kuli's famous son is RT's first Lion, how nice it would be to see both of them in Ebbw Vale again.

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#### NIGHTS AND DAYS OF YORE(130713)

Fanciful talk of turning Warren Gatland and Andy Murray into Knights shows what the media can do when looking for a story. The idea from the good, the bad and the irresponsible came after Sydney and Wimbledon and got me thinking, a novelty in itself. If successful sportsmen should be knighted Byron Hayward should be raised to the peerage. Switching to poetic mode I therefore recommend that the new coach of the Wales Under 20s should henceforth be known as Lord Byron. He's one of many local boys we are proud of and a former Steelman who didn't hang up his boots or hand in his tracksuit but turned to coaching. There's nothing strange in that, we are known for the quality of players who became respected coaches. As a player Byron won more games single-handed than a Southern Hemisphere referee and takes over a successful Under 20s squad. We wish him well and look forward to the day the Under 20s again play on our ground.

Years ago we could not play until September, not even friendlies but on August 31st we go to Builth Wells last visited in 1999/2000 for a 7th round Cup tie. In the 6th round we won at Bedwas 45-9 thus ending their 12 match unbeaten run, scoring six tries, two by Alun Harries and a young man with a strange name kicked fourteen points. Then we went to Builth Wells, scored nine tries, and won 57-12. Then came a home game against Bonymaen who had beaten Cross Keys 23-12 in the round before. It was another try fest, eight of them in a 59-18 win and among the scorers were Rhys Shorney and Josh Taumalolo. Shaun Connor added 29 points.

Before the semi-final we played an epic game in the European Shield at home to London Irish. Only Cardiff had won on our ground and it looked as if would keep that record with two tries in the bag. The turning point came when everyone saw Connor's high drop goal go over except French referee Joel Judge. He went on to referee 35 internationals and became the IRB High Performance Official Manager, but like the umpire in the first Ashes Test last week he was in error and added to our agony by awarding the Irish a penalty goal for them to win 21-20.

Assistant coach Richard Hill said it was "the worst way to lose," but we still had a Cup semi-final to look forward to, the first of three in a row at the Millennium Stadium. We faced Llanelli and they hit us for six to lead 26-0 but we hit back with three tries in fifteen minutes. That didn't win us the game but restored plenty of pride. Scarlets won 38-26 and went on to win the final.

When the Lions went to New Zealand in 2005 the coach, a Knight of the Realm, took almost as many staff with him as players. One was a notorious political spin doctor to take care of public relations which went from awful to terrible. The mood was so different this

time helped by 35,000 Lions supporters who gave Australian tourism a mighty boost. Among them was a hard looking chap who like the Lions had beaten formidable opponents, and even travelled to the Olympic Games with the monarch. Well, sort of.

His name is Craig, Daniel Craig, a cover for his real self Bond, James Bond. He was invited into the Lions dressing room and was soon at home for there was a Doctor, no not that one but Jamie Roberts and rugby's answer to Oddjob, Adam Jones whose head-to-head with Alex Corbisiero will be the highlight of England v Wales in March. There was no 'M' or even Miss Money Penny but better still a Halfpenny, arguably the best ever Welsh full-back. No-one argues with 007 and we await his new film with added interest now we know he's a rugby man. In Bond epics fast cars play a big part so where better to film a future 007 than Circuit Wales?

They could call it "From Rassau With Love."

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WHO'S GOT THE LAST LAUGH NOW? (060713)

The 2013 Lions tour is over and Saturday mornings will not be the same until 2017 when the successors to Gatland's squad go to New Zealand, a much more difficult task but hopefully will not be tarnished by unkind, unworthy and unnecessary criticisms of the coach. Even some greats in the game put nation first and scribblers had a field day. They are now eating humble pie and hopefully suffering from indigestion. Some comments were vitriolic and one writer called it "petty, parochial bickering." How embarrassed they must be after that amazing scoreline, the highest by the Lions since 1966 when they beat the Wallabies 31-0 in Brisbane.

The Lions medical team will be glad of a rest because in the early stages of the tour they were kept very busy. Also busy were sofa selectors whose "comments" on websites were nationally biased and did for the English language what the Boston Strangler did for door-to-door salesmen. Gatland, and presumably his coaching team that included two Englishmen, was accused of favouring Welsh players but the uninformed forgot the make-up of the 2001 Lions tour which was coached by another New Zealander and Welsh coach, Graham Henry.

He took eighteen English players to Australia, ten backs and eight forwards because they were the form players and had shone in the 2001 Six Nations. Henry selected eight Englishmen in the first Test and two others went on as replacements. There were eight in the second Test and four English players came off the bench and nine started the third and final Test with one going on as a replacement. There would have been more English influence had Catt, Luger, Greenwood and Dallaglio not been injured and missed the three main games. No-one complained, the coach picked who he thought were the best for job wherever they came from.

Criticism of the style of play which influences selection is fair enough, but complaints by former Lions and prominent journalists that their fellow countrymen were unfairly omitted were out of order. However this publicised lack of confidence in the selected team did not affect the morale of those chosen on Saturday and probably made them more determined.

The nastiest, daftest and most pathetic comment appeared in what Ray Prosser called a "thick" newspaper. The writer wanted Test places to be more fairly shared between all four nations, presumably regardless of form, which echoed the feelings of a former Lion who felt the concept and the ethos of the Lions was beginning to slip. The journalist wrote that

the selection for the final Test was “in reality more saturated in Welsh partisanship on this tour than if they were headquartered in Ebbw Vale.” Balderdash but at least we got a mention.

Warren Gatland is the second New Zealander to be coach of Wales and the Lions. He is not demonstrative and amid the post-match celebrations praised his players and singled out his man of the match, the English prop Alex Corbisiero. No partisanship there. There was no gloating from the Lions camp but some faces back home must have been as red as the jerseys. Heaven help the 2017 coach, he will need a skin thicker than a rhino. To avoid inter-nation conflict perhaps we should consider someone from the Isle of Man which is conveniently situated between the four nations.

Youngsters who will soon be coached in the new School of Rugby will be encouraged by Saturday's great win and should be told of a 7-year old Tongan who came over to join his family and watched his father play for Ebbw Vale. That kid Toby who we remember kicking a ball around the club car park has gone to the very top and is now one of the best No. 8s in the world.

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#### THROWN INTO THE DEEP END FOR WALES (290613)

When Wales went to Japan recently they under-estimated the opposition. When a similarly inexperienced Welsh team went to southern Africa in June 1998 they began with a comfortable win over Zimbabwe but then entered the Springbok's den in Pretoria where they under-estimated no-one. For the Pontypridd element in the party it was an African version of their House of Pain.

Wales had just lost 50-0 to France in Wembley so all was not well in Westgate Street HQ, known by some as the Welsh Kremlin. Only lock Andy Moore of that team started for Wales in Pretoria. The temporary coach was Dennis John, Bowring having resigned before being pushed, and he and his men deserved a medal for bravery in the face of hopeless odds. The 'Boks won 96-13 but the fault lay with 18 leading players who had dodged the column and stayed at home.

Byron Hayward, John Funnell and skipper Kingsley Jones were in the team and Dai Llewellyn went on to replace Paul John. The Johns were not used to losing, Pontypridd rarely did, and neither did their No. 8 Geraint Lewis one of ten uncapped players who left these shores more in hope than anticipation.

Later that year Wales played the Springboks again this time at Wembley. The 'Boks won 28-20 and by two tries to one but it was touch and go and hinged on a yellow card shown to Scott Quinnell and a five minute hold-up which stopped Welsh momentum when a naked intruder ran on the pitch. Surprise, surprise he was a South African. The 'Boks coach Nick Mallett said he was “very relieved” when the game ended.

Geraint played sixteen games for Wales and was in a good back-row with Nathan Budgett and Colin Charvis. He was in the 1999 Welsh World Cup squad and played 53 games in the English Premiership before retiring as a player at the youngish age of 34. He has plied his trade throughout the British Isles, France, Italy, Africa, the Far East and the Western Valley where he is now our forwards coach. A perfect example of been there, done that.

It's some time since we entered a Sevens competition and with an array of runners we can look forward to Sunday August 25th at the Arms Park. In April 1958 an Ebbw Vale Seven

of Graham Powell (captain), Roy Evans, Mel Williams, Francis Matthews, Doug Ackerman and Ron Morgan won the Snelling Sevens named after a Newport official who helped create the tournament. Pontypridd, Bridgend and Penarth were disposed of and a strong Newport team were beaten 10-5 in the final. Celebrations followed in Pontygof, the Heol-y-Mwyn and Cwm Cons.

This season's Championship, like all rugby success will be decided by forwards who unlike their predecessors of the long ago have a multitude of things to do, especially hookers. Since September 2010 we have excelled at lineouts unlike the Lions in Canberra where they lost eight of them. If Chunky had thrown in that would not have happened. Combinations in rugby centre on half-backs, the back three etc., but as we have proved the crucial pairing is often thrower to jumper, in our case Matthew to Ashley.

Speaking of combos a Daily Telegraph journalist reckons that Sam Warburton and Dan Lydiate out-played a "revered" Aussie back-row in the second Lions Test and added, "Memo to every coach, anywhere. If you have the chance and Warburton and Lydiate are both fit, play them. They compliment each other to rugby perfection." That comes as no surprise to those who saw them on opposite sides when Ebbw played the Wanderers in November 2006.

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#### SUMMERTIME AND THE LIVING IS EASY (250613)

Gershwin's song tells of a sunny lazy time with nothing to do. For those of us who enjoy cloudy busy winters the summer is a mere interlude but weather permitting it is enjoyed by batsmen and two kinds of bowlers at ECP and anglers fishing in the Festival Park lake. For recumbent rugby types the Sky's the limit with coverage of the season in the southern hemisphere but as nice as summer can be it's not as good as a cold wintry afternoon watching Ebbw win.

Sky TV has offered a variety of rugby but post match excuses by the defeated are cliché ridden, like "We can learn from this." Wales in Japan were the most depleted of the touring teams, unnecessarily perhaps, and paid the price. Caps were awarded as they should have been when Wales played two Tests in Argentina in 1968. Clive Rowlands, Laird of Upper Cwmtwrch aka Top Cat is trying to persuade the Union to remedy what we now realise was an injustice.

When new players arrive we like to know their background, where they were born, their school, their early days passing and kicking a rugby ball. Place of birth is not that important and does not determine a player's qualification to play for a country otherwise Graham Price would have been capped by Egypt and Paul Thorburn by Germany. There are of course surnames which indicate a player's nationality, someone called Jones would be more likely to be born in Ebbw Vale's Rookery than a Starmer-Smith.

England have a Twelvetrees, we have a Sevenoaks and both names have a North American Indian ring about them. Tribes named their offsprings after nature and there's nothing more natural than a tree. It is no coincidence that the native name of Crazy Horse who led the war party to victory at Little Big Horn means "Among the trees." He sounds like a flanker to me.

Billy Twelvetrees was born in Chichester and his father was – wait for it – a tree surgeon. Welsh Regiments add a number to soldier's surnames because there are so many called Jones, Thomas and Williams but why twelve trees and seven oaks? All players have

nicknames, we had one we called Chippy, but Twelvetrees who joined Gloucester from Leicester last season was known at Welford Road as '36.' Gordan Murphy dreamt that one up, his Irish brogue made "Twelvetrees" sound like "Twelve Threes."

Murphy joined Leicester as a youngster and so did five of the six Tigers with the Lions who came through their club's Academy which encourages those who believe we should have one. Media emphasis is on four regional sides and their academies but schools rugby although forgotten by narrow minded scribes is alive and well in our area. RTB Ebbw Vale keeps providing juniors with opportunities to learn and enjoy the game like an eight year old who told me he had decided to be a hooker "even if I end up with cauliflower ears!"

There are so many opportunities for youngsters to play team sport thanks to adults who give their time to coaching and looking after them. We have just signed up three products of RTB Youth which was the launching pad of Ian Watkins, ten times capped from Ebbw Vale in 1988 and 1989 and the Blaenau Gwent Schools Under 15s played in a tournament in Poland. What an experience, in my day going away to play meant bat and ball on Barry Island sands.

Byron Hayward came home on Monday after being a member of the coaching team that took the Welsh Under 20s to the final of the World Junior Championships when they narrowly lost to England. Byron is another former Steelman who has reached the coaching heights and we are pleased for him and proud of him.

REL

LET THERE BE LIGHT (180613)

We have new state-of-the-art lighting on our ground which will encourage us to stage mid-week games as part of our development plan as well as schools rugby. It's not before time because our old lights, I use the word advisedly, were installed in the 60s and "improved" in the early 80s. Added to our answer to Blackpool's illuminations will be new lights on Cae Canol where it has been so dark coaches didn't recognise wings from props until they heard them talking.

In October 1879 Newport played Cardiff at Rodney Parade in the first floodlit game anywhere. They were not very effective but a novelty at a time when most homes were neither AC or DC. Daylight rugby dominated thereafter but in season 1956/7 Cross Keys installed lights which were switched on for a special game against an all-star side. Going by train (GWR) to Keys and then joining the huge crowd heading for Pandy Park in the dark was a novelty. We stood at the foot of the mountain dazzled by the brilliance of it all and left determined to have the same. One advantage of course was that more games would be played and more ale drunk in clubhouses, and another was that supporters working on Saturdays could see their team play.

Let there be light took on a new meaning and encouraged Ebbw Vale help form the Floodlit Alliance which was a try only competition intended to liven up what was becoming a dour sport. The WRU reluctantly agreed and the top Welsh clubs and Bristol were invited but the RFU did not approve and stopped them accepting. Newport being members of Welsh and English Rugby Unions were also banned which lost them added revenue. The RFU's decision derived Welsh crowds from seeing the great England and Bristol outside-half Richard Sharp in action. He became a journalist and at the risk of being called a name-dropper I remember how friendly and helpful he was when I sat next to him in the Redruth press box.

The Alliance began in October 1964 at Pandy Park in rain so heavy that a tough-judge carried an umbrella, and that is a fact. The season before Wales ended a losing streak at Murrayfield when they won 6-0 in a game typical of the time when direct kicks to touch were allowed and fashionable. There were 111 lineouts, Clive Rowlands at scrum-half kicked to touch incessantly while his outside-half Dai Watkins in his second international touched the ball five times. Outside-halves in the Alliance had the time of their lives.

The greatest club game on our ground was in the 1970s Floodlit Alliance meeting with Bridgend. We had to win and score seven tries to reach the final and we did. Bridgend players were told to Get Turner, but they couldn't. Glyn got a try hat-trick and when the lights were switched off everyone staggered to the bar shocked, excited and in need of something strong.

Our new lights will shine on those following in the footsteps of greats like Glyn Turner. They will develop and entertain and once newcomers get used to the voices from the terrace led by divas of grand opera standard they will respond and flourish.

REL

#### TOURING DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES (110613)

They were more like days of beer and pasties really because although they bring back happy memories there was nothing sophisticated or charming about rugby tours to Cornwall where Ebbw Vale used to end their seasons. We went there to win because victory was the main objective and so of course is avoiding losing at home. Francis Matthews, a great tourist, used to say, "A good win, a good night" and that's the way it was in those April days in the Duchy.

Ebbw have lost three games at home in the last three seasons, an excellent record that upholds a reputation of invincibility on a ground variously known as the Bridgend Field, the Welfare Ground, Eugene Cross Park and to quote Kingsley Jones, Fortress Ebbw. May it long continue.

Before Leagues it was difficult to keep a ground record when playing 45-50 games. The season traditionally ended with three fixtures in Cornwall generally at Penzance, Redruth and St. Ives. Winning in Cornwall was customary and mandatory and on one occasion the Championship was confirmed there. A clean sheet in the Duchy was expected despite many distractions like visiting places of historical interest and missionary work among the natives.

Until the 1980s we regularly won every game on tour but lost four between 1983 and 1989, to Redruth twice, St. Ives and the Pirates. When the news reached home, morale slumped among the workers in the Hot Mill and the drinkers in Tamplins. The occasional defeat in Cornwall since our first game there in 1914 against Redruth was regarded as a hiccup and everyone, including those who stayed at home, blamed the refereeing.

We now get results within minutes of the final whistle but at the time of Cornish tours those who stayed at home relied on newspapers and the occasional telephone call from a tourist capable of putting a coin in the box. Not many homes had 'phones so we waited for the Western Mail which was packed with rugby news and reports on games of every calibre. No longer.

On tour Alan Morgan the club treasurer was often under siege. There are emergency meetings these days to solve European finances but none to compare with an enquiry into

the state of the tour beer kitty on a Sunday afternoon in the Tinnars Arms near St. Ives where players making their Cornwall debut were introduced to the club's culture.

It would be nice if we could arrange an end of season tour, but at the top end of the game touring continues. The Lions are in Oz where rugby union is much stronger than it was in 1971 when it needed a big boost. Carwyn James's Lions were asked to play a game in Queensland on their way to NZ a few days after getting off the 'plane. They lost but a tour that began badly ended in triumph and a coronation. Barry John came home a King for as one reporter said, "If ever a Lions tour could be said to revolve around one player, that man was Barry John in 1971."

Individuals can still win games but the emphasis now is on teamwork on and off the field. Our coaching team has been reinforced by an old friend Lewis Roberts who will be in charge of skills and conditioning and Geraint Lewis who will coach the forwards who I regard as the elite of the game. By saying that my safety is assured when within range of them.

Our squad is looking good, newcomers are being made welcome while those who once played for us say how much they miss the friendly atmosphere. To those who leave us we extend sincere thanks and best wishes for a great future. Our duty and pleasure is in developing young players who one day will follow former Steelman Dan Lydiate and play at the highest level.

REL

COACHING, REFFING, BEHAVING, SERVING (030613)

Penallta beat RGC 1404 in a Division One East game last April and their club report in understandably triumphant mood read "the North Wales Dream Team were no match for the South Wales Dream Team." Penallta are known as the Pitmen, RGC are getting known as the Gogs but the teams referred to consisted of coaches not players.

A club with a good coaching team has a good chance of success, if it hasn't it's almost certain to face disaster. It's a far cry from the early days of coaching when one man was given the job, generally a former player, now coaching is a science but so is refereeing with officials armed with punishment cards and at the top level assistants running the line to aid and abet them.

Ernie Lewis played outside-half for Ebbw Vale in the late 40s and early 50s and was in the same successful team as Glyn Jones, a centre of quality, who sadly has recently passed away. Outside-halves are generally well behaved so it would be wrong to say that after his playing days Ernie turned from poacher to game-keeper when he became a first class referee with an international to his credit, a bruiser between France and Australia.

Paul Adams is another former Steelman to reach the heights of officialdom and he often refereed games in the top English league. Now we have two other locals aiming for the top which is not easy because they are carefully assessed. Steve Nash and Simon Beard are to be congratulated on their promotions and although they will never referee Ebbw Vale in a competitive game they will advise in the ever-changing scenario of laws handed down by the International Rugby Board.

The 1950 Lions tour made history when an injury to Irish full-back George Norton resulted in the first Lions replacement, Welsh Golden Boy Lewis Jones who became a world class player in both rugby codes. The 2013 Lions have also made history, a replacement was

called up before the party even reached Heathrow although many believe Ulster's Rory was the best anyway and should have been selected in the first place.

The brilliant decision to give free admission to our ground to members of the Armed Forces has reminded those of a certain age of Ebbw Vale players who served in wars, particularly those who lost their lives. National service continued after the 1939-45 war and conscripts from both rugby codes played together in rugby union Services games. Two who played many times for Ebbw Vale appeared in the prestigious Inter-Services Championships at Twickenham, scrum-half Roy Evans (Army) in 1954 alongside Billy Boston and prop Alan Foster (RAF) in 1961 with another League great Alex Murphy. Another local man was Arthur Edwards who played a few games for Ebbw and as a regular soldier was capped for The Army seventeen times in 1951-1956. He won two Welsh caps from London Welsh in 1955.

One of the most inspiring Ebbw Vale and Crawshays Welsh characters was Dai Regan Jones who played for the South Wales Borderers and Leicester, both teams wearing red, white and green. When Dai came home our colours were black and amber (!) but were changed to narrow red, white and green hoops which was no coincidence. While in the Midlands Dai played 18 games for the Tigers in 1928/9, a season in which they played Cardiff who had two players sent off for arguing with the referee. At least they didn't swear at him.

The British Army XV dominates the present Inter-Service games and the Welsh influence is strong with great rivalry between current Army Cup holders the Welsh Guards and the Royal Welsh Regiment. Despite being deployed on active service they maintain their rugby traditions and enjoy playing Welsh clubs. Food for thought.

REL

THE FRENCH WORD FOR RUGBY IS MONEY (250513)

With nothing much to do on a Saturday, watching televised rugby passes the time quite nicely. With two French sides in the Heineken Cup Final a treat was in store and a chance to see how good or bad French rugby was and if the top players were worth the huge amounts of money they get. The best team lost, but judging the state of the game in France was not possible because Toulon are rugby's version of the Foreign Legion.

In football Premier clubs are full of foreign players which might account for poor performances by the English national team. Not so in Germany for in a recent Champions League game Dortmund fielded seven Germans who beat Manchester City with one Englishman prompting a winning spokesman to say "We don't have to buy ageing foreigners any more." Food for thought.

Supporters of Welsh rugby clubs have an advantage over those who follow the famous in football, we know and often meet our players who are local lads or others who have made themselves at home here. In our sporting world the word "local" means just that and the supporters respond. Players say how helpful that is and the Cup tie at Cardiff in February was a good example of the force being with them, we knew Ebbw would win when a tumultuous roar greeted the side as it ran out. It was close but we won with the roars continuing to the 96th minute.

Rugby in our islands strikes a balance between home grown and imported players who are very important to major teams when international duty takes their players away. It's one of many new elements in a game which still springs surprises. Last season Wales won the

Six Nations Championship but its four teams failed in Heineken and Challenge Cup games. France on the other hand had three clubs in both finals but came last in the Six Nations. Sacre bleu.

Brian Moore describes the Toulon squad as mainly “a bunch of multi-national mercenaries.” Success at club/regional level should result in international success but it didn’t work for Les Bleus. Half of the twenty-three Toulon match day squad in Dublin were not French, five were English and others came from Wales, New Zealand, Australia, Argentina and Georgia. France though is where the money is and we will never match it so there’s no chance of Ebbw signing Rougerie or Harinordoquy. Even if we won the lottery we couldn’t guarantee them regular rugby, Peter The Voice couldn’t pronounce their names and our chef doesn’t do garlic.

The 2013 Euro champions Toulon are different to the side we beat twice in the 1999/2000 European Shield. We no longer play in the same world but we both need funding, we need money to survive, Toulon need it to win the Heineken Cup with or without many Frenchmen. We do not envy them but are old-fashioned enough to support the view of an American major league baseball owner who said, “I believe there are certain things that cannot be bought: loyalty, friendship, health, love and a Championship pennant.”

The latest news from HQ is very encouraging with favourites plumping for the red, white and green again. Rugby is different to other sports, it still encourages loyalty, respect for opponents and a desire to serve, whether a club or a community. The term mercenary according to my dictionary means “primarily concerned with money or other reward,” and that is not confined to the very highest level of the game. But let us finish on a bright note, last week looking at our ground as the sun set was a pleasure, being with those who work behind the scenes was an honour. We have so much to look forward to and intend to enjoy every moment.

REL

THE LIONS GO FORTH (170513) In 1950 the only British and Irish rugby followers who saw the Lions in New Zealand were those who had emigrated there. Television had not reached most parts of the United Kingdom and rugby had not penetrated the BBC sports department anyway so we relied on newspapers to find out how the Lions were managing. Those who recall those days do not take today’s TV coverage for granted, it will show us all the games in glorious technicolour and in my case without endless chatting before and after because I turn the sound down or better still record the whole thing and then zip through the adverts and interviews.

In 1950 the Test results were broadcast on Saturday mornings in between the weather forecast and the latest on farming. The mid-week results remained a close secret and we had to dash up to the Crossing to buy the Argus to get the latest news. The Western Mail was as important as a Baptist minister’s Bible in those days and with JBG Thomas out there with the Lions we had journalism of the highest quality.

We at Ebbw Vale didn’t always agree with Bryn when it came to Welsh selection, he was a Cardiffian, but he had one important link with the town which won him Brownie points, in his early days he courted a girl from Badminton Grove. If he had moved here more of our players might have been capped because although there were five WRU selectors behind the scenes JBG was a sixth.

The Lions travelled Down Under by boat, going through the Panama Canal and tried to keep fit by physical training on the deck the effect of which was ruined later by eating in

the restaurant. They played 23 games in New Zealand, winning 17, drawing one and losing five including the three Tests 8-0, 6-3 and 11-8.

The All-Black full-back was Bob Scott who was the star turn in the 1945/46 New Zealand Army team which after fighting in Italy toured Wales, England and Scotland and lost only twice, at Murrayfield and Pontypool where Monmouthshire triumphed thanks in part to outside-half Ben Southway of Ebbw Vale one of many Steelmen from Blaina.

The 1950 Lions played six games in Australia, winning five including two Tests and losing one. Then they faced a seemingly endless journey home but it did not deter Don Hayward the Newbridge prop who had met a lady in NZ and returned to marry her. Isn't that nice?

The 2013 Lions would sooner go by bus to Blaenau Ffestiniog than sail to Australia, and just to break the journey, hopefully not in economy class, they play the Baa Baas in Hong Kong. That will be interesting because James Hook will turn out for the Barbarians after another successful season as outside-half for Perpignan. This year's tour will have added interest to clubs who once had tourists on their books, in our case Dan Lydiate who is so good he won selection despite playing very little through injury. One of our supporters from afar lives in Canada and reads the website to keep in touch. If there's an exiled Ebbw Valian reading this in Australia send for one of our replica shirts to wear when Dan is playing. But be sure to cover the postage.

Football is busy sacking managers, we are busy re-signing players we know and entrust with our future in another very important season which this time will involve a trip to North Wales. It's a little early to feel on edge but it will not be long before training begins. In the meanwhile it's the Lions in Oz where they hate losing as much as we love winning.

REL

A GALA NIGHT TO END A GREAT SEASON (110513) Consistency brings success. Cup triumphs are all very well but the team that keeps its form throughout a season deserves top honours. In the season just ended we have consistently played great winning rugby, losing only twice by one point. In doing so we have furthered the hopes of the club to be returned to the Premier Division having met important requirements of the Union to keep the game alive in our community, develop players and form links with local schools and clubs like RTB Ebbw Vale.

The coaches and players set themselves such high standards that even in victory they were disappointed as they were after the final match against Bargoed which needed a spark to set it alight. With so many tries scored most of them converted and a record points tally our defence has been over-looked but a strong Bargoed pack in both matches against them found the Steel Curtain difficult to penetrate. As if Obi Wan Kenobi had called from another planet "May the force be with you" the pack changed the game with a try by Spencer Gibson supported by seven other enforcers. It was the only official try of the night because the one Polo Uhi scored was disallowed. It was not seen by the referee so he could not award it, there was no official assistant referee to turn to and the advice of the TMOs on the bob bank didn't count.

The season's end was a relief after we played eight games in thirty-two days, the last three as champions and although not easing off the lads had to work hard to win them as the stats indicate. We scored 28 tries, 188 points and conceded 35 in games 21 to 23, and 11 tries, 91 points and conceded 51 in games 24-26 against Narberth, Beddau and Bargoed who to their credit tried hard to take a coveted scalp.

We piled up winning bonus points only failing to do so against Bargoed twice, Cardiff Met and TATA Steel. We played 29 games, three in the Cup, winning all but two for a 93% win/loss ratio. It was our third league title in a row and our average over that period is 85%. In our last Premier season. 2009/10, we averaged 19% in what the Bard would call a winter of discontent.

There was much to celebrate at the Annual Dinner when awards were made to a select few although every player and those behind the scenes deserved recognition too. To use a lovely Welsh word, approved by Robert The Web, the “crachach” were there in force, the clubhouse was full of long time friends and some new ones all enjoying themselves. A gala night to be remembered, for those who could.

Josh Lewis made history as the first Ebbw Vale player to be named Most Promising Player of the Year and Players' Player of the Year, and got a hat-trick as the season's top points scorer. He kicked a lot of goals for Ebbw and one in particular at Bargoed in November in difficult conditions which levelled the score. That was a turning point in the game and the season.

The Addicts' Player of the Year was Ronny Kynes, Wes Cunliffe won a trophy for scoring the most tries, Charlie Simpson who is off to France was presented with a special trophy, outstanding skipper Damian Hudd was also honoured and the man whose testimonial season it has been, Matthew “Chunky” Williams, was Clubman and won the Clive Burgess Man of Steel award.

Therein ends the lesson. The seemingly endless season is over and thoughts are already focused on the next campaign. Someone has described Ebbw Vale as a comfortable club to work for, play for and support and I have permission from the chap who is our chaplain to say amen to that.

REL

CITIUS, ALTIUS, FORTIUS (040513)

The Olympics have changed and are no longer sporting in the true meaning of the word but their motto is the same: Faster, Higher and Stronger. Our motto is Iach Feddwl, Iach Gorff - Healthy Mind, Healthy Body. There can be no doubts over the health of our lads' bodies but only Rev One can answer for their minds. The Olympic motto also applies to us because we have fast forwards who run like backs and backs that run like Bolts out of the blue. We are higher at every lineout and have leapt to the top of the table and our coaches and those at the helm of the good ship Ebbw have shown the strength of will to get us where we are, and are ready, willing and desperately keen to take us further.

When the campaign closes we will be left with the memory of glorious rugby and enjoyable company, all serving the same cause. It has been a remarkable season, we expected a good one but our mass of points and tries make it the most successful for ages. Added to the results and the way we got them was Chunky's testimonial which was the icing on a scrumptious cake.

There has been added pressure on players and coaches in the final six weeks when postponements resulted in eight games. Not that it stopped our gallop to the title but bear in mind our lads are not professionals. That term is not confined to money, it also means “having or showing the skill of a professional” which is what every member of the squad has done. Once again they rose to Cup occasions with the Pontypridd game drawing attention to the club from the media and the public. We owe everyone concerned thanks,

congratulations and whatever tipple they fancy.

Having praised all and sundry it's time to place feet firmly on the ground and discuss our win at Beddau. There's an interesting four sided clock at a roundabout between Beddau's clubhouse and their ground, and time was a topic in the aftermath service of thanksgiving because our winning try was well into extra time. We were nowhere near our best while Beddau, as one of their officials said after, wanted to beat the champions and very nearly did. So near did they come that most of the Ebbw Valians there, and there were a lot of them, would have been satisfied with a draw.

Beddau have nurtured many players who went on to play for Wales and the Lions. Their spacious clubhouse walls are plastered with photographs of them so visitors immediately feel they are in a special place. The current squad is full of enterprise and did everything except win on Saturday. But with the fierce wind behind them and opportunity knocking they didn't have "it" when it mattered and we did. A win by half a point would have been welcome but to get a winning bonus point came as a surprise.

We too have produced players for Wales and those who knew Dan Lydiate when he played for us are over the moon, on Cloud Nine and highly chuffed that he has been selected for the Lions. They remember him as a cub and now he's a fully grown lion and a world class player. From up here he will go down there with all our hopes and best wishes.

At the end of this week awards will be made to a select few but it's a pity there wasn't one that recognises a comeback such as the one at Beddau. It was our lowest score in a League game since we won 10-3 at Bargoed last November. It was too close for comfort but some was found in one of our favourite watering holes, although oasis is a better description after experiencing such an exciting but nerve-racking game. Still, sufficient unto the day are the points thereof.

REL

#### CHRISTMAS IN NARBERTH (290413)

There are lots of songs about time and place, for example "April in Paris" and "Autumn in New York," but there are none about equally famous spots in Wales. "Easter in Ebbw Vale" or "Whitsun in Waunlwyd" spring to a mind that is rapidly running out of ideas. We made a start last Saturday for although it was a Spring-like day it was "Christmas in Narberth" where our supporters turned up in Santa clobber they had mothballed when the December fixture was called off. Whether in fancy dress or not, they are welcomed in clubs where away support is a thing of the past and they know the Championship hinterland very well.

I doubt if there is a more welcoming rugby club than Narberth, which was packed to the doors, a rarity for the Addicts who generally outnumber the home crowd. The wind was strong and cold but everything else was hot because the Otters threw everything at us.

Narberth honoured the Steelmen by clapping the team as they took the field, a much appreciated tribute to the champions. The Otters became the first team to score four tries against us this season, and for some time before that, and provided a stiff test but Jason Strange said afterwards he was very pleased which was fair because we did score six tries which were all converted by RTB product Dan Butler who on his debut.

We were playing our fifth game in fifteen days with two more to go while it was Narberth's final fixture. They kept us busy from start to finish and can be pleased with their performance. Their outside-half, James Stephenson, is the son of Jeff who joined us from

Laugharne in the early 80s and captained us on the 1982 Canadian tour. Jeff was glad to see us and recollections of on and off the field activities were trotted out.

Everywhere I go, in and out of Wales, I am asked the same question: why is there no promotion for clubs like ours? We are not in the big money rugby scene but have broken records and have contributed to the game in our parish but the ultimate reward still evades us. We ask a lot of our coaches and players who also work for a living and this was highlighted at the Championship celebrations. Our captain Damien Hudd hoisted the Championship trophy high at 9pm and went to work at 5 o'clock the next morning.

We go to Beddau on Saturday, another hospitable clubhouse which on our last visit we shared with a wedding party to everyone's delight. The finale of the season is on Wednesday the 8th of May when we are home to Bargoed. It remains an important game with Bargoed out to topple the champions.

Two days later is the Annual Dinner when awards will be announced, very difficult this year because so many did so much. The first award for Player of the Year was in 1963 when prop Gordon Main of Abergavenny was the winner. According to props they are the most important members of a team and they were in 1964 and 1965 when two of the clan made it three in a row when the Players of those Years were Len Dimmick and Denzil Williams.

A once highly rated international was recently "hit by a bus" while crawling around pubs and was hospitalised. If one of our forwards had been hit by a bus (a) he would have hit back and (b) the bus would have been in intensive care.

REL

V E DAY (240413)

Victory in Ebbw Day. It was expected but being modest folk we did not ask Rev One to ring his church bells, that would be showing off. We are Champions of the Championship, our third title running but there was no nail-biting finale this time because we had four games left much to the relief of those who haven't recovered from Bedlinog 2011. We began the final lap at home to Blackwood who had beaten our rivals Bargoed 31-17 three days earlier. Conditions were remarkably good after rain and under the circumstances a no-bonus win would have been acceptable. Being good is not good enough for our lads who laid on a brilliant display that brought a 56-8 victory that included a club record.

For the first time both Ebbw Vale wingers scored a hat-trick of tries in the same game. Wes Cunliffe and Polo Uhi finished off classy moves and once again the hard men up front joined in the fun. Rob Sevenoaks scored a try on behalf of the working classes, unusual for a prop but he says he scored another earlier in the season only for the referee to award a penalty try instead!

The storm that had blown away a dogged Blackwood showed no signs of abating at Llanharan who had beaten Bargoed 17-13 in March. We were in pink, they were in black and blue which was how they felt when we ran in ten tries, three by Dan Ajuwa in Lomu fashion. Pace ruled and with tries on offer skipper Damien Hudd chipped in with two beauties.

According to the BBC Damien not Josh Lewis converted eight of them but that's the Beeb for you. Llanharan are a good bunch and sportingly admitted being torn apart but as we have said of many opponents this season they never gave up. The PA announcer was generous in his welcome and showed a sense of humour when he announced the final

score thus, "10-66 and all that."

The game that decided the Championship ended a busy period of four fixtures in eleven days but the try fest continued against Glamorgan Wanderers. For the third time in the last eight games we scored 66 points, passed the 1000 point mark, Chunky played his 200th game for the club and the scoreboard almost blew a fuse. In the second half with the title in the bag, the visitors showed plenty of spirit and spent some time in our 22, scoring two tries but turned the ball over with the result that from threatening our line they found themselves defending theirs after we snaffled the ball and ran it the length of the field. Pace brought tries and Dan Haymond's and Josh Lewis's conversions, four out of five each, added to the visitors' woe.

We celebrated at the first ever ceremony of its kind on our ground and deserved the plaudits we have received. In two seasons we played six Premier clubs in the Cup, won four, drew one and lost one by a single point. We hope those who hold our future in their hands will take note.

Amid the joy we mourned the passing of Clive Best, a wonderful man who will be missed by those who played with him and others who had the pleasure and honour of being his friends. Clive played at a high level in rugby union and League and only hung up his boots when he was fifty as a founder member and player of the Essex based Phyllosan's Over 40s club. When he returned to Wales he put a great deal back into the game for Breconshire County rugby and our Past Player's Association. Words cannot describe our feelings but as someone once said on hearing the death of a great composer, "I don't have to believe it if I don't want to."

REL

COME RAIN OR COME SHINE WE STILL SCORED TRIES (140413)

Cardiff Met came with fourteen wins behind them and the memory of holding Ebbw to a 12-9 win back in October. The Ebbw faithful came with the usual expectations of a five pointer but wondered how on earth that could be achieved on a pitch badly hit by the weather. When the game was over they still wondered because the seemingly impossible had happened, six tries in the bag. In a season of great rugby the 36-6 win over the students will rank as one of the best bearing in mind the conditions. Had it been a fine day and a dry pitch no doubt Cardiff Met would have contributed much more, but so would our runners and they are not restricted to the backs.

Quite recently, someone whose hobby is researching rugby e-mailed asking for the results of the 1992/3 season which were duly despatched. But why 1992/3? It is our most dreadful in at least forty years. We languished in Division Two played 22 games, winning seven, losing fifteen and conceding doubles to Dunvant, Cross Keys, Glamorgan Wanderers, Narberth, Llanharan and, wait for it, Penarth! We won two and lost eight 'friendlies' and to cap it all were KO'd out of the Cup by Talywain. There were no bright moments even though we got one double, over Blaina, and ended with a win/loss ratio of 27%.

In September 1995 we returned to the First (now the Premier) Division of the Welsh League full of hope which disappeared in September when we conceded 178 points and only scored 33. As the autumn leaves fell so did our hopes and we wondered if we were good enough, but after changes off the field we improved and ended with a 50% record, better but still not good enough.

1995/6 was the season when bonus points were introduced and what a difference they

made, a team would get one for scoring three tries, another for five and yet another for seven or more. The game as a spectacle livened up and the in-form clubs prospered, none more than Neath who were the best of the bunch. They made history when they got three bonus points by scoring twelve tries against us at the Gnoll but despite being humbled 76-29 we got a bonus point when Neath eased off. It seemed as if we had played the New Zealand All-Blacks not the Welsh version.

We play home to Blackwood on Tuesday, at Llanharan on Saturday and are home to the Wanderers the following Tuesday seeking another double. Like Neath in that 1995 Gnoll hammering we scored twelve tries and seventy-six points but the Wanderers have improved and last week went to Bargoed and lost 21-17 scoring three tries in the process. There will be no letting up in the final furlong that's for sure.

One of many attributes of Matthew Williams is his loyalty to our club over ten years of ups, downs and a lot in between. He was honoured last Saturday at a packed out testimonial dinner and will continue to be for if we had a 21st Century Hall of Fame he would be in it.

REL

AND THE BEAT GOES ON (070413)

A final word on the Cup quarter-final drama. The aftermath has been amazing, we have received so many favourable comments it bordered on embarrassment. The reaction on the websites and the press was remarkable bearing in mind we lost but it seems we won the hearts and minds of a lot of people. Messages from Pontypridd were particularly warm, not only about the game but the staging of it, the atmosphere created by supporters of both teams and our future status. We now put that behind us and concentrate on the even more important task of topping the bill in the main show, the Championship. As B B King would say, the beat goes on.

Adding to the joie de vivre as they say in Upper Rassau was the news that key players have already re-signed for next season which says a lot for our infrastructure and those who have built it. There will be more joy and a lot of viva and vino when Matthew Williams, the Chunky Bar Kid arrives for his testimonial dinner on Saturday. I hope we are insured and the policy covers the roof because when Chunky enters the room ours will be raised. His testimonial season is our first ever so he makes history off the field as well as on it.

Bridgend Athletic also indirectly paid us a compliment by switching their home game to Waterton Cross where we used to play South Wales Police. They expected a bigger than usual crowd and our followers did not disappoint them. It was not a great game, we did not display all our goods, the Athletic did well and showed spirit throughout, but we scored seven tries on an away ground and pulled off another double with an aggregate of 108-28. Job done.

The hangover, literally in some sections of the support army, after the high tension Cup game may have affected an un-polished performance but we were clearly the most dangerous side. Give the Athletic credit for a spirited effort which brought them three consolation tries for they do a lot for Welsh rugby and field nine teams from under-9s to under-16s every week. Amid the squabbling at the top of the Welsh game it's clubs like that really matter for without the cake there would be no icing.

On Saturday we host Cardiff Met who posed problems for us last October when a Charlie Simpson drop goal brought us a 12-9 win. Drop goals are rare, only five have been recorded in the Championship so far, but two World Cup Finals have been decided by

them in extra time. In the 1995 "Mandela Final" South Africa beat New Zealand by a Stransky drop. Wilkinson did the same in 2003 thanks to Johnson's pack who patiently drove forward until they delivered the ball in the right place for him. An exiled Ebbw supporter was there and on the train back to Sydney heard a downcast Aussie say, "All England have is Wilkinson," to which a very English voice replied, "No, we've got the \*\*\*\*\* World Cup as well."

It's heart-breaking to lose by a drop goal, but great when your own player puts one over. At Cyncoed we were surprised by the Met and a neutral would have said we were lucky and a draw would have been a fairer result. I don't dispute that but I became a firm supporter of the drop goal that day!

Among the clubs we still have to play are those whose season will be made if they beat us. The Met, third in the table with fourteen wins, can give us a lively game and will not be put off by the usual roar when Damien & Co trot out. We are in another race to the top; an outsider won the Grand National but we must see to it that the favourite wins the Championship.

REL

#### A PREMIER PERFORMANCE (310313)

On the week-end the clocks went forward it is no exaggeration to say that we did too. Our performance against the best club team in Wales sent yet another message to those with eyes to see and ears to hear that the game is alive and healthy in our town and deserves to be played at a higher level. I go further and declare with one hand on heart and the other on a cup of black coffee that last Saturday we staged, played and witnessed our best and most important game of the century which I admit is only thirteen years old. It had everything except the result we longed for and deserved. Pontypridd were full of praise and the Chief, alias Dale McIntosh, said it was their toughest encounter all season which is a great compliment because Ponty are riding high. Every Ebbw Vale player did exceptionally well with the pack excelling. According to one visitor our forwards were the hardest nuts to crack (or try to) since Ponty lost in Ireland to Leinster 'A.' They have only lost twice this season, the other defeat was in the Welsh Premier Division which they lead by a mile. We, too, have only lost twice each by a single point.

We were unlucky but not downhearted and prouder than ever of a team that came within a few minutes of toppling a formidable outfit. A superbly struck conversion got Pontypridd through to the Cup semis, kicked by late replacement Dai Flanagan one of a strong bench. There was a period in a one-sided second half when we laid siege to the Ponty line, Wes Cunliffe being denied a try in the corner, and if we had turned pressure into points at that stage it would possibly have taken us to a second Cup semi-final in two seasons. We were on top but the margin was too close for comfort and injuries to key men in the crucial closing minutes did not help.

Credit to Pontypridd for snatching victory from the jaws of defeat and we wish them well as they go for a League and Cup double. We met old friends and the programme reminded both sides of a game in January 1998 when the Ponty side was captained by Dale McIntosh and their right wing was Gareth Wyatt who as we saw on Saturday is still playing. The crowd was our biggest for many years and among them were former players including the tallest man in the town he once lodged in. New Zealander Jason Lillas played for us in the 90s, a giant who no-one would want to sit next to in a 747. A lock who dominated every lineout he was as disappointed as we were when that last kick went over our cross bar.

“Onwards and upwards” said Jason Strange and he’s quite right. We rose to a big occasion and if we had won no-one present would have complained. The Championship remains to be won so onwards it will be. It’s the upwards bit that is out of our hands but it does seem time for us to recover our former status. Our CV is full of reasons why we should and like last season good performances against Premiership clubs in the Cup adds to our claim.

On Saturday we play the first of eight remaining League games. It will be our first visit to Bridgend Athletic, another change of air and beer, and although they were well beaten on our ground in November, 63-3, they lacked nothing in spirit and cannot be taken for granted. A report on that game said that Dan Haymond “amazingly” converted each of the nine tries. We were not amazed, we make more conversions than St. Paul. Off the top of my scrambled head I reckon we have scored 111 League tries and converted 85 for a 76.5% success rate. Not bad at all.

It was a great week-end and we have much to look forward especially as key men have already committed themselves to the club for next season. Others will follow because we offer good facilities, great coaching and an environment a player can be comfortable in. In the past defeat in the Cup virtually ended the season, but that doesn’t apply to Damien and his Merry Men. The next two months will be exciting, enjoyable and certain to cause more throbbing heads and hearts.

REL

AND THE WINNER IS – RUGBY (170313)

The vast majority of those who watched Wales hammer England live or by television know nothing of the club game but that is where international players come from, stars like Dan Lydiate and Sam Warburton who once opposed each other in an Ebbw Vale-Glamorgan Wanderers game on our ground. We have other links of interest, Toby Faletau went to Pontygot School and the up and coming Rhys Patchell of the Blues is from an Ebbw Vale family – remember Patchell’s Shop? So, at a time when Wales hit a new high and the party is still going on I can be excused for going back to Friday night and a club game important to Ebbw – and Bargoed.

It was business as usual and the rain did not prevent us from scoring nine tries. Leading 40-0 at the break the game was over, and with the bonus point in the bag after 25 minutes the pressure on a plucky Bonynmaen side eased considerably. They took full advantage aided by over a dozen penalties in their favour and played some good rugby in the second period as they did on their ground where we struggled to a 10-3 half-time lead. It was their second trip to Gwent in two weeks having beaten Newbridge 29-17 but their fate was sealed in the first quarter.

The morning after was hangover free because of the evening kick-off but there was worry among the masses over the other big game of the week-end although one devotee was more concerned at Ebbw conceding two tries the night before. To view three internationals in eight hours calls for dedication, concentration and a bottle of stimulant with a cork not a screw top and the main course was served by a Welsh team that lived up to its reputation and played rugby, real rugby. It was the biggest margin of victory over England at Cardiff since 1969 when, like Alex Cuthbert, another wing Maurice Richards hit the headlines. He scored four tries and Wales became Champions and Triple Crown winners. On Saturday England’s solitary score was their lowest in Cardiff since their 27-3 defeat in 1979. The wheels have temporarily fallen off their chariot.

That's done and dusted, now for the Cup. Last season's success was highly praised because the teams we played were in the League above us, Pontypridd will be different because they are top of the Premiership and in great form. They have been consistently good since Leagues were introduced and in a world of regional distraction they kept their standards while others have not as a glance at the bottom six of the Premier Division shows. Half a dozen of Wales's notable clubs are down there, but it comes as no surprise that Pontypridd are still successful.

This does not concern our coaches and players, they want this game and we want to see them in action against the best. Our supporter's chorale, with Angharad as leading contralto, also face a challenge. At every other game they have out-numbered and out-shouted the few opposing fans but on Saturday we expect more away support than we have had for a long, long time and it will be a Battle of the Chants, Ebbw, Ebbw, Ebbw versus Ponty, Ponty, Ponty. It's a game we have been waiting for since last season's semi-final so get there early.

Players and supporters look forward to it with confidence. Everyone is tuned up for what could be a great occasion and with memories of the last round still fresh in our minds, watches will be carefully synchronised. There are three clocks with four faces in our town, the nearest to the ground is the one on the cricket pavilion. Pity it doesn't work.

The Noise Abatement Society are on alert for when the team runs out the Addicts roar will shatter the sound barrier, destroy hearing aids and frighten the sheep on Llangynidr Moor. Roll on Saturday.

REL

#### THE POWER AND THE GLORY (100313)

Many Ebbw Valians recall games at Newbridge when we were lucky to come away with a ten point deficit. Younger supporters have more recent memories because Newbridge, with Bargoed, have been our only challengers of late and beat us twice last season. I always enjoy going to the Welfare Ground although I am never confident, but last Wednesday despite a bright start by Newbridge it didn't take long to see that the Steelmen were in the mood for another win. Also in the mood were families of players, and watching a game in their company is a pleasure, especially when their lad scores a fifth try in five days as Adam Jones did. Not every family member was interested though, Wes Cunliffe's little 'un missed his dad's umpteenth try, stayed in the clubhouse and fell asleep in his buggy.

Although possession and territorial advantage was fairly even, the result was never in doubt. The power generated from the pack was evident at the set piece and in awesome drives, one of which seemed to be heading for the Crumlin try line higher up the valley. Then came the glory boys behind who capitalised on the forward dominance, scored all six tries and conversions with not a banana skin in sight. Our previous highest score at Newbridge was 48-34 in March 2005, but the margin of victory last Wednesday will take some beating.

With over 713 League points scored compared to Bargoed's 490 the emphasis is on attack but we are not only offensive, nothing personal of course, for every player defends like the 24th of Foot at Rorke's Drift and they leave as many casualties in their wake. A high rate of conversions, 82% in the last five League games, keeps our total buzzing and scoreboard operators on their toes.

Fifty years ago the Welsh selectors, aka the Big Five, chose a team to play England at the

Arms Park that contained six new caps three of them from Monmouthshire clubs. The new captain was also making his first appearance in the plain scarlet jersey and white shorts which only carried the Prince of Wales feathers and no adverts. Much smarter than modern jerseys which carry as many ads as a Formula One car. The skipper was a young man with an old head, Clive Rowlands, a West Walian playing for Pontypool who did not like losing. Not even the toss. Others on debuts were Dai Watkins, Brian Thomas, Roger Michaelson, Dai Hayward and Denzil Williams. Wales lost 13-6 so Rowlands decided on a no-frills policy at Murrayfield where Wales had not won for ten years. He kicked Scotland to a 6-0 defeat, not literally of course, in a game always remembered for 111 lineouts. It was a drab affair but winning was all that mattered and a half of a century later nothing much has changed. On Saturday Murrayfield was honoured by the presence of some of Ebbw's more adventurous ladies but the game did not produce entertaining and exciting rugby of the sort they have got used to back home. The girls, repeat girls, celebrated and hope to be home in time for Friday's game at ECP.

We have the Championship and the Swalec Cup to play for in a hectic final quarter to the season made more difficult by wintry weather. We seek five points at home to Bonymaen on Friday and eight days later Premiership leaders Pontypridd come to town in form but maybe in for a shock. It's the best of the quarter-finals and might even attract the notice of the press. If they remember how to get here.

Let the power and the glory continue for ever and ever, Amen.

REL

#### THE GREATEST WING FOR SCOTLAND AND EBBW VALE (030313)

To score ten tries and then feel dissatisfied is symptomatic of our ardent camp followers. Our lads are creating their own records, traditions and reputations and with respect to Whitland who after all inflicted our only defeat this season, the 66-0 score flattered them. It was more than sufficient and another huge addition to our points total and if half of the second half mistakes had been eliminated the cricket scoreboard at the end of our sporting arena would have been activated. Whitland took it on the chin, mauled with energy and showed fight in the second half but could not match a team that has gained a winning bonus point in their last six games.

A currently optimistic Scots crowd of bravehearts wearing kilts (and only kilts) expect their side to win at Murrayfield on Saturday. An equally optimistic Welsh crowd of softhearts wearing caps if male and plastic daffodils if not also expect their lads to win as they did on the last two visits to the ground. Those who fail the medical and have to stay at home are left with memories of what Max Boyce called the Murrayfield Trip.

International fixtures were once permanently fixed and the Scottish game was always in February when it was cold enough for the toughest Jocks to resort to trews instead of kilts. On arriving at Caledonian Station we suffered a culture and temperature shock, especially if we had travelled by the LMS railway. Clubs, social as well as rugby, saved up all year and organised a week in Edinburgh with the game on Saturday as an after-thought.

Others left work on a Friday and got back in time for tea on a Sunday. I did that three times, in 1957, 1959 and 1961, beginning at Beaufort Railway Station and progressing through Brynmawr then Govilon and eventually Hereford, Shrewsbury and other foreign parts before crossing the frontier in the Borders in the early hours. Sitting in compartments scoffing sandwiches, imbibing rum and Ribena and trying to sleep was not the best way to start a day in Edinburgh. We got in the mood with the usual breakfast but with haggis

instead of bangers and then we were on our feet all day. There were no opportunities to sit down in one of the many pubs in Rose Street because (a) they were full and (b) there were no chairs. Landlords took no chances especially if Hearts played Hibs the same afternoon.

In 1957 Wales lost 9-6 and Arthur Smith (Cambridge University) scored the home try, and a vital penalty was kicked by a full back named Scotland. In 1959, Wales lost 6-5 with Scotland's full back Scotland again booting a penalty. Cliff Ashton (Aberavon, who later lived in Chepstow) just missed a drop goal which would have snatched a first Welsh win in four successive appearances there. The aforesaid Arthur Smith represented Gosforth. In 1961 Arthur Smith (Edinburgh Wanderers) scored a try and we lost 3-0 which ended my rugby trips to Murrayfield, the result of which was that Wales won in 1963, the game of 111 lineouts.

We had a particular interest when Wales played Scotland at the Arms Park in February 1960 because Arthur Smith was the visiting captain and for the only time away from home represented Ebbw Vale. Wales won 8-0 and Monmouthshire rugby put it down to there being eight from the County in the Welsh team. Arthur's centre was Joe McPartlin who once spoke at our 200 Club Dinner in the 70s and is still regarded as the funniest we ever had.

Arthur Smith retired in 1962 having played 33 times for Scotland and was never dropped. A Lion in 1955 and 1962 he died in 1975 aged 42 and to those who played with him, met him and watched his graceful style he will always be Scotland's and Ebbw's greatest wing.

REL

#### THE GREAT REUNION (240213)

While we were shivering and moaning when Friday night's game was frozen off, one of our distinguished former players, Byron Hayward, was in sunny Italy with the Wales Under 20s team. But it wasn't sunny, it pelted down and the game against the Italian Under 20s was more water polo than rugby. Byron is one of several former Steelmen involved with the national game and in his day was as good a No. 10 as any around. Confined to barracks and the Under 20s game delayed we watched extracts from the 2005 Grand Slam season and once again wondered why Mike Ruddock left the Welsh scene. One day we might find out.

When the thermals were temporarily discarded and we endured a night in instead of a night out reassurance came from the man of the moment, Chunky, aka Mathew Williams by some and Peter Pan by others that the Past v Present match at High Noon next day would go ahead. With the previous Saturday's time-keeping still being discussed among the intelligentsia we knew there would be no controversy when Ebbw Vale's greats from the recent past ran out to meet the greats of the present in a friendly that was a reunion for players and those who had watched them over several years.

For sheer entertainment, relaxation and pleasure it took some beating on a cold afternoon. The programme, superbly put together and as usual expertly produced by Dover Printers of Abergavenny was full of stories, photographs and tributes to Chunky's activities on and off the field, from singing "Delilah" after a game in France to Andrew Bevan thanking him for knocking several years off his life "due to constant worry every time we go out." Argus journalist Chris Kirwan wrote of a "scrum-capped No.2 buzzing around being a nuisance to the opposition," and Club President Mark Powell described Chunky as a "massive figure in Ebbw Vale who is without a doubt the Clubman not just of the season but of the 21st Century." Never have so many owed so much to one player.

As expected Wales beat Italy to top a week-end that would have been perfect had Friday's game under lights been played. There'll be no nostalgia when the old ones are replaced and presumably we will celebrate the switch on, a sort of Blackpool Illuminations ceremony on a slightly smaller scale. Rev One, who has been in more club bars than any of his calling, won't mind me quoting from Genesis, the Book not the rock group, by proclaiming - "Let there be light, and there was light." Undersoil heating and modern equivalents of the gas heaters above our heads in the old grandstand would be very welcome too.

On Saturday Whitland with one win this season, at our expense, play their first game on our ground and as we have said so many times this season it will not be taken for granted. The Cup might dominate our thoughts at the moment but the League still has to be won. Most of us welcomed the home tie with Pontypridd, a club that like ours has great travelling support. They have only lost one game this season and so have we.

Bookies and horse-racing go together and although most people only bet on the Derby and the National there are others who study form daily like Alan Morgan who once flew to Las Vegas and spent five dollars. He has spotted a familiar name in the racing press and was reminded of an 18 year old who played in our backrow and scored 11 tries in 2005/06 under Codling. Mike Scudamore, a trainer like his famous father is another former Steelman who had the privilege to play with a hooker described in last Saturday's programme as "ageless, nimble, mischievous, a winner, a nice bloke and everything a rugby player should be." That fits Chunky perfectly.

REL

#### THE AGONY AND THE ECSTASY (170213)

Our hard won but deserved victory at Cardiff did not produce a feast of running rugby and lots of tries which has been par for the course this season, but it was a thriller nevertheless and it brought not just a happy but a stunning nail-biting ending. If I over-dramatise I make no apology, the finale was real drama and it seemed the curtain would never come down. By then I had stopped looking at my watch but, from afar, laid questioning eyes on the man with the watch that counted. Time keeping is a fine art in top rugby and should apply at all levels.

We began nervously, unusually lost a lineout near our line and conceded a try, but even in a disappointing first half there were promising signs. We have constantly benefited from our fitness programme which helped us dominate the second half which, to quote the Cardiff website "belonged to the visitors." Down to 13 men and despite a spate of penalties against us, which naturally the visitors felt should have been more equally shared, we held our line to beat a Premier club of note. There have always been upsets in Cup rugby, especially when "minnows" won at home, but this was an away win and we are not minnows. When the final whistle was blown the applause was so deafening it shattered windows in Penarth.

We went through agonies in a long drawn out period after the 80th minute with Cardiff going for the try that would see them through, but were ecstatic when justice was done and supporters and players applauded each other. The whole club seemed to take part on a day of the usual Cup shocks which left only two of the five Gwent sides that began it still in the competition.

Our second half comeback was remarkable, Polo Uni's try was a gem considering the surface he was running on but we should hold a steward's enquiry into why Wes Cunliffe didn't score as he usually does. It was impossible to select a man of the match but Damien

Hudd's leadership was a major factor. Add a massive turnout of supporters and it was a happy day in the Capital, some even got home before midnight. As one Cardiff stalwart said, the best team won, a typical gesture from a club we always enjoyed playing. In the 50s the biggest attendance for a mid-week club game, 25,000, was at the Arms Park when Ebbw Vale played there. That and other marvellous memories were revived when we met some of Cardiff's great players from those days.

A Past v Present match was played in 1960 the purpose of which was "to bring together all the rugby fraternity connected with Ebbw Vale RFC in sporting rivalry." The purpose of a similar event at high noon on Saturday is to bring together Ebbw Vale players and supporters to honour Matthew Williams. A special programme is being published and it will cost a little more than the 30 page one in 1960 which sold out for a shilling. The main advertisers were haulage contractors and Edmunds Luxury Coaches whose claim was "Travel in Comfort".

The Past XV 53 years ago included Ieuan Sheen an attacking full-back who had joined Gloucester, hooker Albert Jackson of Blaina who was the Chunky of his day, the best uncapped forward in Wales Eric Finney and Horace Matthews of the famous Cwm rugby dynasty. In the Present side were Arthur Smith (Cambridge University, Barbarians, captain of Scotland and later the 1962 Lions), halves Roy Evans and Wilf Hunt (Welsh reserves), prop Len Dimmick who former Cardiff props said on Saturday was their toughest opponent, and a brilliant back-row of Graham Jones (capped in 1963), the great No.8 David Nash (Wales and the 1962 Lions) and Francis Matthews who was in direct opposition to brother Horace.

We play Wanderers on Friday and next day will enjoy Chunky's big game by which time like many others I will have come down earth.

#### RELTHREE TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED (100213)

O Ye of little faith, disbelievers who expected us to beat Newbridge in the Cup but not by scoring tries in bad conditions, others who expected us to win at Bonymaen but not by getting a bonus point on a miserable afternoon, and those who expected France to beat Wales. Five tries against Newbridge, another five at Bonny Bonymaen and watching Les Bleus left with the blues completed five days of happiness for followers of the faith. Welsh supporters left the City of Light with French rugby in tatters, our supporters left the City of Swansea with Ebbw Vale rugby stronger than ever, for whatever the weather we can handle it.

On a clear day you can see forever from Bonymaen's clubhouse, on Saturday you had a good view of clouds and mist over Swansea. It was standing room only on the clubhouse vantage point, there was no seating but it was irrelevant anyway because gutsy Bonymaen kept the visiting supporters fidgeting and on edge as a battle royal between Bonymaen's main force, their pack, and Ebbw Vale's all round ability was fought. On a dry day the winning margin would have been much wider, but the home side were spirited enough to momentarily furrow a few visiting brows. Two forward inspired tries exemplified our superiority up front but there were three others by the backs worthy of a sun-drenched day. Wes Cunliffe is setting records by scoring in every game and a tackle by Damien Hudd was registered on the Richter Scale. The huge number of Ebbw Valians made the most noise in the village since VE Day and stayed in the chummy clubhouse to watch the taut, tight, tense Welsh win. Thus ended a good day all round.

This year's Six Nations games are show-cases for players who want to be Lions hence the hype. Long ago when we celebrated the Lions selection of distinguished Steelmen Arthur

Smith, David Nash, Denzil Williams and Arthur Lewis there was less publicity but in 1971 someone hired a topless double decker bus for Denzil and Arthur to wave from. I still wonder where the bus came from, we didn't have topless barmaids in Ebbw Vale let alone topless buses.

The rugby public today is more demanding. Unless a nation in the Six gets a Grand Slam it's a failure but we forget how rare a Slam is. Since France joined the Home Unions in 1906 there have only been 37, won by England (12), Wales (11 including the first ever in 1908), France (9), Scotland (3) and Ireland (2). The fourth Welsh Grand Slam was in 1950 but celebrations were muted after 78 Welsh supporters flying from Belfast were killed in a terrible 'plane crash at Llandow, half of them from Monmouthshire.

We prepare for D-Day on Saturday with last season's Cup run in mind. In the last ten Premiership games between the clubs Cardiff won six to our four, in games at the Arms Park in that period it was 3-2 to Cardiff. In 2006/7 under Alex Codling we won there 21-19 but in the return lost 31-22 at home which meant we finished second not first in the Premiership. Cardiff brought in Andy Powell and he made the difference. Hopefully the infusion of regionally experienced players is a thing of the past.

The Steelmen will of course be strongly supported on Saturday and red, white and green will be the colour of the day in Westgate Street. It is the beginning of a busy period for Ebbw, a week later the long awaited Past v Present match will kick-off in honour of that hookiest of hookers Mathew Williams known to most as 'Chunky' and to the Reverend Waggett as 'Saint Mathew II'.

It's a good time to be a member of the club: enjoyment every week and so much to look forward to. Just one thing, where can we get a Bustler without a top for Chunky's ticker-tape parade?

REL

BONYMAEN et LES BLEUS (060213)

Those with memories of Cup games in wind and rain expected a dour struggle on Tuesday night especially as we were playing Newbridge in a Gwent Derby. It turned out, to repeat a well worn cliché, a game of two halves and Ebbw were on top in both. Despite the elements we scored five tries to one as if it was a Spring day. The pitch held up and thanks must go to the groundsman because until last week it was covered in snow.

Strength in depth is what good teams must have and this was exemplified when towards the end a mass exit took place and all our replacements eagerly took the field like the Magnificent Seven. The foundation of an important victory was laid by a magnificent pack who dominated every phase. Newbridge never stopped trying and showed defiance from start to finish but it was not just the result that must have impressed the Cardiffian present but the way we achieved it. Howard Stone who played for Cardiff many times at Ebbw many times will have plenty to ponder on before we go to the Arms Park full of confidence.

The last time we played on the same day as Wales was 29th September 2007 when we kicked off early at Aberavon and won 22-17. The plan was to dash home to watch Wales beat Fiji in the World Cup but the best laid plans of mice and the men who ran the Welsh team were dashed by South Pacific magic. Fiji did a Samoa and won an eventful game 38-34, exit Wales followed by the coach. All was not lost, the following year Wales won the Grand Slam.

We share a Saturday with Wales again when we play at Bonymaen who are difficult on their own patch but conceded 95 points in a Cup tie at Rodney Parade on Sunday. They have beaten Pontypool twice, Wanderers and Whitland and lost nine including near misses at home to Bargoed and Newbridge who won 10-9 and 16-13 respectively. Our last game at Parc Mawr was a friendly in August 2009 which we won 10-9, not impressive and a sign of things to come because 09/10 ended with the infamous drop. This time we go there in different mode and mood.

At tea-time on Saturday we switch to Paris where France are always favourites to win providing the real French team turns up. Perhaps that is an excuse and gives little credit to teams like Italy who beat France for the second time running at home last Saturday and deserved it. It was "Arrivederci Roma" for les Bleus who will be in revolutionary mood on Saturday.

France don't have a Blanco, Sella or Rives but they have men who do well in the Heineken Cup and their domestic league is the strongest of its kind in Europe. Players are well paid but they have to be first class to be in teams like Perpignan whose No. 1 outside-half is James Hook. He played for about seven minutes against Ireland, does anyone know why?

On a Friday night in February 2002, the eve of the Wales v France game in Cardiff the countries Under 21s played at Ebbw Vale and a glance at the lineup shows the value of that competition for some of them made it to the very top. Damien Hudd was in the side and his pen profile in the programme gave his age as 21, height 6'4" and weight 18st 4 lbs. He had played for Nantyglo Comp, Cross Keys, Gwent Under 20s and captained Ebbw Vale Youth and Under 21s. Like all representative games on our ground the Under 21s against France drew a big crowd, France winning 30-22, Wales's only defeat that season. Welsh coach Chris Davey said, "Our decision-making just didn't perform." The 2002 Six Nations Championship was disastrous for Wales beginning with a 54-10 drubbing in Dublin and ending with the WRU Vice-Chairman declaring, "No coach in the world is worth £250,000 per annum!"

REL

BRING BACK THE 'A' TEAM (260113)

While our players are stamping their feet in frustration a select group are touring the world's top holiday resorts and getting paid for it. Television shows us the two types of rugby union, the one that matters and the IRB World Sevens tournament played in hotbeds of the game like Dubai and Las Vegas. Players specialise in the Sevens game and very few play fifteen-a-side which makes one wonder if it's worthwhile because while many have been promoted from 'A' teams no-one steps into the international arena from the Sevens.

Sevens Rugby will be in the 2016 Rio Olympics but when Six Nations players expressed an interest the Sevens people pulled up the drawbridge said "hands off" and pointed out it's a different ball game albeit with the same ball. If lack of funds prevents Wales from fielding an 'A' team and a Sevens then the choice should be based on which directly benefits the Welsh national side and we know which that is.

Priorities in rugby are changing. Two thirds of the English Women's 15-a-side squad will miss the coming Six Nations to concentrate on the Women's World Cup Sevens. At least their players are capable in both aspects of the game but where will it end? Women's rugby has made enormous progress in recent years and I see no reason why Ebbw shouldn't raise a team from among our supporters, but what a difference to the early days

of the game in Wales. The chapels were against rugby and claimed it was a threat to morality and clean living. In 1886 a clergyman wrote to a Llanelli newspaper declaring that watching the game was “unsuitable for young ladies of both sexes.” V-e-r-y interesting, but West Wales always was different.

When Wales ‘A’ played Italy ‘A’ at Ebbw Vale in February 2000 we had three of our players in the Wales 22. Nathan Budgett started and Iestyn Thomas and Jason Strange were replacements with former Steelman Dai Llewellyn who had emigrated to Newport. Although losing 43-16 in cold and rain there were pluses for Italian rugby, thirteen of their 22 on duty got full caps and three mustered 153 between them. Italy’s elevation to the Six Nations was heralded in the match programme with the heading “The Rise of a New Roman Empire.” There was a greeting in Italian supplied by a pupil in the school Alan Evans taught at, and one of the sponsors was Sidoli of ice cream fame. Never forget, Ebbw Vale is not only famous for its rugby but also for its ice cream.

There will be at least one game played in Wales on Saturday when some of the happiest supporters of rugby from Munster, Leinster, Connacht and Ulster converge to sample Guinness outside its natural habitat and then cheer on a galaxy of O’s who have successful European Cup experience behind them. Ireland have won four of the last six games played at Cardiff so many of their players will know the Millennium Stadium and their supporters will know which pubs draw the best Guinness.

Wales v Ireland is a dawdle for commentators with simple names like Jones and O’Somebody to get their tongues around, unlike those covering world tennis. One confusing and tongue-tying headline emerged from the recent Australian Open that even Jonathan Davies would struggle with - “Novak Djokovic meets Stanislaus Wawrinka after Agnieszka Radwanska beat Ana Ivanovic to reach the quarter finals.” Try saying that the morning after a night on the tiles.

I make no mention of the weather this week, there could be a typhoon over Tredegar, a tornado over Trefil and an earthquake at Eugene Cross Park but we can do nothing about it. It’s all very frustrating but hope springs eternal – see ya’ll on Friday.

REL

IT’S THE CUP – MAYBE (200113)

I am in a dilemma, which is halfway between Briery Hill and Cwm. The problem is this, whether to mention the unmentionable weather or whether to forget the weather, whether or not the weather improves or carry on as if it’s not winter in the belief that we will play Newbridge in the Cup on Saturday. There’s only one thing to do – Carry On Scribbling.

The first Cup tie of the modern era was at Vardre United in 71/2. Their game plan was to upset their more famous visitors and deliver a knock-out. Unfortunately for them the visitors were Ebbw Vale and we won 40-10. Two ties later and we played our first Cup tie at home beating Maesteg 15-3, no mean feat because the Old Parish were a real handful in those days. In 41 seasons of Welsh Cup rugby we have played at home 54 times, winning 40, losing ten with one draw of which more later. Another bit of useless information but it passes the time when one is hemmed in by snow.

Critics of club rugby who advocated change in the form of regions often accused us of being non-productive, parochial and not looking beyond our little world which was bunkum as our fixture lists showed. In the early 80s both Ebbw and Newbridge toured North America and we had some very attractive regular fixtures with clubs in England, Scotland,

Ireland and France long before European Cup rugby was a dream that turned into a financial nightmare.

But the bread and butter games were just as enjoyable and drew the crowds in their thousands. When we last played Newbridge in the Cup, in 1983, there were two semi-official competitions, the Western Mail Championship which was decided by results against first-class clubs in and outside Wales, and the Welsh Merit Table also based on average and in its final form consisting of eighteen Welsh clubs. Gwent was a Merit Table hotbed with Ebbw Vale, Tredegar and Abertillery at the top of the County, Pontypool and Cross Keys in the middle and Newport at the bottom, one third of Merit Table membership.

The Welsh Cup, once the main competition, has lost its flavour and minnows no longer swallow whales. The "smaller" clubs have their separate Cup competitions which is a pity for them and for rugby in Wales generally. The visit of a "big" club to a remote village was special and quite often the locals upset big apple carts. But like so much else in Welsh rugby we grin and bear it in the certain knowledge that there will be more changes at all levels in the near future. It is also a pity the Cup draw is not shown on television anymore, it would add to the viewing figures and create interest at a time when even the attendance at the Cup Final is much lower.

Our team that played Newbridge in the February 1983 Cup tie was Wayne Bow; Brian Thomas, Steve Flynn (capt), Jeff Stephenson, Des Parry; Stuart Lewis, Kim Norkett; Colin Williams, Jonathan Williams, Malcolm Sibthorpe; David Bidgood, John Williams; Neil Robinson, Carl Dennehy, Phil Gardner. It was 6-6 after extra time and Newbridge went through as the away side, Jeff Stephenson kicking two penalty goals for Ebbw and Paul Turner a penalty and drop goal for the Bridge.

The "bench" is now an important element in rugby and match management is an art. We notice anxious glances by opposing teams when our replacements warm up because no-one relishes the sight of The Incredible Hudd and his mates joining the battle to mop up. Who can blame them?

REL

### STEELMEN'S SIX CAUSES SPLASH IN THE POOL 130113

I have discovered the reason of our success and it's quite simple. Not many of us know the Laws of the Game, one being a chap near me at Pontypool who started advising the referee to get his eyes tested three minutes into the match. While the Laws governing rucks, mauls and scrums are puzzling even to past forwards like Charlie Faulkner and Graham Price who were at The Park on Saturday, everyone will understand a Law in the IRB Yearbook for 2013 - "After the kick-off any player who is onside may take the ball and run with it." That explains our try count, but why can't other teams do it? Because we don't let them.

Fair play to Pontypool they made every effort to take the ball and run with it, but they faced a side on form and with no knowledge of how things had been in the old days. Not so the bus pass holders who used to travel there on Jones's and I admit feeling nervous approaching the ground, memories of battles of the past clouded my mind but were quickly dispersed once the boys swung into action. The second half was one-sided, the chants from the bank grew louder and we registered what I reckon is our biggest win ever at the ground.

Once again it was well nigh impossible to pick an Ebbw Man of the Match, the Back Row

Union were serious contenders, and it was nice to meet Charlie Simpson's family after the final whistle who said they were proud of him as indeed we are. Within a few hours the result reached frozen Canada and a former player Elwyn Davies sent a message saying it warmed the cockles of his heart. We were a happy homeward bunch when we saw the white-capped Domes but paid tribute to a Pooler side that lacked nothing in spirit and who have gone through very tough times of late. We scored 99 points against them this season and conceded 14, but they will return.

In the 2009/10 season we only won five Premier League games, all at home against Llanelli, Swansea, Bedwas, Pontypool and Glamorgan Wanderers. Since then losses have been rare, something we do not take for granted but have got used to. There have only been seven in the two and half seasons following relegation, three to Newbridge, two to Bargoed and two we still cannot understand at Merthyr and Whitland. Not enough to deny us two Div One East championships but enough to show that Newbridge and Bargoed are our main challengers.

After five barren seasons when we didn't play Newbridge we got a remarkable double in 2004/5, winning 24-14 at home and 48-34 away. Even when we were leading comfortably in the latter game there was a lingering thought that as it was Newbridge we were playing the scoreboard must be wrong.

Rugby is no longer a game for hooligans played by gentlemen, top players have agents and sponsors to the amazement of old timers one of whom asked "Since when did a Welsh three-quarter wear a fake tan, spiked hair and silver boots?" It's some time since David Campese shocked the old school by admitting, "I'm still an amateur of course, but I became rugby's first millionaire five years ago." That's at the peak of rugby where there are more big games than ever which is good for player's wallets. For those in a valley renowned for its rugby, ambitions are different and winning a local Derby, like the one next Saturday, is one of them.

We have re-arranged postponed games with the Wanderers and Bonymaen but everyone should note Saturday 23 February. At mid-day we stage a game to honour the Great Chunky. A testimonial match between Ebbw Vale Past & Present will be played before the second important game of the day, Italy v Wales. Have you picked your Past XV yet? Start with the hooker!

REL

MAGIC MOMENTS 060113

Twenty-three tries in the last three games and only two conceded are statistics to dream of and those scored against competitive TATA Steel were magical. If we had a Try of The Season award on Saturday's selection alone the judges would face an impossible task. TATA's strength lay with their forwards, as heavy a bunch of grafters as we have seen this season so there was extra applause in the second half when a driving maul led to the sixth touchdown. It was as if Chunky and his cohorts wanted to remind us of their formidable presence for we are strong everywhere at the moment.

As always it was our sheer pace that did the trick, out-running the opposition and always threatening. The second half was less entertaining than the magical first but no one can complain of a 42-7 win and our try count continues to rise. We get more entertainment watching the Steelmen than sofa spectators get in a year watching so-called top rugby on the box, some of which is soulless, meaningless and pointless.

There were times in the 80s when a visit to Pontypool Park was compared to facing an assault course, a win there was unlikely, survival was the only hope. The old Laws favoured a side with a powerful pack and a place kicker and Pooler had both. It was their ball and no-one else was allowed to touch it, if they did it was at their peril. Some of Wales's best forwards were in that pack and they were never without a kicker who would rarely miss. It hadn't always been like that of course, Benny Jones of the Fifties was as good an outside-half as any when he played in a team with a young forward called Ray Prosser and much later the half-back duo of Dai Bishop and Mark Ring, both Kerdiff Cockneys, brought back play to a club famous for its forward power.

Ebbw Vale traditionally played fast open rugby and the current squad revel in it. We have props running like deer, locks who shove, jump, catch and score tries, back rowers who are like greyhounds off the leash. That just about sums up the Ebbw Vale forwards, the backs always were fast and flashy but now they are faster and flashier than ever, and every man in the squad is dying, not literally one hopes, to show he and his mates can do the same in the Premier Division. Think back to last season's Cup run and they have a case.

We have won the last two games against Pontypool, in April 2010 when we were already doomed for the drop and last September when we won 55-8, an incredible scoreline given the history of games between the two clubs for over a hundred years of confrontation. The circumstances surrounding Pontypool in 2012 were dramatic and very worrying for them and so far this season they have played 14, lost 13 and won at home to Whitland who everyone seems to have beaten except us! That doesn't mean we will take things lightly on Saturday.

Vague memories are par for the course for those of us who have passed forty but I believe that when Pontypool and Newbridge combined to play the 1951/2 Springboks at The Park there was a late change to the home team. A forward (Colin Cobley?) dropped out because he was injured on the morning of the game! Pooler readers might confirm, but I mention it to illustrate the difference then and now when top players don't even take the cotton wool off until the goat mascot appears.

It was great to be back in action on Saturday and the big win will set us up for three absolutely vital games against Pontypool who will be thirsting for revenge and Newbridge on the following two Saturdays. The Addicts are also thirsty - for more and more stylish wins for they believe if at first you succeed try, try again.

REL

STEEL YOURSELVES AND SAY HELLO TO TATA 291212

White or wet, a Christmas without rugby is not amusing. No sensible person dreams of a white one, and I have yet to see anyone singing in the rain, so forget Hollywood musicals let's return to reality. We don't ask for much in this crazy world, just a dry week building up to a Saturday afternoon in the fresh air watching artistic performances by men we know. And we don't have to cluster at a stage door to see them after the show.

At the professional level we have coaches and players who when interviewed pay no respect to the English Language like wot I do. They always claim to be honest, you know the sort of thing. "To be honest the boys gave 150% and to be honest we could have won. To be honest the boys didn't deserve to lose 50-0 and it flattered the other team and to be honest I thought we had the worse of the reffing." One player when recently asked by a newspaper reporter what he thought of the criticism of his team said "To be honest I never

read the papers!" I gotta be honest at least he was honest.

It will not be a real clash of steel when we host TATA on Saturday as it used to be when we played Aberavon in the days of Hot Mills, Blast Furnaces, Open Hearths and full employment. Despite doing everything in our power since 2010/11 we cannot play the Wizards and other clubs in the Premier Division. It has an unusual look at the moment, the bottom six clubs were once the prominent of Welsh club rugby. Time marches on. Or are we going backwards?

TATA Steel, once Corus, denied us a winning bonus point when we played there last September and will be taken very seriously. After our experiences in Div One East we realised how important bonus points can be at the final reckoning so we were disappointed that in our 36-14 winning total at Margam there were only three tries. Watching from the balcony of TATA's clubhouse with a nostalgic view of the steelworks which seemed to be leaking a lot less smoke than ours once did, we soon realised that the West Wales Steelmen lived up to their name.

Ebbw Valians with degrees in gadgetry are funds of knowledge thanks to midget computers. The Club Secretary can give you half-time scores from Outer Mongolia but is more in demand when we want to know how our rivals got on. We now demand instant news but were just as happy and under less mental strain waiting for the Football Echo to arrive around 6 o'clock.

Magical bits of plastic reveal the final scores of other Championship games at a press of the right button which (to be honest) is beyond me. On October 27th with Halloween a few 'orrible days away we beat Beddau at ECP 36-0 which was quite satisfactory. Then came the hot news that our closest rivals in the League, Bargoed had drawn 28-28 at TATA Steel which came as no surprise after our experience down there. It was the first time Bargoed failed to win, and a week later they suffered their first defeat when we won at their ground. Crucial results that will count for a lot in May.

New friends are always welcome and we can expect something different, perhaps difficult, when the other Steelmen come to town on Saturday. So, it's tata to 2012, hello to TATA which confirms that the corn in these epistles will still be as high as an elephant's eye in the new year which I hope will be a happy and healthy one for everybody.

REL

ASHLEY JUMPS FOR JOY 221212

I couldn't resist that headline, it's not often a line-out jumper supreme becomes a father and how typical of the club that the news of the arrival of Indie Belle Sweet was reported on the club website which generally covers rucking, reffing and other rough past-times. Last week brought tidings of great joy but after all it was Christmas. Some parents sign up their newly born for Eton or Rodean and it's never too soon to book a place for Indie Belle in the Welsh team for a future Women's Rugby World Cup. In the second row of course.

Headlines are written by sub-editors who make them eye-catching and sensational to attract the punters and sell the papers. Even sports reports have been cheapened by flashy headlines, so different and inferior to the one in the Sunday Times on January 22nd 1950 after Wales won at Twickenham, it simply read "How Wales Beat England." In today's tabloids it would have been "Tough Taffs Topple Twickers Toffs." Our media finds Welsh connections with events that are nothing to do with us, but none beats the headline in a Welsh paper reporting the sinking of the Titanic, "Welshman Lost At Sea." I take full

responsibility for my headlines which are less dramatic, less important, full of clichés, head-banging more than eye-catching but I have fun in doing them, like the following:

"Steelman's Son Smashes Springboks" - Toby Faletau. "Ebbw Reigns At Rainy Rumney" - a wet day in Kerdiff. "Thoroughbreds Win The Derby" - important win over Newbridge. "The Charge Of The Heavy Brigade" - the pack at Blackwood. "Possession, Pace, Points and Pints" - nine tries v Bridgend Athletic. "The Forwards Are Revolting" - reaction to Welsh pushover try that involved the backs.

This is a shortened edition because it's a busy time, finding the decorations, untangling the lights for the tree, searching for the bottle opener etc., but suddenly the heavens have opened and that gives more time to do the mundane things. I do wish the man in charge of weather would realise the effect postponed games have on the faithful but clearly some of them have strayed unto the paths of unrighteousness.

There were matters of concern last week, one was the weather and the other was the declaration by a religious group that the world was coming to an end on Friday. How could that be? We were only halfway through the rugby season and extra supplies of Rhymney Best and Rev. James were ordered. By the way Rev James is not the Club Secretary.

The Ebbw caravan goes to Narberth on Saturday, a nice town in a holiday county which has numerous castles, bays, waves and pubs of character. Our last visit was in April 1995 when in the final game of the Second Division season we got the double (33-10 and 39-9) which brought us promotion and Narberth relegation. This season in our second League game and after winning 76-13 at Ely we hosted Narberth and won 45-16 a repeat of which will depend on the conditions.

The Addicts never make New Year resolutions, they have the same one all year round, it's to keep the Home Front in good order and support the front line troops. Simple as that.

REL

PHYLLOSANS, TERMITES AND UNDERTAKERS 161212

It was only the second rainy Saturday of the season, an unwelcome change to the usual sunshine for players and spectators who spent enormous sums of money on Father Christmas bonnets, took out travel insurance and prepared to head west. Rain drops had fallen too heavily on the Bonymaen pitch so we will go there when it's dry and perhaps warmer. We have two trips left to the west unless we draw Llanelli in the Cup. If it's at Parc y Scarlets it will house the biggest crowd for a club match since it was built.

But what does one do when Ebbw are not playing? I decided to visit premises which advertise in our programme and which, coincidentally, are licensed to sell shandy and the like. Televised Heineken matches were on the box and people were getting excited but I wasn't. As pleasant as they were I was among people with a passing interest in rugby and it was nothing like as good as my usual Saturday habit. Standing in pouring rain at a distant ground watching in a real rugby crowd would have been the real thing not an imitation.

We have often played the Wanderers on opening day, not always successfully although the last twice have been different, two five pointers to set the season on fire. Our 76-13 win in September included twelve tries and created several records. It was the highest score against the Wands, certainly the highest in any of our opening games and probably the most tries we have scored in a competitive game. It was the perfect start to the

campaign and more of the same followed.

It is unusual for a Welsh club to be known as the Wanderers but it's nothing compared to some in England's grass roots. There are the Old Albanians who are not OAPs from Albania, the Ealing Trailfinders presumably Scouts trying to find the nearest tube station, Preston Grasshoppers who boast two England caps, one of them, Wade Dooley, a bobby on the beat, Dings Crusaders who never play east of Gib and one that has now disbanded - the Phyllosans.

Clive Best has been mentioned many times in these pages because he is unique. He represented Brynmawr Grammar School in a great Welsh Secondary Schools side, played full-back for Ebbw Vale and then went to Rugby League, reaching the pinnacle in that sport, a Wembley Cup Final. Moving to the warmer climes of the South East he joined the quaintly named Phyllosans because he was over forty.

The Phyllosans played rugger not rugby and among their opponents were Hertford Termites and Chelmsford Undertakers, both popular with the press who glorified in headlines like "Termites Buried by Undertakers." But the latter club was not a dead end because a famous English wing ended his playing days with them. A.W. Hancock of Northampton scored one of the game's greatest tries which drew the Calcutta Cup match of 1965 running from his own half with minutes left, stumbling twice and falling exhausted over the Scottish line. He won three caps and when his fame died he joined the Undertakers. This year the Phyllosans ran out of tonic and disbanded when their diehards realised they were now over eighty not forty.

Speaking of the unusual there's Rygbi Gogledd Cymru, alias Rugby North Wales, or RGC 1404 for short. Why the date? As every reader knows, it was in 1404 that Owain Glyndŵr became Prince of Wales, not a major historic figure because he was not a Welsh cap. To show those in the north that we are as Welsh as they are, I conclude with seasonal greetings in the mother tongue which will please our editor who is bi-lingual having got an A level in Wenglish - Nadolig Llawen a Blwyddyn Newydd Dda.

REL

LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT 091212

It was nippy, it was sunny, it was nice to be back in Downtown Pontygof among real people and the Steelmen played some great rugby. It's not often we find ourselves a score behind but while Llanharan spoiled we came away with the real spoils and laid on a second half extravaganza of tries galore. A 62-11 scoreline calls for a string of adjectives but brilliant, audacious and stunning will do for now. We have one game left of the first half of the season, at Bonymaen, and a glance at Saturday's results tells us it might not be as easy as our last two wins when we ran up a total of 125 points. That must be something of a record but there's so much to enjoy at the club there's no time to dig into the archives and I still haven't found the Christmas tree under the cwtch.

Unless bad weather affects our Saturday fixtures we will play only one evening game in the league this season. When the 2012/13 fixtures emerged from the WRU clockwork computer there were two, both against Bonymaen. Floodlit matches should be between neighbours but whoever compiled the fixture list had clearly failed in geography. Bonymaen were not pleased nor were we so we play them at their ground on Saturday instead of a Wednesday. The return is on Friday 15th March the night before Wales beat England when Spring will be here and scarves and fleeces are left at home. On the other hand Wales might lose and it will be snowing.

To literally brighten up the game in 1964 eight Welsh clubs formed a Floodlit Alliance. Bristol wanted to join but the RFU disapproved and as Newport were and still are members of the English Union they were not allowed in either. The first winners were Llanelli who dominated the competition right up to its finale in 1972/3 when they were known as Llanelli.

Finals were played in two legs and in 71/2, our third consecutive final, we lost 20-8 at Stradey Parc before 8000 spectators most of whom were Scarlets and therefore total unbiased. We won the return 20-16 but Llanelli were champions on aggregate. The last Alliance final was won again by the Scarlets who beat Swansea in a dour affair 6-4. After four seasons only tries counted but players being human gave away countless penalties knowing they would not be punished by goal-kickers like Phil Bennett. Shots at goal were brought back and Phil rubbed it in by kicking the two penalty goals to top Swansea's try in what was not a great finale. A year earlier the Whites would have won.

The Floodlit Alliance was entertaining and exciting and suited Llanelli, Bridgend and Ebbw Vale who were the current exponents of fast open rugby. In nine seasons of fun under lights we only lost once at home and one game stands out, to reach a final we had to score seven tries to beat Bridgend. We did and Glyn Turner who revelled in the Alliance got three of them.

Our first game with Bonymaen was a home friendly in February 1991 which we won 24-12. We next met in 1994/5 in Division Two when we lost 17-0 away and 13-3 at home. After we were promoted we played a friendly in Bonymaen comfortably winning 36-12. In the 1999/2000 Cup Bonymaen beat Cross Keys and the Wanderers to reach the quarter-finals where we awaited them having scored 102 points in ties with Bedwas and Builth Wells, both away.

We beat Bonymaen 59-18 scoring tries by Shaun Connor (two), Lee Banks, Rhys Shorney, Gareth Green, Jonathan Williams, Josh Tauamolo and Brad Clark. Connor converted five and kicked three penalty goals for a personal tally of 29. We lost the semi-final against Llanelli 38-26 after trailing 38-9 but came away with a lot of pride.

Finally the World Cup. We should go all the way, dim problem - providing we don't play Samoa in the final.

REL

THE FORWARDS ARE REVOLTING 021212

When Wales play New Zealand something unusual and controversial happens. In the 29th game in the series an All-Black forward was cited for foul play for an incident spotted by every spectator and millions watching on TV except the three officials at the scene of the crime. Late in the game a bizarre pushover involving everybody except our scrum-half and the water boys led to a try not by a forward but a three-quarter. Forwards everywhere are not amused, their reputation is at stake and they are revolting.

Who would have thought the dandies of the team would have the nerve, or the gall, to take part in a pushover try? But they did and the forward's Union are treating it as a demarcation dispute. If that sort of thing spreads the backs will demand equal rights, even taking control of the beer kitty. It could be the end of civilisation as we know it. Big Chief Sevenoaks is arranging a pow wow to make certain it doesn't happen in Ebbw, and when props emerge from their wigwams brandishing their credentials it's not a pretty sight.

It's back to real rugby again on Saturday and the penultimate fixture of the first half of the season. Llanharan, who often got the better of us in Div Two days, have played ten games so far this season, winning five and losing five, among the latter a 40-16 defeat at Bargoed. They have beaten Blackwood, Bonymaen, Whitland (32-18 away), Beddau and Pontypool. They are in the middle of the table but will not be taken lightly, not that any of our opponents are. Life in the Championship is too serious, frivolity is not an option.

The most important sole participant in any game is the official in charge. They have umpires in cricket and tennis, we have referees and it must be one of the loneliest jobs of all. He is the man who influences the result, the chap who controls the emotions and flightiness of innocent, angel-faced forwards who when penalised look amazed when spotted. Television exposes referees to millions who reckon they can do a better job. Some players pose and become actors when carded, shaking their heads in disbelief knowing the cameras are on them. They change from battle hardened law breakers to innocent angelic pussy cats who are as pure as the driven slush.

The only former Ebbw Vale player who refereed an international game had been an outside-half so he was able to get his revenge on wing-forwards. From Abertillery to Toulouse might not be considered a hike today but it was in 1971. When Ernie Lewis, the fastest whistler in the Western Valley, refereed France and Australia in Toulouse it was not a comfortable place to be, both countries favoured the black arts of the game and so it turned out. When Ernie awarded an important penalty to the Aussies the crowd began to stir and when the game ended with France losing police escorted little Ernie to the dressing room.

Refereeing is a labour of love, especially at semi-pro or amateur level. There are grounds without grandstands or terraces where the spectators are within a few metres of the man with the whistle. Ribald comments are frequent, if in fun they form part of the game, but not only does the man that matters need a whistle he needs patience and a knowledge of the Laws of the Game which very few spectators have.

When Dorothy finally met the Wizard of Oz she found he was not much of a wizard after all. When Wales met the Aussies they thought the same but having pinned them in their 22 with a few minutes left failed to keep them there and defeat was snatched from the jaws of victory. The end of our rainbow is farther away but there's always the Six Nations to look forward to - and the resumption of club rugby on Saturday. Thank goodness for large mercies.

REL

#### WHEN THE WIZARDS OF OZ CAME TO TOWN 261112

The famous in sport are now seen by millions via TV and the fortunate who can afford tickets for big sporting occasions, although not all of them are there for the game. Long ago our only sight of the stars was in cinema newsreels or on cigarette cards, but on one memorable occasion I actually saw one play. A friend of the family had an Austin car, registration number AWO 2, and I was taken to Worcester cricket ground where the 1938 Australians opened their tour captained by the greatest batsman of all time, Don Bradman. I was disappointed because he put Worcestershire in first so I did not see him bat, a pity because the next day he hit a double century. But we had gone to see Bradman, and we did even though he was fielding.

The memory of that day reminds me of another great Australian sportsman who everyone hoped would play but didn't when he came to Ebbw Vale on Tuesday November 17th

1992. The touring Wallabies played Monmouthshire but David Campese was rested. He kept busy by signing his autograph surrounded by hordes of youngsters who not only saw him but spoke to him as well. The Aussies won 19-9 before 7000 people in a poor game dominated by an Irish referee called Bertie Smith who made history of the wrong sort by awarding 52 penalties or free kicks. He was an Irish joke but no-one laughed.

There were no Ebbw Vale players in the County team, understandably because we were in Division Two at the time. It says much for the WRU that they awarded us the game despite our lowly position but we had a good record of hosting major touring teams. 1992 was a bad year for Wales who lost 23-6 to Australia four days after the Wallabies came to Ebbw. Campese ended the game in dramatic fashion, scoring a try after a 60 yard run, his 52nd in a record Test total of 64.

It was the second visit of Australia to our ground, the first was in November 1966 when they beat an Ebbw Vale/Abertillery XV 25-6. Ebbw Valians in the team were full-back Barrie Edwards, wings Phil Westwood and Ritchie Wills, centre Arthur Lewis, fly-half Ivor Berry, prop Gordon Main, lock Denzil Williams (capt), flankers Peter Moyle and Gordon Shipp.

In the Monmouthshire squad for the 1992 game were former Steelmen David Llewellyn, Andrew Dibble, Mike Voyle and Ceri Jonathan who would have been in an Ebbw Vale Past XV if it played Ebbw Vale Present. Twenty years on and clubs are fully occupied with League fixtures, but what fun it would be if such a game could be revived. It would be easy to pick a team of former Steelmen still active and a coach from those plying their trade outside Wales one of whom, Alex Codling, is the new head guru of Rotherham Titans. They play in the English Championship one stage below the highly competitive Aviva Premiership and one thing is certain, their lineout will improve dramatically.

The 1924 All-Blacks, who let it be known I didn't see, won every game but had a forward, Cyril Brownlie, sent off at Twickenham in front of the Prince of Wales. The next dismissal in international rugby was at Murrayfield in 1967 when Colin Meads was sent packing. He recently spoke at a dinner in Llangattock and club members had the privilege of meeting him. Like Brownlie in 1924 "Pinetree" of the 1963 All-Blacks weighed 15 stone and was 6'3" tall, midgets compared to the giants of today.

On Saturday the Kiwis came, saw and conquered once again. They will be followed by the Wallabies who in their last twenty games between us have won 17, drawn one and only lost to twice, in 2005 and 2008, both Grand Slam winning years. An omen perhaps?

REL

POSSESSION, PACE, POINTS AND PINTS (181112)

We had a trying time on Saturday afternoon. We expected the Steelmen to win but had no idea what to expect from Bridgend Athletic who we had never played before. They proved to be one of the liveliest sides we have seen this season, they kept yapping at our heels, never gave up and were still trying at the final whistle. But we took possession of the ball, out-paced them, piled up the points and then shared some pints with them after. That makes the perfect rugby day, unless you are on the receiving end. It was a complete victory, nine tries and every one converted, the second highest score this season, the first being seventy-six at Ely.

For most of the time the Steelmen were dazzling, the forwards probed, charged, destroyed, dismembered and laid the solid foundations for the backs, seven of whom

scored tries. Cameron Regan was the forward to score although Robert Sevenoaks said he deserved a mention on the scoresheet for services rendered when we were awarded a penalty try. For us it was thoroughly enjoyable, for Bridgend Athletic it was not but of all the teams we have scored heavily against this season, and we have an average score of 39-12, they earned the most respect. They came to play rugby and did. We play them at Newbridge Fields in March and look forward to it.

In other parts of the rugby world there might be doom and gloom. In ours all is well but as Jason and Llyr know there are harder games ahead with away trips to Narberth next month and Newbridge in January top of the list. We will shortly have a 100% fitness list and one has resumed service already. When Damien Hudd went on he had a standing ovation, except for those in the grandstand who were iced to their plastic seats. The big man would have made everybody's day if he had scored a try which he almost did, but how good it was to see him playing again.

Reunions are great occasions and there was a special one in the clubhouse last Thursday when a former Ebbw Vale lock forward from South Africa met old friends and players. F C Smit also met coaches and players of the current squad. He visited the dressing room he and his fellow South African, prop Balie Swart, changed in, and spoke to the lads before training. Those present report that it was an emotional and moving occasion which the current Steelmen greatly appreciated.

F C is larger than life in every way and was brought by Phil Easley who played with him and has kept in touch for many years. Other South Africans played at Ebbw Vale and two became Springboks and took part in a titanic Cup tie against Pontypool in the 1989/90 season. It poured with rain, we lost 12-6 but even Pooler people agreed that "we wuz robbed." On Thursday, F C pointed to the bottom riverside corner where he still maintains a try was scored but not given. He and Balie took defeat hard and stayed in the dressing room for a long time before joining the other players in the clubhouse.

In 1992 South Africa returned to international rugby and played games in France and England. F C joined the party as a replacement and his first game in the Springbok jersey was against the French Barbarians. He played against a Midlands XV at Welford Road and an England B team before winning his cap against England at Twickenham as a back-row forward. His visit was twenty years and a day after that historic game. He said he felt at home all those years ago and is proud to be not only a Springbok but a Steelman!

F C represented Western Province, one of the great sides in the Republic and his soul mate Balie Swart came from another rugby stronghold, the Transvaal. In 1995 Balie was in the Springbok side that won the World Cup in Ellis Park. Not even I will claim or even suggest that our two Springboks got to the top because they had once played for us, but I am tempted.

REL

#### LETTING YOUTH HAVE ITS FLING (111112)

The Development game played last Wednesday was the hardest so far for our lads. They faced the regional Dragons Under 20s who won a keen contest 12-6 in the third of a series of similar games at ECP. While gloomy comments on Welsh rugby fill the air and are debated by experts, with finance high on the agenda, watching more than thirty of Gwent's young in action was encouraging and must have satisfied two former Ebbw outside-halves who were on opposite sides. Byron Hayward and Jason Strange, who look as young as ever, now inject skills and enthusiasm into a new generation that, given the opportunity,

will restore Gwent's rugby reputation.

The temperature was higher than it was at Bargoed the previous Saturday but the talk was still about that clash of the two top sides in the Championship which ended, as all rugby games should, in the warmth and friendliness of a clubhouse. It had been a close run thing, our average points for per match so far this season is 36.7, but it was no surprise that the lowest would be at Bargoed. It was eventful to say the least and there are still aspects worth recalling. The interception try by Wes Cunliffe was the killer blow and our defence thereafter kept Bargoed at bay, but the long range penalty goal that levelled the score was something special given the conditions. A kick to touch was considered but Josh Lewis said he could land the goal and he did. Josh is short for Joshua, the anglicised version of Yehoshua and that means salvation which is what he brought us. When the final whistle blew, Jason and Llyr were modestly chuffed, unlike the supporters who were noisily chuffed.

On Friday, Wales play Samoa who were twice winners in Cardiff in the 1991 and 1999 World Cups. Next day we play our 11th Championship game against a side we have not met before. Bridgend Athletic are not Bridgend RFC's second team, they are completely separate and were formed in 1972 when players for Bridgend Youth came of age, kept together and formed an adult club. Quite an adventure but they did it and have reached the second level of Welsh club rugby. They have not made an auspicious start but have beaten Whitland, which we did not, Pontypool which we did and Cardiff Met who we pipped with a drop goal.

Our Match Programme often gets nostalgic and features guest writers like our web master, a sort of hi-tech Spiderman. He recently picked an Ebbw Vale team of his "personal favourites, perhaps not always the best but always the ones I've loved to watch." As my memories of Ebbw players covers many decades I have difficulty in choosing an entire best team but Arthur Smith, Glyn Turner, Denzil Williams, David Nash, Clive Burgess and Gareth Howls would certainly be in it.

Favourite teams need coaches and one springs to mind immediately, an Englishman who came as a stranger but soon became a Steelman. He saved us from relegation and took us to second place in the 2006/07 Premier Division and although he was not here long Alex Codling will always be remembered. Nostalgia can be fun but the present is more important and we can be pleased that not only are we developing quality players but inspirational coaches too.

Coaches get all the credit, and the blame, but there is still a place in modern hi-tech rugby for the captain. In the heat of battle leadership can decide the result which brings me to Mathew Williams, alias Chunky, who has been with us for a decade. Off the field he is a be-spectacled gent but on it he's the boss and if we did the Haka he would lead it. I can imagine him making faces at opponents, poking his tongue out at them and threatening them with fates worse than death. I will treat him with even greater respect in future, and call him Sir.

REL

NOT PRETTY BUT PRETTY GOOD (051112)

After an Ebbw Vale win away from home an old mate of mine would say, "There's not a lot wrong with the world tonight," and there wasn't on Saturday despite cold, rain, sleet and bitten nails on frozen hands. Everyone with an interest in the result kept warm watching two strong sides engaged in a titanic struggle. A draw was likely at one stage but coaches

and players were not satisfied and the battle intensified. One side had to win but both deserved praise for producing such a game in difficult conditions. The 10-3 victory at Bargoed was a relief such was its importance and the final whistle sounded like the "All Clear." All concerned on and off the pitch contributed and although it wasn't pretty, pre-match rain saw to that, it was a good old fashioned game. Neutral observers, a handful probably, would have appreciated it especially if they were retired forwards. Only former front rowers can see and appreciate what we mortals cannot, and with two outstanding back rows in action ex flankers and No. 8s had plenty to savour.

For the first time this season we endured a sunless, soggy Saturday which restricted the running game and concentrated on the forward battle. Bargoed's 3-0 half-time lead was not enough but it still needed a mighty forward effort to draw level and then get a try when none seemed possible. Wesley Cunliffe might not know it but they name chapels after him and he was praised by the Vale congregation when he scored his fourth try in two games. It was, however, our forwards who bore the brunt against a robust Bargoed pack not used to being in a losing team. The backs with few opportunities played their noble part defensively while longing for drier conditions.

There's no-one happier than a prop after a win and the sight of Ross Jones clapping the supporters as he and his mates trooped off was worth the admission. Was it a coincidence that we wore red, white and green not pink? Or was it a rallying call to the troops who defeated the top of the table side two weeks after losing to the bottom team? They deserve a fortnight off but pity poor Bargoed, our next home game is November 17th, theirs is December 29th!

On Saturday Wales play Argentina who we first took seriously in 1968 when Wales toured there, winning three, drawing two and losing one game. No caps were awarded and we didn't do well in the two Tests, losing the first 9-5 and drawing the second 9-9. Only one try was scored in both games and it was by Ebbw Vale's Glyn Turner. Reports described it as one of exceptional quality and was launched by Laurie Daniels, then of Pontypool but later a leading points scorer with Ebbw Vale, who ran from his goal line, JPR Williams linked, Glyn touched down and John Dawes converted.

In January 1998 we hosted two Argentinian clubs, beating Cordoba 17-16 and four days later losing to Tucuman 22-10. In 1991 Wales played their first official Test against Argentina and scraped a 16-7 win at the Arms Park. Their record in thirteen games with the Pumas is not impressive, winning nine, the biggest win 33-16 in Cardiff in 2009, losing four, the biggest defeat a shattering 45-27 in 2006 in Buenos Aires which tempted Andrew Lloyd Webber to rename his hit song "Don't cry for me Wales."

Wales return to the pampas in 2019 accompanied by supporters seeking descendants in Patagonia and watching Wales in the company of Ebbw Vale's greatest tourist, Irene, who can tango and speaks Spanish like a native - of Ebbw Vale. Distance means nothing to her, whether it's Buenos Aires, Brisbane, Bargoed or Bonymaen she'll find it and it will never be the same again.

REL

NORMAL SERVICE RESUMED (301012)

Have you noticed how sunny Saturdays are compared to the rest of the week? Even if supporters get wet going to chapel on Sunday mornings they don't mind after an afternoon in the breezy air of sub-tropical Pontygof watching Ebbw in full flight as they were against Beddau. We expected to win and did so with ease in a strange match initially full of interest

but which faded in a forgettable second half, the mood of which was affected by uncontested scrums which should be banned. There must be a contest for possession and it's time the IRB found an alternative. There have been occasions when it seemed the unscrupulous manipulated these farcical aspects of the game but it was not so on Saturday. Beddau suffered from so many injuries that their physio was the busiest human on the park and the props, who are also human, were not over-worked when Rugby League scrums took over. Despite that, Beddau battled hard, always against the odds but emerged with pride as we knew they would. We look forward to going there in March and wish them well.

Dashing Wes Cuncliffe got three tries, always an achievement, and finished his last with a theatrical dive, a practice not to be recommended as many a try has been lost that way. There were times in the second half that can only be described as bizarre and one involved Dan Haymond whose brilliant burst should have ended with a try under the posts only for him to change the habit of his young rugby lifetime and knock-on. It all added to the fun, but the object of the game was serious, we had to win and get maximum points. Afterwards, the hi-tech brigade logged in to the other scores and in particular the one at Margam. After playing there in September we prophesied that future visitors would not find the Steelmen of the West easy to beat. And we were right.

Bargoed first appeared on our radar in August 2008 when we played a friendly there before the Premier Division season began. We won 31-27, a game that could have gone either way and it was a warning of things to come. A week earlier we had won another friendly at Henley so we experienced two totally different worlds, ruggar and rugby, boaters and caps, Pimms and Brains.

In our first season in Div One East we began well enough at Bargoed winning 27-19 but suffered our only home League defeat of the season to them in March 2011, 12-20. Last season we were pipped 18-19 at Bargoed in September and struggled to beat them at home in March 15-10. Although we were champions in our two Div One East campaigns Bargoed and Newbridge ran us close. Whatever the result on Saturday there will be twelve games left in a season that is already intriguing and unpredictable.

There are only two League games in November because Europe will be invaded by colonists from the southern hemisphere who come north to gain experience at the hands of the masters. We must encourage them, make them feel at home and explain that playing ruggar is not about winning but taking part and being chummy after. On the other hand perhaps we have been over generous and should make an effort to win this autumn for a change.

Winning is not impossible despite our record against New Zealand (3 wins and 25 defeats) and Australia (10 wins, a draw and 24 defeats). The games will be played in arguably the best rugby stadium of them all, the pubs are minutes away, so is Chip Alley, and it's quite chummy standing in a long queue for the train back home. No-one cries for Argentina anymore and we must be cautious against Samoa having beaten them five times but losing three, two of them in World Cup games. Will their fifteen be as good as their seven? The question that matters however is which fifteen will come out on top at Parc Bargoed.

REL

TWO LOWS AND ONE HIGH (211012)

It wasn't the week we expected. Two losses, first our Head Coach and then a game we fully expected to win against bottom club Whitland who had lost six and drawn one against

our seven straight wins. For those who could not make the journey west the result was inexplicable and the statistics of the game do not help. We scored four tries to two, converted three to Whitland's one but lost the penalty count six to one. Perhaps it's not so inexplicable after all.

The trouble is we have become used to winning. In what we might call the New Ebbw Era, from September 2010 to date, we won 41 of the last 50 League games, an 82% success rate. Saturday was a set-back but we are still second in the table, four points behind Bargoed who we play on November 3rd, two days before Bonfire Night. Watch out for fireworks, it will be a humdinger probably decided as most games are by the forwards and goal-kickers.

Before then we play Beddau who were beaten at home by TATA Steel 31-10 on Saturday. The western Steelmen have surprised everyone and so have Cardiff Met who contained us until the final minutes on their ground the week before. An omen perhaps.

Naturally we will miss Neil Edwards who did so much to resurrect us after our fall from the Premier Division. He encouraged us off the field as well as on it and we will remember his stentorian voice echoing from the top of the stand, the confidence he gave us and also his efforts socially as he revived old traditions and encouraged rapport between players and supporters. In his own words "systems are now in place at ECP to ensure the club sustains its very high standards." Jason and Llŷr made up a triumphant trio and we are in their safe hands. It goes without saying that the whole club is behind them, but I'll say it anyway!

The high point of the week was on Wednesday night when we hosted a special game in which Jason Strange played an important role. In the maelstrom of modern rugby the youngsters have been forgotten by the media and nothing much is known of the Academies but in our town schools rugby has carried on, and prospered in two comprehensives which are now one and known as Ebbw Fawr Learning Community. Jason teaches there and was as impressed as we were at the performance of the Under 15s and their opponents, Monmouth School. The Ebbw boys won in heavy rain but undeterred they and the crowd enjoyed every one of the 70 minutes and we look forward to a repeat. After the game both sides were applauded as they entered the crowded clubhouse, they looked smart and were a credit to their schools. It was as good an occasion as we have had in Ebbw Vale for some time.

Monmouth's Director of Coaching is John Bevan, a great winger of the Seventies who played for Wales and the Lions with Gerald Davies, Barry John and Gareth Edwards and the like. It was a privilege to meet him and to be among young players, for the future of Ebbw Vale rugby is in their hands. When the town's youth all go to school in the old works site they will begin a new era of education with sport an important element. That is where we should come in, and we will..

Glum, gutted and generally low, that was how ardent addicts felt Saturday night. But that's sport for you, ups and the occasional downs have to be accepted. Defeat inspires determination and we have plenty of it in what Neil called our system. And remember, even the All-Blacks fail to win sometimes.

REL

STOPPED IN OUR TRACKS (141012)

We don't drop many goals these days but we score a lot of tries, or did until last Saturday

in a game of infringements and missed chances. Cardiff Met surprised the travelling support as they had done to Bargoed's followers who had also bitten their nails until they pulled off a one point win earlier in the season. The students are not to be taken for granted, but as fit as they were looked weary in a second half when we hit back. In one way and another we were stopped in our tracks in a hectic period when rugby's homicide appeared. Killing the ball is a bugbear and if the crime of "Loitering with intent" is not in the Laws of the Game it should be.

When it was most needed our midfield was hit by an injury to Dan Haymond but cometh the hour cometh the man in the shape of Charlie Simpson, as famous locally as the TV family is internationally. Crowned King Charles by Ebbw Valians who are not used to a scoreboard with so few points on it, his drop goal was unexpected, cool and won the game. It was a most disappointing afternoon for coaches, players and followers who know there are even more difficult games ahead as the Championship takes shape.

The Met's programme notes are worth mentioning, "This competition provides an exciting new dimension to League rugby in Wales as it brings together the cream of the old Division One (East and West) and includes a number of ex-Premiership clubs such as today's visitors." The visitors concerned enjoyed the comfort of the spacious bar at Cyncoed, but not the game. It was a hiccup but let us remember that we still have a 100% record.

Last week the English referee Dave Pearson retired from active service and said that the game at the top is so fast and so competitive one referee is not enough. He says there should be two officials on the field, one in each half. That would mean two with a whistle, two assistant referees running the line, a fourth official, the TMO and a citing officer. What is the game coming to? And why get another ref when every spectator is one!

The game is getting bizarre and those who remember it when the only money was a ten bob note in a boot would be shocked at the recent antics of Saracens, a club we used to play, but which is now run by South Africans who seem to have unlimited funds. They suggested to Edinburgh that their home game in the Heineken Cup should be played in Cape Town. They also asked Munster to play another Cup game in New York. Edinburgh said thanks but no thanks but the Irish were interested, after all there are more of them in New York than County Cork. If Saracens seek exciting venues to play their home games I suggest Cae Canol. When it's raining.

We play at Whitland for the first time on Saturday and I advise supporters include Welsh speakers in case of difficulty finding the ground - it's called Parc Llwyn Ty Gwyn. Like many other similar clubs Whitland has produced some great players and run many teams of various ages. They have recently formed an Old Player's Association and three members are Mike Phillips, centre Jonathan Davies and Scott Williams, internationals of repute. We will face a side with only a draw to their credit this season, but will not under-rate them.

Last week's Development game with a lively Bedlinog team was another success because it was an opportunity for locals lads to play on our ground and be coached by experts. The community aspect of the club is bearing fruit and will be noticed by those at the top of the Welsh game. Competitive schools rugby is not as prominent as it once was but we are into that as well, so watch this space.

REL

THE CHARGE OF THE HEAVY BRIGADE (071012)

Getting a winning bonus point away from home should signify a comfortable victory but it wasn't like that at Blackwood. We were dangerous in the early stages but at least two gilt-edged try chances were lost, Blackwood took heart, trailed by only a point at the break and led by six within minutes of the restart. But when in danger call up the cavalry, the heavy dragoons not the lighter lancers, and what followed was typified by a forward drive that almost broke the speed limit. The fight back had begun.

Forward dominance wins games and our Heavy Brigade decided enough was enough. The scrum was awesome and the backrow equally so. The backs will understand if praise is heaped on the forwards and men of the pack will understand if the name of Ronny Kynes is mentioned above all and not just for his two tries.

It was a hard unrelenting battle with supporters of both sides following the tradition of disagreeing with penalties awarded against their team. It must be difficult for referees used to working with assistants to keep an eye on everything but it's something they have to adjust to when coming down a notch and there are simple decisions that require no second opinions, like making sure players are not in front of the ball at drop-outs.

When all was settled a voice of authority was heard to say "When will we be rewarded for playing good rugby?" He was seeking perfection which is not possible in any team sport, but we know what he means. However let us remember that our average match score is 46-13. Not bad for a side that wants to do better is it?

On Saturday we play a side of many names. Once known as Cardiff Training College, South Glamorgan Institute, University of Wales Institute Cardiff (UWIC) they are now Cardiff Metropolitan University . One thing hasn't changed, they play rugby for enjoyment and with dash. When Leighton Davies was coach they were the most popular visitors to our ground, and we played all the top Welsh and many English teams of note at the time.

They were young, fit and supported by students of everything from maths to mauling. In England there were St. Lukes College , Exeter and Loughborough Colleges who were also famed rugby nurseries and Oxford and Cambridge would have struggled to match them. Great players came from Cyncoed and some captained Wales and played for the Lions like Gareth Edwards. The talent still emerges from there and this season's team has done quite well winning four (three at home) and losing two.

"The Rugby Paper" which comes out on a Sunday headlined its report of our win over Newbridge "Steelmen have look of Champs" and referring to Bargoed's late win at Cyncoed 21-20, "The students raced into a 20-0 lead, slicing the visitor's defences at will." Poor old Will, he's always at the receiving end but it shows what we can expect on Saturday. We are good at slicing too, and winning, but can we avoid having to come from behind next time? It's not good for the nerves.

REL

THOROUGHBREDS WIN THE DERBY (300912)

It was like Epsom Downs on Derby day, a big crowd keen with anticipation and the bookies caught in two minds. Adding colour to the occasion was the display in our shop of new replica kit with the away jersey in glorious pink the main attraction. We have decided on the colour for good reasons but I can't wait for Saturday at Blackwood when our props trot out looking like pink elephants. If they win they will probably paint the town mauve.

After five games it's time to mention those who undertake tasks out of sight and without

whom our enjoyment of the game would suffer. I speak of the invisible men of rugby, the scoreboard operators who are under great stress here at Ebbw Vale and away grounds. Instead of a comfortable afternoon tucked away with a few cans of beer they have been over worked and under pressure. We have scored so many points they don't get a moments rest, and I am particularly concerned at the Wanderer's scorer who deserved a bonus after we totted up 76. The way we are playing things will get worse for them but at home our hi-tech system is in the capable hands of a veteran of the Royal Flying Corps in the Great War, former Leading Aircraftman Morgan A.

I will not attempt to write of Saturday's momentous win over Newbridge because our webmaster's account is as masterly as ever. How does a man note everything with one hand while clutching a can of Speckled Hen with the other? I am not buttering him up hoping he will give me a day off, (*I should think not, you had a day off in 2009 - Webmaster*) but his match reports are worthy of one of the thicker papers. My only comment on the game is that it was the biggest winning margin over Newbridge since the 1987/8 season when we won at home 36-0 and I have Alan Evans to thank for that statistic.

We were privileged to have Nigel Owen as referee. He has recently officiated in the other Championship, the one down under and hopefully enjoyed the way both sides played and the general atmosphere. The last time he refereed us was 29th March 2008 at Cardiff Arms Park in an important Premiership game because Cardiff, captained by Tristan Davies, lay second and we were third in the table but the gap widened when the Blue & Blacks won 21-0. Matthew Williams and Neil Edwards were in our lineup and a young full-back starred for Cardiff, Leigh Halfpenny.

Sixty years ago open attacking rugby was rare Ebbw Vale were one of the few clubs who practised it while others depended on forward power and kicking penalties. Under the old laws there was more grunting than running but there were exceptions. The 1951/2 Springboks unlike their successors in 1960/1 were popular off the field as well as on it and only lost one of their thirty-one games. The 'Boks had a great tour, Ebbw Vale were Welsh Club Champions and Wales won a fifth Grand Slam. You can't get better than that.

It might not be appropriate in a rugby context to mention violent words like "blitzkrieg" and "schwerpunkt" because our game is played by gentlemen who wouldn't hurt a fly. Another player maybe, but not a fly. "Blitzkrieg" means lightning war and the centre of gravity of the assault is the "schwerpunkt" which means to attack where the enemy is weakest. I have that on good authority but will not repeat that "schwer" word again.

The appeal by our President for funds to improve the training lights on Cae Canol is not quite as memorable as the Sermon on the Mount but has biblical overtones, "Let there be light" so we must get some. Success begins on the training field and it needs brightness. Just a thought, maybe the lads should train in pink tracksuits. That should draw a crowd.

REL

## THE SPEED OF LIGHT (230912)

Some time ago a bright spark tried to explain the speed of light to me. He failed, but having watched Ebbw score 212 points and 30 tries in the first four games this autumn I am getting to understand it. I like our web-master's description of the first minute of the second half on Saturday, "Ebbw were Bolt-like out of the blocks," a fashion not confined to the 1st XV. Last Wednesday our Development side put 42 points on a much favoured Bargoes outfit which led a prominent Ebbw Valian to say it was the most inspiring

experience in his time with the club. The promise shown by our youngsters, among them several RTB products, was immense and got everyone in the right mood for the Derby a few days later.

History was made when we scored nine tries against a club that was once formidable under the direction of great names like Ray Prosser who watched from the terrace. A 55-8 win over anybody is commendable, such a result in a Gwent Derby is unusual. One of the most difficult tasks at the moment is naming the Man of the Match because there are so many candidates, on Saturday the accolade went to our amazing No.8 Spencer Gibson, who some reckon is out of this world, which could mean Cwm, Rassau or maybe Pill. May the force always be with him

There was a good crowd and we were reunited with two favourites who played for both clubs. Still active and looking good was outside-half Sam Mills, a good player and a smashing bloke and on the bob bank was scrum-half Nigel Osborne who once held the try scoring record at Pontypool. No doubt there will be others on Saturday when Newbridge come to town. Already it looks like another three horse race for the title between the same horses that led the field in the last two Div.One East seasons. With respect to others Bargoed, Ebbw Vale and Newbridge are favourites to finish in the top three which makes Saturday's visit by the 'Bridge very important.

Neil Edwards said in the build-up to the 2010/11 season that we were a Premier side that happens to play in Division One and the same applies to Newbridge our closest neighbours in the Championship. We feel at home in both clubhouses and in a season of journeys into the unknown a short trip to an away game is very welcome. The great thing about rugby, which we take for granted is the hospitality and the welcome we get.

Before autumn internationals a major touring team would come to Europe every three years, to play thirty odd matches, four internationals and the majority against clubs and combined teams. There were also smaller tours and in February 1967 we combined with Newbridge to play the Sables at our ground. They were a South African Universities side and they included future Springboks. We won 6-5 which prompted a comment that it was "one of the best matches seen locally since the War; any war from Agincourt to WW2."

The first, but not the last, Development game was a great success and while the press ignore us and it is often impossible to get Championship results on the web, the clubs as well as the academies deserve credit for providing opportunities for the young. Scarlets boss Simon Easterby (whose brother Guy played for Ebbw Vale) has said that his region is ahead of the others in developing players. We are less boastful and do not claim we are ahead of any club but there is a great effort being made to bring on the young and set them on the yellow brick road.

All we need now is an open door to the Premier Division but it's still somewhere over the rainbow.

REL

RUGBY IS NOW A GAME OF CARDS (160912)

Watching rugby is not just about enjoying a game and supporting a team, it also exercises the mind by discussing the Laws of the Game which are enforced by one man armed with a whistle and authority invested in him by a body more powerful than the United Nations: the International Rugby Board. There's much to talk about because, being human, officials have differing interpretations of things like the off-side law, which tackles warrant stern

warnings or are relatively harmless, and even whether a throw-in goes the required five - metres which, in the absence of a neutral touch-judge, can be difficult to spot. Some penalties result in rugby's version of capital punishment, a ten minute whiff or even an early shower.

The wages of sin are having a coloured card waved in your face, a decision only one man can decide thus incurring the wrath of spectators whose player has been penalised or their approval if it's the other lot. Depleted teams often prevent their full strength opponents from taking advantage as we did at Margam when two of our players briefly shared the sin bin. Many will remember a win over Newport with thirteen men which makes us breathless even to talk about it..

Winning 36-14 away is an achievement, we scored three tries and two of them by Spencer Gibson and Polu Uni were little gems. The weather was fine, so was the pitch and we faced a well organised side who many visiting teams will find hard to beat. In the first few weeks of the season we have beaten the first and second placed teams in last season's Division One West, an interesting experience for the players and the many Ebbw Vale supporters who having said goodbye to TATA came away pondering on rugby's game of cards while looking forward to a sip of Reverend James whose mission apparently has not yet penetrated western Glamorgan.

All clubs have their glory days and their bad ones. Relegation in 2010 was bad but we shrugged it off and by a combined effort restored our pride and are set for a return to the top if the prevailing system lets us for nowadays events off the field often over shadow those on it. In 2010 Pontypool who return to Ebbw on Saturday were also in the relegation battle so the game on April 10th that year was very important. It would depend largely on the pack as all games do for the fundamental things still apply as time goes by.

We won but were still relegated and Pooler stayed in the Premier Division until the present season when they left it under controversial circumstances. Only one current Steelman who played that afternoon is still with us, the clubman of clubmen, Matthew Williams who scored one of only two tries in the game, Andrew Bevan getting the other. The word pyrrhic makes its first and probably last appearance in these notes but its dictionary definition fits the bill, a victory won at too great a cost to be of use to the victor.

No longer do we have a "trainer" who with only a bucket of water and a sponge would revive the stricken with a squirt whatever the injury. Now we have qualified physios who can deal with anything except a maternity case. Ours is Rhys Shorney who in 1998 set a league record of tries scored in a match, seven for Pontypridd which was equalled four years later by Lennie Woodard for Pontypool. Rhys played over a hundred games for Ebbw Vale and looks as fit as ever.

After both Olympic Games ended the PM said that 2012 would be as well remembered as 1966. Interesting but over the top because although the most important sporting event that year was Wales winning the Five Nations Championship they didn't get the Grand Slam. So why the fuss?

REL

ACCENTUATE THE POSITIVE (090912)

And eliminate the negative as the old song goes. We are a positive side that likes to attack and are positively ruthless in defence. We should bear in mind however that most of our players hadn't known, or played with, each other until recently. On Saturday we had

another big win and it could have been bigger but for some unforced errors, but the more you try the more mistakes are likely. There were many mischances, luckily for Narberth who were negative for most of the game, kicking a lot while we ran a lot. They were strong up front and although trailing by a considerable margin put on a lively final quarter effort. It was a very good win but we should not expect perfection at such an early stage. Perhaps we have been spoiled and expect every game to bring five points, but the pursuit of excellence will take time.

Narberth were a good bunch of players and officials and we can be assured of a warm welcome when we play there in the last game of the year. We scored six tries to two under the spirited captaincy of Mathew Williams who once again sent his fan club into raptures of delight. Chunky is decades away from being a veteran but there is a place for oldsters to keep playing in clubs like Narberth who run fourteen teams of various ages. One is a veteran' XV and recruits are assured that "games are played at the speed of a Rugby Special slow motion replay." Very considerate.

In the first game of the season Narberth had hammered TATA Steel who topped the table in 2011/12. But as a fair minded Narberth visitor said, TATA had a player red-carded and others were yellow carded which did their cause no good at all. He also said TATA are a very physical side but what team isn't? It all adds spice to Saturday's journey into the unknown. They don't know us either and, by the way, we are physical too.

TATA, who beat Pontypool 41-20 last Saturday, are known as the Saints but are not as famous as the Saints of Franklin's Gardens where we played every other year in pre-League days. John Powell was our President and Northampton was his home town, hence the connection. Going to Northampton was a popular trip especially as we established a tradition to stop at the White Hart, Stow-On-The-Wold on the way home. A lot of players were late for chapel next morning.

TATA's website tells us that they are not sponsored by TATA Steel Ltd., one of the world's largest producers and are self-sufficient. Since the game went professional the club has lost its local player base and apparently very few of their players work in the steelworks in Margam. Unlike them we have kept our local player base but sadly not steel-making.

The demise of the Ebbw Vale works did not mean the end of RTB RFC which among other achievements has developed countless youngsters in their many junior teams. We are close to RTs and last week announced that Keir the son of our former wing Mark Hughes has joined us on a development contract. It's always encouraging when the son of a Steelman wears the same colours as his father and we remember Mark very well.

The report from the front office on ticket sales is encouraging and we have more player sponsors than ever. Charlie Simpson for example is sponsored by Ebbw Vale Churches United which explains why he is such a divine runner.

REL

A MOST SATISFACTORY RESULT (020912)

I need no excuse to mention Clive Burgess in these notes and will do so later on. I thought of him at Ely and how much he and others of the past would love to play in the present Ebbw Vale side and under laws that were changed dramatically after they had retired. Every Ebbw player wants the ball, wants to use it, run with it and score tries with it, and on Saturday that reached a climax with twelve tries, a record in itself, and a 76-13 scoreline which was another.

The massive, superb win over a side that traditionally had bothered us on their own pitch was certain after a few minutes when the forwards surged all over the home eight and opened the scoring. From that moment it was a case of how many tries we would score but no-one except possibly Ashley Sweet and his marauding men thought we would get a round dozen. How the poor scoreboard operator felt we'll never know but the small home crowd went numb.

Our supporters despite the great win were not over-excited, they sank their post-match cups of tea quietly and marvelled at what they had seen. Despite a big lead at the half the lads kept up the momentum and never eased off, a tribute to their fitness which has been good in the past two years but is now excellent. Every player deserves a mention but one reminded me of the great Budgie who got the ball, made it his own and broke defences with surging runs. That's what No. 8 Spencer Gibson did time and time again – and on his debut.

Take no notice of the headline which modestly implies it was just another day at the office. I had thought to head this piece with "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" but I couldn't spell it. The coaches will put the game behind them, feet will remain firmly on the ground for there are harder games to come, but this was a performance we would only have dreamed of a few years ago. There is something special about our squad and also about the support they get because yet again we out-numbered the opposition. While we were running in tries at Ely, next Saturday's visitors Narberth scored six in a 45-21 win over TATA Steel so it should be another cracker.

Ebbw Vale was known for its heavy industry, Narberth still is for farming. Steelworkers and farmers brought power to the game and West Country clubs like Gloucester relied on huge men off the farms to win their games. It took more than skill and clever back play to win at Kingsholm and propping against a farmer who had been muck-spreading was not a happy experience.

The emphasis is on power nowadays, lifting weights is more fashionable than lifting pints and the tackling is fierce and never ending over eighty minutes so proper diets and body care is necessary. Ebbw Vale's club motto is as meaningful as ever, "Healthy Body, Healthy Mind," with the emphasis on the body. It is no longer necessary to work in heavy industry or farming to qualify for the man's game and internationals don't work at all. Training, especially here at Ebbw, is getting harder, players now go home after a session over-tired and under-beered.

Like Leicester Tigers, the Ospreys, various Bulls and Lions, Narberth too embraces the animal kingdom for they are known as Otters. Treorchy are Zebras which is also the name of the new Italian franchise in the Pro 12 league. They are not the first Italian side named Zebre, the first was an international select team based in Milan which from 1973-1996 attracted star players from the rugby world, among them Ebbw's Clive Burgess who was playing for Brescia at the time. Thanks to Clive we played three games in Italy in 1983, one against the Zebre who fielded eight internationals one of them Budgie. He would have revelled in Ely 2012.

REL

RAINDROPS KEPT FALLING ON OUR HEADS (260812)

It didn't rain on Friday night it tamped down, a monsoon if there ever was one. Add some mist and a reddish sky that might have signalled a Martian invasion and you don't have the scenario for a rugby match. But the hellaments did not deter the players who should be

congratulated for giving us a good game which although a friendly was as intense as a League encounter. If someone had to win then of course it should be Ebbw and so it was. It augured well for the impending season and when the Ebbw Vale coaches and players dried out they must have been more than satisfied.

All we needed to complete a typical August night was thunder and lightning and we got both. The thunder from the pack who drove the mighty 'Quins back and matched them in everything else while the lightning came courtesy of the backs. Our try was a cracker, scrum-half Chris Thomas with his sniping run belying the saying that lightning never strikes twice. The green, grass of home was pitch-perfect and it was a pleasant hour out of the house.

It's a few years since we won all our pre-season friendlies and this time the games against Blackwood and Carmarthen 'Quins were particularly strenuous. Neil Edwards sent out a bunch of keen, enthusiastic and very fit players, most of them young in age or heart, Mathew Williams being in the latter category. The next day while watching New Zealand v Australia I decided that Kiwi hooker Mealamu is the Chunky of the All-Blacks. There's no greater praise than that.

On Saturday we begin a journey not unknown because it ends where many of our hopes have begun. Are you still with me? If so I refer to the Memorial Ground, Ely the home of one of the most unpredictable clubs on the circuit and a suburban backwater that brings back unhappy memories of games unaccountably lost. But we laid the bogey there in our first fixture last season and not only did we win we got a bonus point, some consolation for our army of supporters who were surprised at the cost of entry to the ground.

The bogey was not just laid it was buried. We beat them 30-14 down there and 50-11 up here an aggregate of 80-25 with 12 tries into the bargain. Ely is not far from Westgate Street where the Cardiff Blues return this season after low attendances at the football stadium they rented. Clubs in the Blues region have benefited playing-wise so who knows who we will face on Saturday. But it's irrelevant, last season we beat three Premier clubs and like Ol' Blue Eyes we did it our way.

Those of a certain age look forward to meeting an Ebbw Valian in Ely. Dai Amos, a native of what denizens call the Holy City, Cwm played in one of the liveliest packs in Wales in the immediate post-war years - the Second not the Boer - and then moved to Cardiff which was not officially the capital then. He gave great service to the Wands and will be there on Saturday wearing his Ebbw tie when no doubt we will talk about the old days and how different they were.

One example of how rugby has changed beyond recognition is news from London Welsh that didn't even cause a ripple in rugby circles. Their signing of a Romanian prop and a Russian lock recalls a controversy thirty-six years ago at Old Deer Park when an England outside-half Neil Bennett joined the Exiles from Bedford along with "other foreign players." Opponents of the move were deeply angered, which in those days meant writing letters to The Times, claiming the purpose of the club was to provide for purely Welsh players. Presumably London Irish had the same idea but no longer, their latest signing Yanuyanutawa sounds more like a Japanese admiral than an Irishman. Top rugby is nothing more than an export and import business these days.

REL

WELCOME THE BOGEY MEN (200812)

Until the 21st century our only regular opponents in Carmarthenshire were Llanelli and in the days when Carwyn James played opposite Wilf Hunt the games were very exciting and away wins were rare. What wasn't rare was the cross kick by a wing to the centre of the field where a lurking team-mate would collect it and score a try. The ploy was seen at its best in a winning home game with Llanelli (as it was known then) in the 1950s when we scored five tries, three from cross-kicks.

The best known cross kick was by a flanker not a wing. Clem Thomas playing for Wales against New Zealand at the Arms Park in 1953 found himself on the touchline with the ball, kicked it into the middle and Blaenavon bred Ken Jones of Newport, an Olympic silver medallist five years earlier, took the bounce and scored the try brought our last victory over the All-Blacks. My family has a good record against them, an uncle saw Wales win in 1905, my father in 1935 and "I was there" in 1953. Sadly the family tradition has failed ever since.

When the new century arrived so did Carmarthen 'Quins. We first met in 2000/01, a Cup game at their ground which we won 32-25, and two seasons later we again played there in a Cup tie and scraped a 13-8 win. It was a crazy time in Welsh club rugby with games in a Welsh/Scottish League, European Shield, Celtic League, Welsh League and Parker Pen Cup. Whoever was responsible probably left the country to avoid lynching. It meant long and expensive away trips with no benefit.

The 'Quins were promoted to the Premier Division in 2003/04 and that began a series of defeats at their hands. Until we parted company through relegation we played eight League games against them and only won once. We even lost two friendlies but broke the bogey last season when we beat them in the Cup 16-6. We were in a sequence of four undefeated Cup games against Premier opposition and beating the 'Quins was a real scalp.

Friday's game with them will be a dress rehearsal for the new Championship but there's also a new one in the southern hemisphere, not as important as ours perhaps but worth a mention. Argentina joins the Big Three and the Tri-Nations is now called The Rugby Championship. The Pumas were purely amateur when they toured Wales for the first time in 1976 and Hugo Porta was rated the finest attacking outside-half brought by any touring team to Britain.

Our own Gary Lawrence played opposite him for East Wales who lost 25-22, the tourists then beat Cardiff and Aberavon but lost to West Wales by two points and Wales by one, Phil Bennett's late penalty saving the day. But as John Billot wrote, "the Pumas are no longer an emerging rugby power, they have arrived." It will be tough for them down under but we wish them luck.

We don't depend on luck and, like the players, the supporters are raring to go, having warmed up at Blackwood and Gwernyfed. Player spotting beats train spotting and the young talent in deepest Powys warmed hearts and brought seven tries. There was talk among the veteran supporters of buying a pint for every try the team scores but they just can't afford it anymore.

The pleasure of seeing our lads in sporting pose doesn't end with the final whistle, we can then enjoy the marvellous pics of the team displayed on our website. It's remarkable the quality you get with a Kodak Brownie.

REL

## THE DAY THE EAGLES LANDED (120812)

Professional rugby players wonder how amateurs managed to train and play first-class rugby while working full-time. Some, like the majority of the famous 1971 Welsh team had white collar jobs, but for farmers it was not nine to five but all-day toil whatever the weather. Combining rugby with that, especially if the club was many miles away, called for dedication and loyalty in the extreme. Gwernyfed, only founded in 1965 and admitted to the WRU in 1996, is where Robert Stephens began his rugby career, a village in Breconshire which boasted a County team that revitalised the Welsh Counties Championship in the 80s. Alas rugby has changed, not always for the best, and County rugby is one of its victims.

In the 1980s some fine players joined us from Breconshire, served us superbly and went back to their roots to help the local game. Gwernyfed's Team Manager is Des Parry and two of their six coaches are Alun Phillips and Chay Billen. One of our greatest flankers, and that's saying a lot, Robert Stephens did something in October 1987 no modern player would even contemplate, he played two games against international opposition in four days and farmed in between!

In October 1987 he played against the United States Eagles for Breconshire on a Wednesday and for Ebbw Vale on the following Saturday. Other Ebbw Valians turned out for Breconshire but only Rob played in both games. It was a labour of love, there was no big cheque at the end of it and everyday work could not be put aside for there are no days off on a farm. The Americans lost at Brecon, 15-9, then crossed the moors to our ground where a new clubhouse was being built and it was at that end the drama unfolded and they snatched defeat out of the jaws of victory. The Eagles scored three tries to one by Ceri Jonathan but were beaten by the boot of our bi-lingual full-back Arwel Parry who was beloved by S4C. Everything depended on a final lineout five metres from our line and an American throw-in. It was delayed, we got a free kick, cleared our lines and won 16-14. The Eagles were learning and got more lessons at Glamorgan Wanderers in their next game losing 25-6, but they shook the Welsh scene at The Gnoll of all places and beat Neath 15-6 followed by a 21-15 victory over Pembrokeshire in Whitland, but in the final tour game Wales were too strong and won 46-0.

The season the Eagles came ended with the first Triple Crown for Wales in nine years and Ebbw Vale hooker Ian Watkins kept his place after going on as a replacement in the first game at Twickers. Ian was in the Vale pack that beat the Eagles who were given a great after match party in the Lever Hall. The programme was full of stories of Ebbw's three American tours and not surprisingly one headline was "The Eagle Has Landed"

The game at Blackwood was a "friendly" the like of which has taken over from pre-season trials, but this one was more interesting because we will play Blackwood in the Championship. It does matter who wins and after a scrappy first half that's what we did, 26-19. It was serious enough for our supporters who once again filled an away clubhouse and are already in the mood.

On Saturday we play at Gwernyfed for the first time and will meet old friends so a welcome is assured and also an interesting game because Gwernyfed did well last season beating their closest rivals Brecon twice. The next Olympic Games will be in Rio and rugby will be included. Luckily it's the Sevens variety so masters of masculinity like props won't be involved thus avoiding the embarrassment of them being given posies of flowers. Beer vouchers yes, flowers no.

REL

## FRIENDLIES AND FIXTURES (010812)

Our pre-season friendlies are more local this year but welcome nevertheless because we have strong connections with three of the four clubs and face Premier opposition with the team we defeated in the Cup last season, Carmarthen 'Quins. Players from Powys and Abergavenny have filled our ranks successfully and we are getting much closer to RTBs at senior and junior level thus giving a real meaning to community rugby. The large numbers training all want to play for Ebbw and there will be real competition for places. Also in training are the supporters who will add colour and vocal backing wherever and whenever their team plays.

In the recent past friendlies were played against English clubs like Moseley and Coventry, the latter taking the August game so seriously they charged £15 admission! When Barking came we looked forward to meeting their coach, Alex Codling, again and his influence was apparent. It was played at Brynmawr School ground and we were taught a few lessons that ended in an embarrassing 20-5 defeat. We did much better a fortnight later at Worcester where Mike Ruddock was in charge and only lost 21-20 but it was a false dawn. The campaign that followed was desultory, disappointing and disastrous. We went down but then a new Ebbw appeared, the gloom lifted and two title wins followed. A third is our target this winter.

We made several first time visits to clubs in the last two seasons and there will be three more this time, Whitland, Bridgend Athletic and Tata Steel. The latter will bring two steel town teams together for the first time since we played Aberavon, the difference being that they still make steel in Margam and we don't. We said ta-ta to that many years ago.

In the pre-League days one of our regular and favourite opponents were Cardiff Training College whose most famous product was Gareth Edwards. It was re-named South Glamorgan Institute then UWIC and is now officially Cardiff Metropolitan University. If the CMU team is as good and as enterprising as their predecessors we can expect exciting encounters.

We note with pleasure that Beddau have made it to the Championship and recall our last visit there which coincided with a well attended local wedding reception in their clubhouse, Welsh cakes included. It's far too soon to speculate but Bargoed and Newbridge who both presented problems in the last two seasons will be dangerous again, and no-one should under-rate Pontypool who have been relegated after a traumatic on and off field summer.

Spare a thought for Ebbw Vale Cricket Club whose fixtures have been ruined by the heavy rain this summer. Once upon a time many of our players quickly turned to cricket when May came and so over the years we have a close relationship with the local club. A word too for the ground staff who at a high altitude care for rugby, football, cricket and bowls and annually produce a superb sporting arena. All systems are go for them and us as the winter game approaches, there is a lot to look forward to, including Welsh cakes at Beddau.

In the outside world former Steelmen have moved to pastures new. Prop Duncan Bell, five times capped by England as a Bath player, is now coach to Lydney where we once played on a Wednesday night long ago. Iestyn Thomas who played here with Duncan and was capped from Ebbw Vale and many more times from Llanelli is forward coach at the Dragons, and lock Deiniol Jones, also capped from Ebbw and then Cardiff is team manager at the Blues who are fervently hoping their return to the Arms Park will improve their attendances. We expect ours to go up in a new League and our opponents will undoubtedly benefit when the Addicts Army invades them.

REL

## A SUNNY DAY IN EBBW TOWN \* (230712)

Something strange happened on Saturday, it didn't rain. Well it wouldn't would it? Not when the third annual pre-season Steelmen's "bash" was being held in the forecourt of one of Ebbw's historic buildings – Faletau House. In the car park where young Toby once played RTB Juniors had a great time with the Ebbw squad which was good fun and even attracted recruits to the RTB club which does so much for youth in the town. It was a family affair, a typical EVRFC gathering with players and supporters meeting and getting to know each other, some for the first time for we have new Steelmen to welcome. Season tickets went like hot Welsh cakes and a good time was had by all and sundry.

Trophies won by Wales last season were on view, a reminder of 2005 when the coach of the Welsh team brought the Grand Slam silverware to the club for all to see and touch. It was the first Grand Slam for 27 years and the coach was of course Mike Ruddock who had coached Ebbw after laying the foundations of the great Leinster side.

There have been 36 Grand Slams since the first in 1908 and 63 Triple Crowns since 1883. Denzil Williams and Arthur Lewis were in the 1971 Grand Slam side, a legendary group who today would be near millionaires, and most of them – but amazingly not Denzil – formed the backbone of the 1971 Lions who won a series in New Zealand for the first time. Denzil was also a Triple Crown winner in 1965 and 1969 followed by Clive Burgess in 1977 and Ian Watkins in 1988.

The death of Jack Matthews, the centre the Kiwis called Iron Man after his crash tackling on the 1950 Lions tour, has brought back many memories including the day he came to Ebbw Vale for the game with our favourite opponents, Cardiff. It was the middle 80s and we didn't have a clubhouse (burned) or a grandstand (certified unsafe after the Bradford disaster) so we took the visitors to the King in Newtown for a pre-match drink.

Doctor Jack and his side-stepping centre partner Bleddyn Williams, were unbeatable, one might say unplayable which is how a London Welshman recently described Gavin Henson. He meant well but his choice of words was unfortunate. With Jack that day was another crushing tackler, Claude Davey who before the Second World War played 22 times for Wales and was in the 1935 Swansea and Wales teams that beat the All-Blacks which must be a record of sorts.

Alan Morgan is not one to drop names but he often talks of meeting Bleddyn Williams and Jack Matthews in Cardiff Athletic Club on the 11th of October 2008 before and after our game with the Blue & Blacks. We won 26-25, Aaron Bramwell converting a try in an exciting finale Llyr Lane will remember because he played for us that day. It compensated for the 21-0 defeat there the previous March when a young lad named Halfpenny scored a try and converted three tries.

After topping Division One East for two seasons we should really be in the Premier Division but nothing is as simple as that in Welsh club rugby. The new Championship, a brain-child of someone at HQ is the next minefield we have to get through. Under-funded it certainly will be with more travelling, but there will be a few local Derbies to look forward to. Saturday's party began the season socially and ended rather late for many, but the real party is yet to come.

REL

\* The headline? I was listening to 'Ol Blue Eyes singing "A Foggy Day In London Town" at the time.

#### THERE'S GOOD NEWS AND EVEN BETTER NEWS (150712)

The last time I went to the pictures on a Saturday morning Hopalong Cassidy was the main feature and Popeye was the cartoon. But last Saturday I escaped the summer cold and went to the General Offices to see a film recently made featuring the Steelmen. The occasion was rather special because the audience, sitting on the floor like Bedouin, was made up of the Ebbw squad, and you can't have better than that. It was a movie that moved you, a sort of slide show of the club's great players of the past and emotion too when the leading lady, Angharad of the famous Simpsons, told the world why she couldn't get enough of doing things for the club. There wasn't a dry eye in the house as she outdid Shirley Temple who also appeared regularly in the old Plaza. Not that Angharad will remember her. Popeye maybe, our Shirl no.

There's talk of the film being shown on the big screen at the Millennium Stadium, so the sight and sound of the Steelmen will reach an even bigger audience. It was an unusual Saturday morning and much better than potching around the house and pulling up weeds. It's always nice to be among nice company and as Confucius didn't say, if you want to stop feeling old hang around with young people.

That was the second feel-good experience of the week-end. The first was reading an article in the Argus with scrum-half Robert Lewis, who has joined Cardiff Blues, in which he is reported as saying he has "fond memories of his spell with Ebbw Vale," and thoroughly enjoyed his time at the club where "the fans were fantastic and so were the rest of the boys." Rob also said, "I'm a proud Ebbw Valian and reckon I will probably even finish my career there." Then came more good news that on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> August we will play a friendly at Gwernyfed in the heart of Powys where we will meet up with former great players of the 80s, men of the soil who travelled a long way to train and play for us with no monetary reward. The Breconian Mafia were marvellous on and off the field, first-class players and smashing blokes like Chay Billen, Robert Stephens, Alun Phillips and Des Parry.

Before that on Saturday we have the summer "bash" at the ground when everyone, just everyone, will be there. All of this whips up expectation as the season gets nearer and when that starts, as Angharad said, we won't get enough of it. There's a lot to look forward to and season tickets to buy. Have you got yours yet?

REL

#### BRAVEHEARTS AND HIGH HOPES (030712)

I interrupt my summer cruise down the reaches of the Ebbw because there is alarming news from the land of Braveheart (Hollywood's version). Despite losing three Tests in Oz we still consider ourselves best of the Celts but now a shadow has fallen on us. In Scotland, where men occasionally wear skirts and Sean Connery wants to be President, their rugby union, rejoicing after beating Australia in pouring rain, Fiji and Samoa, has declared a four year strategic plan which includes securing a Six Nations Grand Slam AND winning the next World Cup. According to a spokesman, "With unity and support from the whole nation, there is no reason we can't achieve these goals." Speaking of goals one assumes that the "whole nation" includes those who support Celtic and Rangers.

The clans are rising like the froth on a pint of McEwans, the pipes are skirling, the pipers

are puffing and their gentle melodies echo through the glens. But where are the English, French, Irish and us? Don't we want to win everything too? If the Jocks can launch such a plan why can't we? Then there's Italy of course, surely they too can get a Grand Slam and win the next World Cup. Not forgetting Namibia.

It's as optimistic as a former small Urban District Council which once declared itself a nuclear free zone but didn't tell the bad guys. Hope is a fine thing but after too many decades of seeing them dashed, for example the Championship lost by a whisker in 1976/77 or more recently the semi-final at Rodney Parade, I can only say that hope won't win a World Cup.

There is better news from Pontygof. The tribes - we don't have clans - are gathering and soon the training pitches in the Borough will sound with the thundering hooves of young and mature men readying themselves for the new rugby season. And once again togetherness will be the theme when soldiers and civvies gather for the August answer to a Buckingham Palace Garden Party. We will meet again and ask how the summer went and whose round it is. I have one serious question to ask, was that our Irene we spotted in the crowd Down Under yelling Wales on? I hope so, I've told everyone I know someone who has been on TV.

My annual pilgrimage to the Isle of Jersey begins shortly and this year will be enhanced by the news that recently a hoard of valuable old coins have been found there. Ebbw played Jersey in October 1979 so its probably the beer kitty hidden by the Treasurer, Alan Morgan but I shall take my mine detector and traipse the golden beaches for more and promise to donate same to the kitty the Treasurer is building up so we can buy the best bottled water for the sweating throng wearing our new kit. On the other hand I might not traipse farther than the Mary Ann brewery.

Just a word of warning to our fellow Celts north of two borders. Planning is one thing, getting there is another and in the case of a World Cup win there are Kiwis, Wallabies and Springboks in the way. Don't imagine that the best laid plans will result in success and ignore spin doctors. Even if the Jocks don't get the Grand Slam next season or win the next World Cup they are still tops in Salmon fishing. Sorry Alex, nothing personal.

REL

FINAL THOUGHTS FROM VICTORIA (130512)

It's time to go into hibernation. Cricket has started so we can expect heavy rain, and Saturday afternoons won't be the same until September. Season 2011/12 ended with a bang, the players scored 106 points without reply in the last two games and then joined in holy communion with their followers for the nosh-up of the year. The ladies dressed up and some of their men folk had a swill under the tap because it was Awards Night in Pontygof, Europe's answer to the Academy Awards ceremony in downtown LA. The difference was that we had a cooked dinner – but no sprouts – and they didn't.

The world of entertainment was represented by the Two Ronnies. There was Ronny Kynes the Player of the Year and Ronny Kynes the Player's Player; a double act loudly applauded and accompanied by fruity comments from his mates. It's a long time since we had a player called Joe so young Bartlett is a novelty to say the least. He won the Most Promising Player award although we don't know what, and to whom, he promised something. Buying a pint for everybody maybe? Those awards show how good and fast our assembly line is and why so many young players want to get on it but don't forget those of us approaching the forties. Maturity matters as Clubman of the Year (should be

decade) Mathew Williams alias Chunky shows every time he goes on the field and the opposition tremble. The bad news is that he's retiring – in ten years time.

Four times Club captain Gareth Howls was present and so was former scrum-half Nigel Osborne, former colleagues of Clive Burgess whose Man of Steel award went to Ashley Sweet who once again dominated every lineout he played in. Damien Hudd was presented with another trophy named after an Ebbw great, the Denzil Williams Captain's Award and did everyone a favour by not displaying his leg wound which kept him in hospital while his lads were playing in the memorable league clincher at Tredegar. He's such a big bloke and so important to our cause that we accepted his excuse without a murmur.

Those who worked their socks off for the club behind the scenes were duly recognised and so was The Voice who compeered the evening brilliantly and was loudly applauded with one of several chants in the supporters' repertoire – *Nellie, Nellie, Nellie*. The catering was very good and the Reverend Waggett (By Appointment to H M The Queen) put in a cameo appearance. All in all a cracking night out with nice people with some comic turns that didn't cost us a penny. They included a mock auctioneer in the guise of Mark Powell who emptied some pockets, one item being a genuine, post-Stalinist Russian rugby shirt which was snapped up quickly in case the KGB got to know about it. It was the genuine article according to the President but as he is a lawyer can we trust him? Neit.

The evening that turned into day was a perfect end to an almost perfect season and now is the time to put the bottle of Quink away, lay down the Parker Pen, unwind the computer and start thinking of the first match programme and which cliché to put in it. Until then keep taking the tablets, and the occasional Reverend James.

REL

HAIL THE CHAMPIONS 020512

After seeing his team lose an irate American fan shouted, "Hey coach, there's a bus leaving for Chicago at midnight, be under it." After seeing another Ebbw Vale title win one of our fans should have shouted, "Hey coach, there's an open top bus leaving the Crossing at noon, be on it." Returning Lions Denzil Williams and Arthur Lewis waved to crowds from the top of a bus in the 70s so why can't our lads be honoured in the same way?

For the second year running we celebrated winning Division One East away from home but with a major difference. At Bedlinog we were still getting our breath back and putting nerves in order after a game that should have been easy but ended in drama as we snatched the vital winning bonus point. In Tredegar it was all over at half-time when we led 33-0. It was bitterly cold but it got warmer with every try we scored. One was a cracker by Dorian the Kicker turned Darter who ran so far and fast he ended up in Trefil. After the match the players celebrated melodically which would have pleased the Reverend Eli Jenkins of Under Milk Wood fame who said, "Thank God we are a musical nation." The players rendered, meaning to take apart, what our reporter called a classic. I'll take his word for it.

When a team wins coaches adopt modest poses even when bursting with triumphant joy. Neil Edwards who has been known to bellow forth says all the right things after a game but has made loud speakers redundant. Inscrutable Jason, of Brynmawr not the Argonauts, is always cool as he was when winning games for Bristol and the outrageously fit Llyr Lane keeps in good condition by dashing on the field bearing messages from on high and keeping the lads fighting fit.

The only Steelman not at Tredegar was club captain Damien Hudd who was recovering from an operation the success of which will ensure he's fit and ready for the Championship at the end of which we fully expect to be Champions. The late stages of a campaign are often shaky, remember Bedlinog, and when Damien got injured we needed a man to take over. That was Tristan Davies who not only took the trophy, a posh vase, but didn't drop it. You can trust Tristan.

We didn't need to beat Mountain Ash to keep the title but the players wanted to finish in style at home and they did after an early period when the pack laid down the law and scored the points. Scoring over a hundred points in the last two games is yet another record. In the last two seasons we have enjoyed almost total success losing only six of forty-four League games and three wins, a draw and one loss in the Cup. Statistics can be misleading but ours are worth remembering and the coaches have nothing but praise for their squad. The supporters rather like them too.

On Friday May 11th all will be revealed at the social event of the year, a sort of Ascot indoors or the Oscar ceremonies in LA but without the cameras. The Awards Dinner marks the end of a season of content and also of the weekly sermon, never as inspiring or as serious as that given by the club padre before his biggest congregation ever last week. But on his television debut why did he appear in vestments not Steelmen replica kit?

Two years ago we were pondering and wondering, with no hope of an answer, what life would be like in the 1st Division, but very soon following a meeting of the entire club we were confident that we would rise from the depths of despair. Thanks to many on and off the field we not only survived but showed Welsh rugby that, as Neil said, we are a Premier club that happens to be playing in the 1st Division. The Cup run proved that so we can face the new Championship with confidence. As for the padre, if he ever gets on Songs of Praise he had better be properly dressed.

REL

HERE IS THE NEWS 220412

The bad news first. We lost at home for the first time in just over a year and in doing so failed to claim the Div One East title there and then, not that it matters where and when as long as we win it. Now the good news, we need only two points out of the ten we can get from two games against the two bottom teams in the league. We have not been used to losing and certainly not at home so we felt deflated and disappointed on Saturday night. Newbridge lived up to their reputation of being as strong, determined and able a side as they always were. Credit to them for upsetting an apple cart, pity it was ours, but one 11 year old had a good day, she met one of her two rugby heroes again – Andrew Bevan. The other is Brian O'Driscoll!

Tredegar, away on Saturday, and Mountain Ash on Wednesday May 2nd will not, cannot, be taken for granted and this week's training will be as important as any pre-game preparation this season. However, with due respect to most of the clubs we have played, the main contest has been confined to three who form a league within a league, Bargoed, Newbridge and Ebbw, although good ol' Gilfach Goch have had their moments. In the six games between the three not one got a winning bonus point, but in each there was a losing bonus point. That's how close it was.

The Cup adds glamour to a season but the real test is the league programme where consistency counts. This is our second and last season in Division One, it's been a great experience and we have made new friends in the heartland of Welsh rugby but it's time to

move on to something new and there's nothing newer than the Championship. We'll meet Newbridge again next season and are ensured of another close run Derby which is what we certainly had last Saturday.

We have shown, in four tough Cup games, that we can compete with the best in Welsh club rugby and next season we can step up a gear in the new Championship. I sense an air of rugby camaraderie in Gwent, long established clubs in both top divisions have met on the field, coaches got together and supporters shared exciting games in the best of spirits although the majority prefer beer. Perhaps the fact that three of the four Swalec semi-finalists came from the Western Valley will penetrate the minds of Them and Castell Gwent will be recognised again.

Match programmes record a club's history and thanks to that famous hoarder of relics, Alan Morgan, I now have a lot to browse through, in between gardening of course. Reading them it's clear that while the structure of the game has changed some aspects have not but Alan is used to change, he's a Liverpool supporter. In the programme of our game at Cardiff on 29 April 2000 an article by Robin Davey of the South Wales Argus began, "The Ebbw Vale experience is one of the most heart-warming success stories in Welsh rugby this season." The same could be said now.

It has been encouraging of late, and entertaining, to see former players at our games. Kingsley and Josh are regulars and so is Alan Tovey a Wales B centre who could have played for Wales. Last Saturday Des Parry and Robert Stephens, two outstanding Breconians appeared, some saying they were seeking former Treasurer Alan Morgan for expenses he owed them! Also there for a special reason was Phil Easley who is in regular touch with Fred Smit, a Springbok cap, who played for us and has given Phil a unique set of South African jerseys.

F C as he was known to us was an outstanding forward and although he was only in the team a short time has become a legend. It is appropriate then that the jerseys which Phil has given the club are now permanently on show in the Legends Bar. The frame is particularly fine and has been provided by Alan Morgan who remembers the good old days and the South Africans very well. However he can't remember anything about players' expenses.

REL

WELCOME HOME THE UNBOWED AND UNBEATEN 170412

I dislike political spin doctors who dress up the news to suit their ends but don't mind giving it a go when it comes to more important matters like rugby, so let's start this belated chat on Saturday's semi-final by issuing a statement from No. 3 that Ebbw Vale never lost a game in their magnificent, superb, amazing Cup run. We had the toughest call; unlike the other three, each of our opponents in the run-up to the semis was in the Premier Division and we wouldn't have wanted it any other way. Now the dust has settled over the classic Gwent confrontation we rue the final result in Cup terms but are immensely proud – and that's not spin – of our lads. And they ARE ours, a perfect mix of youth and experience that can take on the best.

When they take the field they always get a rousing reception but last Saturday there was the biggest eruption of noise since Vesuvius blew its top, and therein lies a tale. Two Ebbw Vale followers made the mistake of the century, they booked a trip to Italy long ago only to find it coincided with semi-final day and Ebbw were in it. Viewing Vesuvius from a safe distance they held their mobiles tensely until the result came through and Ebbw's

outstanding performance was known. There was however some compensation over the Cup exit with the sight of red, white and green flags fluttering everywhere which was rather nice of the natives.

Our support base was multiplied at Rodney Parade, so many coaches and cars took Neil's Army to the field of battle it looked like an invasion force, as indeed it was. They were disappointed when the final fateful whistle blew but here's another bit of spin talk: we have not lost at Newport this season. Hopefully the same addicts who went south for the game will travel a much shorter distance next Saturday when we play another very important match, for the League title is within three points reach and as Newbridge came near to Pontypridd in their semi we can expect a major challenge to our ground record. Some say that, as the Bridge are out of the title race, they will not be motivated but don't believe them, Newbridge are playing Ebbw and that's all the motivation they need.

Three Gwent clubs in last week's semi-finals reminded many when club rugby in the county was particularly strong. It was a time when Arthur Lewis, Denzil Williams, Alun Pask, Hadyn Morgan, the Pontypool front row were automatic choices for Wales. They played regularly for the clubs and even early exits from the Cup did not lessen the interest as the seasons drew to a close, thanks to games with some of Britain's best. End of season tours were looked forward to by players and supporters who could afford it and get time off from work including an Ebbw Vale couple whose names I forget and if I remembered I would not dare mention them. They spent their honeymoon in Cornwall when, coincidentally, Ebbw were playing three games there but there is no record of the bride being told beforehand. At least they didn't miss a game unlike the two aforementioned who abandoned us for Italy.

Our season, even greater than the last, is by no means over. We have three League games left and the first of them is a reminder of a year ago when we won the race for the title by a neck from Newbridge. There's a lot riding on Saturday's match but it's also a homecoming after a Cup run only surpassed when we reached the final in 1998 with one big difference, we were a fully professional side then. What coaches, players, the support team, administrators and of course the Addicts Army, have done is remarkable. It was what the club badly needed following relegation and cannot be under-estimated. Welcome home mon braves, and finally – think of what the final will miss now we are not in it.

REL

EBBW REIGNS AT RAINY RUMNEY 090412

Riverside Park was wet, umbrellas were brought out and most of them were coloured red, white and green. The spirit of the Ebbw supporters was not dampened, Rumney battled from start to finish but they forgot one of rugby's commandments, thou shalt not kick the ball to a side like Ebbw. We have often praised the speed of our lads, how often they cut defences apart with skill and sheer pace. They are good, very good, but let us remember that the ball they get, unless it's gifted by the opposition, comes from the forwards. Rumney's spirited effort was not helped when two of their players were shown yellow thus transgressing another commandment, thou shalt not give away daft penalties when your backs are to the wall.

Watching a game alongside the touchline gives a new perspective compared to viewing from our bob bank or grandstand, which is where you sit, unless it's on one of a dozen or so plastic seats at Rumney. They turn out several teams every Saturday and deserve great credit for that but had nothing to offer but guts and endeavour as the score suggests. Despite the chill and rain in suburban Kerdiff after the game everyone did what rugby

people do after shivering for two hours, get warm in the clubhouse drinking cold beer.

We have supporters in all parts of the civilised world as well as backward areas where they kick round balls and each other. Emlyn Davies lives in Canada where the main sport doesn't use a ball but a puck but the former Cwm player left his heart, not in San Francisco, but Ebbw Vale where little cable cars don't climb halfway to the stars although some will remember drams going up the Domen. Like others away from the Welsh scene he is surprised we will not play in the Premier Division next season. So are many others, but the new Championship awaits us and some of our away trips will head west which means strange beer and more expense which should be borne by those who send us there. For players no road is too long, they are on what Graham Henry incessantly called a learning curve except that ours is straight.

A Cup campaign gets harder as it goes on, but the experience of playing in it does young players the world of good. Saturday will be our fourth Cup semi-final in twelve seasons and the first at Rodney Parade where it all began last January. It doesn't matter which dressing room we are allocated, if it's the visitors the boys will feel at home and then run out to the sound of their devoted followers who believe they are the best Ebbw Vale side, regardless of status, we have had for several seasons. I occasionally (!) exaggerate but not this time.

We have played Cross Keys twice in the Cup and honours are even. In 1980/1 we were home to Keys led by their new coach, Arthur Lewis, who had played for and coached us. We lost 13-12 but in 1985/6 the Keys came again and we won 16-9 after trailing 6-0. Skipper Neil Robinson rallied his troops but Clive Burgess never needed encouragement and both scored a try.

We have two remaining home fixtures which means two match programmes whose covers show one of the greatest rugby photos of all time, Budgie confronting Gareth Edwards in a 1978 Cup quarter-final. We lost, but Clive was the man who stood out and thanks to a sharp photographer we are constantly reminded of it. The Cardiff side on the 25th February 1978 was captained by Gerald Davies who was described in our programme thus, "his course is as dodgy as a Minister answering questions in the Commons," which still applies and "his footwork made Fred Astaire look like a Morris Dancer wearing a jock strap two sizes too small." Oh for those days when English literature was at its best.

REL

#### THE FASTEST GUNS IN THE EAST 030412

And in the West, for there is no other team in Division One with so much speed in thought and action. Rugby's three Ps, pace, possession and position were displayed in style against a plucky, somewhat inexperienced Merthyr side that earned respect for their effort and were good company after the game. Neil Edwards had said the preparation was every bit as intense as it was for the Cup tie against Swansea and so it proved. Minor worries of anti-climax after the Cup win were quickly dispelled, ten tries were scored and only one of them was not converted. It was our highest score since we beat Dunvant 68-24 in the 1999/2000 Welsh-Scottish League and before that in 1997/8 against Namibia 75-7.

Although tries hit the headlines the goal-kicking should not be forgotten. Conversions and penalty kicks keep pushing the score ahead and there's no time wasting by Dorian Jones. Not for him the long preparation or the golfer's stance, he tees up the ball, takes up a few steps and over it goes. His partner for most of the game was Dai Jones who was named Man of the Match. Years ago a great Ebbw Vale character, Dai Regan Jones, played for Leicester Tigers who also wear red, white and green kit which is one reason I support

them from afar. Between us last Saturday we crossed for seventeen tries and didn't have to bother with penalty goals.

My favourite moment was Charlie Simpson's diagonal run out of his half which seemed to be heading for the supporters on the terrace. Was he defecting? Had he lost all sense of direction? Why didn't the Ironmen nail him? Charlie is the darling to many Ebbw ladies and outpaced everyone including his own team-mates and turned north to good effect. It reminded me of an old Nat Cole song "Straighten Up and Fly Right."

It was another giant step, not by Neil Armstrong for mankind but towards another Division title. Our coaches have taken us into space, Cloud Nine to be exact, but their feet remain firmly on the ground. The Division has not been won yet, but hopefully we won't leave it to the last game to be certain. The signs are good, after 22 league games last season and 18 in this one we have won 35 and lost five which according to my wind-up calculator produces a success rate of 87.50%.

We are used to winning but in Manchester known for its two warring football clubs there's a rugby club whose results have also made headlines. In 2009 Manchester RFC were relegated from England's second tier whereupon they lost their players and their way and are now in League 3 (Midlands). They then began to create the wrong kind of record and lost 87 consecutive games until a few weeks ago they beat Old Northamptonians and three hundred loyal (and they must be) supporters went wild. How old their opponents were is not recorded but Manchester's revival was short lived. On Saturday while we scored 68 points their opponents also scored 68 without reply! Our supporters have got used to seeing their win all the time, but spare a thought for rugby minded Mancunians whose only hope is another win this century.

There's concern in rugby circles about the scrum which a former England forward has described as a "mess." I have no problem with scrums provided the ball comes out quickly on our side but watch films of the 80s and you see scrums forming in seconds. Now there are four instructions from the referee whose timing of the word "engage" is crucial. Front-row forwards are gentle souls and only rarely are human versions of weapons of mass destruction but they should be left to their own devices. Let nature take its course, forget crouch, pause, touch and engage and leave the ouch.

REL

A PREMIER PERFORMANCE 260312

I wasn't exactly worried but my knees were not the only ones knocking as the contest of the season drew to a close. Late penalties, super scrummaging and the bliss when referee Tim Hayes ended both agony and ecstasy were soon memories as we modestly traipsed the long walk to the clubhouse longing for a nice cup of tea. It was a gripping ripping yarn we spun when we gathered in holy worship at the bars, we had broken Swansea's Cup bogey and had put away the third Premier club in a row. Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see their team win.

In the summer of 2010 when a new look Ebbw Vale squad was being assembled a new coach said "Ebbw Vale is a Premier club that happens to be playing in Division One." Neil Edwards promised to change that and if a normal promotion system used by every league in every sport in the world was in force we would now be hammering at the door of the Premier Division.

Three Cup wins do not make a winter but three wins against Premier clubs must mean

something. We have deserved every one of them and the players have seemed comfortable and confident. This icing on the cake takes us to a Cup semi-final for the first time in eleven years and not only are there three District A clubs in the last four but they are based in the Western Valley, which is probably a 'first' also.

There are those who expect perfection but sport is not like that. Much depends on the opposition and Swansea fielded some young yet already experienced players, one of whom landed the longest penalty seen on our ground for many years. Match management is now essential and ours was first class and the X factor (not that silly TV version) has taken us through. Rugby is one of the few sports where physical endeavour, sheer determination, and if you are Welsh 'hwyl,' can win a game. What we can be particularly pleased about is that despite their youth we have lads who have matured quickly and never panic.

As expected the win over Swansea was the hardest yet but there can be no doubt we deserved it. This was no lucky Cup tie shock, it was earned and as always we finished the stronger which is a tribute to the fitness of the players. We were not happy under the high ball early on but it will take a good side to beat us, especially at home. Fortress Ebbw is now a fact.

Every player was Man of the Match and with a pack that got stronger and stronger and a place kicker like Dorian Jones we were home if not dry until the final whistle was mercifully blown. Having two experienced neutral touch-judges helped too.

A long drop goal by Dorian levelled the scores and reminded the more mature of a similar drop by Byron Hayward in a Cup tie against Bridgend in 1997. He was one of several former Steelmen at the game, Kingsley was there of course also Josh Taumalolo, Phil Gardner, Alan Tovey and Nigel Osborne. Ossie reckoned it was "like the old days" and Alan admitted his heart pounded in the latter stages. Welcome back boys.

We had the biggest crowd of the season so the sun shone on the Club Treasurer as well as those basking in heat and eventual glory, on the bob bank. But somehow we must put the game out of our minds because in its way we have another must-win game at home on Saturday against Merthyr when Steelmen meet Ironmen in a clash of heavy metal.

REL

IT'S CUP DAY SO IT MUST BE SWANSEA 190312

In a team of highly talented players was Dan Lydiate and I am tempted to headline this piece, "Former Steelman Grand Slam Man of the Match." Selecting the best player was impossible because every Welsh player was outstanding. On a day when Scotland went down the Tiber without a paddle, when England laid down a warning of things to come, when France closed the upper reaches of the Eiffel Tower, the Italians played as well as they sang, the Irish ended St. Patrick's Day early, we topped the bill. Grand Slams were once rare, the first I saw in 1950 was also the first since 1911. Which I did NOT see. (Listened in on the wireless, did you? - Ed.)

It's back to business now and our next challenge is on Saturday when Swansea play us in the Cup for the 11th time. Casual rugby followers feel their season is over, no more watching from the sofa, but ours is in full flight. Swansea are hovering at the foot of the Premier Division but since our first Cup tie with them in 1978/9 they have been our bogey team. In ten games they won nine and our only win was in 1997/8. Having beaten Cardiff 24-9 and Swansea 27-13 in a memorable semi-final at Sardis Road we over-ran Newport

44-10. We lost the final against Llanelli at Bristol 19-12. Man of the Match was Josh Tauamolo who recently went with Kingsley Jones to Russia. As a result Putin got re-elected and rugby made the back page of Pravda.

The 1997/8 Cup win is remembered for an act of sheer bravery by diminutive Swansea outside-half Arwel Thomas who risked life, limb and liberty when he attacked our captain and flanker Kingsley Jones. Perhaps "attacked" is too strong a word but the Welsh Rugby Annual's writer, the great and still lamented John Billot, reported Kingsley being "felled" with a "wicked short arm." There were very few arms shorter than Arwel's but he was sent to the cooler.

Kingsley's membership of the Back-Row Hard Men's Union was in jeopardy because back-row men are trained to damage pivots not the other way around. Another "incident" in a game with Swansea that raised a laugh was in November 1996, a Premier League encounter against an All-Whites side packed with capped players. Their prop was Stuart Evans and our No.8 was Mark Jones both big butties at Neath and in Rugby League.

Those were days when club games were well reported and Gerald Davies covered it for the Sunday Times, that's how important it was. We won 13-9, both sides ending with fourteen men because Stuart and Mark were sent packing after, as Gerald Davies reported, they were spotted "belting the living daylight out of each other." Rather steamy for the stately Times but Gerald didn't approve of the dismissals especially as the miscreants came off arm in arm laughing and joking. As Pierre Berbizier once said, "If you can't take a punch, you should play table tennis."

When leading figures talk of rugby being at the crossroads we are left with The Crossing, once the hub of activity in the town with steam locos hauling trucks of limestone from Trefil to the steelworks and drivers and conductors of Griffin and Western Welsh buses taking breathers while gasping Woodbines. It was where men in caps discussed Ebbw's last game, alas no longer.

There was no Welsh Cup then but it was resurrected in 1971/2 and gave clubs something tangible to aim for. On Saturday we play in the last eight of the Swalec Cup with a possibility of three of the semi-finalists coming from Gwent. The visit of Swansea coincides with the tragic death of Mervyn Davies, Swansea born, captain of the All-Whites and Wales, and a Lion on the victorious tours of 1971 and 1974. Like the present Welsh XV those teams were full of high quality players, but Mervyn literally towered above everybody.

REL

HOME OR AWAY, IT DOESN'T MATTER 110312

We must not take away wins for granted. Even in what the ancients call the good ol' days when we had internationals in our ranks, winning away was rare, and not just at the Arms Park or the Gnoll. Those who survived wet and windy nights in places like Maesteg celebrated if we came away with a loss by a few points. Playing on the Sabbath was rare and was once banned by the WRU not to offend the deacons in the chapels, but with the club padre present at Blackwood we were given the OK and made the sunny afternoon one of rejoicing.

Before the game we met Lenny Woodard, former ace try scorer for Ebbw Vale who is involved with Blackwood and perhaps his influence shone through when the home team started the game in style, stretching us a little but not for long. Forward power and pacy

backs put pay to any vain ambitions Blackwood had and we had grabbed the bonus point by half-time. One try by Wes Cunliffe was conjured out of nothing and takes some explaining, wizardry maybe, fantastic certainly and breath-taking absolutely.

As is often the case when we score four tries in the first half we relax a little in the second in which we only scored ten points. Blackwood to their credit played open rugby and also had a handful of hefty bull-like forwards who assaulted our defence like men possessed. As one observer said, and I wish I had, they huffed and they puffed but they didn't blow our house down.

It was a very welcome result and another hurdle jumped without raising a sweat, well done the lads and also the large number of supporters who went to Blackwood.

Casual rugby followers, of which there are too many, must have wondered why WRU Chief Executive Roger Lewis (no relation) warned that the game in Wales is at a crossroads, at a critical stage and changes are needed. How can that be? Wales are the best in the Six Nations and on the brink of an 11th Grand Slam. But he meant the regional set-up which suffers financially and, a new problem, losing players to France. My fellow clansman is right, now is the time to sound the alarm because not everything in the Welsh allotment is rosy.

Regional attendances are getting lower maybe because casual rugby followers have jumped off the band wagon, and it will be a long time before we match the 23,000 who despite heavy rain forsook their firesides and went to see Leicester play Gloucester last week. They could have stayed indoors to watch it on TV but serious rugby followers don't do that. To quote famous lyrics "If we had the chance to do it all again, would we, could we?" Maybe not in the same way which is why changes are in the air. Clubs are constituents in the regions so we await developments with bated breath. Well, sort of.

The melody of "My Way" was written by Frenchmen but what is the French way of playing rugby? Inconsistency is par for their course so once again we wonder which French side turns up on Saturday to avenge Waterloo and, in the case of those from Toulouse, Ebbw Vale Parkway. One thing is certain, there will be no cockerels let loose on the pitch to support them as there once was. The RSPCA used to be called in but it was just a little cock-up really.

The Sunday lunches at the club are very good but we now have a reputation for breakfasts. On Saturday over 30 Manchester City fans dropped in for a full Ebbw Vale breakfast plus a few pints to send them on their way to the Liberty Stadium where their team lost to Swansea. If they had dropped in on the way home we could have helped them drown their sorrows, something Ebbw Vale supporters have forgotten.

REL

A COMEDY OF ERRORS 040312 *But Ebbw had the last laugh*

There's a new cliché in the game, playing ugly but winning. Saturday's game certainly wasn't pretty but it wasn't as ugly as Derby games years ago when there were more vendettas than in the bad old days in Sicily. Tense games test referees and when they don't have independent assistants running the line their task is made more difficult. Max Boyce once sang about a one-eyed Irish referee, but it takes more than two eyes to detect what's going on deep in the jungle of scrum, ruck and maul. There's huge responsibility on the man who dishes out yellow cards which is one way of exerting authority while the red card is the ultimate punishment. Sometimes a red is too harsh and a yellow is not harsh

enough.

But that's by the way, back to the game. As expected it was hard, an under-statement, and the points difference was very little to the very end but had we taken all our chances home supporters would not have bitten what finger nails they had left in the final quarter. Never have so many passes gone astray or not been delivered to players begging for the ball. White line fever broke out and as usual failed to bring a try so it was left to Dorian Jones, our version of Cool Hand Luke, a young man with maturity beyond his years to kick all our points with accuracy and aplomb. And I don't use the word aplomb often.

The win really mattered, the Bargoed website had described the game as the "defining moment of the season for both clubs." A winning bonus point would have been icing on the cake but for a time it looked as if a losing bonus point might be all we would come away with. But the Steelmen, fit as fiddles and used to winning, were stronger in the second half. It took a mighty effort to regain the lead into the wind then defend it in the dying minutes. To quote another cliché, Bargoed were really "up for it."

There are more defining moments to come in a busy programme of League and Cup games and it's far too early to find space on our clubhouse wall for another Division One East Championship banner. The Division title chase is now a three horse race and sadly we will be without skipper Damien Hudd through injury. His place on Saturday was superbly taken by 18 year old, Joe Bartlett who packed down with the incomparable Ashley Sweet thus gaining invaluable experience in the front line. It was another team effort and picking Man of the Match was hard, but dynamic Ronny Kynes won it. It was a day for forwards and it pays to say nice things about them, they are so big and menacing aren't they?.

The coaches have put the game behind them and will be thinking about Swansea's Cup visit after Sunday when we play at Blackwood. The better the day the better the deed but remember last season when although we won both games against them, 20-16 at home and 23-20 away, we failed to get a bonus point. The policy though is simple, win first, bonus points are just that – a bonus.

Brian Moore, England hooker of renown and now writer of repute, recently spoke of replacements and putting them on at crucial moments. Fresh bodies, he claims, always take time to fit into the rhythm of a game but we don't seem to suffer that way. The Welsh coach recently said of his squad, "There's some younger players showing maturity beyond what you'd expect and they don't have that fear factor." Tell us about it Warren, we have them in abundance.

REL

HOLD THE FRONT PAGE 260212

There's good news – and better news. Our water carriers have turned down big money to sign on with French clubs and we have a home tie in the Cup quarter-finals. Water was never a popular drink in rugby circles except to wallow in after a muddy encounter and only beer came out of bottles, but now bottled H2O is as necessary as the sponge used to be. If a place-kicker takes a pot shot at goal he invariably takes a swig of water first. Place-kicking must be thirsty work.

We are still shaking heads in wonder at the quite outstanding win over Carmarthen 'Quins but working ourselves into another nervous frenzy over one of the key fixtures of a season full of them, home to Bargoed on Saturday. They want to win the Division title too and have

that one target in sight while we have the Swalec Cup to plan for as well. First things first, but hidden away is that once impossible longing for a Swalec final. It's in the Cardiff City stadium this year, you know the one, it's where the seats behind the posts are empty when the Blues play there.

The Hollywood image of an editor is a hard-bitten, cigar chomping tough guy in bracers shouting "Hold the front page." Our editor is different, he doesn't display his bracers in public, but he's red hot statistically. If we win our next game, he says, we'll equal the record of fourteen successive victories set in 1999/2000, a season full of variety including home and away wins over Toulon, Bucharest and the like. A win at home cannot always be guaranteed, last season Bargoed were the only side to beat us on our ground so Ed. will hold the front page on Saturday.

Our Cup run has revived memories of tense ties when while hanging on to a precarious lead we longed for, prayed and promised to give up all sorts of things for the final whistle to blow. There was more pressure next day when we sat watching the draw for the next round being made in glorious black and white on TV. We no longer see the draw live but have to wait for the news direct from Westgate Street, and last week it couldn't come quick enough as we waited and wondered if they had run out of balls. My reaction was good, Swansea for the 11th time in the Cup and at home, but it wasn't certain, Swansea would have to win at Beddau first and no-one should take them lightly. We have played and won there twice but it wasn't easy. On a clear day you can see for ever, on a wet day you will struggle at Beddau for ever.

Welsh wins at Twickenham are scarce but on Saturday the tide turned and we scored the only try of the game. England wing Strettle reckoned he scored one and publicly blamed the officials for not awarding it. Well he would wouldn't he? Maybe I'm old-fashioned but top flight players should be seen and not heard, but both coaches were generous and said all the right things in the post-match interviews.

After the 'Quins game their coach, former Welsh forward Steve Williams, acknowledged we were the better side on the day and reports from Carmarthen were equally honest and fair. Saying the right thing escapes many coaches but Neil Edwards too got it right. He described his squad as a "great bunch of lads" who "just don't surprise me anymore." Neil, Jason and Llyr I hope will agree with a US college coach who paid tribute to his players when he said, "No coach ever won a game by what he knows; it's what his players have learned." This season ours have learned a lot and it shows.

REL

## COMMAND PERFORMANCE 190212

As we walked away from Ebbw Vale's unusually battle-scarred pitch someone said, "That was a first class performance," but it was more than that, it was a command performance in difficult conditions against a side that came with a huge forward reputation and left with it in tatters. Arguably it was our best showing in the recent past, even better than the decisive victory at Newport. We controlled the game and showed we can play it tight as well as displaying the inherent adventurous skills which have put us on top of our Division through bonus points.

In their previous three Premiership games Quins won 34-17 at Bridgend scoring five tries, 23-22 at Cross Keys and against Neath at Carmarthen 38-19 scoring four. They came when fourth in the Premier Division and beat Bridgend in the previous round but they foundered in the face of an Ebbw Vale side that dominated an old-fashioned Cup tie. Our

game management was superb, the strategy simple but effective and every Ebbw Vale player was outstanding, doggedly led by skipper Damien Hudd who carried an injury but shrugged it off.

Mathew Williams, alias Chunky, was Man of the Match but it came as no surprise to me because I would nominate him even if he didn't play! One thundering tackle by Damien Hudd trembled the Richter Scale and must be the hit of the season. It typified the entire team effort, playing in the faces of a very good side, never giving them room to move especially in the second half. On the whole a smashing day for Ebbw supporters which followed a rather special Friday evening.

The Past Players annual Wally Talbot dinner packed the clubhouse and tickets were at a premium. It was a great occasion and a privilege to be among so many former players again. A long, happy night featured that star of television, coach and player of clubs too numerous to mention, Kingsley Jones. Dashing from Cardiff where he had been covering the Blues game, he was always entertaining and hilariously funny, but that's Kingsley for you. All in all a smashing night among wonderful people.

I haven't been to Twickenham for ages and don't intend going again even though it's more rugby than rugger now genuine supporters from outside the stockbroker belt go there. No doubt the pseudo toffs still drink champers and munch paste, sorry pate, butties in the car parks followed by an hour or two of confusion as they sort out which colour of which team they must clap for. It was like that when I first went there in 1950 when we paid at the gates which were closed an hour before kick-off leaving people literally in the January dark there being no TV alternative.

Our full-back was 18 years and 9 months young and a National Service rating in the Navy. Lewis Jones began his climb to greatness in both codes when he fielded a kick on halfway, zig-zagged through a shocked defence and gave a try-winning pass to prop Cliff Davies. Half the England side came from Oxbridge including several from the Dominions inspiring a Welsh banner which read "Wales v The United Nations." We won 11-5 and went on to the first Grand Slam since 1911 but it ended sadly when a 'plane bringing Welsh supporters from Belfast crashed at Llandow killing nearly a hundred, many of them from the Western Valley of Monmouthshire.

On Friday night we play another Cup tie, not the Heineken, the Amlin, the Swalec or the World but the Ben Francis which we have not played in for ages. It's an all Gwent competition and has produced shocks like in April 1998 when Rhymney beat Newport 33-22 in the final at Ebbw Vale. I don't know who Ben was but his Cup continues and we'll be in another quarter-final on Friday against Garndiffaith, a club that gave us wing-forward Graham Jones, capped three times from Ebbw Vale in 1963.

The "Guard of Honour" of RTB lads when the teams ran out at last Saturday's Cup game was a tribute to those who develop the young, something the RTB club excels in. It reminded us of the Ebbw Vale Youth XV and the volunteers behind them including Chris Tamplin who was also a member of the Committee. Last week Mount Pleasant Chapel was packed to the doors for his funeral service, a tribute to Chris who died after a very long illness bravely endured.

REL

A STRANGE AND FRUSTRATING WEEK-END (120212)

*Bizarre*, that's the only way to describe it. Snow in sunny Rome, no roof over France's top

stadium and a man in the Scottish coaching box who by his gestures is obviously a soccer manager in disguise. As for us it was another lost week-end with brass monkeys getting frostbite, Ebbw Vale supporters getting frustrated and coaches and players preparing all week only to kick nothing but their heels. But let's look on the bright side, we have three postponed fixtures and plenty of time to play them before the season ends when the daffodils are out. The targets remain, winning the Division and the Cup.

It was Dame Vera who lifted spirits in the blackout when she sang "When the lights go on again all over the world" so it's time our inspirer and spiritual leader Neil Edwards, who is taller than most of us and nearer to The Man Upstairs, puts in a good word to ensure the games go on again all over EXP.

Re-arranged games are often played under floodlights which appeared in rugby in the 1950s thus increasing the number of matches played, in 1980/1 for example we played 52. Evening games in the depth of winter changed family life, Dad not only went out to watch rugby on Saturdays but Wednesdays as well. The first proper game in Gwent under lights was in the 50s at Pandy Park and before we became a mini Blackpool our players trained on the top school field which was only "illuminated" by the street lights on Beaufort Road. It wasn't ideal and Health and Safety inspectors would have had a field day, or rather evening. There was the danger of injury in the gloom and players were particularly keen to avoid damage to their lifting arm.

Coaches are now essential in all sports and they have to be serious while remaining human. The toughest and most demanding coaching job is in American Football which is not a game to be trifled with. They don't play for fun and their coaches have to be particularly serious. A Dallas Cowboy coach was described thus, "If he was married to Raquel Welch, he'd expect her to cook." He must have been a misery because when one of his players was asked if he ever smiled he said, "I don't know, I've only played there nine years."

There's no bonus point to be sought on Saturday, winning is all that matters in the Cup and although we have lost to Carmarthen 'Quins in seven out of eight League games we have beaten them twice in both our Cup encounters, albeit in their developing years. Since 2000 the 'Quins now fourth in the Premier Division have exported their rugby to east Wales but sadly not Felinfoel's Double Dragon. In the last round of the Cup they pipped Bridgend who beat us in the competition last season so we know what to expect.

In 2000/01 we won a Cup tie at the 'Quins 32-25, three tries each and coach Mike Ruddock commented, "We had to keep focused against a Carmarthen side that was well drilled and highly motivated." Our tries were scored by Alan Harries, Rhys Shorney and Gareth Green. Shaun Connor and Jason Strange added goal points. Rhys was also with us at the 'Quins in 2002/03 when we won 13-8 in extra time thanks to a try by replacement flanker Paul Williams. Mike was still coach and said, "We got what we expected, a hard physical battle." The second row confrontation was particularly fierce, former Welsh cap Paul Arnold and Paul Matthews v Chay Billen and Peter Sidoli.

There's something special about a Cup game, let's hope the weather is special too.

REL

ANOTHER BLANKETY BLANK SATURDAY 060212

The only compensation to sitting indoors watching rugby is if it's a great game and your side wins. That's what happened on Sunday afternoon in total contrast to Saturday when

our game was frozen off and we were condemned to watching a Calcutta Cup match that had as much excitement as a whist drive and as much oomph as a junior aspirin.

Having got used to watching Ebbw Vale play every Saturday, the weather and the Six Nations combined have upset our routine which is frustrating and, what is more, affects our social life. Unlike sofa supporters we want to be out of doors on a Saturday watching real players, not images, especially as we know ours so well and they rarely lose. We played 22 League games last season and 15 so far in this one and won 32, a success rate of over 86% so it's no wonder Ebbw Valians thirst for the great outdoors.

With luck we'll be home to Newbridge on Saturday. With our attention focused on Bargoed perhaps we forgot them and the tussle between us for top spot last season. They are still a threat and apart from the League points at stake it's a traditional Gwent Derby. So was the Cup game at Newport where, in case you have been on the moon or are still stranded in the Rhondda, we won handsomely, bringing us a home tie with Carmarthen 'Quins who lie third in the Premier Division. I rather fancy a League and Cup double don't you?

Before TV arrived to affect normal living, club games were played at the same time as internationals. Those who could afford them brought transistor radios to games to keep up to date on the Welsh match but we would have to wait until Monday's Western Mail came through the letter box to get the full story. Those who saved their shillings would go to Murrayfield if they were fit in mind and body. Leaving Beaufort LMS Station (*younger readers note: there was a railway station in Beaufort! - Ed.*) on a Friday evening and returning on a Sunday afternoon was an assault course, and in my day Scotland always seemed to win. Now they are more inclined to lose, they haven't scored a try in a Calcutta Cup game at Murrayfield since 2004 despite kilted fervour, repeats of Braveheart and wailing bagpipes.

One former Welsh international said on Friday, "I fear Wales will lose in Dublin," but fear is a word not to be used in sport. Rugby can be violent and the faces of front-row forwards, not ours, can be fearsome but it is a game for all shapes and sizes and the best example is Shane Williams who when he first played for Neath at Ebbw Vale was described by a Gnoll addict as being "too small." Size and fear figures largely in American Football as a 5'9", 177 pounds midget among giants once said, "When you're my size in the pros, fear is a sign that you're not stupid."

That's an appropriate quote because the Super Bowl was played on Sunday, a long drawn out affair that begins with a famous pop star singing the Stars and Stripes out of tune. It's the most important game played with an oval ball in North America but in our little world we have an important game every Saturday. Weather permitting.

REL

QUITE A PLEASANT AFTERNOON 290112

The sun shone, the pitch was perfect for a running side and we won away from home scoring three tries to one. Everyone did well against a team that after a disappointing spell had recently found form, their match programme describing a win at Cardiff as "a fantastic performance." We faced a pro club that are officially a class above us, but on Saturday we looked the better outfit and played as a team. It was not a case of underdogs upsetting the favourites in bad conditions, for example when Newport lost at Penclawdd and we lost at Tondy long ago in the Cup, games that veterans of both clubs remember with pain. No, this was a game played in perfect conditions that began with the home team favourites. Even though Newport rallied late in the game they never threatened despite having some

big, strong three-quarters. That is an asset to any team but they need the ball to perform and the Ebbw pack were not in the mood to let them have it.

The famous suspension bridge is not far from Rodney Parade but there was little suspense for our supporters who went on to celebrate in Newport Athletic Club. We were well received and did our usual favour to the home treasurer by buying lots of cuppas and J20s to refresh us before heading home on the route once traversed by Griffin and Jones's buses

It was the composure of Ebbw that impressed, they settled down quickly, played their normal game with complete confidence and two of the tries were crackers. The first came from the forwards who yet again provided the base for success. It was our first win at Newport since November 2007 and for style it was one of the best. For the more ancient watchers (well, one at least) it had the flavour of days past when Gwent Derbies between rivals who were good friends was the norm. Those who missed the game missed a treat.

It's back to business on Saturday and the game at Tredegar must not be an anti-climax, the pursuit of five league points a match goes on because we want to win Division One East again. It's a three horse race and we are leading while Tredegar are bottom of the Division but it's a local Derby and they need a boost. Traditionally games between our clubs were akin to Cup Finals, whatever happened in the rest of the season a win over neighbours was cherished.

Long ago when Ray Sullivan and Elwyn Davies watched Ebbw play Tredegar it was a major event, always a tough fixture and with supporters of both clubs working side by side in the steelworks there was a huge build up to the match. Ray and Elwyn still support the club but won't be at the Rec on Saturday. They have travel problems, quite understandable because Ray lives in California and Elwyn in Ontario. Not even Edmunds Buses could get them here.

The second most important match on the week-end is Ireland v Wales. They have three out of four teams in the quarter-finals of the Heineken Cup and we have one so they will be favourites especially as they will play within a whiff or two of the Guinness factory. It's not true that Ebbw Valians watching in their clubhouse will be banned from buying Guinness but being non-conformist they will stick to Reverend James. It's a pity our town doesn't have a brewery, if we had one we could call our brew Reverend Waggett.

There were other things I could have done on Saturday, like walking up the Domen to check if the wimberry crop will be good this year but on the whole I'm glad I went to Newport where I met old friends and watched a good game followed by a lot of socialising. It was quite a pleasant afternoon out.

REL

DOWN FOR THE CUP 230112

Long ago if Ebbw Vale had played a game in Moseley, Bath, Gloucester and the like and lost by a few points there would have been an inquest in the town next morning. Those games counted in the Welsh Championship based on average and it took a good side to win it, which we did four times. The Cup was the top domestic competition and everyone was on edge and tense in the days leading to a tie, especially if we were heading for unknown fields in West Wales.

Pitches are much better now although exceptionally heavy rain can still affect a game as it

did recently at Gilfach Goch, but that didn't compare with ploughed fields and windy hillside grounds we often played on in the Cup. We had a great side in the 70s yet struggled against non-Merit Table clubs, but except for a few occasions were warmly welcomed. We always won, often narrowly and our first defeat to a "small" club didn't occur until 1990/1 at Tondu.

Among those who enjoyed the visit to Gilfach Goch were four of Ebbw's young ladies who had the "perfect" day which began in the rugby club, continued at the ground, followed by a visit to the only Irish pub in the Rhondda near a chippie which was all rather Strange. We enjoy visiting clubhouses new to us during our temporary stay in Division One and who will forget the beer and Welsh cakes in Beddau? Newport Athletic Club has not been visited for some time but once it was packed when Ebbw Vale and other Gwent clubs played at Rodney Parade.

It was there we met one of Wales's great wings, Ken Jones originally from Blaenavon who was in the Great Britain 4x100 metres relay team in the 1948 London Olympics. The USA won gold, our lads silver but the Americans were disqualified so Ken and his mates (including two other rugby internationals) switched to gold. The US appeal was upheld so our team handed the medals back and came home with silver after all. When asked how they all felt Ken said, "We swopped medals without a fuss and that was that." Imagine the furore we would have today.

On Saturday Ebbw Vale play Newport for the fourth time in the Cup. We lost three and won a memorable semi-final at Sardis Road in 1998, 44-10 which took us to the final in Bristol. Our team was Josh Taumalola (three tries), Alun Harries, Jonathan Hawker (replaced by Jason Strange), John Funnell, Lennie Woodard (two tries), Byron Hayward, David Llewellyn, Alun Phillips, Leighton Phillips (replaced by Steve Jones), Mike Wilson, Chay Billen, Kuli Faletau, Richie Collins, Mark Jones, Kingsley Jones (captain). Josh was named by the press corps Man of the Match.

It's a pity we are not home on Saturday but as one who misses fixture lists of infinite variety I see the game at Newport as a change from league rugby and a different challenge, no bonus points to chase, for our young squad. It's a pity we can't relive the old days and go by train (changing at Aberbeeg) but it doesn't go to Newport and it's a long walk from Rogerstone station. So, we'll hit the road again but with a difference, we'll go down a valley not across one.

With no game last week-end I crossed the frontier to Gloucester where Ebbw had played many times, often losing but famously inflicting two consecutive defeats on the Cherry and Whites. The Shed was as vociferous and as packed as ever, the floodlights were so bright one needed sun glasses and the game was a stunner. More stunned than anyone were the Toulouse players who were firm favourites but ended up out-played which lifted the roof of said Shed.

One nostalgic thought struck as I retired to a milk bar after the game. I have now seen mighty Toulouse lose twice in the Heineken Cup. The first was in 1988/9 and you know where don't you?

REL

ANOTHER STEP FORWARD 150112

There's no such thing as a perfect game of rugby and we didn't have one on Saturday. But it was another step to the form we showed when playing every week. There were bright

moments when the true potential of the side was apparent, and others when pedestrianism took a new meaning. It takes two to tango and two teams to play positively otherwise we get stuck in a battle of attrition. Normal service is gradually being restored but through it all we are winning and when was that something to moan about? Another bonus point went into the bag and for the first time this season our opponents score was zero. All in all it was a damn good day at the office.

We are now entering the funny period, gaps between games because of the Six Nations plus Cup commitments. The reaction of coaches after their side loses a Cup tie is always, "Now we can concentrate on the League." But as we don't expect to lose at Rodney Parade that doesn't apply to us. Winning the Division this season is very important as we face the new Championship and anyway it's nicer to win even if it's a game of Ludo.

If you want to stop feeling old hang around with young people. Never in the field of rugby conflict have so many young players trod our sacred turf and there were too many to mention at last week's development friendly with Penallta, a rare floodlit game which to say the least was very interesting. It was also an excuse for the watchers to have a night out in good company.

The Ebbw Vale XV won 26-12 but that didn't matter, it was another example of clubs playing their part in developing youngsters, of turning callow youths into men and exposing them to all sorts of experiences like sharing a dressing room with forwards. The development ladder begins with mini-rugby and junior workers who give up their Sundays to spread the rugby gospel. The next rung up is club rugby, then the regional academies and so on, but too many nestling in the top perches forget the part clubs play in the process.

Props are never young or old. When the world was created they were different, a separate species, neither human or animal but lovable creatures who are multi-purpose. The 1951/2 Springboks style of play was fluid, exciting and raised a lot of eyebrows. But their goal-kicker was a prop, burly Okey Geffin! At Swansea he booted the ball as only a prop can, the ball hit one post, landed on the cross-bar, hit the other post and went over. Ebbw Vale had a great side at the time and showed enterprise with their attacking full-backs, among them Ieuan Sheen and Bob Davies. The latter was not only a good full-back but a character unsurpassed. Sadly he died in November, but will be fondly remembered.

Bob was a character and so was, or rather is, Malcolm Sibthorpe who in his first season with us, 1981/2, was in a winning side at Bath which didn't please their future England coach at all. Sibby was on the Canada tour in 1982 and later captained Ebbw Vale. He was at the Penallta match to watch RTB players and remains a Steelman because he works at Port Talbot steelworks.

Prop Ross Jones was Man of the Match against Treorchy but got nothing but congratulations. In big-time rugby they get bottles of champagne, plaques, cups and even glass vases which never seems to me suitable for muddied hairy-strewn monsters weighing 18 stone. And that's just the scrum-halves.

I try to keep on the right side of forwards so I won't mention a quote which I read lately, "Forwards are the gnarled and scarred creatures who have a propensity for running into and bleeding all over each other."

REL

DUW IT WAS HARD 080112

We thought it might be, but after the usual navigation problem we arrived at Gilfach Goch, looked at the pitch and knew it would be. Obviously the recent rains had hit the Ogmere Valley hard, the surface was well below standard and as a result the standard of rugby was affected, favouring a big pack but making it difficult for quicker backs. Gilfach were a man short for most of the game but were still tough opponents, they had suffered a red card in the same fixture last season, but they never gave up and in fact threatened our line at the end. The final stages yesterday brought something new, Ebbw Vale defending a five point lead which jarred the nerves of the majority of the spectators, all clad in red, white and green. But thanks to the doggedness of our lads all's well that ended well.

One sensed a feeling of slight disappointment among Ebbw Valians at the end but allowing for everything, we were playing away against the third placed side, scored three good tries and almost got another two. Gilfach were undefeated in the League this season, so it was a successful afternoon's outing. There had been a pitch inspection at 11am so we were not denied a game, our first in the League since November. Pity it rained heavily in the week though.

Several generations of Ebbw Vale players and administrators attended the funeral of Ivor George, from Ernie Lewis of the Forties and Fifties to Neil Edwards and Llyr Lane who represented the current squad. In Ivor's time we had strong links with Breconshire rugby and two of many outstanding players from the county, Des Parry and Robert Stephens, paid their respects and joined a nostalgic gathering in the clubhouse afterwards.

We have also lost another Ebbw Vale rugby character, Tom Jenkins, who like Ivor was a teacher and served us at a time when clubs relied on volunteers and players like Phil Gardner former captain and coach who was also at Ivor's funeral. They faced a 40-50 match fixture list and worked for a living. They all enjoyed annual reunions and one tradition is still kept, the Past Players Association Wally Talbot dinner which this year is on 17th February when Kingsley Jones will be the guest speaker, described in the dinner circular as a "former coach to all countries east of Nantyglo" The invitation also states, "Past and Present players with guests are welcome as are all Ebbw Vale rugby folk." It will be a great night.

There's a big difference in gate money at Gilfach Goch (who will miss us next season) and Ebbw Vale to Welford Road or Kingsholm, a matter of thousands of pounds. Accurate attendance figures are now published, for example over the week-end there were 6,897 at the Dragons, 13,459 at Northampton, 9869 at the Scarlets, 9390 at the Blues and 21,310 at Leicester. At a rough guess, and it is rough, there were 21,000 at our ground when the All-Blacks played there in 1972, and canny club treasurers preferred low attendance figures to be publicised in case the tax men read the match report in the newspapers. I wonder why?

If it isn't a bright sunny day on Saturday when we are home to Treorchy we will put in a formal complaint to the Man Upstairs. If it is we will recall David Coleman announcing, "I'm glad to say that this is the first Saturday in four weeks that sport will be weather-free."

REL

PS. You may have guessed that I had a book of sports quotes in my Christmas stocking.

WE'LL MEET AGAIN – AT GILFACH GOCH (030112)

It's been so long since we all met we'll have to be introduced when normal service resumes at Gilfach Goch on Saturday. As for the lay-off our players are not pros as

Scarlets and 'Quins are, highly paid "employees" who have to "work" over Christmas and they deserved a whiff. We can be sure that our Three Wise Men will get the machine working again and they realise that Gilfach are no pushovers. Forget our big home win over them last September, they have only lost twice, just like ourselves and Bargoed.

Gilfach Goch are third in the table, undefeated at home in the League and one of six games on their own pitch was a 19-14 win over Newbridge. Saturday is their Cup Final, they have an outside chance to take the title so it will be a tough one physically as it was last season even though we eventually won 43-9. They have also lost a third home game, 16-19 to Newbridge in the Swalec Cup which emphasises how good they can be "on the day."

Something unusual happened in Welsh rugby over the Festive Season. At Parc y Scarlets spectators sat behind both sets of posts and with an estimated 15,000 inside church bells rang throughout West Wales. Not only that but the losing coach, or whatever fancy name they use these days, didn't blame the referee.

Regional rugby is now our highest level below internationals providing only four stepping stones to the very top. The biggest regional Welsh Derby is arguably Scarlets v Ospreys, the equivalent of 'Quins v Saracens in England who expected a fair crowd at their Christmas showdown so they played at Twickers before 82,000. It's odd really but at their club level (equivalent to our regions in status) England prospers yet we don't but at international level we did much better than they did in the World Cup.

If I knew what a twitter was I would offer an opinion as to whether referees should use it to communicate with players – no, they should not. Perhaps a twitter is for twits but what ever it is (a) it's a means of making money for those who make and sell it and (b) there's far too much silly communication between people these days, much of it rude and pointless. Trends mean nothing to me so I still use a fountain pen but also the more useful and sensible modern conveniences by which I don't mean the one on the Crossing. I have however stopped using my wind-up gramophone because even The Plug does not sell needles anymore and Bose is so much better.

On paper there doesn't seem much left in the remainder of the season, nine League games of which five are home but there's a long run in the Swalec Cup to prepare for and in between time wasting activities like gardening, wall papering and painting the cwtch we have the Olympic Games which I am looking forward to with great excitement because I know we'll be subject to gems of commentating clangers.

None will beat David Coleman's "He just can't believe what's not happening to him" or "A fascinating duel between three men" and "It's a great advantage to be able to hurdle with both legs." Not that rugby hasn't had its duffers, Rob Andrews once said, "There's no such thing as confidence. You either have it or you don't," and Martin Bayfield's "Scotland are staring down the barrel of a wooden spoon," takes some beating. I like the comment by Gareth Chilcott (who once played in an Ebbw Vale jersey at the 1992 Garden Festival), talking of his last game for Bath, "I thought I would have a quiet pint....and about 17 noisy ones." Not a Colemanism but props are too intelligent for that sort of thing.

REL

A HAPPY YEAR ENDING IN SADNESS (281211)

This is the time to wish everyone we meet a happy New Year. We also look back on the Old Year when our family club shared some good times. While 2011 was full of joy for us

on the field and satisfaction off it, we ended on a sad note when Ivor George died after a long illness. As a player, secretary and life member his contribution to the club was immense.

He played outside-half for Cwm, Tredegar and the Vale and after he retired became a first class referee. Ivor did his National Service in the Royal Navy but never went to sea. He played for Devonport Services, which was a first class side in those days, and was also a boxer. Many former players and club colleagues will have a fund of memories of Ivor, his zeal in getting the best players to join the club, touring with him to North America, Italy and of course Cornwall.

Ivor and I shared the same taste in music and he often said, "We had the best of the rugby and the best of the music," but as far as rugby was concerned he meant the various changes in its infra-structure in Wales, first Leagues rather than the Merit Table then Regions which lowered the status of clubs. He approved of the more exciting rugby of modern times and when his watching was confined to televised games he was kept up to date with Ebbw Vale's affairs by friends.

Ivor closely followed our title bid last year and when games ended he was the first to be telephoned with the result. The one that decided the championship came on Saturday April 23rd at Bedlinog where Ebbw Vale had never played before. It was a historic, tense, almost unbearable day and I did not enjoy it all. I was a bag of nerves until that final memorable moment when the referee, bless him, awarded a penalty try. Bedlinog were doomed to relegation but were stubborn as mules until they yielded to our pack, bless them, and the champagne was uncorked.

Only those who are loyal to a club, who follow it through thick and thin, who work for it, understand what it's like to endure moments of high tension, moments when the saying "It's only a game" is as meaningless as a politician's manifesto. That was the feeling at Bedlinog, and it was exemplified in the closing minutes when it was obvious we would win but were stuck on three tries and needed one more.

One of our lady supporters, who shall remain nameless but they call her Dawn, started wandering away from the field of play in obvious despair. I know because I was behind her doing the same thing. A headline flashed through my shattered mind – Dawn Is Breaking – but suddenly a war dance broke out at the far end of Bedlinog's answer to the Millennium Stadium. We had a fourth try, and soon got the victory banner. Dawn broke, but into tears of joy.

Bedlinog is our Battle Honour for 2011, an afternoon nervous types never want repeated. It was a memorable year, may the new one be as successful and more importantly bring health and happiness to everyone. But for Dawn's sake, and mine, no more last minute dramas please.

REL

LET ME BE THE JUDGE (171211)

In the early days of BBC's Grandstand the show went on even when the games were off, games meaning soccer because it took years for the Beeb to realise rugby was also being played and watched by lots of licence holders. When weather hit they got four alleged experts to form a Pools Panel to decide what the result would have been had the games been played. This was to accommodate Littlewoods and Vernons football pools.

As the sun shone on our pitch last Saturday morning the loyalists dug out their thermal socks, scarfs and Dai caps and prepared for the big game. But the ground was frozen as one notable discovered when he arrived for the pitch inspection. Getting out of his massive four-by-four he adopted a horizontal position in the car park, ice being the alleged reason, which was most undignified for a person of such sobriety and distinction and non-U for an officer and a gentleman. As a result of the postponement I have suggested that Welsh club rugby should have something like a Pools Panel and have volunteered to be its Chairman being totally unbiased. And I mean that most sincerely.

Only two of the six scheduled Division One East games were played, a severe blow to treasurers. But we should recall a year ago when the only game we played in December was a friendly at Glamorgan Wanderers. We have played 13 League games this season, winning 11 and losing at Bargoed by one point and Newbridge by three. According to a calculator which Father Christmas put in my stocking years ago that's a success rate of 81.62% which is very good indeed.

The record is even better if we judge the calendar year of 2011. From January to April we played 11 won 10 and lost 1, and added to the above mentioned figures for this season so far the total is played 24, won 21 and lost 3 for a success rate of 87.5%. It looks like another 80% plus season and a run in the Cup will be the icing on the cake.

Some will remember when the draw for the next round of the Cup was made live on television and on one occasion from our clubhouse. We waited anxiously for our numbered ball to be drawn out of the bag by blazered big shots, hoping and praying (especially the Baptists) for a home game. If we were drawn with an unknown club in West Wales we would hasten to the road map and start worrying because games against so-called "small" clubs were dangerous.

The main reason I was disappointed at the latest Cup draw was that we would be away because there is a paucity of home fixtures after Christmas, not good news for the clubhouse. However like the weather there's nothing we can do about a lucky dip and for the first time we will play a Cup tie at Rodney Parade. Cup rugby is so different and vocal support helps considerably but in that respect home or away is the same for us. We have played Newport four times in the Cup, once at home and in three semi-finals. The aggregate over those four games is Ebbw Vale 79 points Newport 77!

As they say on Sky, "oin us after the break" during which I will pop down to Monte Carlo to check my yacht. Bit of a fag really but one has to keep up appearances which is more than can be said of the notable who carried out the pitch inspection on Saturday - in the car park. He gave a whole new meaning to the jolly Festive greeting "bottom's up."

Merry Christmas everyone.

REL

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST (111211)

To genuine supporters every match is important. Some time ago when Griffin buses ran and the Plaza was packed we created a strong fixture list and thousands came to watch. There were no League points to play for but winning was still very important and morale in the steelworks, offices, shops or pits went up or down according to the results. I remember a Christmas Eve game in the 60s at home to Newport with Ebbw clinging to a 3-0 lead (a try was worth three then) for most of it. Then the Newport flanker Cresswell levelled the score with a try and full-back Norman Edwards converted to snatch a win. Norman worked

in the steelworks and that added to our woe leading a downcast supporter to say, "That's ruined my Christmas!"

But when League points mean survival and stepping stones to higher status there are fixtures more important than others. They cannot be taken lightly, earnestness is the key word when facing a vital game. Last season we had to beat Newbridge at home, this season it's Bargoed although it's premature to say it will decide the final table. It's a pre-Christmas crowd puller because we are top of the division and they are second. Will it attract the attention of the sofa rugby followers? Not likely, but there will be more away support than usual and every Ebbw Vale member simply must be there because it's the perfect game to end the year and the result matters.

Bargoed come with optimism, they beat us at Ebbw last season and at Bargoed last September. But we are optimistic too, if it's going to be a battle of pace we are well equipped but all big games are decided by forwards and goal-kickers and our armoury is full of good ones. It's no use forecasting, you can't write a script for a game in which thirty blokes play with a funny shaped ball that can bounce the best laid plans to nothing.

We have eleven bonus points in our piggy-bank which is a pleasant change to the same time last season. Both clubs are assured of places in next season's new Championship but winning still matters especially in a local Derby. Beyond the Championship is the Premiership where we would like to return but there are so many steps to be taken to get there it's not worth puzzling our already busy minds thinking about it at the moment. Rugby was so simple wasn't it?

One big difference between an Ebbw Vale home game in the 60s and now is in the attendance. They were not that good in our last year in the Premiership but now only the true supporters turn up. Television has funded rugby but it has also reduced the numbers who buy season tickets or come through the turnstiles – except in England. Grounds like Welford Road, Franklin's Gardens and Kingsholm have people outside waiting for returned tickets!

What with pre- big match nerves already jangling and Bargoed's 26-0 Cup win at Blackwood, it's been an edgy week, but not as serious as the news from Brussels where European leaders met to decide a future to suit each one of them. I was very concerned but didn't pop over because you can't get sprouts in Brussels so I sweated out the crisis at home, listening intently to every news bulletin. Would the French get their own back for Trafalgar and Waterloo? Would civilisation as we know it end? Then came the final decision and once again I slept soundly – we are still in the Six Nations.

REL

AN HOUR OUT OF THE HOUSE (041211)

This is not the New York Times or The War Cry. We can't "hold the front page" so if news changes suddenly you have to put up with it and appear foolish. In last week's sermon a game at Brynmawr was announced but within hours it was replaced by a game at Ebbw Vale against Abergavenny. No matter, it was an opportunity to mention our captain's home town and it's always wise to keep in with the nobility.

Not many clubs could round up so many supporters for a friendly as we did on Thursday night, a very rare opportunity to switch on our 60 watt bulbs courtesy of The Plug. The Ebbw XV introduced us to new talent who obviously enjoyed playing on a ground where All-Blacks, Springboks and Wallabies once trod. It was very good of Abergavenny to bring

a team to play us and it was their first visit for a long, long time.

One of the rare previous encounters was the first game of the 1977/78 season at Bailey Park. Both teams were fresh, rarin' to go, keen to kick-off the new campaign in style and the result was an exciting 0-0 draw. There was more action than that in the clubhouse after, but we won the next eight games starting with Newbridge and ending with Aberavon.

Youngsters new to the Ebbw Vale jersey enjoyed themselves last Thursday, there were many tries, unlike English rugby where they don't pass the ball but the buck. After the game the clubhouse prospered and so did the winner of the raffle for two Wales v Australia tickets given by Marcus who was once referred to in a match programme as the noblest Roman of them all. A charity in memory of Lewis Smith who aged 21 died after playing for Abergavenny Seconds last January also benefited. It was an hour out of the house and a genuine rugby occasion.

Australia beat Wales for the fourth successive time in what some called a "buckshee" fixture of no purpose but to fill the Union funds. Warren Gatland was honest enough to confirm that in the days leading up to the game, he "feared the Australia game was one too far" and his players needed a rest after "the emotional" World Cup campaign. He also conceded he had to "surrender to financial pressures." It was a non-event with a happy ending, Shane's try will be remembered long after the "match" is forgotten.

The WRU needs more money and they have only one way to get it, big games at the Millie. The use of that money throughout the Welsh game is crucial and one wonders if clubs in next season's new Championship who will have to travel farther afield will be reimbursed. A club in one of the much lower Leagues based in Glamorgan recently fulfilled a fixture in Powys. It cost £250 for a coach to get there at their own expense. Players chipped in with a tenner each, but it was a great burden for a small club. Finance is not easy to find at the grass roots of our game.

One of the classic Western films was "Shane" and the final scene showed him riding into the sunset after sorting out the bad guys while a boy he had befriended shouted, "Come back Shane." Our Shane will not come back to play for Wales but will be fondly remembered every time we watch a DVD of his exploits. Many remember his first game for Neath at Ebbw Vale when a visitor said, "He's pretty good but a little on the small side!" So was Dai Morris, also of Neath, who incidentally played one game for Ebbw Vale. Luckily a team pic was taken that day.

On Saturday Shane got one decent pass and scored, just like Jonah Lomu who played in a special match at Ebbw Vale exactly fifteen years before when he too got one decent pass and scored. What a waste of talent but what memories of seeing them in action.

REL

WINNING WITH THE WIND (271111)

There were two celebrations in the Beddau clubhouse on Saturday, a local couple's wedding reception and a bunch of strangers in red, white and green whooping it up after their team had won. For those at the game there's no need to describe it, for those who were not – tough. You missed a great effort in awful conditions, you missed the horror of passive scrums, you missed a post-game gathering in one of the most hospitable clubhouses on the circuit and you missed pneumonia.

There's no need to say "Take me to your leader", Damien Hudd could out-lead Monty and

when it comes to kicking out of mud from touchlines we have the world champion in Dorian Jones. It was as great a performance in wind and rain as at Merthyr, no-one expects a team to score four tries in such weather. And when it was over we dried out and enjoyed a pint and free mince pies.

On Thursday we play a friendly at Brynmawr a town that has supplied us with some great players. They once played a Welsh Cup game on our ground but not against us, the reasons for which still upset their older followers. The revitalised Welsh Cup kicked off in 1971/72 but a few of the "bigger" clubs disapproved, claiming they would lose traditional fixtures. This worried the WRU who faced a problem when Brynmawr drew a home tie with Newport who wanted it to be played midweek so they could fulfil a fixture on a Saturday.

Brynmawr did not have floodlights and asked the Union for support to play the game on the allotted Saturday. Discussions took place (at Newport !) but Brynmawr lost and had to play on another ground under lights. It was the biggest appeasement since Munich 1938. The ground was Ebbw Vale's and Newport won 23-10. There was no more of that nonsense and the Cup became a regular feature that occasionally produced shock wins by so-called "small" clubs, among them Penclawdd who in 1980 beat a Newport side that had just done well against the All-Blacks.

The All-Blacks and Springboks were once regarded as superior to the Wallabies but times have changed. The Wizards of Oz are back in Cardiff on Saturday with Wales, according to local supporters, favourites to win. We were also fancied to beat the 1984 Wallabies but were hammered 28-9. Wales went into shock and when skipper Mike Watkins was asked "What next for Wales" he said, "Over The Angel for a pint." The Welsh pack went into hiding, Australia's four tries included a pushover, but there was one bright spot, with Terry Holmes injured David Bishop a former Steelman and then with Pontypool got his only cap and scored a dazzling try.

Elsewhere last week a Samoan who misbehaved in the World Cup was fined a hundred pigs by his village, English rugby called in plumbers to stop leaks, Saracens RFC's selfish plan to play a Heineken Cup home game in South Africa was scrubbed and the Welsh Premiership Division next season was re-re-formed from 14 to 10 to 12 bringing Bridgend and the 'Quins into the super league "in order to fulfil the talent recruitment strategy requirements of the Ospreys and the Scarlets." If you can understand that you're a better man than I am Gunga Din.

The Saracens change of plan has eased the minds of Ebbw Vale supporters who feared we might consider a similar caper. I can state officially that our home game with Bargoed on the 17<sup>th</sup> of December WILL be played at our ground and not at Beaufort Welfare, Hilltop or Cwm Betterment.

REL

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE (201111)

On and off the field, combatants and non-combatants have restored pride to Ebbw Vale Rugby Club. Not that I am prejudiced but the evidence is there for all to see. We were relegated and didn't give in, we were as Neil Edwards said a Premier club that happens to be playing in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. Our once bogey club Glamorgan Wanderers have not risen to the challenge, they were relegated last April and are now bottom but one in the Division.

Weather forecasters described last Saturday as dull but for the loyalists at ECP it was bright. Another try fest set the ground alight and fused the electronic scoreboard. It is pace

that sets us apart but there's a long road still a-winding with the final game of 2011 home to Bargoed on December 17th the key confrontation of the season. Before then we have a serious challenge at Beddau who ran us close twice last season. We go there on Saturday and will have to play really well which is normal. Not that I'm prejudiced.

Late wins are not unusual these days. We don't have technology to signal "no-side" in Welsh club rugby so we depend on one man and his watch to decide when the ordeal ends. The nearest we came to a late drama was at Bedlinog last April but thankfully we now make certain of victory early in the game. It's much better for the nerves but at international level a game doesn't end until the fat prop collapses so every second counts..

In the first two rounds of this season's Heineken Cup Munster snatched victory in the dying seconds with O'Gara drop goals which sent their supporters into ecstasy and Northampton and Castres into depths of despair. That was unknown in the old days, a side could hang on to a narrow lead in the final quarter by kicking the leather ball into touch from anywhere. The laws then did not encourage adventurous teams but there were some renowned for their attacking skills. Without being prejudiced one must say that Ebbw Vale was one of them.

One of the first attacking full-backs was Kiwi Bob Scott (NZ 1946-54) and we had Ieuan Sheen in the 50s, and Mostyn Richards in the 70s. The full-back and wings are now labelled as the back three facing countless high balls and mounting counter-attacks from their own line. Without being prejudiced every member of the current Ebbw back three excels in that.

Front row forwards now run like three-quarters of old, but who was the first handling prop? None other than Ebbw Vale's Denzil Williams who played his second game for Wales in 1963 at Murrayfield where Wales had lost on their previous four visits. Clive Rowlands, like Denzil had made his international debut two weeks before against England and was fed up with his country losing in Edinburgh by playing open rugby.

What followed was arguably the poorest international ever played with only the winners and their followers happy. Rowlands kicked every ball that came his way and as a scrum half that was a lot. The result was 111 lineouts, mercifully a record that will never be broken. On the Welsh throw in the wing would aim for Denzil at the front who "handled" it back to Rowlands who would kick it back into touch. Not pretty, but effective and we won.

The first national Welsh coach was David Nash of Ebbw Vale, our best ever No. 8. Now there are almost as many coaches and other off field assistants as players who are controlled by a head coach whose lines of communication are complex unless he has a voice like a Sergeant Major. Without being prejudiced we have the best of that species. If you don't believe me sit in front of him in the stand and experience The Voice first hand. But bring ear-plugs.

REL

ANOTHER MOUNTAIN CLIMBED (131111)

Someone up there is looking after us. It rained last week but stopped by Saturday which suited a side that revels in the open game. Had the downpour continued we would still have won as we did in wet and windy conditions at Merthyr, but a fine, crisp Saturday afternoon is much better. The icing on the cake was another five pointer against a stout hearted Mountain Ash side who remain third from the bottom of the table.

The form we are in should not be taken for granted. To comment that it's been a "pretty good" first half of the season is the under-statement of the year especially when compared to not long ago when an away win brought out the bell ringers of Christ Church . The Old Firm as Mountain Ash have been called for a hundred years battled hard but it was pace that undid them, that and the usual mighty forward effort and a defence that disapproves of the opposition even getting near our line.

We are home to Glamorgan Wanderers on Saturday. Their last visit was in April 2010 when we won 36-30, the penultimate match of a bad season that brought a "success" rate in the League of 19.23% and relegation. When we were relegated we hit back and won the championship but Glamorgan Wanderers have not recovered from the same shock. The sheer joy of watching our mobile pack succeeding at the coal face and the pace of the backs providing entertainment should draw a good crowd on Saturday as we begin the second half of the season.

It has been not only a successful but an odd first half. There was the mark that wasn't in Treorchy and two balls on the pitch against Rumney. It's not that long ago that the Ospreys had sixteen players on the field, but two balls! When a defender goes for one loose ball, an attacker goes for another and scores a try it's time to bring in the TMOs on the bob bank who are never wrong, know the laws better than the referee and are totally neutral.

Next year the Olympic Games will dominate sport and residents of Blaenau Gwent are already under-whelmed at the news that the Olympic torch will pass through Brynmawr. The Mayor's chains of office will get a coat of Brasso, school children will line the route and for a brief moment their parents will forget how much the Games are costing them. Our hills might be alive with the sound of music but in London the tills will be alive with the sound of money. To avoid all the fuss and cost the Games should be permanently held where they started and be confined to track and field events. The ancient Greeks, as Joanna Lumley has just reminded us, didn't have synchronised swimming and "ping pong", so let's get back to basics.

The club was represented at Sunday's Remembrance service at the war memorial and a wreath was laid on its behalf. While rugby was regularly played during the last war by men who were kept home to carry out vital work in the coal and steel industries, other Ebbw Vale players joined the armed forces and some never returned. Remembrance Sunday is an important occasion and it is appropriate that our club takes part in it.

REL

EBBW LEADS THE WAY (061111)

And not only because we head the table, it's more the way we are playing. Ebbw Vale season ticket holders, the backbone of the club, are certainly getting their money's worth watching a young side that is being "raised" in the proper manner by coaches who are seeing the results of their efforts brought to fruition every Saturday. Winning is very enjoyable too!

Ebbw Vale are providing entertainment, but for the technically minded who know the Laws there's an added interest, studying – impartially of course - their interpretation by the lone figure with a whistle and we had lots to judge on Saturday. The black arts of the game can be exploited when only one official is on duty, but as we saw in the World Cup even assistant referees and citing officers can miss the odd forward pass and even more seriously, gouging.

Not that I am prejudiced but there's no other Division One East side playing as well as Ebbw Vale at the moment. The win over Rumney was assured even when we were held to one try and a ten point lead for a time. Then enormous pressure was turned into points, the dam broke and four more tries were added, some of them as sparkling as fireworks.

The first half of our League season ends on Saturday at Mountain Ash, a club we met in 1993/94 when suffering in the Wilderness Years, the Second Division. We beat them at Ebbw Vale 27-0 but made a complete hash of the return, losing 28-3. Controversial selection didn't help, our international forward Andy Allen watched but didn't play. It was a worrying, disturbing and generally rotten season, we finished 9<sup>th</sup> out of 12 and Mountain Ash were relegated, but for Ebbw it was the beginning rather than the end because the following season brought promotion.

Mountain Ash were promoted last season and so far have played 10 games, winning four and losing six. Last Saturday they won 30-16 at Glamorgan Wanderers so they are a club to be respected. They have more players than watchers and field a 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, Youth and Veteran's team as well as 4 mini and 4 juniors. League leaders are always targeted by other clubs so we can expect a major challenge by the Old Firm on Saturday.

We played them between the two world wars which meant hiring charabancs to cross the Great Divide between Monmouthshire and the Cynon Valley . It was a modern version of the covered wagons on the Oregon Trail without John Wayne and Sitting Bull. On one occasion the Old Firm were due at the Bridgend Field but didn't turn up. A telegram boy cycled to the ground with the dreaded message that they wouldn't be coming, which upset the Club Treasurer who had to pay back the admission. In tanners.

The entry to the ground was different then, now it is guarded by volunteers who have car parking duties to handle. One of them is Errol Evans who is hospitalised at the moment. We miss him very much and look forward to seeing his cheery face again soon.

REL

#### WINNING IN THE RAIN (311011)

A large body of red, white and green approached Merthyr with trepidation when it rained cats and dogs. We want dry grounds and cloudless skies, we have a running team not a bunch of sloggers. Could we survive the elements? Could we scrape a win? A bonus point in gale force winds seemed impossible. We lost the toss and played down the slope in the first half which answered all our worries. Yes we could master the conditions, yes we could score tries. How, only the players know but it was arguably the best team performance of the season bearing in mind the ground conditions and incessant rain. Those huddled in the "stand" did not realise how bad it was until they emerged with smiles on their frozen faces.

The result of the only wet Saturday for ages is that we are second in the table, one point behind Newbridge but with eight bonus points to their five, a complete contrast to the same time last season. We hope, nay expect, to get another five points on Saturday against Rumney who beat Mountain Ash 28-17, three tries each, on the same day. Presumably it pelted down in Kerdiff, if so that is a very good performance by both sides.

We are at a time of year shop owners love. Having sold Halloween rubbish they now flog fireworks and they will be going off on Saturday. If current form is a guide there'll be fireworks of a different kind on our ground when Rumney make their second visit. Their head coach is Matthew Silva who has played for countless Union and League clubs and is also WRU Development Officer for the Vale of Glamorgan, working with under 18s and

19s.

Another former Rumney player Steve Ford won eight caps as a wing from Cardiff in 1990 and 1991. It was not a good time for Wales and Steve was on the winning side only twice, both against Namibia. His last international was in Brisbane, a "day of shame" for Wales who were beaten by a star-studded Aussie side 63-6. Ford played opposite Campese and among others in the home back division were useful players like Jason Little, Tim Horan, Michael Lynagh and captain Nick Farr-Jones. With that lot on form the result was expected, but not the margin.

In 1990/91 there were lots of schools and youth competitions and one of the youth finals was at Cross Keys where Abercynon defeated Tondu 48-0. A report described the winner's captain as an inspiring No. 8 in a forceful pack. His name was Neil Edwards. Do we know him? Surely there's not another of the same name who is inspiring.

We are told that the All-Blacks Haka is part of the culture of New Zealand, poking tongues and slitting throat gestures included. The French, having sung "Aux armes citoyens" which is somewhat military, stepped forward en masse to face the All-Blacks as they were doing the Haka. It was a Gallic response to the challenge, but the International Rugby Board thought otherwise and fined the French \$4900 for showing disrespect. It's as daft as the 2012 Olympics big wigs urging residents along the cycling route to plant flowers in Olympic colours in their front gardens. It won't affect me because the only bikes I see are ridden by kids, and skilfully too. Furthermore I don't have a garden visible to the outside world and it displays just one colour – dandelion yellow.

As for the Haka, they should either scrub it or encourage not discourage the challenged to face up to it.

REL

#### BLACK WEEK-END FOR FRANCE - AND BLACKWOOD (241011)

The Big Show is over, the circus has left town and life returns to normal. No more early morning viewing, no more controversial results, the All-Blacks did as everyone thought and won the World Cup but not in the way we expected. Wales lost by one point to France in the semi-final and France lost by one point to New Zealand in the final. Close encounters of the nerve-racking kind. Them that has gets because New Zealand get stronger while others get weaker. Except Wales because we came out of the competition with a bunch of youngsters who will do the business for their country for years to come.

Who would have thought that Priestland would have emerged as our No. 1 outside-half and would be badly missed in the last two crucial games? And what we saw of scrum-half Lloyd Williams was enough to show he will be No.1 scrum-half before long, and not just because he's the spitting image of his father Brynmor. Another son of a great player has emerged in the Welsh set-up, a lad that we remember kicking a ball around our car park. Toby Faletau has become a world class player in a matter of months and we can only imagine how proud his dad Kuli feels. Australia edged a win in the semi-final but the last few minutes belonged to Wales and there's no doubt who the most popular players from outside New Zealand were in the tournament.

Now it's back to business on a week-end eagerly awaited by manufacturers of masks, pointed hats and other 'orrible contrivances because it's Halloween which we used to call ducking apple night. Kids will dress up as monsters and witches and doors will be knocked. We go to Merthyr on Saturday afternoon with memories of our last visit which

was another horror, a game we lost which everyone, including local supporters, thought we would win. We threw it away but unlike the clocks that go back this week-end we forge ahead and will forget that shadow of the past.

We needed a good show against Blackwood to get us in the mood for Merthyr and boy did we get it. Nine tries, six of them converted against a side that had begun the season well was a command performance. If we had shown half that form at Newbridge we would have won there comfortably. The early stages were penalty-strewn but when Wes Cunliffe ran like a deer in the first few minutes the writing was on the Blackwood wall.

A legendary All-Black, Charlie Saxton once described rugby as a game in which fourteen players try to put a fifteenth clear with the ball. On Saturday Ebbw Vale got Nos 15, 14 and 11 clear and each scored two tries. The pace we knew was there was shown in all its glory and the pack shared the plaudits with a penalty try and another by flanker Nicky Coughlin. If we keep that form we have a lot to look forward to. While we were running wild Newbridge were losing at Beddau and Merthyr at Mountain Ash. Unlike last season when we took a long time to get bonus points we already have seven, more than any of the other clubs.

While the Brylcreem boys in the backs were making the headlines the PBI, aka Poor Bloody Infantry, up front were doing the hard work. I say this because I feel safer with forwards than backs, but winning games depends on the pack, and goal-kicking which we excelled at on Saturday. On the few occasions when Blackwood got into our 22 and put in or threw into a set piece they got nowhere because Damien and his lads wouldn't let them. Not with Neil's stentorian voice echoing from the top of the grandstand, Ebbw's answer to a Regimental Sarn't Major in a bad mood.

REL

C'EST MAGNIFIQUE (161011)

And I don't mean the French. Wales should have beaten South Africa and would have beaten France – IF. There will be endless controversy over the quick on the trigger Irish referee because he sent our captain and key player off for good but despite being short-handed for most of the game this excellent Welsh team almost pulled it off. The star of the commentators was Francois Piennar who disagreed forcibly with the red card and as a neutral and a World Cup winning captain he should know.

Being beaten by one point, having scored the only try, losing our tight-head early on and then the skipper made the masses who watched the game on television sad and despondent. They shouldn't be, we have produced a squad with more talent than others in the Home Unions and to lose a World Cup Final semi-final is no dishonour. It's the way we lost that made us unhappy. The buzz word in rugby is "breakdown" and unless the IRB simplify and sort it out that's what every rugby player and watcher will have.

The Welsh Rugby Union should place a statue of John Logie Baird outside the Millennium Stadium. He didn't play rugby and probably never watched it, but he invented television which allowed us to watch Wales play France from the comfort of our homes, clubhouses and even the Stadium itself where thousands turned up. More people watched the semi-final than watched the Coronation in 1953.

There's nothing new in blaming officials, it depends if your side benefits or not. Baird first demonstrated a television system in January 1926 at a time when the first international of the season was between Wales and England. Viewers would not have been entertained

by a 3-3 draw at Cardiff Arms Park in that month which should have been won by Wales . Outside-half Bobby Delahy of Cardiff scored a perfectly good try but the Irish referee didn't give it. Six of the Welsh pack were coppers who resolved to arrest him the next time he came to Cardiff . At Twickenham in 1974 the Irish referee disallowed a try by J J Williams who won the race for the English line closely pursued by two opponents. The official said he did not award a try "because the diving figures obscured his view of the ball." The incident lost us the game which added to the bad feeling when the RFU did not allow the singing of the Welsh national anthem.

Referees get the blame but never any credit but hopefully Friday's third place game will be non-controversial. Wales came third in the 1987 World Cup after beating Australia 22-21 in the "bronze" game which on Friday will be a final opportunity for Wales to entertain and impress.

A few hours after the semi-final the real rugby followers went to see their clubs play and a large number went down the Western Valley to see the big Division One East game of the day at Newbridge. It was not a good game and one could say it was an end-to-end affair except there were dead-ends. We had our chances, Newbridge didn't threaten our line, but the result was decided, not by a referee, but a ball dropped which led to a drop goal off the woodwork.

Meanwhile Blackwood were beating Mountain Ash 25-7, scoring four tries, so they will be "up for it" when they come to Ebbw Vale on Saturday. They are three points below us so this is a must-win game and is expected to be a hard one. There's no respite is there?

REL

AND THEN THERE WAS ONE (091011)

To quote Mr Kipling, the writer not the cake maker, the dawn came up like thunder on Saturday as the bleary eyed recovered from one of the greatest Welsh victories of modern times. Not having heard a cock crowing for years the experience of staggering into the darkness to a neighbouring house of repute to watch the game with mates was very strange. Bacon butties settled one's nerves until it was clear that Ireland were under the cosh and the match in Wellington turned out to be no match at all. Only Wales of the Home Unions remain in New Zealand , the others had early baths and left the scene.

For the real rugby supporters who belong to clubs Saturday morning was a warm-up for an afternoon of watching a game live and by tea-time exhaustion set in. Clubs that once developed players who are in the Welsh squad were especially chuffed, their fledgings flew high and now face France in Wales 's second semi-final. The commentators will ask which French team will turn up, but they know which Welsh team will.

There was no anti-climax when Tredegar came to ECP after a long, long time. It's not fair to the visitors to regard the game as a dress rehearsal for the first of two crucial fixtures against Newbridge. Tredegar's return to Division One has not brought them any joy but there were times on Saturday when they showed considerable spirit even though they were finally well beaten.

It took half-an-hour for the Steelmen to click but when they did the tries began to flow although the opening period was forgettable. We expected a win, got it and didn't ease off when the bonus point was achieved. From 10-0 down we went on to finish 59-17 with nine tries in the bag. On Saturday our toughest away game of the season will be played at Newbridge marginally above us in the current table. The experiments are over, now the

League gets serious. No-one can miss this game.

The World Cup has shown the predominance of Rugby Union over the other oval ball games, Rugby League and American Football. Our game is one for players of all shapes and sizes, it's played by millions throughout the civilised world and the Rugby World Cup is up there with the Olympics and the Football World Cup, but without the seedy bits.

Departure lounges in New Zealand airports were silent as the teams knocked out of the Cup started their long journeys home. The Scots headed for the Highlands to be met by pipers playing the latest lament, the English returned to the Shires where head-hunters awaited them, and the Irish went to the pubs. There's no reason to cry for Argentina, they flew back with their pride intact and South Africa were lucky to beat Wales and unlucky to lose to Australia. But what of New Zealand? They have No. 10 problems, so maybe Warren Gatland can lend them one of our three outside-halves.

Kingsley Jones was at the Tredegar game and was asked his views of the Cup, and particularly the All-Blacks. He said, "They are considered the strongest rugby nation yet they only have one class outside-half." So who will Wales play in the final? Who cares!

REL

VERY GOOD – BUT CAN DO BETTER (021011)

That sounds like a school report but it's a little unfair to say it of a team that scored five tries and won 38-8 away from home. Yet, as we said last week we aspire to greater things and, with respect to a dogged Zebras side, there were more tries on offer. The result was settled in the first half but the second was uneventful although it ended with a flourish. The referee attracted attention and his definition of the "mark" will long be remembered, but it was a satisfactory afternoon that ended in a friendly clubhouse. On Saturday we are home to Tredegar our final chance to fit all the pieces together before we play Newbridge at the Welfare Ground. Like last season the Western Valley Derby will be the one that matters most.

Saturday was the perfect autumn day and the drive to the Rhondda was a joy. The Zebras pack was lumpy and lively and would have been more difficult to handle on a heavy pitch in pouring rain but conditions were ideal for a running side and that's what we are. To realise our potential we need to keep playing our way for eighty minutes and that will surely come. The second half at Treorchy seemed to go on and on and on. But we won, that's what matters.

Rugby language has changed. There are turnovers, off-loads, the inside shoulder which Jonathan Davies often mentions and instead of winning a scrum against the head it's now against the feed. We have a bench, water carriers like modern Gunga Dins from up the Khyber, and a third official to supervise the procession of replacements. The ball has changed and there are no muddied oafs thanks to better pitches. Some say balls used in the World Cup aren't good enough but the moaners are place-kickers having a bad day.

A "Ball-Gate" ended with England suspending two coaches found guilty of "attempting to use a different ball than that used to score a try in contravention of both the laws and the spirit of the game." Caddish behaviour and very un-Twickers like. I would have sent them and their balls home for good. Three prominent England players have also misbehaved off the field and have let their side down. They need a firmer hand and a spanking.

Wales as expected demolished Fiji, 66-0 is a gigantic score and the best launching pad

for the all Celtic quarter-final with Ireland . Scotland don't seem to know that there are tries in rugby and once again didn't flatter to deceive. We could and should have beaten South Africa but whether topping the pool or coming second we would face tough opposition in the quarters.

Of the Six Nations teams in New Zealand , Wales and Ireland have been the most impressive and Wales have a real chance of reaching their second semi-final. In 1987, the first World Cup year, they were well beaten by New Zealand but won the third place play-off. The Kiwis have suffered a terrible blow with Carter ruled out of the rest of the tournament which will confuse the bookies who made them favourites to win it.

Back at the ranch we prepare for the first visit by Tredegar since September 1995 when we won a friendly 26-0. They haven't won a game yet but those who travelled by Red & White to matches with them will remember Tredegar upsetting the odds in typical local Derby fashion. A win and a bonus point is required but also a performance that we know our side can and will produce.

Wales play Ireland in Wellington on Saturday. It rains a lot in New Zealand and I can think of no more appropriate a venue. Wellies and a plastic mac will be required clobber but umbrellas like bagpipes are not allowed.

REL

A VERY ACCEPTABLE RESULT (260911)

When a team scores 44 points and crosses for six tries against the side topping the table it should be something to celebrate. Ebbw Vale did that on Saturday and while we did not expect church bells to ring we were in varying degrees satisfied but not completely so. Coaches want perfection, even Warren Gatland was "not entirely happy" with the 81-7 Welsh win over minnows, Namibia; another example of the haves and have nots in the competition, something the IRB should seriously consider. It can't do nations like Namibia any good.

Losing the third game of a new season by one point and away from home was not a time for mourning, but when a club sets its sights high any defeat is a set-back. The backlash after Bargoed was entertaining, encouraging and very acceptable and in the words of the illiterate of the round ball world, the boys done good. They can do better so look out.

Plucky Gilfach Goch had their moments but were outpaced. One try was a Dan Dearden dazzler but it was the Ebbw Vale pack that laid the foundation of a deserved win with prop Jonathan Williams named Man of the Match among many contenders. Only the stats department know if Wes Cunliffe has notched a try hat-trick before in our colours but when he got the ball it was goodbye Gilfach.

World Cup TV commentators have to learn the unpronounceable names of the newer teams and we must take their word that they've got them right. ITV doesn't cover much rugby but one familiar voice has been heard, that of a Welsh speaking Pembrokeshire man who "did" many of our games in the past and who supplied the English commentary of our play-off game with the Wanderers last April. Bob Symonds does his homework and being bi-lingual handles the names of Polynesians, Romanians and Russians with consummate ease. Last week he commented on Tonga v Japan and didn't put a foot, or a word, wrong. So different from the panel on Sky who call Dewi Morris "Dowy."

As a music lover I was alarmed at the talk of banning bagpipes from World Cup matches.

Hearing the dulcet tones blown by a man in a kilt arouses the passions and is an experience no-one should miss. There are other ways of rousing players and should Wales play New Zealand in the Cup Final they might remember that great hero of the Zulu wars Ivor Emmanuel. When he and his mates faced a horde of extras brandishing their assegais he didn't flinch and frightened them off with a defiant rendering of "Men of Harlech." As rugby is not very popular in Harlech we can always get the combined Beaufort, Ebbw Vale and Cwm choirs to render, meaning to tear apart, "Hymns and Arias," in Wenglish.

Better still let the teams come out, kick-off and get on with it

REL

OH! DEAR WHAT CAN THE MATTER BE? (180911)

Nothing that can't be sorted out and next Saturday is just the time to do it when we entertain the League leaders GilfachGoch. Losing away by a solitary point is not the end of civilisation as we know it, but what disappointed the faithful at Bargoed was a performance by an Ebbw Vale team unrecognisable from the one we have become used to. The home pack were strong and as powerful as expected and no-one can argue with the result because they scored two tries and we didn't get one. We had our chances but they were not taken, especially from set pieces a few metres from their line in the dying moments of a niggly game best forgotten.

Dorian Jones kicked superbly but otherwise there was little to please the coaches, players and loyal supporters. We conceded what turned out to be crucial points when a man down, they didn't when they were a man down. Bargoed depended on their pack who decided the result. For Ebbw it was a minor set-back but a reminder of the first three games a year ago might brighten us up. After beating Llanharan at home and Bargoed away we lost the third game at Newbridge. Lessons were learned, the side began to blend and from then we only fell by the wayside twice.

Next Saturday a side we easily defeated twice last season will provide another challenge and Gilfach Goch are not to be treated lightly. The visitors have beaten Mountain Ash and Merthyr at home and Rumney away scoring twelve tries compared to our six. TV experts reviewing an international match involving France often wonder which French team will turn up. On Saturday the real Steelmen have to up turn up. It's a "must win" game.

Wales as predicted beat Samoa who clearly have arrived in the 15-a-side game. They only had three clear days rest between their game with Namibia and Wales which is unfair but a feature of World Cup schedules. The only people who watched the Wales-Samoa when it was played were insomniacs and friends of landlords who can't tell the time. Consideration had been given to opening the club, providing camp beds and a full Cwm breakfast, but there were no takers.

Russia made their World Cup debut last week and lost 13-6 to the USA in pouring rain. Michael Lynagh was impressed and said "the Russians have arrived," heartening news to head coach Kingsley Jones who has Paul Pook, another former Steelman, at his side. It's a long way from Blaina to Moscow but Kingsley is a rugby nomad who one day might well coach Wales .

There was a song ages ago that began "It never rains in Southern California" but it never seems to stop raining in New Zealand . Things look rocky for Elsom and his Wallabies as it rained Guinness in Auckland which might result in an all-Celtic quarter-final betwixt the

Micks and the Taffs.

Ebbw Vale v Gilfach Goch will not brush the World Cup from the headlines, but to us it is THE most important game of the week-end.

REL

STEELMAN'S SON SMASHES SPRINGBOKS! (110911)

How's that for a tabloid headline? Toby Faletau whose home was once in our car park should have been on the winning side and would have been if a penalty goal that was had been awarded, but wasn't. It was the best Welsh performance for ages and deserved a better result, with Kuli's son the star in a constellation full of them. We should place a plaque on the house the man of the match lived in inscribed "Toby Faletau Lived Here."

It was an exciting week-end but why did it have to rain in Ebbw Vale on Saturday? Last season we enjoyed good weather and it suited our style of play. On Saturday the wind blew from the outback in South Gwent accompanied by rain and it didn't suit us at all. Beddau as expected gave us plenty to think about and it was only 12-9 with minutes to go. We scored a solitary try but it could have been more if there was quicker ball and better finishing. I try, and invariably fail, to avoid well worn clichés but this was a real game of two halves with Neil Edwards sharing the same feeling as Martin Johnson earlier in the day, their teams could have done better but won and whether at the World Cup or in Division One, victory is what matters.

Getting up – or home – at the crack of dawn to watch World Cup rugby, preparing mentally for the afternoon game with Beddau, worrying through it then supping the odd cordial summarises a busy Saturday. The headline of an article in the Ebbw Vale match programme was "Beware Beddau's Back In Town" and the warning was justified because Beddau, as they did twice last season, threatened to upset our apple cart. We have won all three League games with them but got only one bonus point.

Fortunately, World Cup fixtures don't clash with ours, and *clash* is the only word to describe England, in dreadful black jerseys with numbers peeling off, versus the Pumas, and Wales v the title holders South Africa. Neutrals expected the Springboks to win but it's now clear they are in decline which comment takes nothing away from a great Welsh performance they now have to repeat against Samoa.

Two Polynesian teams and one African stand in our way, the first being Samoa whose war cry is just as scary as the haka the All-Blacks have plagued us with for years. Grown men poking tongues at other grown men might be considered rather childish but I wouldn't say that to a 20 stone Kiwi prop. Wales have to beat Samoa next Sunday but the Islanders are not just classy Sevens players anymore, and they have Tuilagi, a Tiger in a Leicester shirt and a raging bull in the blue of Samoa. But with due respect to them, Wales, with its history, tradition and that X factor they call hwyl, will surely be the team to meet Australia in the quarters, not Samoa. The snag is that we expected to beat them in 1991 and 1999 and didn't.

After two good wins Ebbw faces fierce opposition at Bargoed on Saturday. They will also be in next season's Championship and with several former Steelmen in their side will be formidable on their own patch and were the only side to win a League game at Ebbw Vale last season.

What with the Cup in New Zealand and a winning start for the Steelmen I haven't had time

to think of gardening, DIY or painting the shed. I think I'll leave it until the rugby season ends, or better still for ever.

REL

#### WELL WORTH THE ADMISSION (040911)

The new season had a shocking start. The first shock was the price of entry into the Wanderer's ground, £8 instead of the usual fiver and a programme which cost £2. The second shock was experienced by the out-numbered home supporters whose side led 8-0, looked pretty good and went on to concede five tries, welcome to the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Wands. On reflection there could have been a few more.

Forking out an unexpected extra three quid did not deter the Steelmen's ardent supporters from entering a ground where Ebbw last won in October 1993, 32-5. Whatever the cost it was worth it and it must be some time since an Ebbw side scored five tries away from home on opening day. To say the performance was encouraging is the under-statement of the century and it was a great occasion for those playing their first competitive game in our colours. So, it was bye, bye bogey but euphoria must be avoided, one win doesn't make a winter but it looks as if ours will not be one of discontent. It was a blistering start and promised much, not only in results but entertainment.

Beddau who play at Ebbw on Saturday were home to newcomers Mountain Ash and won 13-0 but little notice will be paid to that scoreline as we recall the two challenges they made last season, especially in the penultimate game when they took an early 14-0 lead. Sufficient unto the day is the enjoyment thereof, and Saturday's opener was all of that, although no doubt the coaches will want more. Very few would have forecast a 30-14 win at the Memorial Ground but as they say in soccer, the boys done good.

There are a hardy few who remember 3.30pm kick-offs, matches lasting 70 minutes, heavy leather balls and a half-time raffle (tanner a ticket) with a chap in a cap (Dai) walking around the crowded ground displaying the winning number on a piece of cardboard. There were no 7 pm kick-offs because there were no floodlights, but half past three was a civilised time that allowed pre and post-match imbibing in The Bridgend Hotel where Mr. Ebbw Vale, Wally Talbot and his wife reigned, there being no clubhouse until the 1950s.

Communication was ancient compared to today and when the Lions went Down Under in 1950 the first we knew of the results was via the evening paper. They kicked off when we were fast asleep, and that's the way it is in the 7<sup>th</sup> World Cup. Luckily the World Cup will not clash with the Swalec Division One East thus allowing clubs to play without a rival attraction. There are no autumn internationals this year so we have a simple old-fashioned fixture list with games every Saturday kicking-off at 2.30pm. Tidy.

Our emphatic win at the Wanderers should encourage more to buy season tickets which are different this year. In a credit card format it depicts one of the greatest rugby photographs of all time, Clive Burgess charging at Gareth Edwards in a February 1978 Cup tie. Happy memories, but the current squad look like creating their own, and what can be better than an away win plus a bonus point?

REL

#### LET BATTLE COMMENCE (290811)

The try-outs are over, the real action begins on Saturday at Ely. A blend of last season's Championship side and new recruits will face a club just relegated from the Premier

Division. In friendlies and League games at various levels over several years, Glamorgan Wanderers have given us trouble. It's time we turned the tables and the undoubted presence of red, white and green clad supporters will help.

They are encouraged after we won two of three friendlies the results of which are important. Ireland lost all theirs, their coach saying "We've lost our four games which was not what we aimed for." I should think not. Llangennech also lost their three pre-season games, 12-19 at Merthyr, Llanelli at home 17-34 and Ebbw at home 25-30. Too much should not be taken from results of friendlies but those results show that Llangennech are difficult opponents.

Last season when we began life in Division One East most of our squad were new to the club. Our subsequent success was through our own efforts and without outside help so it will be interesting to see if the Wands get the regional support they have enjoyed in the recent past. It's an early tester and arguably one of the toughest away fixtures of the season but the young enjoy a challenge, past form at Ely means nothing to them.

Far away the Wallabies beat the All-Blacks which might change the bookies minds on who the World Cup winners will be. England won in Dublin for the first time in eight years and we kept our unbeaten record at Llangennech, not much of one because we've only played there twice, but in our corner of the rugby world we too were hoping for a morale booster before a main event.

Money doesn't affect clubs away from the mainstream as it does the pro scene. Passing through Gwernyfed on a sunny Sunday morning recently the grass roots of our game were obviously blooming. Adults carrying kit and balls galore and a bunch of keen kids were heading for the rugby ground for coaching. Gwernyfed is where great Steelmen like flanker Robert Stephens and prop Alan Phillips came from, first class players and particularly nice blokes. RTB Ebbw Vale have been planting roots for years and still do. Good on 'em.

World Cup squads have been announced and those who missed the cut have reportedly been shocked, stunned, gutted and sick as parrots. I have never been near a parrot and hope never to see one throwing up but it must be disappointing to have to stay at home while all the lads are enjoying themselves getting stressed and bruised in the World Cup. There's also the loss of extra income to moan about but no doubt injuries will strike and the moaners of today will be the chuffed of tomorrow when they are flown out to plug a few gaps.

It's easy to whisk a player out to NZ and he won't fly economy class either unlike the Welsh team that went there in 1988. Ebbw hooker Ian Watkins didn't enjoy the flight at all, he was stuck between two big locks and felt like the ham in a sandwich. Having got there Wales lost the two Tests by conceding over 50 points in each so the trip back wasn't so good either.

Season tickets are part of the life blood of a club and ours are on sale now. Quite unique, a departure from the previous style, it not only gets you into the ground and a discount at the bar it's a tangible means of supporting the club. No-one should be without one.

REL

COUNTING DOWN (220811)

Playing in West Wales is as rare as televised rugby without adverts, but in an age that places Llanharan, a nursery for Kerdiff, in Division One West the old tribal geographical

based rivalries have gone. We seem to have an affection for Carmarthenshire, a year ago we played the Athletic there, last Saturday we stepped up a level and faced the 'Quins who finished 11<sup>th</sup> in the Premier Division last season and next Saturday we head west again to pay a second visit to Llangennech who won 8-0 at ECP last season. Then it gets serious.

Elsewhere Wales finished their pre-World Cup friendlies with a win and the All-Blacks without Carter and McCaw lost in South Africa . The Welsh win over the Pumas was expected, the Springboks hadn't won a Tri-Nations game this season so they will head for New Zealand in better mood. And Wales? Many players, new and old, were tried to good effect and there should be no problem when we play our first World Cup fixture. It's against South Africa whose victory over the All-Blacks was entirely due to their outside-half Morne Steyn kicking all their points. If the 2011 World Cup follows the pattern of previous competitions kicking will again decide the winner,

The Welsh team will be supported by a small band of fans who have the cash and the time to travel to the end of the earth. They are big occasion rugby supporters who back the finished products but do nothing to help at the grass roots. Even if I won the club lottery, gave up radishes and Webbs, I would stay at home. It's a long way to New Zealand and I'll see more on TV. Flying that distance puts me off and how many gin and tonics are needed to pass the time?

It's so easy to watch Ebbw play away nowadays but it was not always so when adventurous travel was confined to Edmunds buses which took us to strange places with strange sounding names, although Hoffi often found difficulty in reaching the Palace. It was on an Edmunds chara that I went with Ebbw to Galashiels in the Scottish Borders in 1976. We left at 9am and got there at 2am next day. Two breakdowns were the cause, one after a wheel fell off but I won't go into that.

In mid-winter 1997 and 1998 the WRU imported overseas teams to keep the eight Premier clubs busy but the idea drew nothing but frozen breath. Two of them were from Argentina , Cordoba (beaten 17-16), and Tucuman (lost 22-10). We also defeated Namibia 75-7, Northern Bulls 20-13 and Guateng Falcons 25-19 as well as Romania 28-0.

On one of our rare sunny summer days I gazed over our ground and was lost for words. It was lush and wonderful thanks to a marvellous groundsman and staff whose work never ends. We impatiently wait our first game on it and our first sight of the new kit which was well illustrated on the website. The season tickets will also look new and are already selling well. Got yours yet?

Watching a New Zealand provincial Cup game last Saturday I spotted something amazing. Alongside the touchline was a big jacuzzi steaming away with a bunch of brave ladies in it. Another gimmick, but why? Does it draw the crowd? Will it encourage kickers to find longer touches? Or will it distract players? If that's the way the game is going we should go with it so the search is on for a few old tin baths thrown away when the pithead baths opened. Boil water in equally old kettles and we too could have a club jacuzzi. Provided it passes the WRU criteria.

REL