

# FROM SAINTS TO WINNERS

THE STORY OF  
NORTHAMPTON  
SAINTS'

HISTORIC  
DOUBLE-WINNING  
SEASON



TOM VICKERS

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# Introduction

‘J P, you may award the try.’ Those six words signalled an historic moment in the history of Northampton Saints as Alex Waller was awarded a score that brought the club’s first Premiership title.

Referee JP Doyle, having received confirmation from Television Match Official (TMO), Graham Hughes, that prop Waller had got the ball down, raised his left arm and put his whistle to his lips. The shrill sound sparked jubilation on the pitch and in the stands as the army of Saints fans who had travelled to Twickenham for the second year in succession saw their side finally get over the line.

Memories of agonising semi-final defeats and the previous year’s final loss at the hands of bitter rivals Leicester Tigers were banished as hooker Ross McMillan hoisted a battered and bruised Waller into the south-west London sky.

Director of rugby Jim Mallinder and attack coach Alex King shared a warm embrace, with relief and immense satisfaction sinking in at the end of the most memorable of seasons.

The supporters, decked out in the green, black and gold of one of the country’s most famous clubs, copied Mallinder and King, clutching each other in sheer disbelief and palpable adulation. The waiting was over.

Northampton Saints were champions of England.

# Summer of 2013

THE summer of 2013 was spent rebuilding, on and off the pitch, mentally and physically. Saints had entered the off-season on the back of a Premiership Final defeat to bitter local rivals, Leicester Tigers.

During what was a tempestuous Twickenham encounter, captain Hartley had been red-carded for verbally abusing referee Wayne Barnes, who had alleged that the hooker had called him a 'f\*\*\*\*\* cheat' in awarding Leicester a penalty just before half-time.

It was to be the beginning of the end for Saints' chances of lifting the silverware as, despite a hugely spirited second-half showing, they eventually fell on their sword, losing 37-17.

Hartley was later handed an 11-week ban, which cost him his place on the Lions' tour of Australia, giving Ireland's Rory Best a late chance to grab a seat on the plane to Hong Kong.

Hartley would not be eligible to play again until 1 September, but more pressing was the need to get away from it all. To refresh his mind and banish the immense disappointment of being absent from a tour that he could almost touch. He had even been sent the official team clothing.

The club captain's summer was almost a microcosm of the club's as a whole as Saints were forced to deal with that crushing Twickenham disappointment and use it as fuel for

a fresh challenge the year after. They had carried themselves under the 'Why not us?' banner during a campaign that had seen them overcome mid-season struggles to eventually shock Saracens in a stunning semi-final at Allianz Park and book the trip to Twickenham.

But rather than remaining plucky underdogs, they harboured a desire to be so much more when it all began again in September. They didn't want to use criticism as their main motivation, as they had on the road to their first Premiership Final.

Thankfully for the club's fans, there was solace to be found in the players that had been recruited ahead of the new season. World-class Wales wing George North and England loosehead prop Alex Corbisiero, both of whom were to play key roles in the Lions' 2-1 series win Down Under, were among the men heading to Franklin's Gardens that summer.

They were to be joined by Samoan scrum half Kahn Fotuali'i, who whetted the appetite of the Northampton faithful with a try for the Barbarians against the Lions in Hong Kong in June. He arrived with a reputation for being one of, if not *the* best number nine, in the world and there was widespread excitement that his signature had been secured.

To add to the men who would put the plans into action on the pitch, Saints also recruited a man some felt would be the best signing of the lot. King, an attack coach of real repute, was acquired from Clermont Auvergne, filling the void left by club legend Paul Grayson, who had left the Gardens in the November of that turbulent 2012/13 season.

Saints had been seeking to freshen things up and they felt moving Grayson on would open the door to new ideas. In walked King, a former Wasps and England fly half, who had arrived in France as a player, but later moved into a coaching role at Clermont, cutting his teeth under the tuition of men such as Vern Cotter and Joe Schmidt.

King was a bright young thing among the continent's coaching fraternity and it was felt he could be the man who could take Northampton to the next level – to get the heavy artillery they were assembling to really fire, at home and abroad.

His arrival was to have the desired effect of shaking things up for a club desperate to seize its chance after going so close the season before.

'They were obviously very strong because they had got to the final the season before and they came close to winning that final,' King says, as he looks back on his arrival at the club.

'There wasn't a huge amount of change – it was just about getting a balance to the work between the backs and the forwards and I tried to make sure one unit wasn't doing the bulk of the work.

'We wanted to share the workload, so that was the main thing, and we had to make sure we had some leadership in the backs. We had Stephen Myler and Lee Dickson, with Dylan Hartley and Tom Wood in the forwards, so we did have those leaders across the board.'

Those players, along with new arrivals like North and Fotuali'i, clearly tempted King to swap France for England.

'I already knew what a great squad it was, so to add the likes of George and Kahn to it, I knew we would be in a good position,' King says. 'It puts fear into the opposition.'

'I knew Jim Mallinder, Dorian West and Alan Dickens for a while before moving to Northampton and I knew what a well-run club it was. It was traditional, with great fans, a great stadium, a great history and an even better future.'

'I knew I would be very lucky to be involved and I wanted to help them compete.'

King would certainly do that and his arrival was part of one of the largest-scale set of close-season changes that the club had seen under Mallinder, the director of rugby, who had taken over



in the summer of 2007. It was a revolving door at the Gardens as though the likes of Corbisiero, Fotuali'i, North and Australian prop Salesi Ma'afu came in, stalwarts such as Soane Tonga'uiha and Brian Mujati moved on.

Props Tonga'uiha and Mujati, so crucial to helping Saints establish themselves as one of the best packs in Europe, especially during the run to the 2010/11 Heineken Cup Final, had opted to move to Racing Metro in France, cashing in on their talents during the latter years of their impressive careers.

It meant Saints would have to hope men such as Corbisiero and Ma'afu could shoulder the forward burden, while the likes of Academy graduate Alex Waller and his brother Ethan knew they would get the chance to really make their mark in the next few years.

As it turned out, they wouldn't have much to worry about.

However, while Saints were bidding fond farewells to established on-field figures, they were also saying a sad goodbye off it.

Leon Barwell, the chairman, lost his battle with cancer, passing away at the age of just 46 in the June of that year. The affable figurehead had clung on so bravely, showing his desperation to defy his wretched illness and watch Saints in the final at Twickenham.

Unfortunately his team could not deliver the win on that sun-soaked May day, but they were soon pledging to do it for him during the next campaign, with #ForLeon doing the rounds on social media site Twitter.

More than 900 people packed into All Saints Church in Northampton town centre for the funeral of the much-loved man, who had taken over the role as chairman from his father, Keith, and put so much into it.

Next is the tribute I wrote after hearing of his passing ...

Leon Barwell: a man of action, a man of the people, a true Saintsman.

That is how I will remember the former Northampton chairman, who sadly passed away aged just 46 on Friday morning.

Having met Leon on a number of occasions, it was clear to me that this was a man of the utmost sincerity.

He was a genuine character unbowed by the rigours of professional rugby and by the illness he endured for a long period of his reign at Franklin's Gardens.

During his 18 months as Saints chairman, Leon did not just sit back and rest on the good work done by his father, Keith, before him.

No, Leon was a man of action. He did a sterling job to ensure the club was competitive, on and off the pitch.

Saints continue to be stable financially, thanks to the good work of the Barwell family, allowing the team to consistently challenge for honours at the top of the game.

A tight ship has been run, but director of rugby Jim Mallinder has not been short of backing.

This summer, the likes of George North and Kahn Fotuali'i have arrived to bolster the squad. And what a squad it should be next season.

It is just an immense shame that Leon will not be at the Gardens next season to see his good work come to fruition.

But the sight of him at Twickenham on Grand Final day will live long in the memory.

Though it wasn't the result Saints wanted, the fact their chairman defied his illness to watch his final game at HQ was a huge achievement in itself.

But, typical of Leon, he did not just sit in the stands and watch on as events unfolded. At the game's conclusion, he made his way on to the pitch to console his players.

He put an arm around Dylan Hartley, when the skipper, who was sent off during the game, needed it most.

Leon was a man of the people.

And it's not just those working at the club he reached out to. His warmth extended to the supporters, too.

When some were questioning the club's approach midway through the season, with the team struggling, Leon stepped in.

He was the catalyst for events such as the fans' forum in February and April's open day. Both were a huge success, and both restored faith in the club and the professional game.

Leon expressed his desire to bring back the 'old-fashioned rugby club culture', with barriers between players and fans broken down. He did that.

For me, he was never anything but a pleasure to deal with. He was always on the end of the phone if questions needed to be asked. Some shy away from the media, fearing it as if it's an ogre about to beat down the door. But Leon didn't.

When whispers reached me about the possible signing of North – one of the biggest in the club's history – Leon was happy to give me an on-the-record reply.

He thought carefully about what he said, before giving me a story for which I will forever be grateful.

Even when I called him during a skiing holiday, he fielded the call and spoke kindly from on the slopes.

Put simply, his was an approach which should be a lesson to whoever takes over the role of chairperson at Northampton.

Leon's legacy lives on. He was a true Saintsman.

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Tony Hewitt, a long-time friend of the Barwell family and a man involved with the Saints for 25 years, had taken over as acting chairman when Leon stepped down eight days before passing away, and Hewitt was to take on the role on a permanent basis in September.

## FROM SAINTS TO WINNERS

However, Leon's legacy certainly did live on and the passion he felt for the club was to be carried by the players into the new campaign as they looked to make good their promise of doing it for him.

# Pre-season

**B**Y the time the pre-season encounters rolled round, Saints had sharpened their focus and many of their men had reason to be cheerful ahead of the return to the battlefield. While the seemingly unstoppable North and reinvigorated Corbisiero, who claimed he was 'in the best shape of his life', had celebrated a stunning Lions triumph in Australia, several other stars had been strutting their stuff for England.

With many of their key men with the Lions, Stuart Lancaster's Red Rose had travelled to South America for a two-Test tour of Argentina. There were plenty of Saints players present, with Ben Foden, Tom Wood, Courtney Lawes, Lee Dickson, Luther Burrell and Stephen Myler among those involved.

Burrell and Myler appeared for the England senior side for the first time in a game against a CONSUR XV in Montevideo as they warmed up for the clashes with the Pumas. England were to prevail 2-0 in the series as they showed they could do without their Lions players, and the suspended Hartley.

Not only that, but there was more reason for those of an English persuasion to celebrate during the summer, as the Under-20s, who had Saints duo Alex Day and Danny Hobbs-Awoyemi in their squad, won the Junior World Championships with a satisfying final victory over Wales in France. All in all, it was quite a summer for those of a Saints persuasion, and their

club were to reap the rewards of their international springboard during a blemish-free pre-season campaign.

With the Premiership fixtures announced, Mallinder's men knew they would need to be in good shape come the start of the serious stuff, as they were handed a tough opening set of matches. The season was to start at home to Exeter Chiefs on 7 September, before testing trips to Harlequins and Gloucester.

With that in mind, there was a necessity for Saints to hit the ground running in pre-season and they would need to integrate their host of new signings quickly in a bid to ensure there was no sluggishness from the off.

The first chance to blow away the summer cobwebs came at Goldington Road in the middle of August, with Bedford Blues, a familiar pre-season opponent, lying in wait.

Prior to the match, fly half Myler had been waxing lyrical about new number nine Fotuali'i, going as far as to say that the Samoan would 'take us to that next level'.

Meanwhile, Mallinder was setting the spotlight on King, claiming the 38-year-old had added 'something different' to the Gardens mix and discussing the 'good ideas' he had brought with him across the Channel.

Those ringing endorsements from Myler and Mallinder proved to be more than just platitudes as the work of King and Fotuali'i instantly shone through against a Blues side who were, at times, bamboozled by Saints.

Fotuali'i was only on the field for the first 40 minutes, but during that time he showed signs of the stardust he would add to the Saints squad and he set up a try for South African No.8 GJ van Velze. Gareth Denman, a prop who had arrived from Rotherham, and new Kiwi lock Rob Verbakel were also able to get some game time as Saints overcame the concession of a first-half hat-trick to Blues full back Mark Atkinson to secure a 45-21 win.

## PRE-SEASON

The victory was earned thanks to 26 unanswered second-half points and it was entertaining fare for those who made the trip from Northampton on a warm Friday night.

Saints spent the rest of the weekend tackling a World Club Sevens tournament at Twickenham, with Tom Stephenson the stand-out performer in a format that has never exactly been Northampton's forte.

There wasn't to be much success on the hallowed turf, but the more important matter of 15-a-side combat soon returned, with two games to look forward to in as many days in the week that followed.

First up was a trip to Moseley's quaint Billesley Common ground, where a largely inexperienced Saints side shone in the sun, eventually earning a 38-32 success against the battle-hardened Championship outfit.

The following day saw Edinburgh head to the Gardens and the wait was finally over. North and Corbisiero made their Northampton bows in front of the excited Franklin's Gardens faithful, who saw their team claim a comfortable 24-6 triumph.

The anticipation was noticeable every time North got the ball, with fans desperate to see more of the heroics that lit up the Lions tour. The behemoth back had taken the Aussies to task, scoring tries and even carrying opposition full back Israel Folau on his shoulders in an almighty show of strength during the second Test in Melbourne.

However, he was more inclined to leave the Edinburgh players on the ground with a few of his trademark runs pushing the Scots to the floor as Saints stepped up their pre-season preparations with another win.

It was not North or fellow Lions star Corbisiero who stole the show though, as Saints stalwart Phil Dowson took the plaudits with a quick-fire second-half double. Burrell later credited his side's superior fitness for the success and they were certainly up

and running as they got set for their final friendly, and the one which was likely to be the toughest of the lot.

Leinster were lying in wait at Dublin's archaic Donnybrook Stadium on the final Friday of August, but this was not your typical Leinster side. The hosts were without all of their Ireland and British & Irish Lions stars and instead called on a youthful crop of players.

In contrast, Saints were as strong as they could be as they knew there was just one more run-out remaining before it all began eight days later with the visit of Exeter. Ultimately, the men from Northampton were too strong, dominating possession for large periods at a ground that really did feel like a pre-season venue.

Saints could head into the small bar behind one of the two sets of posts having picked up a dogged 21-13 victory during which patience was the watchword. While onlookers made the most of the alcohol supplies, Saints simply kept knocking at the door, with their pressure paying off thanks to tries from prop Denman and Manoa, along with five points from the boot of Myler and six from young fly half Sam Olver.

The two sides would meet again in two of the most memorable fixtures a few months later, but Saints had plenty of important hurdles to negotiate before then. The season was looming large on the horizon and winning was becoming a welcome habit.

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### **Game one: Saturday, 7 September 2013: Northampton Saints 38 Exeter Chiefs 11 (Aviva Premiership – round one)**

**Saints:** Foden; K Pisi (Elliott 70), G Pisi (Wilson 60), Burrell, North; Myler, L Dickson (Fotuali'i 56); Corbisiero (A Waller 60), Hartley (c) (Haywood 58), Mercey (Denman 60), Lawes (Clark 58), Day, Wood (Manoa 56), Dowson, Dickinson.



**Exeter:** Dollman; Jess, Whitten, Shoemark (Hill 56), James; Steenson (Slade 51), Thomas (Lewis 56); Sturgess (Moon 54), Yeandle (Whitehead 54), Tui (Rimmer 54), Mumm (c), Welch (Hayes 64), Johnson, Scaysbrook (White 51), Ewers.

**Referee:** JP Doyle

**Attendance:** 12,205

**Tries: Saints:** Dylan Hartley, Ken Pisi, Tom Wood, George Pisi, Samu Manoa. **Exeter:** Dean Mumm

**Conversions: Saints:** Stephen Myler (5)

**Penalties: Saints:** Stephen Myler. **Exeter:** Gareth Steenson (2)

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As far as starts to the season go, Saints' was pretty exceptional.

They clicked into gear from kick-off to put their Aviva Premiership opener against Exeter to bed inside 35 minutes.

Four tries during that time secured a welcome five points to get the campaign up and running ahead of tricky trips to Harlequins and Gloucester.

And one of the highlights was the impact made by a couple of players who, a year ago, many fans may not have heard of.

Luther Burrell and Sam Dickinson ran the show, allying power with panache as they helped Saints on their way to a 38-11 success. While George North, Alex Corbisiero and Kahn Fotuali'i took top billing, the northern boys proved they can be headline acts too.

Centre Burrell was instrumental in the opening two scores, flinging a fantastic pass out to Dylan Hartley for the first before making a cutting break and teeing up Ken Pisi for the second.

No.8 Dickinson also wreaked havoc, blasting holes in the Exeter back line and almost getting on the scoresheet himself in a powerhouse performance.

Of course, it wasn't all about those two men, but their opening-game form shows just how strong this season's Saints squad is.

So strong, that Lions star North did not even have to register for his men to get maximum points from their opening fixture.

So strong that the likes of Samu Manoa and Fotuali'i could be left on the bench until 20 minutes from time.

So strong that some of the stodgy games at the Gardens last season seemed a lifetime away.

But, as Mallinder pointed out after the match, it's only one match of 22 in the marathon that is the Premiership season.

Trips to The Stoop and Kingsholm now lie in wait and you can bet your bottom dollar their residents will be out to stop the Saints hype.

But if the men in green, black and gold can continue at the pace at which they began their first game of the new season, there will be plenty more strong showings in the coming weeks.

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While pre-season had undoubtedly been productive, Saints knew that reading anything into those results would have been foolhardy. So the mood in the camp after the Exeter game was one of quiet satisfaction that they had found their opening-day game so comfortable, that they were up and running and that their friendly wins were backed up by a victory when it mattered.

Mallinder was certainly a happy man when he appeared in the press room to give his first post-match interview of the season and he was delighted that his team had been able to maintain the momentum they had gathered in the build-up to the big league kick-off.

'It was very pleasing,' the director of rugby said. 'You can play pre-season games, run around a lot, do some weight training, but you don't quite know where you are until your first game. Generally, we've got to be pretty happy with that.'

The only blots on the copybook for Saints during the curtain-raiser were yellow cards for Dowson and Lawes and Mallinder

quickly made a point of stressing that discipline needed to improve, especially with back-to-back away games to come.

Saints knew they would be put under pressure by Harlequins at The Stoop on the following Friday and a mental note was made as they sought to ensure they would not be hampered by sin-binnings in the first away game of the new campaign.

A couple of days after the win against Exeter there was a different kind of away game to contend with as Saints' second team, the Wanderers, grabbed a welcome win at Welford Road.

Any win for Northampton over Leicester can be considered pleasing, especially given the rivalry between the two teams, but the favourable 23-15 scoreline was not the only positive.

Australian prop Ma'afu, who was starting to get up to speed and down to his fighting weight, was able to make his first appearance in Northampton colours, getting 65 minutes under his belt before being withdrawn, while Glenn Dickson, a Kiwi fly half recruited from Otago, also enjoyed a run-out.

Captain Ben Nutley had led the way in the success as he scored his side's opener and they went on to win it thanks to a penalty try plus points from the boot of Olver and new boy Dickson.

Everything was going swimmingly for Saints as a club at the start of the new season. They were in high spirits having refused to taste defeat during pre-season, the Premiership opener and the second-team clash with Tigers.

And they knew they would need to be in good shape for a clash with a Harlequins side who they had beaten in just one of the past seven encounters between the clubs. In fact, Saints had not won at The Stoop since September 2010.

Nevertheless, buoyed by the fact that they had been largely untested by Exeter and having seen Quins pushed all the way in their win against Wasps on the same weekend, Saints had every reason to be confident.

A game at Harlequins was exactly the kind of contest the likes of Corbisiero, Fotuali'i and North had been brought in to help their new club win. And Saints already had pedigree on their travels from the previous campaign, having claimed notable successes at Wasps and Saracens towards the back end of it.

The club were on the crest of a wave, but, after a sunny start to the season in Northampton, they would soon need to show just how adept they were at dealing with some south-west London water torture.

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### **Game two: Friday, 13 September 2013: Harlequins 6 Northampton Saints 13 (Aviva Premiership – round two)**

**Harlequins:** Brown; Williams (Smith 62), Lowe, Casson (Dickson 73), Monye; Evans (Botica 59), Care; Marler (Lambert 59), Gray (Buchanan 14), Doran-Jones (Collier 54), Merrick (Guest 64), Robson (c), Fa'asavalu (Wallace 68), Robshaw, Easter.

**Saints:** Foden; K Pisi (Elliott 58), Wilson, Burrell, North; Myler, Fotuali'i (L Dickson 58); Corbisiero (A Waller 62), Hartley (c), Mercey (Denman 45), Lawes (Dickinson 43), Day, Wood, Clark (Dowson 58), Manoa.

**Referee:** Andrew Small

**Attendance:** 11,498

**Try: Saints:** James Wilson

**Conversion: Saints:** Stephen Myler

**Penalties: Saints:** Stephen Myler (2). **Harlequins:** Nick Evans (2)

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On the night BT Sport chose to broadcast their game to the nation for free, Saints may not have won too many new fans.

But Friday's success at The Stoop was one for those who have been behind the team since September 2010, the last time Northampton won at Harlequins.

It wasn't a pretty performance. In fact, at times, it was downright ugly. But it was so effective. Saints ground out a victory in the south-west London mudbath and how good it felt for those supporters who have seen their team lose so many close encounters with Quins in recent years.

In 2012, it was the last-gasp Premiership semi-final heartache, surrendering an eight-point lead in the final 13 minutes of the game to miss out on a place in the Premiership showpiece.

Last season, in a dead rubber, Saints were edged out by three points despite a spirited showing.

But this time was different. The line was in sight and no one was stopping Jim Mallinder's men from making it.

James Wilson, the man for all weathers, and most backline positions, was the match-winner, showing great intelligence to bend his run and latch on to a pass to slide over in the corner.

And George North also showed his immense worth with a rambunctious run that saw him hold off three men and put his side in enemy territory before the crucial try was scored.

However, this was mainly a game for the forwards. A real power struggle, eventually won by Dorian West's well-drilled pack. It is far too early to say that on nights like these champions are made, but Saints are certainly displaying the qualities required of a team who can challenge.

In the space of six days, they have shown they can ally silk with steel, using style to see off Exeter Chiefs and strength to shoot down Quins. Plenty more tough challenges await, and many will be far more aesthetically pleasing than this, but few will be as satisfying for those of a Saints persuasion.

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On Friday 13, 'ugly' was the buzzword for Mallinder after the match, but though the performance was about as pretty as Freddy Krueger, this was no nightmare for Saints.

Everyone involved knew that this was the kind of win teams destined for greatness come away with because although it was monsoon season in London, Saints simply rolled up their sleeves, stuck on the armbands and battled against the tide to claim precious points on the road.

‘You’ve got to accept you’re going to get these nights,’ Mallinder said. ‘Against Exeter, it was a dry day, we played well and scored some good, open tries, but here we knew we wouldn’t be able to play too much rugby.’

‘It’s all about getting your set piece right, getting your kicking game right and once you get into their third, taking your opportunities, whether that’s tries or kicking the goals.’

‘To do well in the Premiership, you need variety in your game. That’s being able to play with 15 men, use the backs and a good passing game, but you need your set piece and to be able to play a territorial game at times. Nights like this, it’s very sensible.’

‘They’ve got two good half-backs [Nick Evans and Danny Care] who have, in the past, punished us with their kicking game – I remember a close game we lost to Harlequins at home a couple of years ago where their half-backs played really well and beat us. It was good to come down here and to win in an ugly but nice way.’

Mallinder was well aware of how important it was to get that first away win under the belt and keep the feel-good factor flowing ahead of another away game, against Gloucester, on the following weekend.

More good news came in the form of key summer signings, with distinct signs that the new men were settling in.

North’s run that set up Wilson’s try was the kind of moment of magic that had made Saints desperately pursue the former Scarlets wing, while loosehead prop Corbisiero was key in a huge forward effort.

Players who had already cemented themselves at the club also made their mark, with Wilson's ability to deal with the torrential conditions so vital in securing the success.

Attack coach King had hinted at changes ahead of the game and his words proved not to be hollow as the likes of Wilson and Fotuali'i were handed starts, showing Saints wouldn't rest on their laurels.

And clearly a strong team bond had already been fostered, as the players who had dropped to the bench came on and made an impact, with Fotuali'i later hailing his side's super-sub.

'It's pretty exciting being named in the starting team and it's always good to have a win,' Fotuali'i said, having just dried out following his first Premiership start.

'From what I've heard it's always tough to come here. Harlequins are a quality side and top-four contenders, and especially in these conditions, it could have gone either way.

'Credit to our boys and the bench who came on really stood up and gave that impact that we needed.'

However, while the compliments were flying around and the players were rightly patting each other on the back following a stirring away win, this was just the start. Two wins may have been earned, but there was an awareness that with big statements comes a need to back them up.

Saints recognised they had more sizeable hurdles to negotiate in the weeks that followed, with a game at Leicester looming large on the horizon.

Consequently, Burrell, who had caught the eye in the opening two games, said: 'We know what it's like to go away from home and play – you've got to find that extra edge. Last year we were good on the road and it's just about trying to back that up this year.

'To go to a place like Harlequins and win in conditions like that is massive, so a massive pat on the back for the boys.

‘There’s been a lot of talk about us not being able to beat teams in the top four, but we don’t really read too much into that.

‘We take each game as it comes and to get a victory at Harlequins, who were title-winners a couple of years ago, is a massive success for us and we’ll take it.’

And on the subject of the developing team spirit, the barrel-chested centre added: ‘It’s a good craic in the changing room. There’s a good vibe at the club and we’re trying to build that. We want to be mates on and off the field.

‘We’ve got each other’s backs at the end of the day and we’ll take that. We’re not over-confident. We’ve got some good players. Stevie Myler’s really stepped up to the mark again this season, directing the boys around the park.

‘We’ve got to take it week by week and keep getting these victories away from home.’

That was very much the view coming from the director of rugby’s office, too, with Mallinder long enough in the tooth to know that two wins would not make a season.

‘We can’t [get carried away],’ Mallinder had insisted. ‘It would be ridiculous. It’s only two games that we’ve played.

‘It’s fantastic to go to Harlequins and win because they’ve got aspirations to win the Premiership, like we have.

‘It’s good we got our win, but we’ve got Gloucester away on Saturday and we’ll focus on that.’

Mallinder would never have been expected to hype his team up too much as he is a character who, win or lose, is often unmoved. He would give little away, and that was what Saints supporters had come to expect.

Nevertheless, it could be seen that progress was being made, on and off the pitch. Two days after the Harlequins win, Hewitt was officially named as Northampton chairman, converting his temporary role into a permanent one.



He expressed what a 'fantastic honour' it was for him to succeed the late Leon Barwell and looked forward to carrying on the fine work done by the Barwell family as a whole.

Saints now had the stability of having a guaranteed figurehead who they hoped would continue the strong traditions at the club. Later in the day it was back to the action as the Wanderers gave Hewitt a welcome present with an eight-try 52-26 success against Worcester Cavaliers.

Like the first team, the second string had secured a second win in as many games, displaying the depth in the squad as Kiwi second row Verbakel, signed from Otago during the summer, was joined on the scoresheet by Teimana Harrison, van Velze, Tom Collins, Ethan Waller, Alex Woolford and Howard Packman.

While the likes of Harrison and Collins showed that the future was indeed very bright at the Gardens, back in the present, Saints were boosted by the news that Lawes and Tom Mercey would be fit to face Gloucester at the weekend.

Their power would be key to claiming a win at Kingsholm as Saints sought to continue a strong start to the season up front.

Forwards coach Dorian West had expressed his delight at how the team had adapted to new scrum laws, which had seen 'crouch, bind, set' instructions introduced, with front rows having to bind before engaging and packs unable to push until the referee was happy.

Referees were expected to insist the ball was put in straight and the hookers were told they had to hook the ball, something that had been reduced during the previous ten years.

Saints had shown they were fast learners as they had not lost a scrum in their opening two games, prompting West to say: 'We haven't had too many problems with scrums so far.'

'On the whole, I think it's gone pretty well. I think it's been positive.'