

### Gentlemen and Hooligans

adapted from an article by Gavin Mortimer



- 1 Most British sports fans are familiar with the saying that 'football is a game for gentlemen played by hooligans, and rugby union is a game for hooligans played by gentlemen.' But something strange has happened in the past season or two. This current crop of footballers, particularly the ones wearing the England shirts, are polite and presentable. Not only that, but their enthusiasm for their sport is infectious and it says much about their wholesome image that the most the tabloids can reproach them for is the odd indiscrete tattoo.
- 2 In contrast, the England rugby squad are a sullen and joyless bunch. During the recent tour to South Africa, two of their number were involved in what the BBC 12 described as a 'post-match confrontation'. Another two of this season's squad have been convicted of drink-driving and the captain, the man supposed to lead by example, has been banned for a total of 60 weeks in the course of his career for biting, punching, eye-gouging, verbally abusing a referee, elbowing and headbutting. Harry Kane, the clean-living captain of the England football team, who avoids nightclubs and alcohol, has never been sent off for England or Tottenham.
- 3 Before I go any further I should point out that rugby is 'my sport'. I spent 25 years playing the game, I broke bones, tore ligaments and collected an impressive cauliflower ear for the cause. But I barely recognize rugby union

today. It has become a nasty, dangerous, gladiatorial sport, played by men with too much muscle and too little skill.

4        Nowadays, most players go straight from school into professional rugby, and therefore haven't the well-rounded backgrounds of their amateur predecessors. What they do have, however, is a handsome salary, and this has turned many into strapping spoiled brats. They constantly question decisions made by the referee with whining insolence while touch judges are subjected to looks of snarling contempt. The disrespect is filtering down to the amateur ranks and in the past year alone two referees have been assaulted by players. In recent years we've seen the emergence of bad sportsmanship: players purposely diving or feigning injury in an attempt to have an opponent sent off and even the brandishing of imaginary cards in the hope it will prompt the referee to reach into his pocket for the real one.

5        I will be relieved if my children don't want to play senior rugby. I'm not fearful of the sport's physicality, for me it's the vulgarity. That's why when I go to the park for a kick-about with my daughter, the ball is a round one.

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