

Sport  
Rugby Union

Lions year, but multiple players would have played more than 30 games."

This even applies at Prem Rugby level. Coming out of Durham University fourth XV, Bristol Bears captain Fitz Harding was well versed in rugby's hard-drinking traditions. "There was a night where I got given a raw fish, someone gutted it and wiped it all over my chest and then put the fish down my trousers before we went on a night out in Newcastle," Harding said. "Speaking to lads there, it does not happen now. I can only speak about Bristol as a club, there are not massive boozers."

"There are small groups after a game who might have a few drinks rather than a big social every Saturday. A lot of boys don't drink at all but there's no pressure or judgement."

By and large, this reflects a generational shift among Gen Z, born between 1997 and 2012, who are more focused on clean living. When Sam Warburton, the former Wales captain, came on to the international scene in 2009, he was an anomaly in barely drinking. Now his example is widespread.

One England insider estimates that around one in three in the squad are non-drinkers. There are no explicit rules or curfews, but regular weigh-ins and skin-fold tests are disincentive enough to even have the odd beer.

"These guys will work for at least eight hours a day, whether that is training, being in the gym or video analysis - when you switch into recovery mode why would you compromise that for the sake of a single drink?" Smith said.

"There's a cultural expectation in very competitive teams that have very ambitious goals that if any of your behaviours are undermining the goals of the entire team, then you are letting your team-mates down."

There are exceptions to the rule, as Billy Vunipola's encounter with a Taser in Majorca shows. There are also pockets of old-school traditions in certain Prem teams, particularly on long bus rides, but this is still a far cry from the days when London Welsh used to have a keg of beer as their half-time "hydration". After England games at Twickenham, beers are brought into the changing room but players are generally more keen on the sushi and chicken wings.

There is still room for the occasional blow-out and they serve an important purpose in team bonding, even if not everyone is drinking. These occasions are meticulously planned. Typically there would be a reserved area in a nightclub.

It might well be tempting fate, but several people involved in the England set-up believe an incident such as Brook's would not happen on their watch, in camp at least. The days of international players driving golf buggies down the motorway and downing pints of aftershave may be ending.

Rugby player drinks beer, shocker indeed.

# Old-school booze culture dies out as game goes dry

More matches, more big hits, the rise of sport science and clean-living Gen Z combine to curb drinking traditions

By Daniel Schofield

There is a brief and unfortunate history of English sporting teams' drunken excursions into New Zealand nightclubs. Before Harry Brook's interaction with a Wellington bouncer, there were the 2011 England rugby team's infamous dalliances with various dwarves and mystery blondes at the Altitude Bar in Queenstown.

"Rugby player drinks beer, shocker," was the then-England team manager Martin Johnson's sarcastic attempt to downplay that controversy. Fifteen years on, that statement could now be taken at face value. For better or for worse, elite rugby's booze culture has changed beyond recognition.

Last summer, dozens of former British and Irish Lions players headed to Australia on corporate jollies, seemingly determined to drink their own bodyweight in beer at every bar they entered. Many were shocked by the abstemious approach of their 2025 contemporaries, who preferred flat whites to full pints. "They are living like monks," said one former Lion and Ireland international in a disapproving tone.

Judging by the huge rounds of

whisky sours being amassed in the lobby of the team hotel the morning after the third Test, that is not necessarily true, but it is about picking your moments. During England's autumn campaign for example, the team chose to have their main night out after the 33-19 victory against New Zealand, because there was an eight-day turnaround until their final match against Argentina.

The days of England players having a few pre-match halves in the Roebuck or the Sun in Richmond on a Friday night are long gone. "There's nothing stopping boys from having a glass of wine or beer with a meal during the week, but I can't remember the last time I saw anyone do that," an insider said.

In part this is because of the inexorable rise of sports science. No one ever thought that alcohol improved sporting performance, but now the precise pitfalls are spelt out by sports scientists such as Stephen Smith, the founder of Kitman Labs, the world's leading sports science and performance intelligence company.

"When you drink alcohol you are going to slow down our ability for muscle repair and adaptation to occur," Smith said. "That means you are going to be sore and not be ready for the next training session, or the next game. We also know neuromuscular fatigue increases because alcohol inhibits our ability to have a proper sleep cycle. All of that has a significant impact. That

"It has become increasingly difficult for players to drink without having an impact on recovery and performance"

results in greater injury risk and decrease in co-ordination, decrease in motor patterning, reaction times and performing fine motor skills."

Smith worked at Leinster as senior rehabilitation and conditioning coach, and has seen first hand the changes in players' behaviours over the past 20 years, which have corresponded with the increasing physical demands of the game. Not only do players play more matches, but the ball-in-play time has increased by around 15 per cent.

Research from Kitman Labs shows that over 20 years, the average player endures 50 per cent more collisions. "Think of the neuromuscular damage that creates and what that means from a recovery perspective," Smith said. "It has become increasingly hard for players to do that [drink] without having an impact on recovery and on performance, which ultimately has an impact on their career."

"If you compare 20 years ago the demands of a professional athlete today, in 2005-06 Shane Horgan and Ronan O'Gara were the highest-capped players for club and country and they played 17 and 18 games. Look at last year and it was a little bit different because it was a

Refreshing: Mike Teague (above left) and Wade Dooley on the 1989 Lions tour; England captain Maro Itoje (below) rehydrates

