

SPECIAL REPORT

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From Danny boy to Dan the man

Interview A first Barbarians call-up reflects a new maturity of focus for wayward rugby star Cipriani. By Gavin Mairs



Who are the Barbarians?

The Barbarians started life 120 years ago, as the vision of William Percy Carmael. Frustrated that the rugby season ended in March, he invited a group of players to join him on an end-of-season tour. It was a chance to bring together players who were usually opponents to form one super-side. On December 27, 1890 the Barbarians played their first match against Hartlepool Rovers, winning 9-4. Still invitation only, today the Barbarians are a touring side, allowing high-profile players from work-beating clubs to bask in the camaraderie and joy of the game, without the pressure of an international tournament. The only criterion is that players show grace on and off the field.

When the Barbarians take on Australia at Twickenham on November 26, they will be going for a hat-trick of southern hemisphere scalps, having beaten New Zealand and South Africa in the two previous years. It won't be easy, though: fresh from their World Cup campaign, the Wallabies will be pushing hard for victory.

A Barbarians match serves as a showcase for scintillating and adventurous rugby – played purely for entertainment – as great players from champion clubs around the world come together to form one extraordinary team. As a consequence, match tickets usually sell like hot cakes.

One man who won't be queuing for a ticket is Danny Cipriani. The former Wasps fly-half is determined to reignite his England career when he runs out at Twickenham in the hallowed black-and-white jersey for the star-studded Baa-Baas against Australia. Cipriani won the last of his seven caps for England in November 2008. Since then, he has found himself frozen out of Martin Johnson's squad, to the extent that his move to Melbourne Rebels last year had no impact on his international career.

The 23-year-old saw his move to Australia as the chance to take his game to a new level on the hard grounds of the Super 15 tournament; a fresh start away from the limelight. However, last season was not without its problems for Cipriani, who found himself suspended by his own teammates for breaching a self-imposed curfew, as the Rebels struggled in their first season in the Super 15.

Yet he insists he has learnt from the experience and is ready to knuckle



On the ball: top, Danny Cipriani is thrilled with his Barbarians invite; above, the team press on to victory against South Africa

down for what he describes as "the most important year" of his career.

He is currently in the middle of a six-week conditioning camp in Surrey with Margot Wells, the former sprinter who helped her athlete husband Allan to Olympic gold over 100 metres in the 1980 Moscow Games.

The prospect of lining up against his Melbourne team-mates in a full-strength Australia side is just the incentive Cipriani needs to give a timely nudge to England manager Martin Johnson, and to make amends for the frustration he feels at missing out on the World Cup in New Zealand.

"I have always wanted to play for the Barbarians," he says. "It's a fantastic game. I love playing at Twickenham. I think this is going to be a great spectacle of rugby. I'm hugely looking forward to getting on the field with players of the calibre of Jamie Roberts, Sonny Bill Williams, Keven Mealamu, Kieran Read, Victor Matfield and

Bakkies Botha. These are some of the best in the world.

"There are no autumn internationals at Twickenham this November, so this game is one that England supporters can really look forward to. It will be a full-on Test match."

Cipriani thinks the Barbarians stand a good chance against the Wallabies. He also says that his experience for Melbourne has given him a valuable insight into their game. "Having played in Australia in the Super 15 week-in, week-out, the players from the southern hemisphere Big Three have become less daunting.

"It takes the fear factor out of it. You see them up close; see the things that they do well and other things that they don't. I know them better than most."

Cipriani admits it will be a wrench to watch England's World Cup campaign from afar at a time when he could have been strutting the world stage. "I wouldn't be human if I didn't feel a yearning to be involved," he says. "But what's done is done and I'm trying to move on."

"Do I want to play for England? Of course. And I'm conscious that this is my time. This is the point where I should be starting to fulfil whatever potential I have. I understand how to play the game, but I also have to accept that there were moments when I was out of control, and didn't understand how to put my point across to other people."

"The important thing now is to keep working hard and put myself in the best position to play the rugby I want to play."

Cipriani believes England could be serious contenders in the World

Cup. "It will be difficult to watch, but I want England to do really well. England, Ireland and Wales all have a decent chance. I think it is going to be the best World Cup yet."

For now, though, Cipriani's focus is on making sure he is in prime condition when he returns to Melbourne on November 1 for pre-season training. While his future remains unclear – he has one year left on his current contract – he believes the Rebels are better placed for a tilt at the Super 15 than they were when they made their debut last season.

"I have learnt a lot in Australia" he says. "It's been a steep learning curve, and I have had to work on my defence, but I am feeling good. We have a strong forward pack, and with the likes of Kurtley [Beale] and James [O'Connor] coming in and Stirling Mortlock getting back to his best, I think we will be in a good position to give it a real crack."

Cipriani says that improving his defence has meant an overhaul of his attitude. "It's about commitment; I have been working with a sports psychologist. When Wasps got to semi-finals and finals, I would make my tackles. But now I have learned that you have to make your tackles every single game."

As for the future, Cipriani is keeping an open mind. "I want to play for England, but I don't know whether that will be feasible if I am still out in Australia. I will be in negotiations over the next few months and hope to have something sorted soon."

There can be little doubt that when that time comes, Cipriani will be better prepared than ever.

The Barbarians take on Australia at Twickenham on Saturday, November 26. For tickets to this must-see match, visit www.ticketmaster.co.uk or call 0844 847 2492