

SAM WARBURTON

**LIONS
TRIUMPHANT
THE CAPTAIN'S
STORY**



LIONS TRIUMPHANT

Also by Sam Warburton

Refuse to be Denied

LIONS TRIUMPHANT

The Captain's Story

SAM WARBURTON

With Steve James



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First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2013
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-47111-311-6
Ebook ISBN: 978-1-47111-314-7
Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-47111-312-3

Typeset in the UK by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Getting the Call

Sunday, 21 April 2013.

It is a quiet Sunday afternoon in Rhiwbina, Cardiff, as I recover from playing for the Cardiff Blues the night before, in a match we had lost 24-6 to the Scarlets at Parc-y-Scarlets in Llanelli. I am at my parents' house with my fiancée Rachel. My mum, Carolyn, is on the phone to a friend. My own mobile phone is charging on the table in the kitchen. I hear it ring. Rather lethargically I go to it, thinking it is just a mate calling. I don't get there in time before it rings off.

I look at the screen. 'Missed Call Gats,' it says. That means that I have just missed a call from Warren Gatland, the head coach of the British and Irish Lions. Crikey! I haven't had a call from him for ages. This is no idle Sunday afternoon phone call.

All sorts of things start racing through my head. My heart starts pounding. 'This is it,' I think. This is about the captaincy of the Lions. It has to be. It is only nine days until the official squad announcement, after all. I knew that Warren was going to make a phone call to the player who was going to be

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captain of the Lions, because I had read that he had said that in the press. He'd commented that he had decided in his own mind on the person he was going to ask, but he was going to wait a while before doing so.

Ironically, around the time he had said this, I had met my agent Derwyn Jones for lunch at El Puerto's restaurant in Penarth Marina, Cardiff, and we had bumped into Warren, who was there meeting the Lions' strength and conditioning coach Adam Beard. Warren told me, after a brief handshake and hello, that he would be in touch soon, but he didn't say exactly what it was regarding.

Warren's comment had been at the back of my mind during the lunch when eventually Derwyn was the one to say: 'Do you think it's regarding the Lions captaincy?' It was what we had both been thinking for an hour, but neither of us had said anything. But the flip side of this was that there were obviously a few players in contention. So I also thought that he might want to call those guys who were close to being captain to tell them the disappointing news.

So, either way, this call had to be about the captaincy. Did I think it was going to be good news? Well, if you had asked me a month before the announcement to put some money on it, I would not have put that money on myself. I'd have put it on Brian O'Driscoll, if I'm honest. My parents had asked me that very question, and Brian had been the answer that I'd given them.

But then there had been a story in the press just a few days before that some of the bookmakers had stopped taking bets

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on me to be Lions captain. Apparently, Ladbrokes had had a lot of money placed on me, so they had suspended betting on my being captain and as a result slashed the odds of my starting the first Test as Lions captain in Brisbane on 22 June from 3-1 to 4-7.

Or so I was told anyway. I have to admit that I didn't understand that at first, because I don't bet. I truly didn't know whether suspending the betting was a good or a bad thing. But it was my dad who texted me to tell me about it. I said to him: 'What does that mean?' He replied it must mean: 'There's some inside information which has got out, or something like that.'

'Interesting,' I thought. Apparently, bookmakers have eyes and ears everywhere, so I started thinking there might be some truth in it. But at that stage I didn't know. I really didn't. It was then still 11 days away from the official team announcement.

After that Scarlets match I was put up for press duties, and inevitably I was asked about the fact that the bookmakers had closed betting on my becoming Lions captain. 'I can honestly say, on my mother's life, I have no inkling of anything,' I said. 'The players are often the last people to find out about these things, so I'll just keep my head down for the Blues. One minute it's [Paul] O'Connell, the next minute it's O'Driscoll, the next minute it's myself. It's difficult from a player's point of view. The decision is completely out of my hands. There's not much I can do, really, apart from wait for the announcement. Everybody is texting me, asking what's

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going on, which is really frustrating, because I genuinely don't know.'

The press asked me if I wanted to be captain, which was not as silly a question as it might sound, given that I have always been a rather reluctant captain. And remember, I hadn't been captain of Wales in the last two matches of the 2013 Six Nations that I started against Scotland and England.

'It's a no-brainer,' I said. 'It's the biggest honour for any player. It's mind-blowing when you think about it, to have that accolade. Everybody who has done it has been a legend and it's flattering to think you are in contention for it. I still don't see myself as one of those players, really. It's quite strange, especially at twenty-four. If somebody had told me when I was watching the last Lions tour [in 2009] that I could be in this situation as a potential candidate, I would have laughed. Obviously, it's an absolutely massive honour.

'Everybody is excited and looking forward to the squad announcement and what's going to happen. I'm still in the dark about that. Fingers crossed for all the boys. Players still aren't talking about it to each other. Honestly, they really don't want to talk about it. It's quite strange, it's quite funny. But hopefully there's a decent contingent from the Blues and Wales.

'It's in the back of your mind now, because it is getting very close to selection. You are desperate to go on tour. You are thinking about it quite a bit. I just have to keep my head down and keep my fingers crossed. I'll sit tight for the next few days and see what happens.'

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That had been the night before. I probably wasn't going to have to sit tight or wait for a few days now. I probably wasn't going to have to wait for a few minutes. This phone call I was about to make could change my life. But what was Gats going to say to me?

I'd thought about the Lions so much already up to that point. I'd discussed it a lot with my family, and I don't mind admitting that I would get quite emotional when talking about it. I remember having dinner with Rachel a couple of years before and she suddenly asked me what was my greatest ambition in rugby. We don't usually talk about rugby when we're out, but on this occasion I became very emotional. I told her that my greatest ambition was to play for the Lions. It is the pinnacle. That's how much it meant to me. That's how desperate I was to get picked.

I had always wanted a framed Lions jersey up on my wall. That had long been an aspiration of mine. When I was 16, my parents had bought me a replica Lions jersey with a number seven on the back during the 2005 tour to New Zealand, and for quite a while afterwards I had worn it everywhere. It was my pride and joy. Then suddenly one day I made a decision. I'd had enough of that replica jersey. I took it off and vowed never to wear it again. It's still in my parents' house somewhere, but I said to myself: 'The next one I have to wear will be a proper one.' That's what's been pushing me ever since.

I had been thinking about the Lions announcement. I knew that it was going to take place on the morning of Tuesday 30 April, and it had already been said that only the captain would

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know in advance. Obviously, I wanted to be captain and so be told beforehand – or even told that I had missed out narrowly – but if none of that happened, I had thought about watching the announcement at the Cardiff Blues' training base at the Vale Resort, Hensol, near Cardiff.

I had pictured in my mind the TV being on in the canteen area, showing Sky Sports News with that announcement. All the squad would be there. I had thought about not looking too keen, because you wouldn't want to look arrogant. A few of the players might be watching you out of the corners of their eyes. I imagined it might be quite funny, because there was sure to be quite a bit of banter flying about, although you'd have to be careful about being too flippant if there were players in contention who did not make it.

Not that there had been much talk about the Lions all season at training. Nobody wanted to jinx themselves. I remember one day when winger Alex Cuthbert was waiting for a massage and he wrote his name 'Cuthie' on the massage sheet. Someone, just messing about, wrote next to it 'Lions 14'. He came back into the room, saw it and said: 'No chance,' straight away and scribbled it out. But now it seemed was the time to start talking about the Lions. I grabbed my phone and ran upstairs to my old bedroom, now used as a nursery by my parents for my little nephew, Harrison, when he visits. I shut the door and dialled the number.

Gats answered. We talked. And I have to say that he didn't get to the point very quickly! I was wishing he would. Firstly, he asked how my body was feeling after the Blues match, and

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I replied that it had never felt better – which it hadn't. There were then some silences down the line during which I hoped he was going to give his reasons for calling me earlier.

And then, all of a sudden, he did give that reason. 'Do you want to be captain of the British and Irish Lions this summer?' he asked.

It was the most surreal question I've ever been asked. I'll repeat it. 'Do you want to be captain of the British and Irish Lions this summer?'

I started laughing at first. Maybe there was a little bit of swearing in there, too, because I couldn't believe what I'd just heard. Then very quickly I said: 'Yes, of course, I do. What an honour.'

Happy days! I ran down the stairs punching the air in delight. When I left my parents' house later that afternoon to walk down their driveway I was still doing the same. While it is a massive honour to captain your country, and it is always something I cherish and indeed something I hope to do in the future, this time my reaction was something more. Much, much more. This was pure joy.

When I was first made Wales captain in 2011, I was rather reluctant and nervy. But now I was just so happy and so sure in my own mind that it was a job I wanted to do and also one I knew I could do. I truly felt I was the right person to be captain of the Lions. There was not one shred of doubt. It was such a different feeling from when I was first asked to captain Wales, and it was also completely different from how I had felt just months earlier, when I had had problems with my belief

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in my own game and, as a result, the Wales captaincy. But we will come to that later.

Gats did not say a great deal more. There was not much more to say, but he did emphasise to me how important it was that this news was kept confidential until the day of the announcement. So did Greg Thomas, the Lions' head of media and communications, who phoned me later to stress that point as well. 'We can't have this coming out,' he said.

But I knew that I could tell my closest family. So I finished the call and rushed downstairs to tell Rachel first. There was no way I could have kept it from her. My mum was still on the phone. So I typed into my phone 'I'm captain of the Lions! C U later. Bye,' and showed it to her. Understandably, she lost all train of thought in her conversation and was totally lost for words. So she hurriedly told her friend she would call back and hung up, before giving me a huge hug.

My dad, Jez, was not at home. He was working at Whitchurch Fire Station in Cardiff (he has since retired). I just had to tell him, too. I made the phone call excitedly. I didn't beat about the bush. 'Warren has just phoned up and told me I'm going to be Lions captain,' I said.

He replied: 'Ah great, brilliant. OK ...'

He didn't seem exactly overjoyed. It threw me a bit. So I told him again. 'That's great, Sam,' he said. 'I'll give you a ring back in a few minutes.'

He eventually phoned me back about half an hour later. He was much more enthusiastic now. 'Sam, that's unbelievable news,' he began. So I started talking about it again, and then

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suddenly he went back to how he had been before. 'Yeah, OK. I'll talk to you later.'

I'd just told him the biggest piece of rugby news I could possibly give him, and done so twice, and he didn't seem that excited. I was baffled. But basically what had happened was that the first time I had phoned him, he was among his fireman colleagues at work. They love their rugby, and they were all desperate to find out if I was going to be Lions captain. My dad simply could not let on to them that I was phoning to tell him that I had just been appointed. Then, just when he thought he had found a quiet minute to speak to me later, someone else had walked into the room from which he was phoning. No matter. When he got home later he could say exactly what he wanted to say and show me how pleased he was with a big hug.

I didn't tell my brother, Ben, and sister, Holly, until the following Friday, before the official announcement took place on the next Tuesday. I felt bad about that, but I just couldn't risk it coming out. Ben was working as a physio at the Newport Gwent Dragons then (he has since moved to be with me at Cardiff Blues) and, while I know he would not have done so deliberately, he could easily have given it away accidentally by his reaction if one or two of the players had pressed him on it.

There was also my agent, Derwyn. He came to my house on the Wednesday for a catch-up and asked me if I knew anything about the captaincy. I told him that I knew nothing. But I knew that I had to tell him before the announcement, so I rang him on the Friday. He said he was delighted and then

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asked me one question: ‘Did you know when I came to see you on Wednesday?’

I said I hadn’t. I was lying. It was a couple of days after the announcement that he eventually told me that he knew I was captain when he came to see me on that Wednesday, because he had received a phone call from someone – let’s just say that he is very resourceful. I apologised to Derwyn, but he just smiled and winked, as he’d known all along. He didn’t put any pressure on me to tell him, but I still apologised. I found myself doing a lot of that around this time.

There was one other person I told before the announcement. That was Andy McCann, the Wales team psychologist with whom I have forged such a strong relationship. I asked him to come to my house on the Friday. He had no idea what for. ‘I’m Lions captain,’ I said immediately.

I wanted him to know early, because I knew he could help me with the role. He had helped me enormously when I had first been given the Wales captaincy in 2011. Then he had suggested that we make a leadership compass, a tool business leaders use a lot. We had come up with four qualities, one for each direction of the compass, from which I could draw strength. They were:

1. Professional attitude
2. Positive attitude
3. Develop personal relationships with the players
4. Most importantly my own performance, and leading by example.

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I had saved this compass on my iPhone so that I could refer to it regularly. And, at Andy's instigation, we had also put together a book called *Warby's Winning Ways*, which I have used ever since as both inspiration and motivation. It included all sorts of things from that leadership compass, to positive press clippings and photographs of me playing well, along with photos of my family (including one of my twin brother Ben on his own, because I have always played every game for him after he was injured and had to give up the game), Rachel and even my dogs, to a list of my heroes like boxer Lennox Lewis, Andy himself and my former schoolteacher Gwyn Morris. We had even put in there the sponsorship deals I'd achieved, because Andy felt that it was important that I recognised my rewards.

So we now went over all of this again, and we updated the 'WWW' book for the Lions. And one of the quotes in there I actually used later on the tour in a press conference when I was asked about the goal for the tour before the Queensland Reds game. I said it was to win every game. 'It takes no more energy to have a bigger goal than a smaller goal,' I said. I like that quote. It suits me well because I am so optimistic and ambitious. Andy laughed when I told him that I had used it in a press conference, but I'm not sure it was used by any of the journalists there.

On that Friday together, Andy and I also came up with a specific plan to tackle the Lions captaincy. It wasn't that we didn't think I could cope with it; it was just that, between us, we wanted to make sure that I was fully prepared for it. I wanted

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to be as meticulous in preparing myself for it as I would be with my training, nutrition and sleep. Andy decided to call it the 'Captain's Corner', and it was a grid to which I could refer throughout the tour if I came across any captaincy problems.

We agreed upon six scenarios that I could possibly face and what I might do about them. So one might be that I felt there were too many press demands on me at a certain time, or that I fancied some time on my own. Another might involve some of the players coming up to me and saying that they were tired. So I had to work out when that might happen, and whom I would talk to in order to deal with it.

Other situations we considered were more specific, for example what would I do if the tight-five forwards were tired and sore, and we had a big scrummaging session to come and we had not covered scrummaging that week. There is always a fine balance between having to do scrummaging but not wanting to tire out the tight-five forwards, who do go through a lot of wear and tear during the week. So if Paul O'Connell, as scrum leader, came up to me and said these things, then we decided that I would go to the tight-head props Adam Jones and Dan Cole as reference points, as well as forwards coach Graham Rowntree and Adam Beard, who would have all the GPS data and could say whether we had overworked or underworked during a week.

I wrote all these six scenarios down, and alongside them I added which coaches or players I might speak to, so that if any of the scenarios did occur then I would be able to deal with them swiftly and easily. But the truth is that hardly any of

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them did occur, and I didn't have to refer to the 'Captain's Corner' half as much as I thought I would have to.

Certainly that scrummaging instance didn't occur. That's because we were managed brilliantly. As always, Warren Gatland was adamant that the training sessions should be short and sharp. If he said that the session was going to last only 41 minutes, he made sure it lasted 41 minutes. That's how he operates.

There were a couple of instances early in the tour where, say, Graham Rowntree was taking unit sessions in the morning, and Gats would give him 30 minutes to do so. And occasionally they would last nearly 45 minutes. So at the next squad meeting, Gats would give Wig, as everyone knows Graham Rowntree, some banter about his sessions running over, and Wig would give plenty of banter back. But Gats was making a subtle point and it worked, because for the rest of the tour, all the sessions were spot on.

However, while I was able to plan for the captaincy with Andy, I still couldn't tell anyone else about it, and that was so difficult. There were several awkward situations I had to deal with, and so many people I would have loved to have told, but I couldn't. It was so tough to keep it quiet for nine or ten days. Even other family members were asking me about it and I had to lie to them. I lied to many good friends, as well. Everyone was asking if I had heard anything, and I was just saying that I hadn't. When the news finally came out, I got a lot of sarcastic texts from mates. I apologise to all those that I misled, but I hope they can all understand why now.

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If it is any consolation to them, it was agony, because I just had to keep this massive secret. My team-mates at the Cardiff Blues were trying to trick me into revealing something. They kept asking me if I was going to be at training on the Monday before the announcement, knowing full well that the captain would probably have to go up to London that day. And Jamie Roberts even went a bit further. He said that he had an important charity function on that Monday night, and asked me if I could go along with him as a special guest. I had to tell him I was busy, but he was looking at me with a strange smile, waiting for a reaction. I think he knew, but I couldn't tell him.

I did actually go to Blues training on that Monday, but then I was picked up straight afterwards by Jon Davis, the Six Nations operations director and British Lions secretary, who lives not far from me in Rhiwbina. He took me up to the outskirts of London to the Hilton Hotel in Syon Park, where the announcement was to be made the next day, and where I stayed that night.

I was picked up in a Land Rover, and most of the Blues boys knew that the Lions were sponsored by them, so when they saw me being driven off in one of those vehicles, they texted me to ask what was going on. I had to keep trying to be as secretive as I could, though. When I got to the hotel, we had to go to the back entrance and I had to walk through the underground of the hotel to a private lift taking me up to my room. I just couldn't afford to be seen because we knew, for instance, that the BBC Wales crew were staying in that

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hotel that night in readiness for the announcement the next day.

I had a meal that night with all the coaches, management and committee, but it was in a private room at the hotel. Before that I had walked into the room just as the coaches were finishing picking the squad. That's what they told me anyway, and I do know that there was some last-minute agonising.

It was the first time I had seen Warren since his phone call, so it was good to see him and the other coaches. Warren then asked me: 'Do you want to have a look at the squad?'

I was like a kid at Christmas. I was going to get a sneak preview of the squad, although there was a part of me that was worried whether I would be able to resist telling my mates in the Wales squad. Anyway before I did have a look at it, Warren said to me: 'If you could pick one wild card, who would it be?'

I replied: 'Well, I think you know who I would want to pick.'

'Who?' he asked, even though I think he knew full well who I was on about.

'The Chopper,' I said.

'Who? Dan?' he asked. We were talking about Dan Lydiate, who gets his name because he is renowned for his famous chop tackles. I suddenly realised that this was going to be really awkward if he had not been picked.

'Why would you pick him?' questioned Warren.

'Because I think that he can do things other players can't,' I replied.

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Warren said no more and showed me the piece of paper. My eyes went straight to the back row where there were the names of Sam Warburton, Dan Lydiate, Justin Tipuric and Toby Faletau. Four Welsh boys in the back row, including my great mate Dan! I was so happy. In all there were 15 Welshmen. As well as the four of us, there was also Leigh Halfpenny, George North, Alex Cuthbert, Jamie Roberts, Jonathan Davies, Mike Phillips, Gethin Jenkins, Richard Hibbard, Adam Jones, Alun-Wyn Jones and Ian Evans.

In the selected squad, there were also ten English players: Manu Tuilagi, Owen Farrell, Ben Youngs, Tom Youngs, Mako Vunipola, Matt Stevens, Dan Cole, Geoff Parling, Dylan Hartley (though he was replaced before the tour began by Ireland's Rory Best after he was sent off in the Aviva Premiership final) and Tom Croft; nine Irishmen: Brian O'Driscoll, Tommy Bowe, Rob Kearney, Jonathan Sexton, Conor Murray, Cian Healy, Paul O'Connell, Sean O'Brien and Jamie Heaslip; and three Scots: Stuart Hogg, Sean Maitland and Richie Gray.

I could so easily have sneaked off and texted Dan to tell him. I knew that he was really fretting over the announcement, and that he thought he was going to be off to Japan with Wales. If he had played in the Six Nations, it would have been different – he would have been one of the first names on the teamsheet after his performances in the 2012 tournament – but, because of the terrible ankle injury that he had suffered at the start of the season, he had been able to play only a few games for the Newport Gwent Dragons before the squad was announced.

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Happily, he had done enough, and I so wanted to give him the good news. I knew I couldn't, though. He had to find out through the same channels as everyone else. But I did tell Rachel that he was in. She knew how pleased he would be, and how pleased I was for him.

Even on that Tuesday morning, I still had to keep a low profile. I had to have room service for breakfast and could not go out of my room until just before 11am. If any of the media had seen me, they would have known immediately that I was captain. I heard there were rumours that someone had seen Paul O'Connell there, and so the story spread that he had got the job. There were so many media people present that day, there was no way I could move about the place. It was a huge event.

The subterfuge continued when I had to hide downstairs in the kitchens while everyone moved into a ballroom decked out in red, with Lions logos and those of all of the corporate partners for the tour around the room. By now I was so nervous. I met the guys doing the Lions DVD for the first time, and it made me think immediately of all the other DVDs about the Lions and how good they were. Now I was going to be in one of them.

I was waiting outside the ballroom and it was a very weird sensation, because I knew that at that very moment all the players in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland would be crowding around TVs to see the squad. It was awesome to hear the names read out and to imagine how they might have been reacting.

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The MC for the event was Sky Sports' Alex Payne, and after some preliminaries and the announcement of the rest of the squad, Warren took to the podium and said: 'I am pleased to announce that the captain of the 2013 British and Irish Lions is Sam Warburton.'

The lights were dimmed and my fact file appeared up on the big screen as I entered the room dressed in a Lions shirt. I walked the length of the room up to the big stage. It was an unbelievable feeling to do that. This was it: I really was Lions captain now. Apparently, I was only the fifth Welshman to be selected as Lions tour captain, and the first since Phil Bennett in 1977, and, at 24, I was also the youngest Lions captain in nearly 60 years.

I sat between Warren and the tour team manager Andy Irvine on one side of the stage, while the four other coaches – Graham Rowntree, Andy Farrell, Rob Howley and Neil Jenkins – sat on the other side. Eventually, I was interviewed on stage by Alex and I told him the story of receiving the call from Warren nine days previously. 'It's unbelievable – an accolade that very few people are able to achieve. To have the opportunity to do this is an unbelievable honour,' I added.

'It's going to be new for me. I am going to learn along the way. I can't sit here and say I know what will happen, because I don't. There is a good Welsh contingent of leaders that I know I can rely on, and there are leaders from other countries whose help I am sure I will need along the way. It's an experience that I just can't wait to get underway now. I'm very much looking forward to the squad meeting up. I'm always the

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ultimate optimist. I will go out there with the intention to win every match. That will be the great challenge for the players, as no other Lions team has done that.'

There followed a whole host of interviews with various media outlets: TV, radio and written press, with the latter divided up into Sunday and daily papers. It was a long day, but it was still enjoyable. If you can't be happy about being Lions captain, when can you be?

I was driven back to Cardiff that evening, and picked up my car; it was about 5.20pm and I was not far from home when I spoke to Rachel. She asked where I was. I told her, and she suddenly started acting a little strangely. 'Sam, go and get some milk, will you please?' she said.

'I bought six pints before I went,' I replied. 'We don't need any milk.'

'Sam, just go and get some milk please,' she said.

'Rach, I'm still in my Lions kit. The team has only been announced today, and if I go into Spar with that on, everyone will think I'm a big head.'

I didn't have a clue what was going on, so I thought I would pop into my parents' house on the way home. I got there and they were all dressed up ready to go out.

'Where are you going?' I asked.

They replied that they were going to the Deri Inn in Rhiwbina near their house for a few drinks. 'I'll come with you,' I said.

'No, no, you go home and see Rachel when she gets back from work,' they said. 'You can come and see us later.'

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‘Oh, and Rachel just phoned me and said that you have to go and get some milk,’ said my mum.

‘Why do I have to go and get some milk?’ I was asking myself. Something odd was going on, but I had no idea what it was. So I went to the Spar, rushed in, got some milk, and rushed out again.

I went home, and by this time Rachel was there. She came to the door and, as she did so, she shut the lounge door. She was acting very weirdly, because usually when I have been away for a bit I will often come through the door and say something overly romantic just for a bit of fun, and she will enjoy that. But when I did that now, I got hardly any reaction back from her. All she said was: ‘There is a surprise present for you in the lounge.’ So I opened the door, and there were all my family and Rachel’s family waiting to give me a surprise party to celebrate being named Lions captain. All that fuss about the milk had been Rachel trying to buy some time to make sure she was home from work before I was. It was a really nice gesture from all of them, and I really appreciated it. It was a lovely evening.

I still couldn’t believe it all, to be honest. There were banners up in my house saying congratulations on being Lions captain, but still it wouldn’t sink in. At one stage I glanced at the TV and saw the writing at the bottom of the screen saying ‘Sam Warburton British and Irish Lions captain’. I paused the picture, grabbed my phone and took a photo of it. It was surreal.

I thought back to being in my hotel room that morning and

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going to the bathroom, and as I did so, I looked at the mirror, and there was the Lions badge on my polo shirt. It was only a polo shirt, but I remember thinking ‘Wow! I’m going to be a Lion. And captain, too.’

As I had said in one of the interviews that day about being a Lion: ‘From a young kid, it’s always something that I’ve wanted to do. The captaincy has never been in my mind, which is why it’s such a shock and I’m so delighted. First things first is the performance, though. That’s the most important thing you have to prioritise as captain. The one reservation I’ve always had about captaincy is making sure you don’t become complacent. If you are captain, then you don’t want to assume that you are always going to be picked. I don’t like that. I like it when you go to the team announcements and you are on the edge, you don’t know whether you are picked or not.’

There were some very complimentary words for me from Warren sitting alongside me, who also made sure that I wasn’t lulled into any complacency. ‘Sam is a quiet man who also leads from the front. I think he will do a brilliant job,’ he said. ‘Paul [O’Connell] and Brian [O’Driscoll] were considered [for the captaincy], but if I was picking a Test side tomorrow Sam would be in that side, be it at six or seven. A number of other players will be fighting for positions. I think a lot has been made of this year, but one of the things I admire about Sam is that it is not about him, it is about putting the team first. But he is under no illusions – his performances have to be good enough.’

There had also been some interesting comments from Warren

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about my rapport with referees and how that influenced his selection. 'I saw something happen in the Wales v England game when [referee] Steve Walsh penalised Sam,' he said. 'And he allowed him to go to him three times on one occasion to question a decision and get some clarification. Walsh does not allow that from anybody, and it was a big signal to me that either referees have been talking or they all respect him, because there are only two or three players in the world who would have been allowed to do that. It really stuck in my mind. His ability to communicate and strike a rapport with referees could potentially have a positive influence on the game.'

'I am not concerned about the referees we have for the three Tests [Chris Pollock, Craig Joubert and Romain Poite] and I think the portents are good. Wales have had Craig Joubert on a number of occasions and he is fair. He has a really good relationship with Sam and, having spoken to him, I know he has a really good relationship with Sam, rating him as one of the best opensides in the world. When a referee tells you that he enjoys his leadership, has a rapport with him, likes refereeing Sam and respects him as a player, it was quite an easy decision to make to appoint him as captain.'

What sort of Lions captain was I going to be? That was a question being asked a lot. For a start, I was pretty sure that I was going to be one of the quietest captains the Lions had ever had. But I knew that I was the type of captain Warren wanted. I think it has been well documented that I was shocked when he first asked me to be captain of Wales in 2011. And that was because I did not consider myself a leader in any way. I

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thought a captain was the man who stood up and made a lot of noise. But I was wrong. There is much more to captaincy than that.

I remember Warren showing me some videos of my behaviour on the pitch, the way I was communicating, the way I'd go in for a big hit when the lads' chins were down, and he said: 'That's leadership.' It was those traits he wanted more than being able to give a good speech in the dressing room. Leading by example is the term everyone uses. That's what I try to do.

The other aspect of captaincy that initially worried me was that I don't like being singled out. I'm at my best when I'm backed into a corner. I need to feel those butterflies in my stomach that come if you think you're not going to be picked. As captain I have never wanted to be closer to the coaches than the other players. I think everyone should have the same relationship. And that is certainly the case with Warren and me.

So as a captain I'm not a motivator, screaming and shouting at people. I'm not one for the up-and-at-'em speeches before a match. In fact, I'll usually speak for no more than 30 seconds before we go out on to the field as a team. I don't even usually think about what I'll say until I'm on the bus on the way to the game. When I do eventually speak, a lot of those 30 seconds will be taken up by tactical talk, making sure players know what their roles are in the first five minutes. Make a mistake in that time and it can have massive consequences. I always leave the head banging to the front five. That's what they are good at. They love that sort of thing.

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Some might argue that I'm probably too laid back for my own good in that regard. I don't study leadership, and I don't go looking for too much guidance (although, of course, I will gladly accept help and support), I just try to act naturally. My view is that people can over-complicate things, whether in leadership, rugby or anything else.

One of the best pieces of advice I had when talking about the captaincy was 'just be yourself'. It sounds very simple, but in reality it is not always that simple. A lot of people try to be something or someone just for the sake of others. That has never been my way of doing things. I'm not one to talk about families, fans or countries when speaking to my team. There are no Churchillian speeches. If I tried that, people would know it's not me. Yes, of course, I get pumped up before a game, but it's just that it doesn't come out in what I say.

Warren knew all this when appointing me as captain. He knew what he was getting in me as a captain. And I knew I would not let him down. The decision had been made. I was overjoyed. It was time to get started. It was no time to be worrying what people thought of the decision to make me captain. I was not going to watch or read anything on that matter.

Well, I wasn't, until I made a bad mistake in watching a Sky Sports Rugby Club programme on which they were discussing my appointment. They started talking about it and I thought to myself 'I should turn over now', but instead I kept watching. The consensus seemed to be that either Paul O'Connell or Brian O'Driscoll should have been made captain. I suppose I could understand that. I think the Welsh people knew what I

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could do, because they had seen more of me, but those from other countries would have wanted someone from their country to be captain. But still I got a little angry. 'I can't wait to prove these people wrong,' I thought.

It was just under two weeks later that we assembled as a squad for the first time, meeting at Syon House as we were kitted out for the tour and we sorted out all our administrative stuff like visas, as well as having the official tour photo taken. Some of the boys said it was like a first day at school, and it certainly was. There was a lot of excitement about what lay ahead.

And as for the amount of kit given to us by Adidas, well, it was monumental. Not that anyone was complaining! There were personalised boots, and the level of detail in general was remarkable – we were even measured up for recovery skins to wear on all of our various flights throughout the tour. This was done by a laser instrument that measured the exact size of our calves and ankles.

We arrived there in dribs and drabs, but all the Welsh boys had got there first, having come up on a bus from Cardiff. I was amazed at the tension among us, especially as we were used to one another's company – it was another moment that showed why the Lions are different. I remember George North saying: 'I can't believe how nervous I am!' Some of them were urging me to go in first as we arrived.

I thought that I knew most of the squad already, but then when I got there, I realised that I didn't really. I'd met Paul O'Connell at a Six Nations launch, and I'd shared a table with Jamie Heaslip after a Six Nations match, I'd had a chat with

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Sean O'Brien after another Six Nations match, and I'd met Manu Tuilagi at a sponsor's function – and got on with him straight away – but other than that it was a question of getting to know new team-mates.

It was quite quiet, really. It's always interesting to see how people react to that new environment, treading carefully at first as they size up each other's personalities. You find that it is not until the second or third week of a tour that everyone is comfortable with everyone else's personalities.

I remember walking to have the team photo alongside Geoff Parling, and I asked him what some of the boys' nicknames were. That created some fun through the tour. He told me that Tom Croft was called 'Yog', but the one I found most amusing was that Owen Farrell is called 'Foxy Bingo' after the fox on the TV advert. I didn't know Owen at all at this stage, but as most of the Welsh boys usually add 'boy' after calling someone's name, when I walked past Owen I said casually: 'Foxy Bingo boy.'

He was taken aback. 'How did you know about that?' he asked, before bursting out laughing.

Cian Healy is known as 'Church' and for quite a while I was careful not to swear around him because I genuinely thought he was very religious. Eventually, I asked him and he told me the story behind it. He said himself that everyone expects it to be a great story, but it's actually pretty rubbish. I think I'm right in saying that it is not because he is particularly religious and we'll leave it at that!

I didn't know what to call Ben Youngs. We named his

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brother Tom 'Younger', but I was having to make do with just 'Ben' or 'Youngy' for the scrum-half, so I asked him what I should do. He said that he was known as 'Lenny'. So that's what I started trying to do but, because I had been calling him 'Ben', I started getting a little tongue-twisted – and I know George North had this same problem, too – so that I ended up saying 'Blenny'. That became mine and George's special nickname for him!

There were only two players unavailable for that get-together: Gethin Jenkins, because of commitments with his French side Toulon, and Brian O'Driscoll, who was advised not to fly over to London from Dublin, after he had hurt his back playing for Leinster against Glasgow in the RaboDirect Pro12 league. The injury forced him out of Leinster's Amlin Challenge Cup final win over Stade Francais.

Warren asked if I would speak to the squad. I won't say that I relished doing that, but I simply had to. The players would have been expecting something from me. The first thing I said was that any help from the experienced leaders within the group would be much appreciated, but I also emphasised the role the younger players could play, too. 'Just because it's your first tour, it doesn't mean you can't have a say, and the young players have so much energy it's important for them to be heard, as this can drive a team along.'

I also mentioned about the mentality of winning. 'If anybody asks you about whether we can win, just tell them that you expect to do so. It's not about hoping to do so, it's about expecting it, and that is a mindset that has to be there

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throughout the tour party, from the players through to management and back-room staff. It's an attitude that will drive us forwards.'

Basically, my speech was about the honour and privilege of being a Lion. But I also thought that I would use a true story about something that had happened to me only just before this.

About a week before we gathered for the first time, Leigh Halfpenny and I had made a hospital visit in Cardiff. The wife of our director of rugby, Phil Davies, had asked us to go to see a young boy who was dying of cancer. It was so moving. He had lost both his legs and he could barely speak, but he loved watching rugby. And he was so upbeat talking about it. We signed all his shirts and scarves for him, and you could see that we had made his day. But as we left the hospital, Leigh and I looked at each other. It was a look that said: 'We are both so lucky.' It was an extremely emotional and heartbreaking moment for both of us. Tragically, we discovered that soon afterwards the young boy died.

I told this story to the Lions players and concluded: 'Imagine the joy we gave to that boy. If only I could have had the power to say to him: "You will be OK. You'll play for the Lions one day." That is what we have got. We are doing something that so many people would love to do. Wherever you are, whether it is thinking about doing extra weights or any extra training, please bear that in mind.'

I hoped that was a strong message. 'None of us should ever forget how lucky we are,' I added. 'I don't think we will.'

And I don't think we did.