

Rugby union

Reptile evening helps take England's mind off bad defeat

ENGLAND spent a night with snakes and spiders to help take their minds off Saturday's harrowing collapse to South Africa at Ellis Park.

A variety of reptiles and creepy crawlies were brought into the team hotel at their Umhlanga base on Sunday night as part of a BBQ organised by players to forget the trauma of their 42-39 defeat by the Springboks.

England raced into a sensa-

tional 21-point lead inside the opening quarter only to fall apart as South Africa launched their fightback in a captivating first Test.

Defence coach Paul Gustard said: "We had a reptile show and a barbecue so that the boys were able to not think about rugby for a period of time."

"We had mambas, we had cobras, we had long green ones, long black-and-white ones... a

snake's a snake to me! We don't get many in Newcastle! We had tarantulas, we had dragon things, we had all sorts!

"Dan Robson doesn't like a spider. Nathan Hughes was probably the most confident with a snake. Nick Isiekwe and Dan Robson were terrible."

"It was a chance for the players to enjoy ourselves - have a barbecue, have some good food and have a laugh."

"We didn't have the start to the series we wanted but we are still in it. We can still win the series 2-1 and everyone is a firm believer in that."

Gustard defended England's approach to playing at altitude following a revelation from South Africa scrum-half Faf de Klerk that the Springboks sensed Eddie Jones' men would be vulnerable at Ellis Park.

Jones has located his camp

by the Indian Ocean despite the first two Tests being staged on the Highveld in Johannesburg - which is over a mile above sea level - and Bloemfontein where the air is thinner.

"There are plenty of different people willing to give their advice and I'm sure you're aware of the thoroughness that we look into things to find out what's ideal for the team to perform," Gustard said.

"We've got our own sports scientists. We've got a guy that mentors the coaches that heads up British Athletics. We took all that advice in."

"We spoke to a lot of Super Rugby teams about what to do. And we are very happy with our decision to stay in Durban and go up."

"The result on Saturday is not a reflection of the altitude, it is a reflection of our performance."

Rugby league

Talented Hull back Connor is called up by Bennett



Will England fans, then, get to see Hull FC's mercurial talent Jake Connor in action in Denver?

The gifted and versatile back has, encouragingly, been included in Wayne Bennett's squad for the Test against New Zealand a week Saturday and is perhaps the one surprise inclusion.

It is not a surprise that he is thought of in such company - anyone who has watched Connor since he emerged through the Huddersfield Glants academy ranks will have seen he has all the talent to be an international.

Rather, it might have taken some people aback because it is hard to imagine where he will slot in, in Bennett's team.

The answer is, he may yet not; a 19-man squad flies out to Colorado so two players must miss out. Connor need only talk to his club colleague Scott Taylor about that prospect, the Hull prop who flew to Sydney last May for the mid-season Test against Samoa only to be named 18th man.

Nevertheless, it would be a great shame if we didn't see Connor - one of three uncapped players alongside St Helens duo Luke Thompson and Tommy Makinson - showcase his guile and skills against the Kiwis.

The 23-year-old, who hails

from Halifax, has been a revelation for the Airlie Birds, coming up with some stellar moments either from centre or, after injuries to Marc Sneyd and Albert Kelly, in his favoured half-back role.

Bennett has decisions to make in both positions; his first-choice centre Kallum Watkins, the Leeds Rhinos captain, is out for the season following a knee reconstruction while both starting halves from December's World Cup final defeat to Australia are missing.

Warrington Wolves stand-off Kevin Brown, 33, announced his international retirement in March before Castleford Tigers scrum-half Luke Gale suffered a knee injury that will sideline him until August.

The common belief is that Bennett will pair his other halves from the World Cup - St George Illawarra's Gareth Widdop and Wigan Warriors' George Williams - on June 23 which takes Connor out of the equation there.

That leaves centre. Along with Saints' Mark Percival, he is the only recognised centre in the 19 but, let's not forget, the Australian largely played Wigan second-row John Bateman there last year.

Yet Percival definitely deserves a chance; he was unlucky not to get the nod last season and, with dynamic leaders Saints, has clearly been the best centre in Super League this time around.

Apparently, he was initially all set to play against Samoa in that mid-season Test but after an er-



MERCURIAL: Hull FC's skilful back Jake Connor is one of three new faces in the 19-man England squad for the Test against New Zealand that will be played in Denver, USA, later this month.

ror-ridden training session early in the week was 'hooked' from the 17 completely with Castleford full-back Zak Hardaker instead played out of position.

Infamously, Hardaker was banned by the time the World Cup came actually around but, still, it was Bateman - not Percival - who was given the responsibility down that left edge.

It is a warning to everyone that nothing is cast in stone with Bennett; what he might think his squad will be when they board the flight can change drastically in a short space of time.

It is hard to imagine, though, Bennett would fly Percival thousands of miles again only to leave him out of the 17 once more.

The question, then, is will the Brisbane Broncos chief switch Bateman to right centre in place of Watkins or hand Connor the

chance to make that his own. Bearing in mind Watkins will not be fit in time for the end-of-season Tests against the Kiwis, it would make sense to see how he can fare - and allow former Bradford Bulls man Bateman to flourish in the pack instead.

But there are other selections posers; St Helens' Jonny Lomax or the equally suited Stefan Ratchford at full-back?

Stick with the tried and tested Ryan Hall, from Leeds, and Huddersfield's Jermaine McGillvary who has served him so reliably, or leave one out for the in-form winger Makinson?

Prop Thompson, like Connor promoted from the England Knights squad named in March, warrants his chance while there is a recall for South Sydney prop George Burgess with Taylor, the injured Alex Walmsley, Josh

Hodgson and Ben Currie omitted from the World Cup squad.

Castleford's Mike McMeeken and Newcastle Knights' Chris Heighington also drop out while England EPS members Daryl Clark, Leeds' Stevie Ward and Wakefield's Tom Johnstone are not included.

Bennett said: "The three uncapped players deserve their call-ups after showing their talent and determination both on and off the field."

"We've always been clear the door to the senior squad is open to any player showing the form to be selected. The squad has a real mix of experience and youth and that will prove important during our time in Denver."

England: Bateman, G Burgess, S Burgess, T Burgess, Connor, Graham, Hall, Hill, Lomax, Makinson, McGillvary, O'Loughlin, Percival, Ratchford, Thompson, Widdop, Williams, Whitehead.

Briscoe is happy to commit his future to the Rhinos

DAVE CRAVEN

WINGER TOM Briscoe says he did not even contemplate leaving Leeds Rhinos before signing a new contract at Emerald Headingley.

The former England international's deal was due to expire in November but he has now agreed to stay on until the end of 2020.

Briscoe, 28, joined from Hull FC at the end of 2013 and has scored 55 tries in 113 games in the blue and amber.

He is a third player in less than a week to recommit to the defending Super League champions following Ash Handley and Adam Cuthbertson.

"I saw no reason to look elsewhere," said the Featherstone-born player, who scored a record-breaking five tries in the 2015 Challenge Cup final win over Hull KR.

"I am pretty settled here. We have won a lot of silverware in the last five years and it's something I want to continue."

"I'd like to think the best years are ahead. I can't think of any better place to spend them than Leeds Rhinos. I want to be part of the group moving forward."

"At the minute we are going through a bit with injuries and transition within the team, but looking ahead we are going to be good for the experience we are going through at the minute."

Briscoe, who won the treble in 2015, believes Rhinos can emerge from their recent rut that has seen them slip to seventh.

"The young lads are getting some good game-time and when we get everyone back fit I am sure we'll be challenging," he said.

"We've been through it before, in 2016 and hopefully we've learned a lot from that and won't get as low this season."

■ Catalans Dragons' Fouad Yaha is set to miss Friday's game at Huddersfield Giants after being given a one-match penalty notice for a grade B shoulder charge against Widnes Vikings.

Tomkins has shot at redemption - Robins coach Sheens

DAVE CRAVEN

HULL KR coach Tim Sheens says new signing Joel Tomkins now has a chance to "redeem" himself following his embarrassing exit from Wigan Warriors.

The former dual-code England international has agreed a deal until the end of 2019 after leaving his hometown club by "mutual consent" - barely a week after being stood down when video foot-

age emerged of his drunken verbal abuse of a barmaid.

Wigan suspended second-row Tomkins for four weeks and fined him £10,000 but the player says his resignation was then accepted and struggling Rovers - in desperate need of new recruits - have secured his services.

Last night, Warriors then confirmed the signing of ex-St Helens back-row Joe Greenwood - a long-term target - from Gold Coast Ti-

tans on a three-and-a-half year deal with immediate effect.

Sheens has been reassured that Tomkins' antics were out of character and the East Yorkshire club's board supports his decision to sign the 31-year-old.

He said: "We've been actively looking to strengthen the side for the back end of the season, whether that be securing a top-eight finish or retaining our place in Super League via the Quali-

ers. We're fully aware of what's gone on over the past week or so, but I've spoken to a lot of people who know Joel well and they all agree that the incident was out of character for him."

"He'll get an opportunity to redeem himself with us and we'll be working closely with him to ensure he takes it with his actions on and off the field."

Tomkins could debut at Castleford Tigers on Sunday and, af-

ter training yesterday, explained: "I'm sure everybody is aware of what's gone on at Wigan and I accepted the punishment from them. After sitting down with my family and thinking a bit harder about it, I decided the best thing for all parties would be for me to leave the club and I offered my resignation to Kris Radlinski, which he accepted."

"I instructed my agent to look into a deal elsewhere and there

were a few other Super League clubs that were interested as well as Rovers. But Tim called me personally and really sold the club to me, both for the back end of this year and next season."

Tomkins added: "I'm really grateful to Tim and everybody else involved at Hull KR for giving me the opportunity to move on from this."

"It has been embarrassing for me, there's no doubt about that."

Cricket

Yorkshire's Hodd prepares for emotional farewell from game

CHRIS WATERS

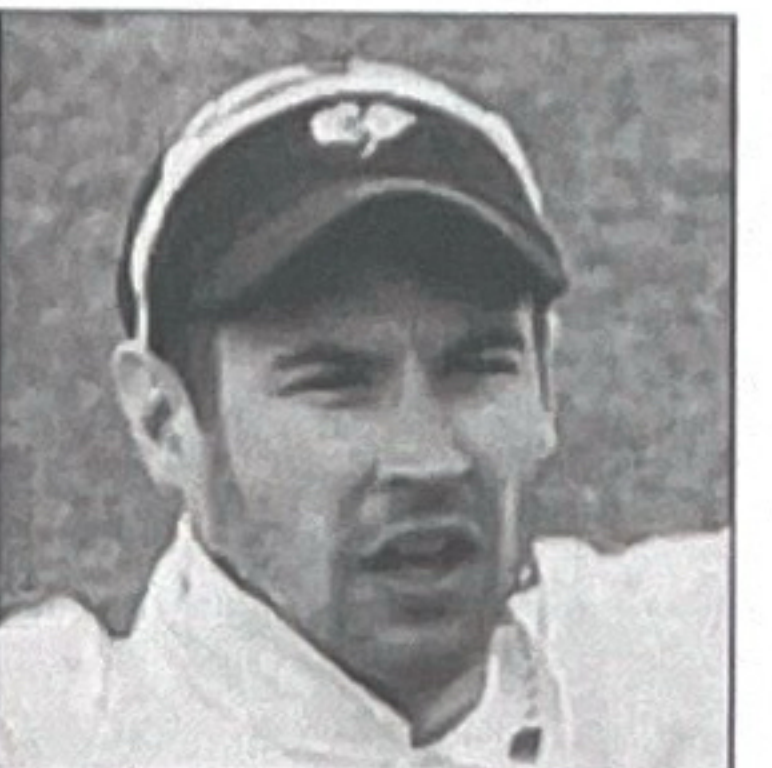
YORKSHIRE wicketkeeper Andrew Hodd is retiring from all forms of cricket at the end of the season.

The 34-year-old, who joined the county in 2012, said that he came to the decision "over the last couple of months".

Hodd had had a challenging campaign and has lately been replaced in the Royal London One-Day Cup by Jonny Tattersall.

Tattersall will now push Hodd for a Championship place with first-choice wicketkeeper Jonny Bairstow on international duty.

"I thought I'd got over the emotional bit when I made it (the decision) final to myself a couple of weeks back, but telling the boys was hard and I'll miss all of them," said Hodd.



ANDREW HODD: Will retire from playing at the end of the current season with Yorkshire.

"Because it's all I've ever really known, I think there will be a long, long line of things that I will miss, but first and foremost the boys in the dressing room will be the ones I miss."

"Half the reason you start play-

ing cricket is for the changing room antics and atmosphere."

"I'll miss them all the way down from the staff and (director of cricket) Martyn Moxon to the youngest guy on the staff."

Hodd has played 56 first-class matches for the club, scoring 1,694 runs at an average of 25.28 and claiming 161 catches and 11 stumpings.

He initially joined Yorkshire on loan from Sussex before signing a permanent deal.

Moxon said: "It has been an absolute pleasure working with Andrew over the last six years. He has been a brilliant wicketkeeper throughout his career, and his influence on the team here at Yorkshire has been outstanding."

"I would like to thank him for his contribution to Yorkshire cricket."

WILL JACKSON

IT HAS been some year for Yorkshire's Jonny Bairstow in one-day cricket.

A year ago, the Test wicketkeeper was a regular 12th man in the one-day international side and forced to play a bit-part role as England's white-ball form improved. After breaking into the side in the Champions Trophy last summer however, he has made the opening spot his own with some remarkable form.

Sunday's shock defeat to Scotland in Edinburgh will mean his own personal feats are somewhat overlooked, but he was once again in scintillating form at the top of the order as he hit a 54-ball century to mark his third ODI ton on the bounce.

It is the first time an English



JONNY BAIRSTOW: Ready to take on the challenge offered by an Australian team in transition.

batsman has achieved the feat - only Kumar Sangakkara has more with four - and it was his fifth ton in his last 16 innings.

"To score three on the bounce is really pleasing considering 12 months ago people were

questioning whether I should be playing or be opening the batting or in the middle order," he said.

England must now turn their attentions to Australia, who they face at the Oval on Wednesday in the first of a five-match series, with Bairstow acknowledging that it will be a completely different challenge to face an Australia side going through an uncertain period following the loss through suspension of captain Steve Smith and his No 2 David Warner.

"It's a completely different challenge and a different team that we will be playing," added Bairstow. "There are guys wanting to compete for places and we know just how dangerous that can be when people are pushing to earn themselves a permanent place."

Question

Will England win their opening World Cup group game against Tunisia?

Vote YES or NO on our website yorkshirepost.co.uk/sport Or by replying YES or NO on our Twitter feed @YPSport Or join the debate by adding your comments online.

YESTERDAY'S RESULT

Will Yorkshire beat Essex in the Royal London Cup on Thursday?

Yes 76% No 24%

Briefing

Deignan sympathy for Sky's Froome

CYCLING: Chris Froome's reputation will be forever 'tarnished' because he has been unfairly treated over his anti-doping case, according to Lizzie Deignan.

Deignan, the former world and Commonwealth and road race champion from Otley, also believes the authorities did not do enough for her when she missed three drugs tests in 2016.

Froome is fighting against an adverse analytical finding for asthma drug Salbutamol that he returned during his Vuelta a Espana victory last September.

The Team Sky rider has since won the Giro d'Italia and intends to race the Tour de France - where he will seek a fifth title - next month as the case against him continues.

Froome has denied taking more than the allowed amount of Salbutamol despite his urine sample showing twice the permitted level of the drug, which is a specified substance. Details of the case are known after news of his positive test was leaked before the process was completed.

Deignan said: "He hasn't had a fair process because already people have made up their minds unfortunately, and that is not based on the full story."

"Unfortunately for Chris his reputation is tarnished and will be for ever. Whether he's innocent or not, it's kind of irrelevant to some people at this stage."

"A leak in a legal process should never happen," Deignan told journalist Orla Chennaoui on her When Orla Met podcast.

Hampshire clash is brought forward

CRICKET: Yorkshire's potential Royal London Cup semi-final against Hampshire has been brought forward to avoid a clash with England's opening match in the football World Cup.

The game in Southampton will now start at 11am instead of the advertised 2pm so that spectators can watch England's fixture against Tunisia in Volgograd, which starts at 7pm.

It follows a request from Hampshire Cricket to which both the England and Wales Cricket Board and Sky TV - which will still screen the match as planned - were sympathetic.

Yorkshire will advance to the semi-finals if they beat Essex at Chelmsford in a quarter-final play-off on Thursday (2pm start).

Due to their ongoing involvement in the RLC competition, Yorkshire will no longer provide the opposition when India A visit Emerald Headingley for a one-day match on Sunday.

An ECB XI will now face the tourists, with admission free.

McFadden fits well with the Steelers

ICE HOCKEY: The experience of Canadian defenceman Josh McFadden will work well with Sheffield Steelers, who have signed him up for the 2018-19 Elite League campaign.

The 27-year-old will arrive in the UK in August with 332 games in the AHL and 152 ECHL appearances behind him, a major attraction for Steelers' head coach, Paul Thompson.

"On and off the ice we believe we are getting a quality person and a player with a very high hockey IQ," said Thompson.

"We've done a lot of work on him as a player and love some of the plays he is able to make."

McFadden added: "Paul was straight, and upfront with me from the beginning - I found him approachable and honest."

"The fit just seemed right."

Sport on TV

Cricket: Women's one-day international, England v South Africa - Sky Sports Main Event, Sky Sports Cricket 1230.

Tennis: WTA, Libema Open - BT Sport 1 1330.

Racing: Live from Lingfield Park, Roscommon and Southwell - Sky Sports Action 1900.

Baseball: MLB, Atlanta Braves v New York Mets - BT Sport/ESPN 0030 (Wed).