

JONATHAN AGNEW



While the countdown to the Ashes continues and football takes its well-earned summer break, it's time for the British and Irish Lions to hit the headlines. This weekend they face the Queensland Reds in Brisbane at the Suncorp Stadium, which is the venue for the first test against Australia later this month.

The combined Lions team is one of sport's most famous concepts, having toured the southern hemisphere since 1888, but the Lions have not won a

series since 1997 when they beat South Africa 2/1, coached by the legendary Sir Ian McGeechan.

One of the challenges facing the management of a Lions tour is the sheer volume of players. Warren Gatland, the head coach, named a squad of 38 and, given that only 15 can play in the tests, there is a real danger of a split in the ranks between those who will appear in the big games and those who will not. McGeechan agrees: 'Dealing with the disappointment of being left out of the side is critical to the harmony of the squad and the chances of success,' he said.

However, there is little doubt that to play for the Lions is the pinnacle of any player's career – even more so than representing your own country. To be chosen as one of the best from England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland is a huge statement of your ability, while the fact that the Lions tour takes place only every four years makes it an oppor-

tunity that might not come your way again.

That pride, together with the rich historical tradition of the Lions, helps to make this combined team work. Similarly golfers, who are used to playing as individuals for handsome rewards, love the Ryder Cup in which they earn nothing, but play in a team.

A very good example of a failed combination is the ICC Rest of the World XI that played Australia in 2005 in a one-off test that was supposed to be the climax of the international calendar. The playing conditions were fidd-

led with (the match was played over six days rather than five), there was no sense of pride or tradition, and the game was viewed by the players as an unnecessary demand on their time. Thankfully, it has never been repeated.

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