

The policeman in the front row

By J. B. G. THOMAS
("Western Mail")

POLICE SERGEANT Michael Knill of Cardiff is a very fine scrummaging prop: more, he is proof — as are Ian McLauchlin, "Stack" Stevens and Charlie Faulkner — that most props are at their best after they have passed the age of 30. None of these happy warriors will take exception to my saying that the art of propping is very much an "older" player's prerogative. It takes a long time to learn it, to acquire the

strength, technique and, above all, the requisite stamina to maintain a high standard of performance through a fast-moving match.

That is not to infer that there are no fine young props about wearing the colours of their country: there are, of course, and none better than Graham Price of Pontypool.

One of the senior members of the Prop Forwards' Association — one might even call him the chairman —

is "Admiral" Stanley Bowes of Cardiff, who was at his best helping Cardiff beat the New Zealanders in 1953 at the age of 34, perhaps 35, as props are always shy about their age.

Mike Knill admits to 32 and looks fitter now than at any time in his career. Helping Cardiff beat the Australians gave Knill much pleasure, if not quite as much as it gave England's loose-head prop, Barry Nelmes, working on the other side of the Cardiff front row. Between them they did a powerful job, as the strength and effectiveness of their scrummaging set up the Welsh club's victory.

When I asked Sergeant Knill what was his proudest memory and happiest match, he related that it was his first, against Newport. "We played it on the Arms Park and won 27-3. Everything went right for us: even for me, as I caught the ball a couple of times and appeared in the right place in the loose, occasionally!"

However proud Knill may be — and he is proud — he remains essentially modest, as are most props. Often they are the most interesting players to talk to when they retire, for they are not given to words when in "employment".

"Since I started playing first-class Rugby, the game has changed considerably", says Knill, "although propping always remains a trial of strength with one's opposing prop.

"No two props are the same, for they vary in size, approach, manner, skill and strength. Of course, after you've played a few times against the same opponent you get to know him and he knows you, and things become more interesting.

"It has taken me a long time to learn the job, but many people have helped me, including several players and officials in the Cardiff club, as well as officials and officers in the

South Wales Police Force. Techniques change and, naturally, you must have good weight, applied correctly, behind you. In the front row we had the weight when playing against the Wallabies."

Knill, born in the small village of Monkton, in Pembrokeshire, is the only son in a family of three children. He played little school Rugby as a junior and attended Pembroke Grammar School before joining Pembroke Youth and then the town senior side when he was 18 — always playing as a prop. Perhaps I was too slow to play anywhere else", he says.

He met his wife when she was on holiday in Pembrokeshire, and they now live in the pleasant Cardiff suburb of Fairwater with their four children, all at school. After joining the police in February, 1963, Knill

started playing for one of the local district sides, Canton R.F.C., who play their home matches on a delightful public park, Llandaff Fields, a mile from the Cardiff Arms Park.

When on holiday with his family in Pembrokeshire, it was suggested he have a trial with Cardiff, and the local secretary recommended him to Cardiff committee man Stan Bowes. Knill had his trial in 1966 and has been with the club ever since, but last season his form fell away, due for some reason to his promotion to sergeant.

"I was not getting enough sleep or training hard enough", he said. "I put on extra weight sitting in a panda car as a patrol sergeant, and the change of job from the C.I.D. affected my Rugby. I played well during the first half of a match but fell away in the second. I noticed it in the Cup semi-final towards the end of the 1973-74 season, against Aberavon.

"I went up to 17st.9lb., and a specialist advised me to get more rest and to diet to bring my weight down. Now I am between 16 and 16½ stones, feel much fitter and stronger and am enjoying my Rugby much more".

When asked which sides he found the hardest to play against, especially in the front row, he mentioned Pontypool and Neath, but admits that clubs vary from year to year. "Playing for Wales B in the French B match at Rouen was an interesting experience, and we had a comfortable front row. Once you settle as a trio it helps immensely".

Sergeant Mike Knill is stationed at the Docks in Cardiff, an area now wholly respectable compared with the tough days before the 1914-18 war, when it was known as "Tiger Bay". The police then went about their business in two and threes. Now it is as safe as any other part of the city.

But if there should be any trouble, I know a good prop who can tackle anything.

The lighter touch

Every month we award a handsome new Ronson gas table lighter to the reader who sends us the funniest Rugby story. This month's award goes to Charles Day, Tithe House, Over Peover, Knutsford, Cheshire, WA16 8UG., sender of the following tale. Post your story NOW to the Editor, "Rugby World", Surrey House, 1, Throwley Way, Sutton, Surrey, SM1 4QQ.

TRAVELLING home from an away game, a friend and myself were trying our luck with a crossword. Our coach stopped at a cafe for a few minutes as we became stuck with one of the clues.

Seeking help, I called out to the only other person in the coach at the time apart from ourselves, a rather slow and thick second-row forward: "Dave, where are the Mendips?"

To which he replied, after looking out of the window: "Over there, past the Ladies!"



Mike Knill scoring a try for Cardiff against Swansea



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