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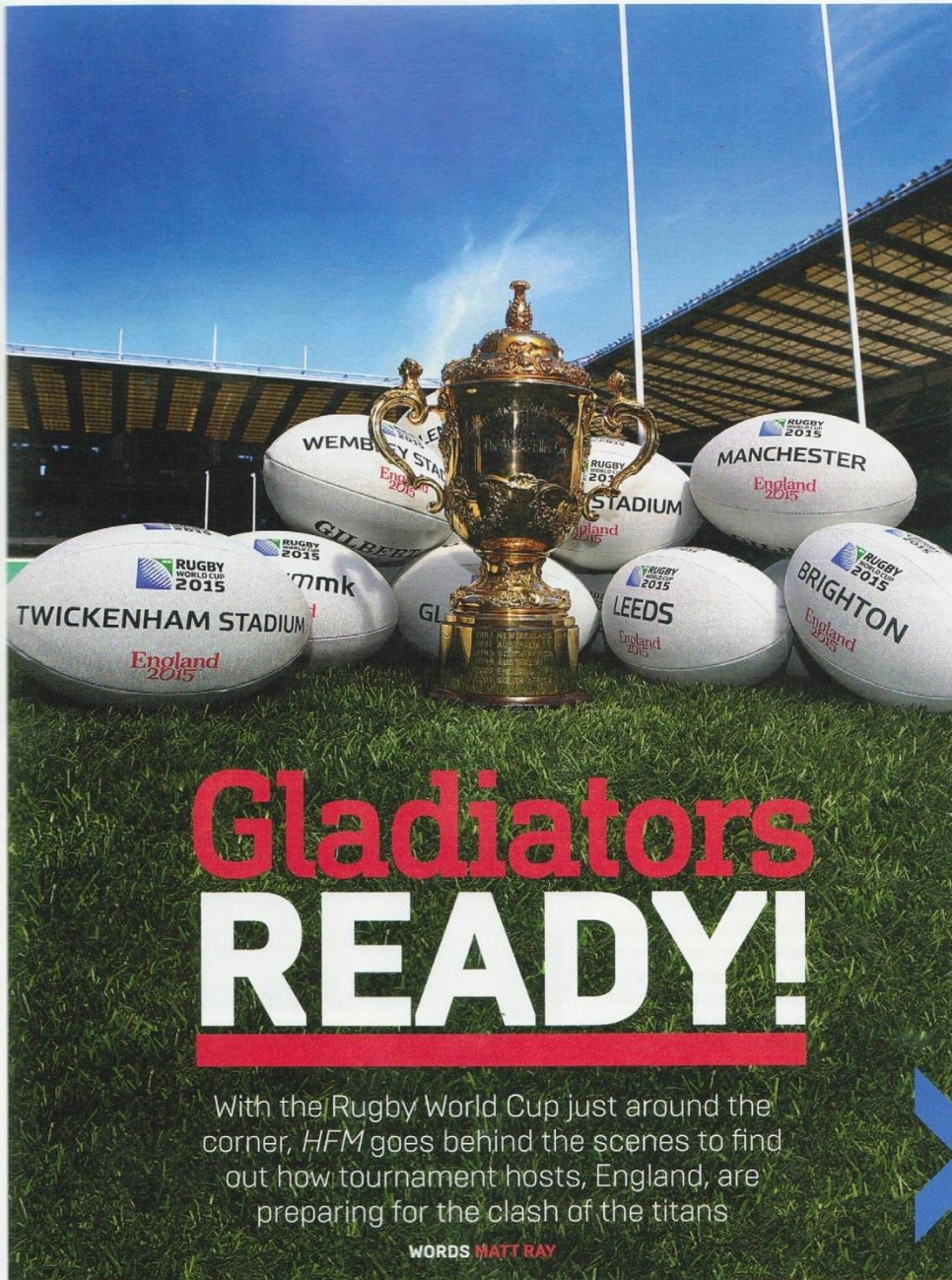
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'I added 14% lean muscle'

HFM'S 8-WEEK TRANSFORMATION







# Gladiators READY!

With the Rugby World Cup just around the corner, *HFM* goes behind the scenes to find out how tournament hosts, England, are preparing for the clash of the titans

WORDS MATT RAY



**W**hen it comes to world-class rugby, we're used to seeing top players shaking the earth with bone-crunching tackles and setting pitches alight with searing speed. But the sight that greets me as I arrive at the Institute of Sport Exercise & Health is slightly perplexing – the powerful figure of England hooker Tom Youngs is set on a stationary bike, not going anywhere fast, but expending a lot of energy doing it.

When I set out to investigate the training secrets of the England squad, I wasn't expecting this. But Wattbikes are one of the unconventional training techniques that have become central to the home team's bid to win the Rugby World Cup this autumn. To understand why, I'm going to do a peak power test. It's six seconds, flat out. I pedal from stationary into the biggest thigh burn of my life – the Wattbike uses air for resistance – and I clock 1292 watts. Not too shabby.

But I wonder what kind of peak power Tom Youngs can turn out – his thighs alone look like they could power the national grid. 'My peak is about 1894 watts,' he tells me. But it's not just about beating your teammates; the Wattbike is used to condition muscles to process lactate faster and beat the burn.

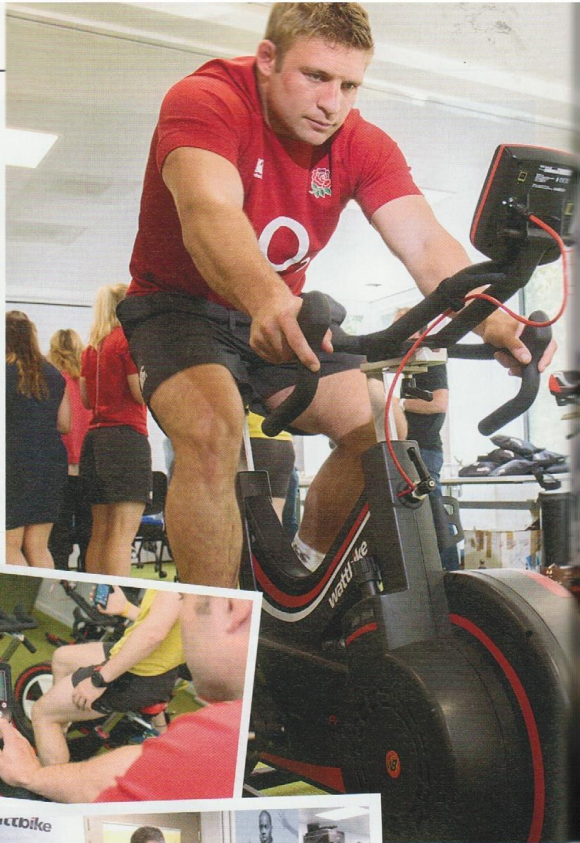
'We structure sessions - 30 seconds flat out, then rest three and a half minutes, repeated four times. I thought, "that's easy." But my God! You get off the bike and the lactate goes boom, straight to your legs,' Youngs recalls with a grimace.

### THE KIT THEY LOVE TO HATE

It's not just forwards like Youngs that benefit from this kind of training – England winger Anthony Watson is strong, fast and can 'sidestep you in a phone box'. The backs need to recover quickly in order to counter attack. 'The Wattbike is my nemesis,' he tells *HFM*. 'It's just as well you caught me 20 minutes after the session – 10 minutes and I'd just be lying on the floor!' Having caught a breath, he adds, 'It's no fun, but once you're off, it's a great feeling to have done it and you definitely reap the benefits on the pitch when dealing with lactic acid build-up.'

Whether you're an armchair pundit or just catch the odd Six Nations match, you can't have helped notice that games are becoming more and more physical. 'Everyone is getting stronger and fitter,' says Youngs. 'There's more sports science in everything and no hiding places anymore. I think that's great, but it takes a toll on the body on a Sunday after a heavy game.'

But hard training is only half the story. 'Recovery is just as key. If you're not recovered and carry on



Above and below: Tom Youngs feels the Wattbike burn during training. Centre left: not to be outdone, *HFM* editor Matt joins in and pushes his legs to the limits





## A WEEK IN TOM YOUNGS' GYM LIFE



This is what the England hooker gets up to in the gym during the playing season

### MONDAY

'One-legged Bulgarian squat, knee to floor with your leg up on something. Four sets of each leg - you get real delayed onset muscle soreness (DOMS). Watch your hip flexors though, because you can pop them. I lift 120kg.'

### TUESDAY

'I hit the bench press and do 4-5 reps over 4 sets at about 155kg. Then I do some core work using the plank or something. I finish with prone row - 4 reps and 4 sets at 120kg, or 3-4 reps over 4 sets of chin-ups with a 50kg belt.'

### THURSDAY

'Rotator cuff work is important to avoid injury, so we do partner pushes for 5 minutes. Then it's into power work, training speed and agility with accelerations over 5 metres, or using the Assassin, a weighted sled on an incline.'

training, you're more likely to get injured,' Youngs adds. He's developed his own recovery routine - nutrition is important, but not the whole story. 'I have a cold bath after a game and jump on the Wattbike for 20-30 minutes on the Sunday - nothing excessive, I just get the blood moving and a bit of a sweat. I find that helps come Monday.'

And the right nutrition is vital for recovery. 'The main thing for me is to have a protein shake immediately after training. You notice the benefits and the day after, you can tell if you've had one or not,' says Watson.

Another 'secret weapon' set to be rolled out in this World Cup are cryo chambers. No, this doesn't mean a cyborg army of players held on ice - it's an evolution of the 'cold baths are good for recovery' concept. 'We've worked with cryo chambers at Bath this year. I couldn't go into

the science of it, but it's something that's helped me massively,' says Watson. The players enter an initial chamber at a face-numbing -70°C for 30 seconds, then go into another chamber at -130°C for 90 seconds. 'It's something to do with shocking the heart and venous return that speeds up recovery. The benefits are huge, but being in the chamber isn't the most pleasurable thing,' Watson admits.

But how do players of his size and power retain their speed and reactions? 'A lot of the drills we do are position specific to develop power as well as speed,' says Watson. 'We do a lot of explosive and reactive stuff at the end of the week, such as box jumps, which are key for me. Heavy lifting we do at the start of the week to build up strength.'

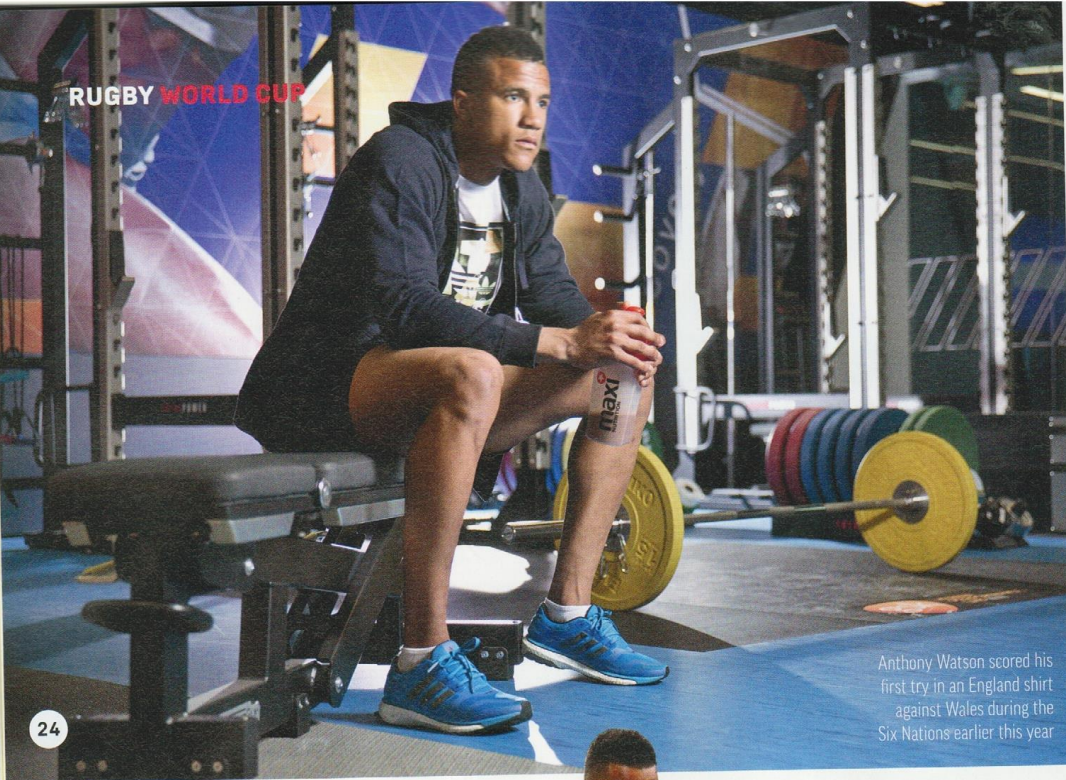
Of course, when it comes to game conditions, there's no point having strength and speed



Youngs running for England as they take on Scotland at Twickenham during the Six Nations







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Anthony Watson scored his first try in an England shirt against Wales during the Six Nations earlier this year

“ Sport is about staying in the moment. If you make a mistake, it’s done – go to the next move ”

if you’re too fatigued to play. Once again, the Wattbike is used to pre-fatigue players before technical drills. ‘We do some contact conditioning, but we can use the Wattbike to do some sets, then go into something very fatigued. When you’re fresh, you make the right decisions at the right times. But a skill like mine, throwing, I do it when I’m very fatigued. I have to calm down and control my breathing to do it – so it’s very important,’ says Youngs.

Not all the focus is on building the body; the mental side also has to be worked on. Watson used to be



overwhelmed by the occasion of big games, until he began working with sports psychologist Don McPherson. ‘I’ve a few techniques I use before and during the game that have helped me hugely in being able to go out there and just enjoy it and have confidence,’ says Watson. ‘Sport is about staying in the moment; if you make a mistake it’s been and done – you’ve just got to try to impact the game with your next move.’

Whoever you’re cheering for come September, one thing’s for sure – it’s going to be a good scrap and an amazing spectacle. Watson will be looking to lift the crowd, just like his boyhood hero. ‘When I was younger, I watched Jason Robinson [England wing and fullback who won 51 test caps] on TV. The main thing for me was his counterattacking and ability to change the game instantly. The way the crowd roared when he got the ball was so inspiring,’ he says.

As for Youngs, the Rugby World Cup is a sleeping giant. ‘The way the UK gets behind sport is fantastic – we’re a sporting mad country, and the more I think about it, the more I think the Rugby World Cup’s going to be a lot bigger than we all realise.’ **HFM**  
Thanks to the Institute of Sport Exercise & Health

Photos: Getty, Maximillion