Unlikely lads triumph in Lions selection lottery but inclusion is not down to luck

Te’o, Daly and George will start the first Test on merit and are ready to make their mark

Robert Kitson
Auckland

For months thousands of people in both hemispheres have been trying to second-guess Warren Gatland. They would have been better off buying a fistful of lotto tickets. Even Gatland himself, as recently as a few days ago, would not have imagined naming the XV he has selected for the British & Irish Lions’ first Test against the All Blacks. In large part this is the glorious in-built uncertainty of every Lions tour. Few foresaw Jeremy Davidson or Tom Smith playing key roles in the 1997 series win in South Africa, or Alex Corbisiero’s belated intervention in the triumphant final Test in Australia four years ago. The way things are going here, several of Gatland’s unlikely lads could yet make a similar impact in New Zealand.

Take Jamie George, Ben Te’o and Elliot Daly. George has yet to start for England, Te’o has made Eddie Jones’s starting XV only once and Daly is regarded primarily as a centre by his club Wasps. For all three to be preparing to face the All Blacks in a starting Lions team captained by Peter O’Mahony, who was battling even to get picked for Ireland in March, is a lesson to every disgruntled fringe player out there. Of the upwardly mobile English trio, George has arguably made the biggest vault, having sat on the bench 17 times for England without being picked to start ahead of Dylan Hartley. The Saracens hooker also had to spend years serving his club apprenticeship behind John Smit and Schalk Brits, putting in endless unglamorous hard yards on empty fields for little immediate gain. His patience is being rewarded.

It is certainly a long way to Eden Park from the third-team artificial pitch at the University of Hertfordshire where he and George Kruis, both then 18, met for the first time. “I remember George coming to the academy when he was 90kg at a push,” the hooker recalls. “He’s about 117kg now.”
For both of them to be starting in the most colossal Lions Test imaginable is a tribute both to their powers of perseverance and the unusually enlightened way in which Sarries develop their young players. Small wonders, then, that the 26-year-old George could not resist the politest of digs - “I’d be hoping to put in a good enough performance to show I’m able to do stuff from the start” - into the exposed ribs of the England hierarchy.

In Gatland’s view the Lions are simply backing what they see. George has been the form hooker on this tour ahead of Wales’s Ken Owens and Ireland’s Rory Best, and the Sarries connection, with Mako Vunipola and Maro Itoje also in the 23, has clearly done him no harm, either. “I don’t think there’s any denying that people think he’s a good rugby player,” says Gatland.

“He’s done his time at Saracens and ended up being the No1, and he’s been doing his time with England. This is not a team that we’re preparing for the future or for a World Cup, this is about the here and now, and the person that can do a job for us.”

It is a similar story with the much-travelled Te’o, who has gone from sitting behind Owen Farrell in the queue to wear England’s No12 jersey into the Lions first-choice midfield without blinking. “We’ve watched and seen the impact he had for England coming off the bench, and that’s kind of where we looked at him,” says Gatland.

“But we’ve found he’s more than just someone who hits the ball up. He’s had by far the most defenders beaten from our backline on this tour; his selection is definitely on merit.”

As for Daly, the Lions coaches have finally had to concede what virtually everyone can see for themselves: George North is not presently the same player who steamrollered Australia four years ago. The 24-year-old Daly, by contrast, has looked increasingly sharp, offers a useful left boot and has a maturing palate of skills that even an All Black would covet. Gatland particularly liked the ability he showed to help engineer the Lions’ spectacular long-range try against the Chiefs this week: “That run down the sideline where he threw the inside pass, there aren’t many who can do that. I’m not sure every player in the squad has the ability to do that.”

O’Mahony’s remarkable rise to the captaincy also reveals a perfect Lions mindset: for those who relish a challenge this is the ultimate tour. It also shows Gatland’s open-mindedness. The selection meeting on Wednesday ended up being among the longest the head coach could remember attending but, even with Itoje starting on the bench, there is logic at every turn. Crucially, the players are convinced. “Everyone in the squad is very confident we can succeed,” says George - the 2017 Lions are capable of something special. Those predicting a 3-0 All Black series win could yet be confounded, too.