Something brewing? How off-field interests boost Saracens

John Westerby
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Whether or not they lift the Champions Cup once more tomorrow evening, winning or losing will not be everything to Saracens. However big the competition, in recent seasons Saracens’ players have been encouraged to develop interests beyond rugby to ensure that, win or lose, the weekend result does not colour the rest of their week.

They are given Wednesdays off to further their education or to pursue business interests, an approach introduced when Brendan Venter arrived to reboot the club in 2009 and continuing under his successor, Mark McCall.

A number of players now have thriving business interests but most relate back in some way to rugby and to Saracens. For Chris Wyles’s brewing business and Brad Barritt’s coffee company, the branding comes in black and red. Even a player in the opposing ranks at Murrayfield today, David Strettle, the Clermont Auvergne wing, developed his business during his time at Saracens and will hold a sports festival, Sevens and the City, at Allianz Park this summer.

“We believe that it helps to create better rugby players,” Barritt, the club captain, said. “But, more importantly, it helps us to become better people.”

The name of Barritt’s new coffee roasting company, Tiki Tonga, comes from the team song that Saracens sing in their dressing room after a win. Needless to say, it has become a refrain all too familiar to opposing teams in recent seasons.

The business was created a year ago, once Barritt had completed his MSc in business management at Hertfordshire University in partnership with Justin Stockwell, a Saracens supporter with whom Barritt had struck up a friendship. Stockwell worked in the industry and Barritt had become something of a coffee obsessive.
“After our final training session in Edinburgh, we’ll find a nice coffee shop and chill out together, I like the fact that coffee brings people closer together,” Barritt says. “I also wanted my business to link subtly to my day job, I wanted it to appeal to sportspeople.”

The result is four blends of coffee, of varying strengths, named after positions on the rugby field. So the No 2 blend is the strongest, “heavy and punchy”, like a hooker, the No 9 blend boasts the “fruity acidity” present in all the best scrum halves, while the No 12 — Barritt’s favourite, of course — is “full bodied and puts in a powerful hit”.

Barritt devotes his Wednesdays and time in the evenings to growing the business. “It sounds brutal, but we know that one bad injury can lead to retirement,” he says. “That’s just the nature of the job, so we want to ensure there’s something afterwards.”

Chris Wyles, Brewing

The brutal truism that players are one injury away from retirement hit home this season when Alistair Hargreaves, the lock, was forced to hang up his boots, aged 30, after suffering the latest in a series of concussions.

Fortunately, a few years earlier, he had embarked on a business venture with Chris Wyles, brewing their own brand of “Wolfpack” lager.

The term “Wolfpack” has become synonymous with Saracens’ voracious defence, coined by their former defence coach, Paul Gustard, now working with Eddie Jones for England. So when Wyles suggested appropriating the name for his brand of lager, did Gustard ask for a cut of the business? “He was more than happy for us to go with it. But if we get really big, maybe he’ll be having second thoughts.”

Wyles and Hargreaves began to raise awareness of their product by converting a double-decker bus into a branded mobile pub that they conspicuously parked at Allianz Park on matchdays. Now the beer is selling in more than 50 London pubs.

“The club have been massively supportive of the business and having other things to challenge yourself mentally means you’re more focused when it comes to playing rugby,” Wyles says.

Maro Itoje, Politics degree

With or without the encouragement of Saracens, Maro Itoje’s interests were always likely to be broad. This week, as well as ensuring he is fully versed in the tactics required against Clermont, the England lock has been completing exams in his African politics degree at the School of African and Oriental Studies in London.

Born in London to Nigerian parents, Itoje has been particularly interested in learning more about the politics of his parents’ homeland. From a young age his parents warned that he would not be able to play rugby if it ever began to impact on his schoolwork. “It’s just about time management,” he says. “Luckily, I have no more essays to write and I can focus a bit more on rugby.”

While his fellow students begin summer jobs, Itoje has a Champions Cup final, the Aviva Premiership play-offs in the next fortnight, and the small matter of a Lions tour to take up his time.

Owen Farrell is another Saracens student, now in the final year of his business studies degree at Hertfordshire University.

Jim Hamilton, Restaurants and media

By the time he arrived at
Saracens three years ago, Jim Hamilton, then 31, knew he was probably signing either the last, or the penultimate, contract of his playing days.

Along with three fellow Scotland internationals — Nathan Hines, Greig Laidlaw and Johnnie Beattie — Hamilton set up Mac and Wild, a Scottish-themed restaurant that now has branches in Fitzrovia and the City. In the process of growing the restaurants, he developed an interest in digital marketing and now has his own business in that field, too. Combining so many different interests can be difficult at times, Hamilton concedes, but has given him the balanced outlook that can often be lacking from a sportsman’s life.

“Even if you are being successful, like we have been at Saracens, it’s not going to last for ever,” he says. “So you need to have something else in your life as well.”
Itoje was told by his parents that rugby was less important than his education.
Wyles’ beers are already on sale in London pubs

Jamie McPhilimney/News Group Newspapers Ltd
McCall, left, has encouraged his team to follow their non-rugby interests, believing that it makes them better players

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Hamilton is unlikely to go hungry after hanging up his rugby boots

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