

Cometh the hour, cometh the man...

England's greatest prop star **Jason Leonard** talks exclusively to *Spoonnews* about crowded calendars, leaving a legacy and the perks of presidency

THREE has been a scarce commodity for Wooden Spoon ambassador Jason Leonard since England rugby's finest moment on the sodden turf of Sydney's Telstra Stadium in 2003.

Having hung up his boots less than a year after the national team's triumphant return from Australia, England's most-capped player quickly discovered that retirement does little to relieve the demands on the diary of a World Cup winner.

Assured of lifelong celebrity status as a key member of the first northern hemisphere side to lift the Webb Ellis trophy, Jason has found days filled with scrums and mauls replaced by a packed programme of black-tie dinners and media commitments.

It is a change in routine that the prop star has taken in his stride and attacked with gusto.

"I have found for a number of years now that my life is not about managing diaries, it is about managing expectations," Jason told *Spoonnews*. "People always want me to do something or to attend something and you simply can't be in two places at once. You have to say no sometimes but if I can't make a function or attend a meeting, it is a case of 'I'll try to make the next one or the one after that'."

Jason, who amassed 114 caps for England during an international career that spanned 14 years, added: "Whether we like it or not, all of the guys from 2003 are ambassadors for the game every day of our lives."

"People stop you as you walk down the street, they want to shake your hand, have something signed or want a picture taken with you – it just goes with the territory."

"It is not something you covet, it is just part

and parcel of being a World Cup winner and every single one of the England players I have spoken to from 2003 does so gladly. They all know they have a bigger role within the game as that win was so important to the English rugby public."

Never one to shy away from a challenge as a player, Jason readily heaped further responsibilities on to his broad shoulders this summer when he was elected as president of the Rugby Football Union (RFU).

The appointment may have added to the blur and burden of attending fixtures, fundraisers and functions but is a year-long role that the former British Lion is relishing.

"At this moment in time I am finding out just how hefty a commitment it is," the four-time Grand Slam winner said. "I certainly have no regrets though – I knew I was going to be busy, I just didn't perhaps realise quite how busy!"

"The role is a huge responsibility but the honour that goes with it is huge. It is something I am massively proud of and is obviously something I want to do to the best of my abilities."

"It is a privilege to lead the RFU and to do so during a year in which England is to host the World Cup is fantastic."

Keen to build on the buzz of this autumn's sporting spectacle, Jason's presidential "manifesto" is focused on the growth and national wellbeing of the game he loves.

"Although the tournament itself is massively important, and will be the biggest and best we've seen, I am more interested in leaving behind a legacy post-World Cup that



**ON THE
CLASS OF 2003:**
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**RUGBY
WORLD CUP
2015**

LEONARD'S LEGACY

114

ENGLAND CAPS

110

ENGLISH PREMIERSHIP APPEARANCES FOR HARLEQUINS

5

BRITISH & IRISH LIONS CAPS

4

GRAND SLAMS

2

WORLD CUP FINAL APPEARANCES

1

WORLD CUP WINNERS' MEDAL



Picture: Andrew Redington/ALLSPORT
and supplied courtesy of the RFU

ON RETIRING:

"You see the first tackle go thumping in and you're glad you are not out there any more."

benefits players, volunteers, clubs, facilities, officials – everything to do with the game.

"The excitement of the World Cup will increase interest in our game at all levels and we've got to make sure we can cope with that demand, which is what the RFU has been doing. We have made a huge investment in the game to make sure that we are ready for this challenge.

"The international level looks after itself – it is the lifeblood of the game that we want to nurture and that is our junior clubs."

Despite the abundance of additional appointments he now has to juggle alongside those of his business interests and family life, Jason insists his investment of time and passion in the RFU's work is rewarding. However, contrary to most rugby fans, it is not the ability to pick and choose which World Cup fixtures to attend or opportunity to rub shoulders with Stuart Lancaster's squad that he cites as the principal perk of his new position.

"I was in an England team for 14 years so am not particularly worried about being around the squad," he explained. "The perk of the job is meeting people in the game; the kids, parents and volunteers at clubs. That is the most important thing to me."

Rest assured that the big-game experience of a man Sir Clive Woodward credits as being the key substitution who helped England to victory against Australia 12 years ago is not going untapped. Jason revealed that he has been asked to attend a number of the national team's World Cup training sessions and is ever-ready to pass on tips to those pulling on the England jersey.

Although quite happy to exchange scrum stories with the likes of Dan Cole and Joe Marler, the 47-year-old is adamant that he has no desire to trade places with his successors.

"I've got to say the opposite," the former Barking, Saracens and Harlequins star said. "Because I was involved at international level for such a long time, I don't miss playing."

"When you watch an international at Twickenham you do watch the players run out, stand and sing the national anthem and think 'I'd like to be out there again'. Then you see the

first tackle go thumping in and you're glad you are not out there any more."

"I will always miss it in the respect that it was such a great, fun time but do I hanker for it, do I want to be playing now? No, definitely not."

As well as being content to watch from the stands, Jason is hoping England's current crop can permanently retire the class of 2003 by being crowned world champions.

"In 40 years I don't want to still be talking about a Rugby World Cup that took place in 2003 like the soccer guys [England's 1966 team]," he added. "While it is fantastic that the footballers are still doing it and enjoy it, I don't want to be wheeled out for functions every

four years to talk about what happened in 2003. I want to watch England win another World Cup and then those players can do all that stuff."

And with home advantage, Jason believes Lancaster's men could soon need to swot up on their after-dinner speaking skills.

"I would say our chances are pretty good," he said. "It is not a great pool group because having Australia and Wales in there makes it tough, but we are at home and I think home advantage will count for a hell of a lot. The home crowd will literally drag England through those games and make them rise to the occasion."

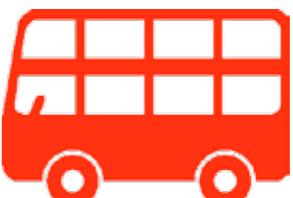
"Whoever wins that group will have a very good chance of going all the way to the final of the Rugby World Cup – I just hope it is England."

Regardless of results on the field, Jason's plans to deliver a lasting legacy mean there will be no immediate respite to his hectic daily routine.

But a demanding diary will not come to the detriment of Wooden Spoon, a charity the player nicknamed "The Fun Bus" has supported for more than a decade and will continue to help drive.

"Wooden Spoon is a charity that is a pleasure to be a part of," Jason concluded. "It does such good work for young people and the volunteers are fantastic. I have the highest amount of respect for those who give up their time and make so much effort for all the kids that Wooden Spoon helps."

"Wooden Spoon is like a rugby club in that you are part of one big family. It is a charity that I will always support, help and try to do something for."



TWO decades ago then England captain Will Carling famously described the Rugby Football Union Committee as "57 old farts". Now at its helm, has Jason "The Fun Bus" Leonard become part of the boring blazer brigade?

"The Union is not like that at all; it is a far more progressive, dynamic organisation than when Will was speaking on it. The age group of council members has considerably dropped and my appointment shows that element of change."