



STEPHEN JONES

Yesterday's triumph has placed Martin Johnson alongside Bobby Moore in the pantheon of truly great English captains

**A**rise, Sir Martin? Our Jonno a knight? Well, Her Majesty will look silly flourishing anything too dainty to dab him on the shoulder. It will need a great English broadsword, lifted by two flunkies, to make the ceremony appropriate for the magnificent Midlands yeoman, now rugby's greatest leader and, alongside the late Bobby Moore, English sport's most successful captain. Jules Rimet trophy. Now William Webb Ellis trophy. England, after 37 years, have won another World Cup.

The trophy itself bestows a mighty significance. In Johnson's hands, as he lifted it above his head last night, it looked like a gaudy toy, no bigger, relatively speaking, than the odd-looking bauble Moore held up with one hand in 1966.


There are few obvious parallels between the cultured, blond East End footballer and the black-haired, storm-force Leicester Tiger; between a player who made stern defence an art form, and a player who, in the trenches, had neither the time nor the temperament for cultured thought. Moore never glowered; Johnson's glower is permanent — it takes his forehead and eyebrows about half an hour to unknit and to form a smile. Moore was a gentleman player; Johnson has been a front-on powerhouse, always unapologetic, never mind the frequent and often proven accusations of rough play that have surfaced, though less frequently of late.

I suppose there has been a parallel with the beaming hug of mutual respect that Moore and Pele bestowed on each other after England played Brazil in Mexico in 1970. At the final whistle of the semi-final against France last weekend, Johnson approached his rival captain, Fabien Galthie, who was defeated and shattered at the end of his last game in international rugby, and threw his arms around him. It was a nice gesture, and, I am positive, sincere. But it wasn't Jonno. It was as if you'd sneaked into his bedroom and found a teddy on his pillow.

There is, however, a similar economy of movement in the play of Moore and Johnson. Moore never looked flustered, would run perfect lines to take him to the next point on the pitch where he was needed. Johnson, for all his power, has that economy. A Jack Charlton or a Phil Vickery would come up snorting, arms and legs waving, teeth gritted. Johnson's almost laconic movement, the habitual perfection of his body position, the sheer unfluffiness of the man, have been striking since I first saw him play.

That first sighting was in a suburb of Glasgow as England Schools played Scotland Schools. Johnson was so much bigger than the other players that he hung over them with a kind of diffidence, like a giraffe towering over the other beasts. It made him look languid and unfocused.

So, while praising his ability, I doubted his fire, his playing heart. Hmm. All I can say in my defence was that it was the last time I ever doubted anything about Johnson, and that as far as I can recall, I was later to become the first observer to commit what New Zealanders, and many others, felt was a sacrifice — to put Johnson above Colin Meads as the greatest lock who has played the game. Yesterday's victory places him at the top as a rugby captain, since the relentless Sean Fitzpatrick never won a



Leading from the front: Martin Johnson fires up his team during yesterday's historic World Cup victory against Australia in Sydney. He now rates alongside Bobby Moore as the country's most successful sporting captain

World Cup when in charge of the All Blacks.

The first interview came a few days after Johnson had won his first cap, in 1993, as a late-wrecked replacement for the injured Wade Dooley. His main memory was of an annoying Rugby Football Union official who was in a panic because Johnson's late call-up meant that he had no dinner jacket for the post-match dinner.

The fellow fussed and fretted endlessly as jackets, trousers and frilly shirts were ferried back and forth from the hire shop and alterations done. After several hours, Johnson was then released to think about playing against France. Imagine the kind of reception the old chap would have received from Johnson later in his career.

How has he changed as he battered his way through three Lions tours, two of which he led, through the glories enjoyed by Leicester Tigers and England? Hardly at all. Certainly, his grasp of the game is excellent. He can change the style on the hoof, which captains such as Will Carling never could.

Yes, he has shown a superb ability to metamorphose to follow the changing demands of the game. He started as a combative tight forward, laying foundation stones for his team; he has advanced to become an outstanding footballing lock, running and tackling, still spare in his movements. He may now be a little lighter at media conferences, a little more loquacious, gracious. A little more. He glowered back after the semi-final when I spoilt the victory mood with an observation that England's midfield never crossed the gain line.

imposes on the opposition: if you want to beat my team, you have to get past me. To get past me, you have to be very good at playing the game, but you have to have an awful lot more than

But what are technical matters and media-speak? The latter won no matches, and the former fewer than you might think. His demeanour is the same as it ever was. So are the imperatives his presence

rugby techniques. You have to get past me in terms of physical confrontation, you have to take me on and fight toe to toe if the game goes down that route. You have to have a sporting mentality harsher than my own.

they once spoke of them, as a soft touch.

At a later interview, I asked him for his favourite memories and matches. He thought for a while. He struggled. I realised that his sporting memory is not merely divided into matches. It is an endless thing, a continuous battle. A relentless facing down of challenges.

I suppose he was at his most

inspirational leading the 1997 Lions in South Africa: massive Springbok forwards shrank beside him. His actual playing form was below par, but his presence was decisive. In

assessing the rest of his career, it is almost pointless trying to judge which burst of power was more effective than another. People ask for Johnson stories. There are few that escape from the team room, apart from those concerning a nerd-like

sporting knowledge. At Manly last week he came loping into the media room, massaged his temples, spoke and loped out. He needed no minders, as Jonny Wilkinson did. He was not mobbed under the palm trees of the esplanade. Perhaps there is an unconscious realisation that some of the small talk, in the week of a World Cup final, is simply too small for Johnson to engage in.

What now? Last night was a

time for celebration, not contemplation. There are always people on these occasions trying to retire you. But there is one thing I can practically guarantee. Within one hour of the end of the final, and being acclaimed as leader of the world champions, I am positive that his thoughts turned to

home and to Leicester Tigers.

His club is languishing near

the bottom. There is another cause to fight for. In the final analysis, rugby at any level, amateur or professional, is still a Saturday-to-Saturday battle, and Johnson is weekly warrior. The Palace should not fix his investiture for a weekend.

I will be staggered if Johnson does not return to club action soon, and amazed if he leaves the game prematurely. He came into the sport as a clerk with Midland Bank. You somehow doubt that his old Market Harborough branch will see him back, but can you really imagine him in the next couple of years making promotional appearances, or sitting in a sheepskin coat with a television microphone up his nose?

In the course of four World Cups I have seen a few players. In fact, I have seen torrents of magnificent performers and outstanding men. I have admired none as powerfully as I admire Johnson. He has been compelling, magnetic. He has reminded all those who needed reminding that before you score a try, somebody has to make the space for you; before you find overdrive, somebody has to grind up through the heavy gears. The All Blacks lost this World Cup by failing to grasp these things.

What more could I ask of Martin Johnson? What more could anybody ask? Well, here's one final request. That he ignore the siren calls of soft retirement. Johnson should follow the way of the warrior until every ounce of an insatiable spirit is finally expended. His retirement will be edgy if he goes before that time.

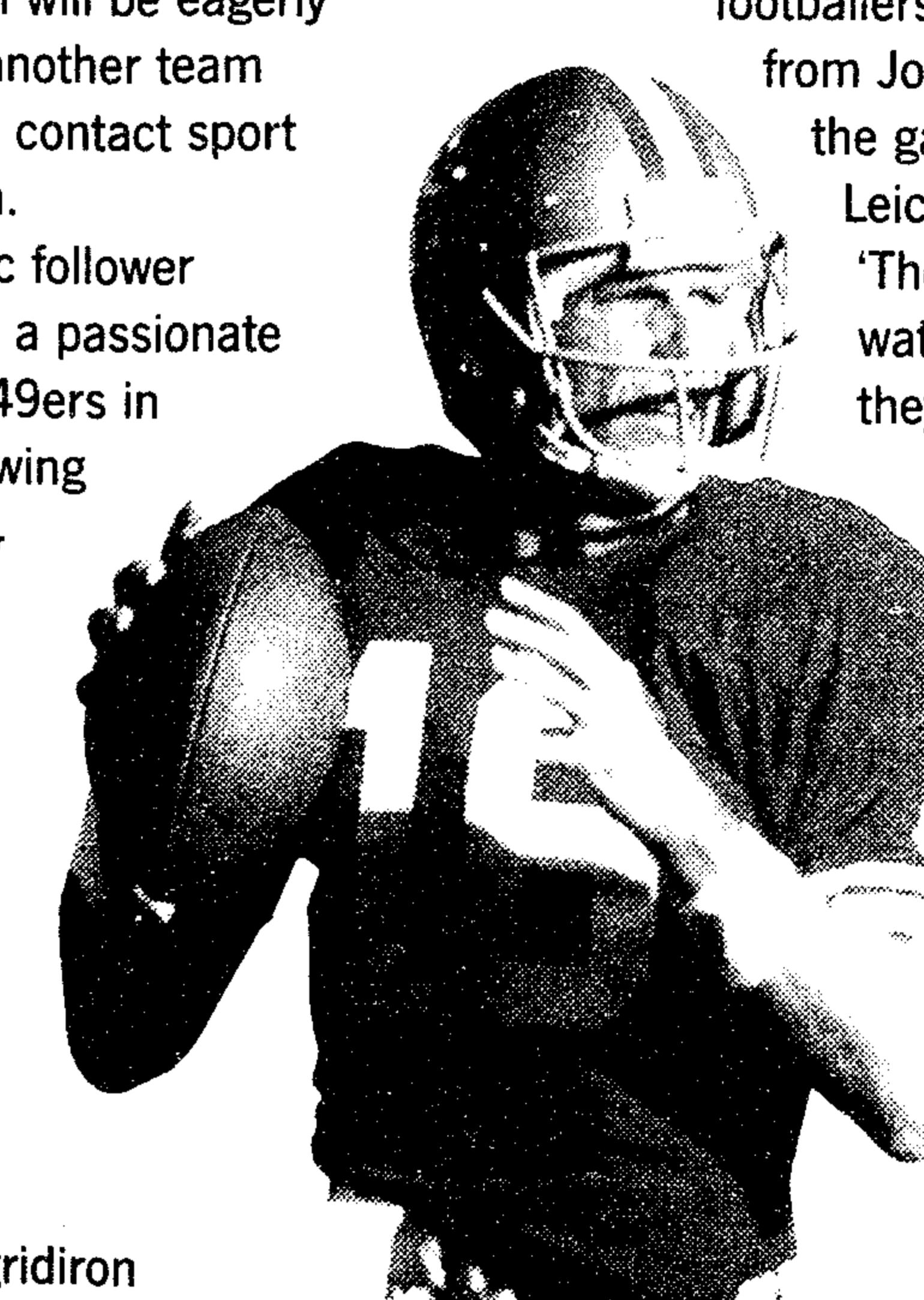
I am positive he has given not a second's thought to the financial rewards of standing alongside Bobby Moore; I am sure that his reward — and his inner peace — comes from the knowledge that in one of sport's hardest environments, he gave it everything.

### Meanwhile in Wisconsin: why there's another big game for Jonno tonight

While the rest of England recovers from the excitement of yesterday's final in Sydney, the England rugby captain will be eagerly following the fortunes of another team playing a brutally physical contact sport later today... in Wisconsin.

Johnson is an enthusiastic follower of American Football, and a passionate fan of the San Francisco 49ers in particular. He began following the sport when Channel 4 started televising it in the Eighties. 'In those days there wasn't a great deal of telly on on a Sunday evening,' he remembers. 'It was that or Songs of Praise or Antiques Roadshow. So, it was American Football for me.'

Those who consider the gridiron



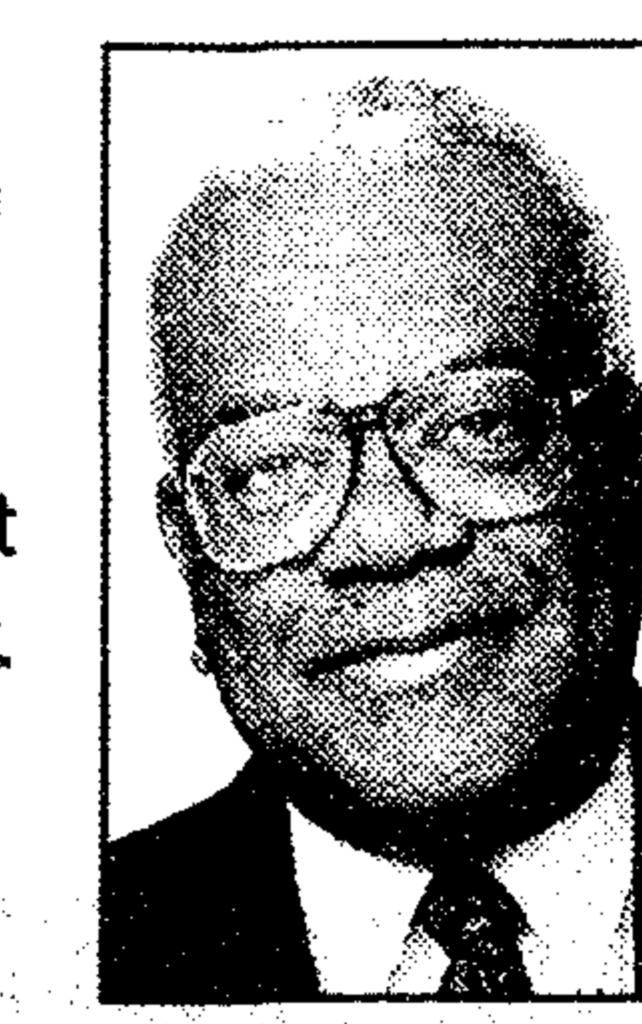
game a softer option because of the protection and padding worn by American footballers get short shrift from Johnson, who played the game briefly for the Leicester Panthers. 'They should go and watch a bit, and if they're still not convinced, go and play it. Basically you get hit by someone wearing a crash helmet,' he says. Johnson is much more than your average fan. He has twice visited the 49ers' pre-season camp in California, just to watch them train — once getting up at 5am so he didn't miss a ball thrown. He boasts an encyclopaedic knowledge of the team, not just who plays for it but their ages, weights and colleges.

The 49ers have a glorious history, boasting such superstar names as Joe Montana, pictured, widely regarded as the greatest quarterback of all time, and Steve Young. They have won the Super Bowl five times, most recently in 1995, but have struggled of late and appointed a new head coach this season to try to turn things around. They go Green Bay with a 5-5 record, knowing that victory will be crucial to their playoff hopes. The game kicks off at 5am Australian time. To most Englishmen it will be a sporting irrelevance, after the thrills and spills of yesterday. But the England rugby captain will certainly want to know the score

### Where were you when Jonny scored?



**Tim Henman**  
In a plane, eight miles over the Atlantic, and equally high on elation to hear the captain announce the news. A month ago, when I booked my family's holiday in Florida, I was filled with a sense of almost committing treason by leaving today. Perhaps I didn't believe we would make it to the final. Thank goodness I was so horribly wrong.



**Sir Trevor McDonald, ITN newsreader**  
Watching at home in our little television den with my wife, son and a tennis partner, and though we don't have any neighbours that close, I thought someone would complain at the noise we made when the kick went over. I am so glad nobody has to depend on me for a moment like that. It was that true greatness in sport is all about

## ALL GOLIATHS. NO DAVIDS.

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Chelsea v Sparta Prague Panithanaikos v Manchester United Stuttgart v Rangers

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Jones, Stephen. "Giant of a Man." Sport. Sunday Times, 23 Nov. 2003, p. 15[S]. The Sunday Times Historical Archive, link.gale.com%2Fapps%2Fdoc%2FFP1803007661%2FSTHA%3Fu%3Dtimes%26sid%3Dbookmark-STHA. Accessed 10 Dec. 2025.