

It's in the genes

There was great joy in the Norton household last week as our five year old granddaughter had been awarded a badge for swimming 50 metres.

So, how does it feel if your son plays international rugby and is also captain going into World Cup 2015? Well that's the situation for ex first team Maidstone flanker of the early eighties, David Hooper. His son, Michael, has just led Australia in the recent autumn test series and is one of the world's top players. David came to our club as a very raw but exceptionally big and athletic player (he's bigger than his son!) . He joined us from Linton and despite not having played rugby at school to any degree he developed into an awesome open side flanker. David had a superb physique and was the fittest player I have ever seen at the club. He worked for the Kent Fire Brigade and every day he spent hours in the gym.



Being 6 foot 2, and 15 stone and very fleet of foot his all action style of flying about the pitch brought him a hat full of tries and many big hits. David was keen to learn the game and took on advice with glee as he was dedicated and determined to play at the highest level. I remember one match where we were having a bad day at the scrum which was most unusual in the early 80's and our loose head prop had to leave the field. Remember, there were no replacements in those days. We put 'Hoops' in the front row - despite never having played there before. Their prop thought he was going to take our rooky prop apart. However Hoops did not take a backward step and crushed his opposite number by sheer strength alone. We won the match. After the game everyone was amazed at his performance but in typical style after the match David was his quiet unassuming self. He was a bull of a player on the field and was fearless in attack and defence. He was keen to learn and it was a pleasure to coach him basic skills and see him progress rapidly. David left us for Blackheath which at that time were a first class club as defined in those amateur days. He did well there until he left to join the merchant navy. This brought him to Manly, Sidney, Australia where he played for several seasons. He was crowd favourite at this top club and that takes some doing for a Pom in Oz.

Michael got his first cap for Australia against Scotland in 2012. I was watching the game and just could not believe that Hooper the debutant looked so much like David Hooper, he is so like his dad. He came on in the 65 minute as a substitute. He had previously represented Australia under 20's at the 2011 IRB Junior World Championships where he sometimes captained the side. He was named Player of the Tournament! In 2013 Michael played every Waratahs Super Rugby match in the season and he won the Australian Super 15 player of the year award, as well as Waratahs' player of the year award. In 2014 at the end of the season he captained the Waratahs to a 32-31 victory over the New Zealand based Crusaders in the Grand Final.

Michael had the last of his 42 caps against England on 29th November 2014 where England battered out a good victory at Twickenham. The rematch match will be on Saturday 3rd October in Pool C of the World Cup – the 'pool of death'. I for one, and probably the only one from the club, will be hoping that 'Young Hoops' can do the business for Australia but it will be role reversal on the 10th October when Wales play Australia. Whatever the outcome, the connection with the 'Hoopers' will outlive the successes or disappointment of an international game.

In the true spirit of the game, Michael has just given the club an Australian international shirt which is to be framed and erected in the club. Thank you Michael, your dad is probably your fiercest critic but I bet there's no prouder dad in Australia for what has been achieved both on and off the field.

Hopefully, this article will be sent to David, and he'll see that he's much remembered in his junior club and if he's over for the World Cup, a warm welcome extends from us all at Maidstone Football Club.

Remember, it's all in the genes. As for my granddaughter, who knows she may end up swimming for England, her country of birth. We all have our dreams and we have to start somewhere – currently Maidstone is a good place to be, and the dream came true for the Hooper family.

Graham Norton