

Brown captivated by Murderball

Alex Lowe speaks to Mike Brown, the England full back, about his interest in wheelchair rugby

It comes as little surprise to learn that Mike Brown is a fan of wheelchair rugby. The Harlequins and England full back relishes the physical, no-holds-barred nature of a sport once known as Murderball because that is exactly how he plays his own rugby.

Brown, whose father has multiple sclerosis and sometimes requires the use of a wheelchair, was first alerted to the sport by his girlfriend's father, Tony Woodcock, the former Arsenal and England footballer.

On the back of watching a few clips on YouTube, Brown made contact with Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby (GBWR). He cheered them on at the 2012 London Paralympics, amazed and exhilarated by the force of the steel-on-steel collisions.

In November, Brown was voted England's player of the QBE autumn international series and donated his £1,000 winnings to the GBWR youth scheme. In the coming weeks he will meet David Pond, the chief executive, again to finalise his new role as ambassador for the organisation.

"Tony showed me some clips and said 'I think you'll like this,'" Brown said. "It is the mindset they have, throwing themselves into every tackle. The physicality and the skill they show with the ball is brilliant. I enjoy playing rugby because it is physical and I enjoy wheelchair rugby for the same reason. It's one thing to watch it on television but when you watch it live, you really see how hard they work."

"The sound they make with the hits they put in is unbelievable. It is a fast-paced, high-action game and hopefully I will get a chance to have a go at it."

Harlequins, Leicester, Saracens and Gloucester have partnerships with GBWR, which has been forging close

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links with the RFU and Aviva Premiership clubs since Pond took over five years ago.

"I heard murmurs that a lot of clubs want to start a team," Brown said. "Hopefully this year I will get more involved in an ambassadorial role and help them push that."

Woodcock has become something of a rugby convert since this softly spoken but fiercely competitive player started dating his daughter, Eliza. Pond is anxious to have Brown on board with GBWR because they see him as the ultimate team man.

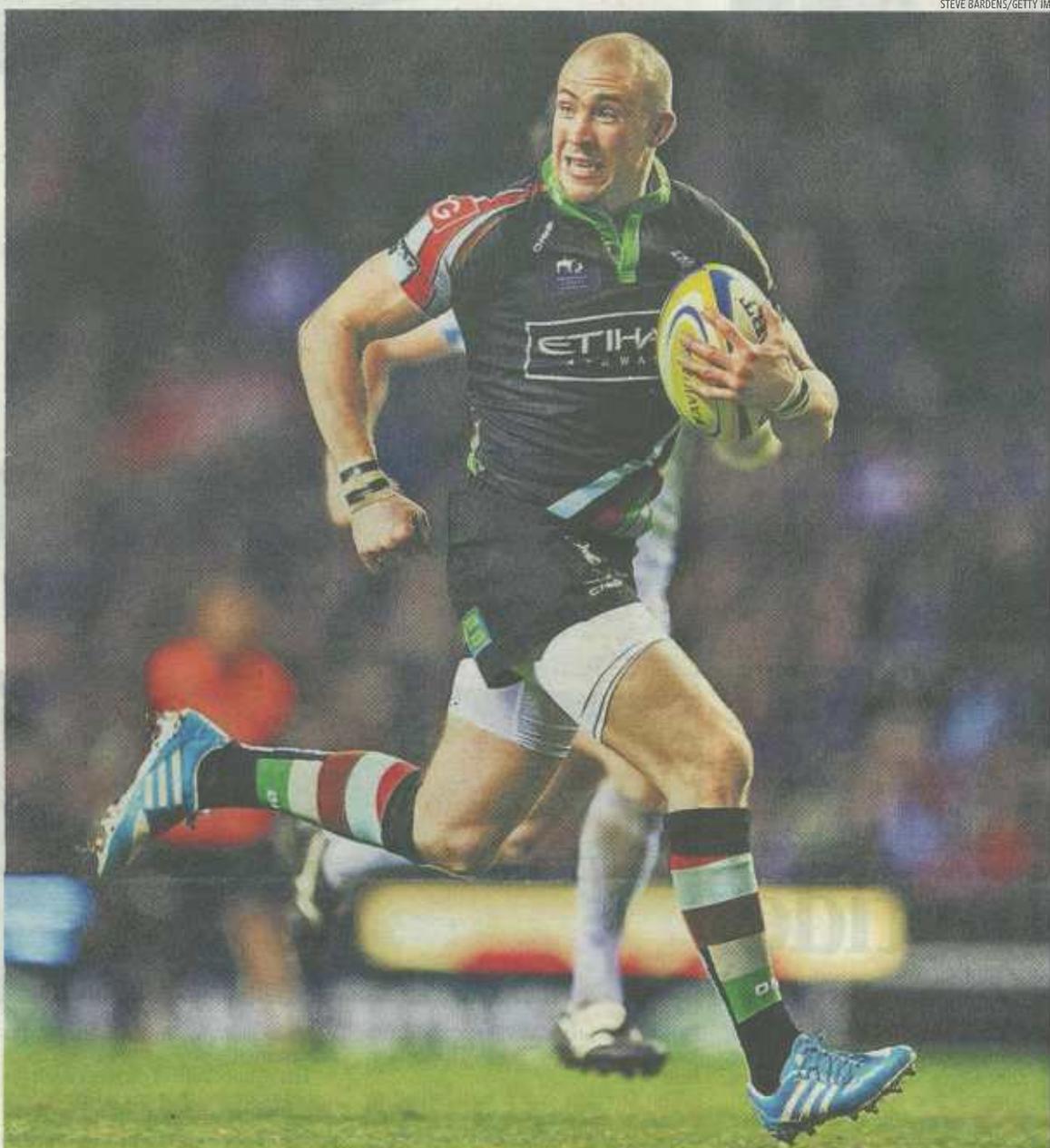
"He is a very understated player, he grafts for the whole team and he embodies excellence," Pond said. "He strives to be the best at everything he does."

The Mike Brown Appreciation Society is no longer populated solely by the Harlequins coaches, team-mates and supporters who have long championed his cause as the best full back in the country.

The misconception of Brown as one of English rugby's bad boys, which developed after he was fined after a boozy night out during the 2008 tour of New Zealand, has long been put right.

It still took four years and a change of coach before Brown was recalled to the national team but by the time Stuart Lancaster picked him in 2012, he was a different person and a different player.

Conor O'Shea, the Harlequins director of rugby, and Margot Wells, the sprint coach, have been instrumental in his development. This autumn Brown



STEVE BARDENS/GETTY IMAGES

World Cup stage to be shared

● A wheelchair rugby tournament featuring the world's eight leading nations, including Great Britain, will be held in London during the 2015 Rugby World Cup.

● The showcase event will be played in the Copper Box Arena, next to the Olympic Stadium, between October 11 and 16, the week before the World Cup quarter-finals.

● The tournament will be separate from the World Cup but it will run in parallel and it has the support of the International Rugby Board. "It will be part of a festival of rugby around that time," David Pond, the chief executive of Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby, said.

nailed down the England full back jersey, earning, he believes for the first time, some recognition from the wider rugby public.

"I had no right to be annoyed that I wasn't appreciated [outside of Harlequins] because supporters focus on their own club, but it is great now to have shown what I can do at a high level," Brown said.

Determined, feisty and dependable, Brown was commanding in the back field, launching counter-attacks, fielding high balls and tackling ferociously. He was the only member of England's back division to play with any thrust



Safe hands: Brown, in action for Harlequins, his club side, cemented his place in Lancaster's England team for the Six Nations with a fine showing during the autumn series and is set to take on an ambassadorial role with Great Britain Wheelchair Rugby, left

and dynamism but he was rarely used in the opposition half.

As a man with 45 tries from 148 Premiership appearances — a strike rate superior to Ben Foden's record of 31 in 134 — he wants more of the ball and feels that England cannot rely on an attacking framework focused so heavily on direct midfield runners.

"I think our attack is still a long way off being New Zealand's standard," Brown said. "We would like a more all-round game."

Harlequins delivered exactly that for 40 minutes at Twickenham last weekend to open a match-winning lead

against Exeter Chiefs. They were frustrated not to claim the four-t bonus point but the victory has set them up well for tomorrow's challenging trip to Northampton, where securing the league will play fourth.

"We were physical and played at high tempo against Exeter," Brown said. "It is great to have played so well going into a tough game."

● IG, the financial derivatives trading company, was the lead sponsor of B Game 6 and as part of its 'Bright Together' campaign offered fans the chance to reveal their inner Harlequin at Twickenham Stadium.