

The Australian

Embarrassing scrum is entrenched

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AUSTRALIAN Test victories in Cardiff are never easily achieved so it might be churlish to quibble over this one.

But the sorry fact is that there is a lot to quibble over.

The starting point this time, the starting point every time, is the Wallabies' scrum. It would not be accurate to say it has become an utter embarrassment because, frankly, it has been an embarrassment for as long as most Australian rugby fans can remember.

The lack of a stable platform up front has cost the Wallabies the past two World Cups, both campaigns brought undone by England. There was no shame in losing to the old enemy in 2003 because England that year was a truly great side, but by 2007 Sir Clive Woodward's once-proud team had been reduced to playing one-dimensional rugby - and still that was good enough to eliminate Australia.

Now, once again, the Wallabies are wending their way to London with their scrum in tatters, there to face an England side salivating at the thought of all the humiliation it is going to inflict on them at Twickenham on Sunday (AEDT).

It is utterly inexcusable that a side as otherwise accomplished as Australia should have spent the best part of the last decade hobbling about on this accursed achilles heel. It's like Tiger Woods not being able to putt or Sachin Tendulkar not bothering to work on his forward defence.

Every team strikes periodic problems with different elements of its game but this is like third-generation unemployment. It has become entrenched, passed down from one Wallabies side to the next. Occasionally, a particularly nasty scrummaging episode will trigger a flurry of activity that delivers some short-term relief but then, Band-Aid applied, everyone soon moves on to something sexier. Meanwhile, the wound keeps festering.

Australia might not produce prop-shaped behemoths the way, say, South Africa does but that is not to say the raw material is not out there. The Commonwealth's strongest man, superheavyweight weightlifter Damon Kelly is an Australian. What's more, he's a rugby player from the same college, St Laurences, that produced Dan Crowley and Brendan Cannon. The only reason Kelly took up weightlifting was to improve his scrummaging yet he slipped through rugby's fingers.

Then there is Cameroon-born Simplice Ribouem, another Australian weightlifting gold medallist in Delhi. There is only one rugby player in Australia with a physique to match his, David Pocock, and yet no-one from rugby has ever so much as knocked on his door.

Speaking of Pocock, it has emerged that he is the reason Welsh coach Warren Gatland completely re-thought his ideas on the perfect build for an openside flanker. It seems that when Pocock, sans jersey, ventured into the Wales dressing room to have a drink with the opposition after last year's Cardiff Test, Gatland and everyone else there was gobsmacked by how strongly-built he was.

On the spot, Gatland decided he needed more muscle in the seven jersey, which explains why the most capped forward in Welsh rugby history, Martyn Williams, was made to suffer the indignity of coming on for his 100th Test without fanfare in the 64th minute against Australia on Saturday while Sam Warburton started the

match. This is not to suggest that strength alone is the answer to Australia's set piece problems. Far from it. Scrummaging is infinitely more technical than that. But it's a starting point. And a start has to be made to solve the problem, even though it is now too late to do anything more than apply another Band-Aid before next year's World Cup.

The only time during the past decade when the Wallabies' scrum has shown any marked and sustained improvement was when Michael Foley was overseeing it. His parting gift to the Wallabies was to prepare the Australian scrum that humiliated England at Twickenham in 2008, when hooker Stephen Moore won the man of the match award but it could easily have gone to either of his props Benn Robinson or Al Baxter.

Foley was made to feel distinctly unloved and moved on to the Waratahs. Patricio Noriega now is in his place and while he has brought no end of enthusiasm to the job, there is no evidence of him introducing any technical improvement.

It would have been a travesty had Wales won on Saturday simply because it had a superior scrum. In every other element of play, the Welsh were battling to hold Australia. Yet solely on the back of scrum penalties, seven of them, Wales was less than a converted try down at the hour mark, 14-9 and again with only eight minutes left to play, 22-16.

Indeed, the men in scarlet actually closed to within a try of victory while they were down to 14 players, simply because they were smashing the Wallabies up front. And while all this nonsense was going on and the ground beneath the scrum was being ploughed, the best backline in world rugby was left to cool its heels.

In the end the tourists won, as they deserved to do.

But it was a strangely dispiriting victory, a victory that far from enhancing the aura around the Wallabies, actually exposed their vulnerability.

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