

DAILY MAIL Wednesday 25th August by Peter Jackson

School of (no) hard knocks: Gareth Bale was excused from rugby for being too skinny and hasn't looked back since ...

A year ago, Gareth Bale had played 23 League games for Tottenham and not won once. Today he is one of the most lauded young players in Europe. 'I couldn't put a value on him,' said Harry Redknapp after Bale's wonder goal at Stoke on Saturday.

PETER JACKSON traces Bale's roots to the same school team as Wales rugby union international Sam Warburton and asks those who know Bale best about his unique talent.

The rocket which Gareth Bale sent flashing around the world from Stoke-on-Trent on Saturday came as no surprise to his old school team back home in Cardiff. Sam Warburton, the other embryonic Welsh international standing alongside his fellow 14-year-old in the Whitchurch High School five-a-side squad of 2003-4 — as Sportsmail's exclusive picture shows — had seen it all before, since Bale began firing guided missiles off his left foot 10 years ago. 'He scored plenty of pearlers during his time at Whitchurch,' said Warburton.



Too hot to handle: Gareth Bale outstrips Stoke's Ryan Shawcross, right, in a game he marked with two goals, including a wonder volley. 'I was football mad then and, because we were the same age, I couldn't wait to go to high school, knowing we'd be in the same team. 'Everybody knew who he was even then because there was nobody to touch him. 'His ball control, speed and fitness put him miles ahead of the rest. He was such an athlete that every year he'd blitz the 1500 metres in the Cardiff Schools Championships. 'I wasn't a bad centre back. I always fancied my chances of being a footballer and then I had a trial at Cardiff City and got a reality check. 'There was no chance of me being another Gareth Bale. He always had his head screwed on with a really professional attitude from an early age. For example, I've never seen him drink. 'He was in a league of his own whereas I was out of my depth. Fortunately, that was about the time when rugby was becoming more important to me.'

Bale's development had been helped by the foresight of the school's head of PE, who would become an international rugby referee.



School of excellence: **Whitchurch High School** teacher Gwyn Morris in front of the school honours board which has pictures of Gareth Bale and Sam Warburton. Bale's left foot is now hailed as one of the best in world football; Gwyn Morris used some perceptive improvisation to ensure the youngster also worked on his right. 'There were games when we only allowed Gareth to use his right foot,' said Morris. 'We'd say, "Any touch of the left foot is a free kick to the opposition". 'His first touch with the left was lovely but you have to work twice as hard on the weaker foot to become a complete player. 'We wanted to challenge him to use his vision and discipline. Gareth had all the evasive skills which would have made him a very good rugby player, had he put his mind to it.' But Bale left that to Warburton, the youngest forward in Wales' projected squad for next year's World Cup, and a rugby league international from the same Whitchurch class, Celtic Crusaders' Welsh full back Elliott Kear.



Early promise: The school five-a-side team (top, Bale fifth from left in back row and Warburton far right)

THE WELSH WIZARD BY NUMBERS

Tottenham manager Harry Redknapp claims Gareth Bale is the best left-sided player in the Premier League. Here's why ...

■ Last season Bale made more successful dribbles than any left-sided player in the top four.

Player	Dribbles per 90 mins
G BALE (Spurs)	2.37
J Cole (Chelsea)	1.96
F Malouda (Chelsea)	1.80
A Arshavin (Arsenal)	1.67
Nani (Man Utd).....	1.64
P Evra (Man Utd).....	1.34
A Cole (Chelsea).....	1.00

■ And he didn't fare badly against the rest either – coming fifth out of the entire league.

Player	Dribbles per 90 mins
A Diaby (Arsenal).....	2.98
S Wright-Phillips (Man City)..	2.89
C N'Zogbia (Wigan)	2.82
E Eboue (Arsenal).....	2.53
G BALE (Spurs)	2.37

CORRIDOR KING



Bale, whose sporting CV also includes a goalscoring appearance in a Welsh schools' hockey cup final and assorted cross-country honours, chose to give rugby a wide berth. The fact that he was then part of the Southampton academy might have had a fair bit to do with it. 'We played rugby in PE lessons but it was too physical,' he said recently. 'A few of my friends played but they were big, like Sam. I thought, "This isn't for me. I'm too skinny for this game".'

Bale did play rugby, although not often at a school whose alumni also include Olympic gold medal-winning cyclist Geraint Thomas. 'Gareth didn't want to risk it because he'd been tied up with Southampton from about the age of nine,' said Warburton. 'If he'd given rugby a crack, he'd have been a pretty good full back. He had the speed, the footwork, the boot and the height to have made it.'

Morris added: 'Some football clubs don't want their schoolboys to play other sports but Southampton encouraged him. The school is very privileged to have had three full internationals in three different sports from the same year — it doesn't happen very often.'

'What is special about them is they never considered themselves special. They were good kids with a work ethic and the school is proud of what they've achieved.'

'We take enormous pride when Gareth says Whitchurch is a great sporting school.' The boy who left with six GCSEs cost Tottenham £10million from Southampton. Having charged on from a winless run that eventually reached 24 League games, his value is probably three times that fee these days.

Indeed, according to Harry Redknapp, the only son of school caretaker Frank Bale and his wife Debbie is priceless. 'You couldn't put a value on him,' said the Spurs manager. 'Every club in the world wants to buy him.'

The Young Boys of Berne will be old way before their time if Whitchurch's former 2nd XV full back uses his left foot to deliver another thunderbolt this evening.

Bale... by those who know him best

HARRY REDKNAPP (Tottenham and former Southampton manager): 'Cliff Jones told me earlier in the year that Gareth would be the first Wales player to win 100 caps. The lad deserves great credit for developing himself. He's got stronger and has grown up. He's mentally tougher now. I always felt if he got a little mark on him in training, he'd limp off. He doesn't do that any more. I used to say to the physio, "When he gets injured, leave him on the floor. Don't keep running over to him". There can't be a better left-sided player. If he was English he'd have gone to the World Cup, for sure.'

RON RUDDICK (former manager of Bath satellite academy, affiliated to Southampton): 'We played a game at Norwich and it was certainly a make-or-break period for him. He earned his scholarship on merit with his performance that day. It just took off for Gareth during the next 18 months. He grew eight inches during that time. Off the pitch, we decided to try to bring him out of his shell a bit more. I gave him the job of phoning through the results of our Under 17 side, telling me who scored and how the games had gone.'

KEVIN RATCLIFFE (ex-Wales skipper now BBC Wales summariser): 'If he could improve his defending and be a little braver, he'd be the full package, world class. He gets you out of your seat when he's playing left back. How many players can you say that about?'

ROB EARNSHAW (Nottm Forest and Wales): 'I remember his debut for Wales well. He set me up for the winner during a friendly against Trinidad and Tobago in Graz prior to the 2006 World Cup. He was only on for 15 minutes but had the composure to set up a goal straight away.'