

# The Resurrection Men

Wales' Grand Slam 2008

Paul Rees



Mainstream Publishing *eBooks*



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*For Margaret*

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# **WALES'S GRAND SLAM 2008**

2 February 2008 – England 19 Wales 26  
(Twickenham)

9 February 2008 – Wales 30 Scotland 15  
(Millennium Stadium)

23 February 2008 – Wales 47 Italy 8  
(Millennium Stadium)

8 March 2008 – Ireland 12 Wales 16  
(Croke Park)

15 March 2008 – Wales 29 France 12  
(Millennium Stadium)



## 2008 RBS SIX NATIONS CHAMPIONSHIP TABLE

	TEAM	P	W	D	L	F	A	PTS
1	WALES	5	5	0	0	148	66	10
2	ENGLAND	5	3	0	2	108	83	6
3	FRANCE	5	3	0	2	103	93	6
4	IRELAND	5	2	0	3	93	99	4
5	SCOTLAND	5	1	0	4	69	123	2
6	ITALY	5	1	0	4	74	131	2

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## FROM BLACK TO ALL BLACK

There's a light around you.  
I've come to switch it on.

*Gordon Lightfoot*

**16 MARCH 2008. ROGER LEWIS, THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE** of the Welsh Rugby Union, is standing in the foyer of the Wales squad's hotel in the Vale of Glamorgan. Weary players run a gauntlet of autograph seekers as they make their way to the car park some 17 hours after clinching the Grand Slam by defeating France at the Millennium Stadium. Lewis's mind wanders back to another Sunday morning, not six months before, when he had turned up at the team hotel in Pornichet, near Nantes in the north-west of France. There were no scenes of joy or souvenir-hunting fans then; instead of leaving for the airport to fly to Marseille to prepare for a World Cup quarter-final against South Africa, the players and management had packed for a lunchtime flight to Cardiff, where they were to arrive under a cloud rather than be greeted by the warmth of the sun. Their tournament, courtesy of a 38-34 defeat to Fiji in Nantes, was over before the knockout stage had started. Lewis had come to tell the squad that the head coach Gareth Jenkins, who had only been appointed 16 months earlier after Wales's failure to build on the 2005 Grand Slam, had been fired. The WRU was on familiar ground as it started the hunt for its 13th coach in 19 years.

Nantes has been twinned with Cardiff since 1964. It was described by *Time* magazine in 2004 as 'the most liveable city in all of Europe', but to Jenkins it marked the last stop on the road to perdition. The WRU board of directors had met hours after the reverse to Fiji and decided on summary dismissal. Other countries who endured unsuccessful World Cup campaigns, such as Ireland and New Zealand, opted for a lengthy review process before determining the fates of their head coaches. Failure to win the World Cup in the past had meant automatic dismissal for All Blacks' coaches, but Graham Henry, the man who had established the base at the Vale of Glamorgan when he was in charge of Wales between 1998 and 2002, was to survive against all the odds. Jenkins had asked to be judged on how Wales performed at the World Cup, and the WRU took him at his word, a contrast to the Rugby Football Union in 1999 when the then England head coach Clive Woodward had said the same thing but survived, despite a media campaign against him, when England were knocked out by South Africa in the quarter-finals. The rest is history.

It is doubtful that Jenkins would have kept his job even if Wales had beaten Fiji. A proud, passionate man, who had long coveted the post, having been, over the years, the most successful domestic coach in Wales at first with Llanelli and then Llanelli Scarlets, he found himself constrained by the problems he had inherited, and having taken so long to clamber to the top of his greasy pole, he was never able to achieve any sort of grip and quickly slithered back down. Instead of building on the 2005 Grand Slam success, Wales had, as they had done on the two other occasions in the previous twenty years when they had tasted success (1988 and 1994), imploded. Jenkins took over with a recriminatory odour in the air following the abrupt departure of Mike Ruddock on the night of St Valentine's Day, 2006. The official reason for Ruddock's leaving one month after the WRU had said that it was ready

to sign a new contract with him was that he wanted to spend more time with his family, but it quickly emerged that other factors were involved, even if there was an absence of anyone willing to go on the record.

At the start of 2007, Jenkins gave a presentation to the coaches of Wales's four regional sides entitled: The Welsh Way - Winning 20.10.07. It was a reference to the date of the World Cup final, and he gave a diluted version of his address to the media. 'You have to be realistic, but there is nothing wrong with being ambitious,' he said. 'I want to coach a team that can win the World Cup. It cannot be an empty mission statement. When I spoke to the players last September, only one or two believed it could happen. I believe we have a better chance of winning the World Cup this year than ever before. There is nothing new about the Welsh Way: the game is about scoring tries, and that is what Welsh players like to do, but to win the Six Nations and the World Cup we have to create the right environment and sometimes play beyond our best.'

Wales came nowhere near their best in the 2007 Six Nations, winning only one match, against England on the final weekend. Two of their four World Cup group matches were in Cardiff, but defeat to Australia meant they had to beat Fiji in their last match to qualify for the quarter-finals. Wales outscored the islanders by five tries to four in what turned out, despite the tight game plan devised by Jenkins and his coaching team, to be a game of sevens - a contest to see who could score the best try. In 80 minutes, it summed up an overriding problem with the side since the 2005 Grand Slam. That success was based on an off-loading, counter-attacking game. When first Ruddock and then Jenkins tried to instil a more pragmatic approach as opponents quickly devised ways of counteracting a style that was as one-dimensional as a ten-man game plan, they met with resistance and players made their disaffection with Jenkins's tactics known publicly during the World Cup.

Little more than a week after paying off Jenkins, who had seven months of his £180,000 a year contract to run, Lewis boarded a flight to New Zealand, along with the WRU chairman David Pickering and the former Wales and Lions wing Gerald Davies, a member of the union's board of directors. Aware that a number of countries would probably have coaching positions to fill in the coming weeks, they were anxious to gain one advantage from Wales's early exit from the World Cup. Even before they left, the trio were linked with a number of names from the southern hemisphere: Jake White, who little more than a week later would win the World Cup with South Africa; John Mitchell, New Zealand's coach in the 2003 World Cup who had assisted Ireland and England in the 1990s; Steve Hansen, the New Zealand assistant coach who had been in charge of Wales between 2002 and 2004 before returning home to rejoin Henry; Robbie Deans, Mitchell's assistant between 1999 and 2003 who was coaching Canterbury Crusaders; and Warren Gatland, the former Ireland coach who had enjoyed four highly successful seasons at Wasps before returning to Waikato.

Lewis had canvassed the views of players after the Fiji defeat, and the WRU determined that leadership would be the single most important quality of the new head coach. 'We need somebody who is tough,' said Pickering before the New Zealand trip. 'We are looking for somebody who demands high standards and who has experience of coaching at the highest level. They have to be able to manage professional and demanding athletes and have a clear direction in which they want to take the team.' The words leadership, direction and toughness were to recur frequently during the 2008 Six Nations campaign; Ruddock's attempts to empower players had rebounded on him, while Jenkins, unable to mould a squad in his own image after taking over so close to a World Cup, never managed to exert his authority in the way he had at Llanelli. 'We came in with

a very mature attitude towards the players,' said Nigel Davies, Jenkins's backs coach who by the end of 2007 had become the WRU's head of rugby development. 'They were internationals, and we felt they could manage themselves. We looked to involve them in the decision-making process, but, on reflection, while Welsh players want latitude on the field, they demand direction off it. They crave certainty.'

Lewis, Pickering and Davies spent four days in New Zealand, but their work was effectively done before they had left Auckland Airport. They met Gatland there after he had made the 90-minute drive from his home in Hamilton. Ironically, given the Ruddock affair, he had been released as Ireland's head coach in 2001 amid allegations that some senior players had opposed the renewal of his contract. He played 17 times for the All Blacks at hooker without winning a cap and was a member of the 1989 tour party to Wales and Ireland. Ireland had spent most of the 1990s involved in a tussle with Wales to avoid the wooden spoon, and Gatland, who had ended his playing career at Galwegians before coaching Connacht, slowly led them out of the wilderness, bleeding players who were to become household names such as Brian O'Driscoll and Ronan O'Gara. It was at Wasps where Gatland forged his reputation: his successes included the Heineken Cup in 2004, and the left-hand corner on the south side at Twickenham where the scrum-half Robert Howley scored the decisive try in the final against Toulouse was to be the scene of a decisive moment in Wales's 2008 Grand Slam campaign.

The interview with Gatland was followed by one with Deans in Christchurch and another with Andrew Hore, the former Wales conditioning coach, in Wellington. Hore was being lined up for a new position being created in the union, the head of elite rugby; in the event, he turned it down and accepted a similar job with the Ospreys. The trio held two meetings with Henry, not to sound him out about a return to Wales, but to pick his mind. Pickering had been Henry's first

team manager when the New Zealander arrived in Wales in 1998, and Henry had never lost interest in the country he had called home for nearly four years. Deans had told the WRU delegation, politely, that he was not interested in coaching Wales. New Zealand had just been dumped out of the World Cup by the hosts France in Cardiff at the quarter-final stage, and Henry was tipped for the sack after New Zealand's worst ever World Cup campaign. It looked a no-brainer, especially after the New Zealand Rugby Union admitted it would be looking for a new coach. Deans, never mind his involvement in the previous abortive World Cup campaign, was widely regarded as Henry's successor, and he was clearly waiting for the call. He ended up being invited to put his name forward for the post only to lose out to Henry, who at the last moment had decided to reapply. Deans was then headhunted by Australia and became the first non-national to take charge of the Wallabies.

Lewis reflected later that it had taken him less than two minutes after meeting Gatland to realise that his search had ended almost as soon as it had started. It might have been different had Stirling Mortlock, the Australia captain, not missed a last-minute penalty in the World Cup quarter-final against England at the Stade Vélodrome in Marseille. Reports in New Zealand had suggested that the RFU was interested in persuading Gatland to return to England, and a salary of £350,000 a year was mentioned. Had Mortlock's kick gone over, England would have been on their way home with their head coach Brian Ashton almost certainly facing the sack, but the wind dragged the ball wide at the last moment, and the holders went on to reach the World Cup final after defeating France in the last four. Ashton held on to his post after surviving a two-month review, but by then Gatland was two weeks into his job with Wales.

'I was not aware of any interest from England,' said Lewis. 'One of the reasons we moved so quickly was that we knew coaches of the highest quality like Warren would be in big

demand. Sacking Gareth Jenkins so quickly had not been something I relished. I had a high regard for him and liked him as a man, but we had to make a statement to Wales and the world that we were serious about recovering our position in the global game. Letting Gareth go immediately was a brutal necessity. I knew straight away that Warren was our man. I had spoken to him on the phone the week before, and he said he would meet us at the airport. He has incredibly high emotional intelligence, an awareness of people and situations. There is a perception that he is hard and driven, given his winning mentality, but he is also sensitive. What struck me at that first meeting was that he used the word legacy: he was concerned about the shape he would leave Wales in. Stability was also something he stressed. He stressed that it was not about one man and said that if he became our next head coach he would look to bring in Shaun Edwards and Robert Howley to his management team. We were all struck by his honesty as well as his professionalism.'

Gatland was quoted in *Wales on Sunday* that weekend as saying that the appeal of coaching Wales was diminished by the frequency with which the position became vacant. 'Every coach understands that results mean everything in professional sport, especially in the United Kingdom, but there's no point in merely toppling the coach every time the results don't go to plan,' he said. 'That has been one of the problems in Wales when you look at the number of coaches they have gone through in recent years. That is not going to give any candidate a feeling of confidence or security and might even put some people off. Any coaching position with an international side in the top eight nations is always going to be an attractive proposition. Coaching is all about rising to challenges, and the Wales job is bound to be viewed as a very appealing challenge around the world.' And he added: 'People shouldn't be too optimistic in the first year, whoever becomes national coach. That person is going to need a lot



of support and help to ensure there is long-term development. I'd like to think they will give the new man a chance to make a difference. He will need the full support of the union and the nation to provide him with confidence – as will the team. It can't always be about winning tournaments. There has to be room and time for coaches and teams to develop and progress to a point where they punch at or above their weight.'

The WRU trio returned to Wales knowing the name of the man they would recommend to succeed Jenkins but were slightly unnerved by the fact that Gatland said he would meet them again at the end of the month when he arrived for a stay in Britain. They feared someone else was tapping him up; Gatland had admitted that he had been approached at some time in the year by another international side and that May had said he would consider returning to Europe. His ambition of coaching the Super 14 side Waikato Chiefs had not been realised, and would not for at least a couple more years. He was not considered a contender to succeed Henry, but when Wales's interest in him became known he was sounded out about a Super 14 job as the head coach of Otago Highlanders. He was not prepared to move his family to Dunedin, arguing later that he would effectively see as much of his wife and children if he decamped to New Zealand's South Island as if he were based in Cardiff. 'I felt I had done my time overseas, cut my teeth there then come back home and had three seasons with Waikato which were pretty good,' he said. 'But there were not any other opportunities for me in New Zealand. I had already turned down one overseas job at international level that year, and I don't think it would have been right to have spurned another opportunity.'

When Jenkins was fired, Lewis said it was not a case of one man taking the blame for failure. The responsibility was collective, but there was no one keen to do any sharing. The figures at the union who had appointed Jenkins remained;

some had been involved in the badly handled departure of Ruddock, whose going matched his arrival in 2004 when he was appointed to a job he had not applied for. Lewis had not been involved in either decision. Indeed, he owed his position to the hash the WRU made of the Ruddock affair, the culmination of which saw an emergency general meeting of member clubs, exasperated by a lack of clarity over the issue, pass a proposal to revive the position of group chief executive, which had not been filled since the resignation of David Moffett on health grounds at the end of 2005.

Lewis started work at the end of October 2006. His career until then had been in the entertainment industry, although it could be said that the goings-on at the WRU had never been less than entertaining. After gaining a degree in music, he started work as a presenter for Radio Tees and then Capital Radio before becoming the head of music at BBC Radio 1. In the 1990s, he moved into the business side of the industry, taking charge of two record companies before becoming the managing director and controller of Classic FM. In 2004, he was appointed the managing director of ITV Wales, from where he joined the WRU.

Whereas both Ruddock and Jenkins had been employed on two-year contracts, with neither seeing them out, Gatland was offered a four-year deal, the first time the union had committed itself to such a long contract since officials flew to Sydney in 1998 to persuade Graham Henry that his future lay in Wales. When Gatland came to Britain after the Auckland Airport interview, he stayed at Lewis's house near Wales's base in the Vale of Glamorgan. Lewis had reversed the policy of his predecessor Moffett, who cut staff and budgets in order to take control of a debt which was worth nearly £70 million, eventually managing to reorganise it. Lewis saw the national side as the means of expanding the union's business. The success of 2005 had been squandered, goodwill quickly turning into dismay and

despair. Gatland's appointment was about restoring credibility on and off the pitch with the union's debt still hefty at £40 million.

If the WRU wanted toughness, Gatland delivered on his first day at work at the start of December, even if he were in Dubai watching Wales play in a world-ranking sevens tournament. In an interview with BBC Wales, he left his charges in no doubt about what lay in store for them. 'I will start off by saying to them, "Imagine there is a mirror – when you come off the field I want you to look into it and say, 'I tried really hard today.'" If someone gives everything, that is fine. At times in training, we will put them under some stress and pressure. I will try to break some players physically and mentally to find out how tough they really are, and I am going to let them know that I will be trying to break them. You have to replicate in training what happens during a match. You have to have intensity and put yourselves under pressure in training so when a game comes around everyone is prepared for it physically and mentally. We will at times make things harder in training than they will be in a match. There is no excuse for a player pulling on an international jersey and not dying for the cause; if he's holding something back, he does not deserve to be there. The players are going to be playing a style of rugby I hope they will find challenging.'

He had eight weeks to appoint his management team and prepare for the opening match of the Six Nations, against England at Twickenham, a ground where Wales had not won for 20 years and where their World Cup preparations had suffered an appalling start the previous August when, fielding a largely second- and third-string side, they were thrashed 62–5. It was not a stadium that held any ghosts for Gatland, who won three Premiership titles there with Wasps, along with the Heineken Cup. He had told Lewis in Auckland that if Wales defeated England, the Grand Slam would be

on, and he did nothing to play down expectation in his first interview as the Wales head coach.

‘The Six Nations is a confidence tournament,’ he said. ‘Win a couple of games and you can get another couple. Lose two and you find yourself against a wall with a hole to dig yourself out of. Twickenham could not come much tougher as an opening game, but I have been involved in a few games there with Wasps and had some good victories. I have a pretty good insight into a number of the England players. It will be a big ask, because Wales have not tasted success there for some time, but one of my aims for us in the next couple of years is to achieve things Wales have not managed for a long time. One is getting a result against England at Twickenham.’

A feature of the 2005 Grand Slam was the barriers Wales knocked down. Their opening game that year was against England in Cardiff, and it had been 12 years since the men in white had lost in the city. Wales had not won at Murrayfield for eight years, while their home record against Ireland was astonishingly dismal, with the last victory occurring way back in 1983. It was four years since they had won an away fixture in the Six Nations. One by one, the historical obstacles fell, and as they did so Wales gathered a momentum that became irresistible.

In 2008, as well as facing a trip to Twickenham, where they had suffered five record defeats since their eight-point victory in 1988, they had not won in Dublin for eight years, while France had not lost at the Millennium Stadium in the Six Nations. And Wales had not won away in the championship since their last Grand Slam season. ‘One of the reasons I took the job was that Wales were tenth in the rankings and had had a pretty average World Cup,’ said Gatland. ‘There was not too far to go below tenth. I saw the potential and the ability within the squad and realised that, with the security of knowing I would have a couple of years in the job, I could change things by putting structures in