

Want your child to be a rugby star? A place

From football heroes to Olympic medalists, the evidence is in the results, says *Jim White*

Ten of England's starting 15 in last year's Rugby World Cup final attended private school. More than a third of Britain's medalists at the Rio Olympics were privately educated. Indeed, the rower Helen Glover, the swimmer James Guy and the rugby Sevens player Ollie Lindsay-Hague, who won four medals between them in Brazil, were contemporaries at the same educational establishment, Millfield.

This is not, however, evidence of some sort of institutionalised discrimination. Sport is nothing if not meritocratic. The only thing that matters is results. Unlike some other professions, these athletes did not advance because of social background, or where they went to school. They were chosen to represent their country because they were the best around. And more and more of Britain's most successful sports people were educated at private schools.

"If I had to come up with an argument why we shouldn't abolish private schools that was best going to resonate with the wider public, the thing I'd say is

that we provide things that are not easily provided by the state sector. And elite sport is the most obvious," says Barnaby Lenon, chairman of the Independent Schools Council.

And Lenon should know: when he was headmaster of Harrow, he recommended giving scholarships (paid for by the financier John Beckwith, an old boy) to Maro Itoje and Billy Vunipola, two of England's World Cup final XV.

Superficially, the reasons behind private school predominance in elite sporting competitors are glaringly obvious. After all, nobody could be wholly surprised that a school with its own Olympic rowing lake produced a rowing gold medalist at the Rio Games, as Eton did with Constantine Louloudis.

Increasingly, in sports like cricket and hockey, private schools provide the sort of infrastructure entirely lacking in the state sector.

The Manchester Grammar School, for instance, has long boasted that it has the second best cricket wicket in the north, after the test ground at nearby Old Trafford.

Sadly, no state schools in Manchester can

afford to employ a groundsman, as MGS does, dedicated to nurturing its surface.

Excellent facilities, however, are only part of the explanation. "At a boarding school less than 20 per cent of the pupil's time is spent in the classroom," says Prof Alex Hill, director of the Centre for High Performance at Kingston University. "There is an opportunity to fill the remaining time with intensive coaching, training and competition."

According to Lenon, for pupils keen to pursue elite sport, Harrow is effectively a year-round training camp, with round-the-clock access to high quality facilities and coaching.

For some parents, this is a significant reason why they send their sons there. In the arms race of school admissions, producing an international rugby player is a significant marketing weapon.

"Whether it be maths, music, drama or rugby: take it seriously, do it well, that remains a vital selling point," Lenon admits.

And the returns certainly suggest it



Olympic rower Helen Glover, far left, and England Rugby Union player Maro Itoje, left and below, attended private schools, which helped them on their way to immense success



works. Every year since 2012 at least one pupil has been awarded a professional rugby union contract on leaving Harrow.

"The level of frequent, high-quality competition is the key here," adds Richard Finch, the school's director of sport. "Harrow players have exposure week in, week out to a top-level circuit with similarly high-attaining players. Additionally, not every player wants a career in rugby, but top-level school rugby is a fantastic arena to build up resilience, composure under pressure and create lifelong collective memories."

Prof Hill points out that an ethos in which elite sport is regarded as important has long been a part of the private school offer. Moreover, places like Millfield, Harrow and Manchester Grammar were never subject to the twin forces that so drastically undermined state school sport in the Nineties: the unholy alliance of a sell-off of playing fields and anti-competitive educational dogma. He adds that the private sector still enjoys significant organisational advantage.

"It is under less pressure from league tables. Which means, not obliged to concentrate entirely on academic issues, private school heads have long believed it is part of their role to invest time, effort and energy into non-academic pursuits, like elite sport. The

theory is that that is where a lot of innovation happens, where character gets built."

Character that can be turbocharged by the wider educational ethos that it obtains in such establishments.

"At private schools, children are encouraged not to see barriers. And to try things," says Prof Hill. "I remember when I was doing some research at Eton hearing a boy say he was keen on improving his tennis. One teacher suggested he get in touch with Andy Murray for some tips. He was being serious."

But there is something more. Luke Webb, whose career as a professional footballer was curtailed by injury before he took up a post as head of football at Bradfield College, reckons the close proximity of academia and sport has significant benefits.

"My under-14s lost 8-0 in a cup game the other day. Name me another 70 minutes in their school lives when they could learn more about themselves. Nothing accelerates problem-solving ability like sport," he says.

Lenon agrees. "At Harrow, cricket is hugely important. And it is a summer game. Boys in the first eleven are often taking A-levels. But we never found anyone for whom it was a barrier in their effort to attain outstanding grades." Itoje was a prime example. As



'It's a fantastic arena to build up resilience and composure under pressure'

Rowers at Headington School, Oxford, enjoy river time

well as playing for England's Age Grade Rugby teams, he represented the school at other sports, including shot-put. Yet he still found time to achieve three As at A-level, before taking a politics degree at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

And the proponents of school sport would argue the two are interlinked. These days, as he shines for England in the Six Nations, it is Itoje's leadership skills, his anticipation, his all-round reading of the game that is most frequently commented upon.

"My experience is that an academic education makes you a better footballer," says Webb, who last year saw his team captain sign a contract with Burnley FC in the Premier League. "It helps you to analyse problems, to resolve issues." According to Julie Stirrup,

lecturer in Physical Education and Sport Pedagogy at Loughborough University, it is a theory yet to be tested by academe.

"There's not any specific research to support that," she says of Webb's contention. "But it is coherent to argue that educating holistically makes for a more rounded individual."

Or as Webb puts it: "Sport always used to be seen as a supplement in private education. But I think we are beginning to realise it is so much more. Sport absolutely complements academic study."

Which is why, he suggests, anyone who has ambitions for their child to seek a career in sport might be advised to check out the private education system.