



Halfback was central figure in Wales' last golden era

EDWARDS, Gareth

WALES



Gareth Edwards became a household name in Wales and then British rugby's signature player in the 1970s.

Although comparing strengths of players from different eras and positions is an ultimately futile task, Edwards has been ranked No 1 in the lists of many authoritative rugby publications – in any position.

He was almost certainly the finest halfback and all-round player to emerge from Britain in a century of the game and probably the best from anywhere in the world.

Although the game has moved on since he played test football almost 30 years ago, champions of one era would surely be champions in another. Edwards remains arguably the most accomplished player the world has seen.

Although blessed with much natural talent, Edwards worked hard on his skills. When he broke into test rugby aged 19, for example, he did not possess an outstanding pass. But within a few years, he had mastered his delivery, as he did with every technical part of his game.

He became the ultimate “ringmaster,” especially playing in such a pivotal position of control between backs and forwards. He could guide his pack – whether they were the Lions, Wales or from his Cardiff club – around the field. Oppo-

Ringmaster supreme: Gareth Edwards gave the 1971 Lions a big advantage with his deliveries and ability to drive the pack. Here All Blacks Sid Going and Ian Kirkpatrick vainly watch him serve his backline once again

sition loose forwards were constantly confounded by his control.

Edwards' No 1 strength was his athleticism. He was remarkably quick and nimble, even for a halfback. Few who saw the match – or the television clip that has been replayed regularly ever since and has been called “rugby's greatest try” – will forget the try he scored in the Barbarians versus All Blacks match in 1973. Edwards features several times in the glorious end-to-end movement, even going to ground at one stage. Yet he is also seen sprinting hard to take the final pass and score.

Another freakish individual effort came against Scotland in 1972. Edwards took off from a scrum, a full 75m out, and fended and ran his way into space. Then he chip-kicked over the fullback, ran around him, kicked again as the cover-defence came at him, and dived on the ball before it could roll over the deadball line.

Such pace befitted an athlete who had been the All-England secondary schools 200yd hurdles champion,

beating Alan Pascoe, a future Olympic and Commonwealth Games medalist, by 15 yards in the process. Edwards had also enjoyed soccer and was good enough to be offered a professional contract with Swansea Town.

Every good halfback has to be agile. But Edwards' was more than that. After a hamstring injury, he was once asked by the Welsh selectors if he had recovered. Clearing a space in the foyer of the Angel Hotel, Cardiff, he performed a backward-somersault, to prove he had.

Edwards' other main asset was strength. He also had a low centre of gravity. These traits enabled him to burst through the most determined of close defences. He was also a courageous tackler and even a good goal-kicker. His tactical and defensive kicking game was the best around.

Add his superb concentration

* BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS *

Gareth Owen Edwards

Born: July 12, 1947, Gwaun-cae-Gurwen.

Position: Halfback.

Represented Wales and Lions: 1967-78; 63 tests – 53 for Wales, 10 for Lions.

Points for Wales and Lions: 85 (20 tries, 2 conv, 3 DG).

High school: Pontardawe Technical School, Millfield.

Other: His autobiography, *Gareth*, is believed to be the highest-selling rugby book of all time. Awarded the CBE in 2006.

Occupation: Studied physical education at Cardiff Training College. After his retirement as a player was a commentator with BBC; also columnist and author or co-author of a number of rugby books.



level and competitive spirit and here was a rare player indeed. Barry John, his partner for Wales and the Lions in the first part of his career, described him as “an explosion just waiting to happen.”

This 1.72m (5ft 8in), 83kg (13st) ball of energy and plotting genius was also tough and resilient. He eventually played 53 tests for Wales. These matches were played consecutively, over 12 years. He never missed a game through injury. It was a rare achievement indeed.

Such was his influence, Edwards also made other players and teams look better than they might have been. Lesser teams were uplifted by him, while he complemented the

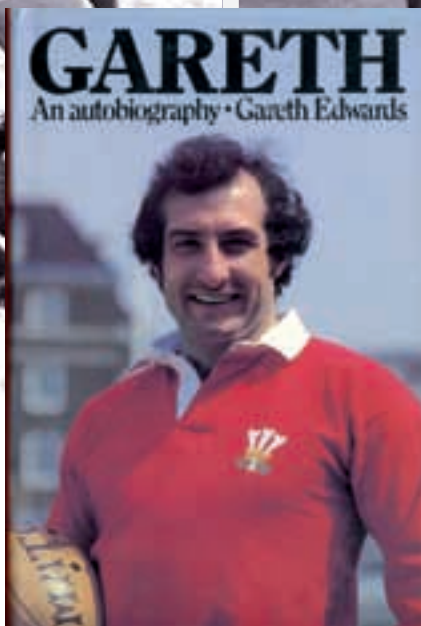
strengths of several star-studded British Lions teams to make them even stronger.

His greatest partnerships however, were with two Welsh flyhalves – John, with whom he linked with Cardiff in 1968 and played 23 tests together for Wales and five tests for the Lions until John’s retirement – and Phil Bennett.

Edwards won his first test cap against France in 1967. He played three matches against the touring All Blacks that year – for Wales, beaten 13-6; as captain of East Wales in the 3-all draw; and for the Barbarians. He toured South Africa with the Lions the next year and in 1969 was in the Welsh team, the Five Nations champion, that was badly beaten on its New Zealand tour.

But these were learning phases. When the Lions toured New Zealand in 1971, after an early injury, Edwards came back to help the tourists to the momentous first series win by a touring team in that country since 1937. He looked world class.

The Lions repeated the dose to the South Africans in



1974, with Edwards and Bennett in the pivotal roles and their Wales team-mate, Mervyn Davies, adding to the Springboks' miseries at No 8.

Edwards had had great battles with the All Blacks' Chris Laidlaw and Sid Going and the Springboks' Dawie de Villiers, among others. In time, no-one could best him. Edwards continued at the top of his game for another four years.

When he played his final test in 1978 he had been an integral part of Wales' remarkable three Grand Slam, five Triple Crown and seven Five Nations titles during his era. Even in his final season, he was in dominating form. Against France, in the crucial game, he took control after an early reversal and guided Wales to victory.

It was said Edwards, a humble man, found captaincy a trial in his early years. He had first captained Wales, aged 20, at Cardiff in 1968, in his fifth test. He was the world's



Final seal: Above, Gareth at Buckingham Palace with wife Maureen and his father.

Fender bender: Left, All Black first five-eighth Bob Burgess is the victim of this powerful fend as Edwards sets his sights on further progress, watched by Mike Gibson (left) and Barry John (far right).

First of many: Far left, Edwards scores the first of his 20 test tries against England at Twickenham in 1968

youngest test captain. But John Dawes and Mervyn Davies led Wales for long periods in his era. Edwards did captain the side in 13 tests over his entire career however.

Edwards finished his career as the world record-holder for most tests by a halfback. He had played more tests and scored more tries than any other Welsh player.

Edwards was inducted into the International Rugby Hall of Fame's First XV in 1997.

Cardiff also has a statue of Edwards in passing mode for visitors and citizens to be reminded of this diamond-like talent who was the central figure in Wales' last golden age.