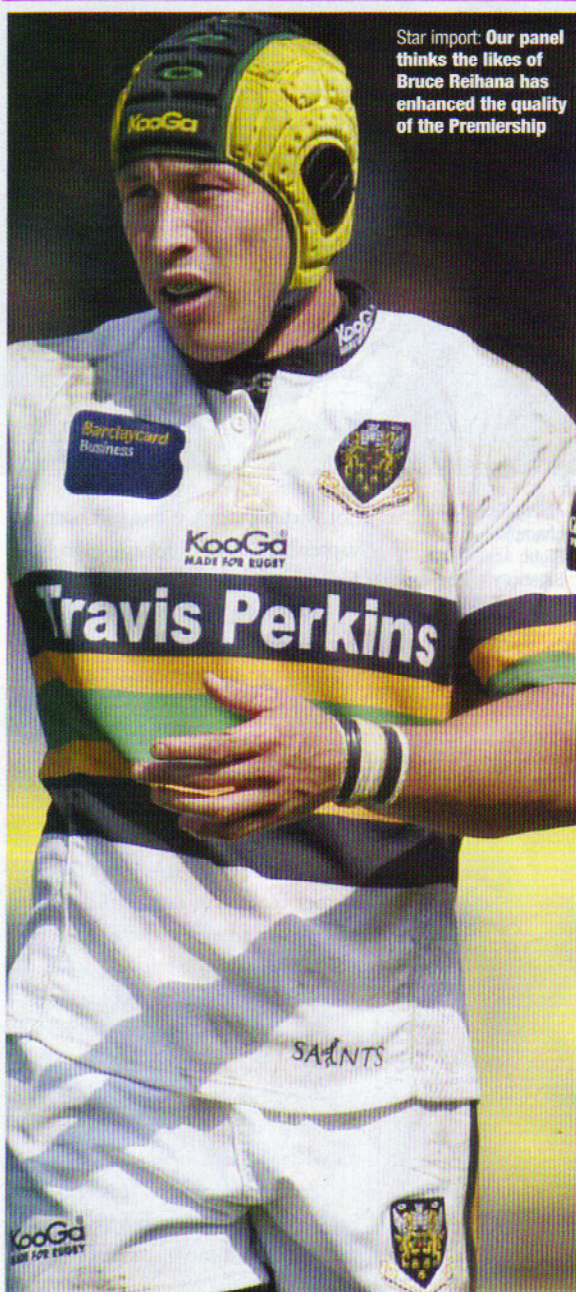


"A STRONG ENGLAND AND A STRONG CLUB GAME GO HAND IN HAND, THEY'VE JUST GOT TO SORT OUT THE SPAT BETWEEN THE TWO. IT'S A SHAME THOSE FEW COLUMN INCHES RUGBY GETS ARE DOMINATED BY WAFFLING ABOUT POLITICS"



Star import: Our panel thinks the likes of Bruce Reihana has enhanced the quality of the Premiership

ROB: I think that's rubbish and it should be scrapped. If we're looking at too high a demand on the players right now, I think things like that just get in the way. Also, how serious are the clubs about that competition?

ED: A lot of clubs, like Bristol for example, fielded their second team in the Anglo-Welsh Cup pretty much every single time. It's strange because I remember when I first started watching Bath play, it was never about the league, it was always about the cup. Winning the league always came second to the cup. If you lost a league game it was 'oh well never mind' but if you got knocked out of the cup, it was the worst thing to ever happen.

ROB: OK, scrap the league and let's have two more cup competitions.

ED: Well we have scrapped the league because it's now a playoff, it's Super 14.

RUPERT: The point is those fixtures turn over a lot of cash, and if the second XV's are playing but people are still coming to watch, fine, but it's the fact that teams who are forced to pick their best players in those competitions is what's harming England. The solution seems to be to invest in foreign players, who are great to watch, but it's harmful in other ways.

ED: I don't mind the foreign players coming in because they add value, they raise the standard and when the English guys are on international duty it keeps that star quality in the league. You're happy if you're a Northampton fan - well you're probably depressed at the moment - but when your England stars weren't playing, you could still go and watch Carlos Spencer and Bruce Reihana week in week out. But what happens to a young fly-half who is trying to come through?

ROB: But that young fly-half is training with Carlos Spencer and if there are 35 games a year he will get a chance.

IRN: In the end, what's more important: to have a strong England or a strong club game?

ROB: You've got to keep the domestic league attractive to build our own rugby and attract players, but the end goal is obviously to have the best England side possible.

ED: The difference between England and the Celtic countries, is that England have an incredibly strong club structure and a lot of strength in depth, whereas the Celtic nations didn't. As soon as those clubs started playing each other in the Heineken Cup a few years ago, bar Llanelli, everyone was getting spanked by the English teams and they created the regional structure. Ireland are a much stronger team as a result.

RUPERT: I think the two go hand in hand. There's nothing wrong with the Premiership; they've just got to sort out the spat between the two. I actually think one of the worst things they're doing is having the whole discussion in public. All you ever read about in the press is bickering. The whole point is that the actual league is really strong and it's a shame that those few column inches rugby gets, seven pages back into the sports sections, are dominated by waffling about politics. They should be having these discussions in private.

ROB: But they can't decide anything in private so the only way they can do it is try to win public support by sniping at each other. It's a mud-slinging exercise.

ED: Obviously there's no easy solution to it but remember our professional structure has only been in place for 12 years and we have always been playing catch up with the southern hemisphere who were professional before us. Those countries made their national sides the priority, but in England we're too far down the line and the clubs are too strong to move to a regional set-up. **IRN**