

THE FIXER

He's a vital member of our team in the toughest sport on the planet. We talk to the man responsible for patching up Warrington's walking wounded.

The image of a little pot bellied physio scuttling on to the Rugby League pitch with his black bag and towel at the first shuddering collision is consigned to decades gone by.

The sport has evolved rapidly and thankfully so has the physio's role, which is now as much about prevention as cure, and has a much wider remit than simply squeezing a wet sponge in the face of a player who has just cracked a rib on a freezing February evening.

Ross Mitchell doesn't have the shape of his forbears. He is a big lad, a six footer who stays in shape, which is no bad thing given the first team squad's propensity to take the mickey. How can you talk to elite athletes about matters of physique if you look like Elma Fudd after he let himself go? Particularly given his baptism of fire, thrown in at the deep end at the beginning of this season.

Heralding from Birmingham before studying at Manchester University, Ross began life on the physio's table in 2003 where he worked in the NHS until 2011, as well as working at Saints Academy part time over the last four years. He took the role of assistant physio at The Halliwell Jones Stadium in October 2011, but when John Hartley moved on at the start of February Ross took the reins.

He's enjoyed life at the sharp end. Having inherited a couple of injuries at the start of the season the team accumulated another handful pretty quickly after bruising encounters with Leeds, Huddersfield, Wigan, Saints and Catalan. Ross says: "That was a busy time at the start, quite a challenge and a bit stressful, especially being in a new department where it was all on."

Reassurance

Ross has had to build up the trust of the players quickly, as each case remains a work in progress. He says: "You see an injury through to the end in the immediate term but you carry on seeing the players for the rest of their season. A lot of my job is to do with diagnosis and reassurance. Players want to know what's wrong with them and how long they'll be out for. They're all professionals and do what they need to do to get fit again. How they react does depend player to player, some can just shrug it

off but other players need a bit more reassurance and goal setting, but that's normal. In a squad this size, there are many different personalities that react in many different ways.

"If I have seen the injury in the past I can tell them what to expect. If we see a freak injury then we go to a specialist. We have a great, flexible network of consultants and radiologists, and if needed we can see an investigation done within 24 hours, and you can't do much better than that in any sport. We are an elite team in the sport and we need to be set up like that all the way through."

And the physio will have the ear of the top man, as Tony Smith needs to know exactly how his players are faring. Ross liaises regularly with the coaching staff, and after each game the medical team assess what has happened and what needs to be done. Every head coach wants to know when his best players are ready and it's a vital call. Ross says: "Ultimately we have to rely on players - if they are confident in their abilities and pass key fitness tests then they are cleared to train and play and equally if they say they're not, then we need to reduce the risk in terms of recurrence, and effect on Tony's plans."

"Players want to play and sometimes they will push but they're all top professionals, they come in and train hard and wouldn't have achieved what they have if they didn't. Ultimately it's their body and they have to put that through all sorts of pressure. They take the good times with the bad and work hard at getting back to full fitness. I have a lot of respect for that."

Prevention

Within a month of the end of the regular season, only one first team player was unable to train, and that is when the medical team do some of the most valuable work. "When the squad is fit and doing well you're always anxiously looking round the corner," he says. "So at quiet times we look at screening and prevention work."

A lot of effort has been put into injury screening at the club over recent years - weighing up the risk of injury for each player. Ross says: "We spend time assessing the players physically to see if there is something they need to work harder on to reduce the risk of injury, particularly in areas of the spine and neck. You can't always predict what's going to happen on the pitch but there are elements we can work on without turning the players into robots. We want them all to be fast and strong athletes so we spend a lot of time and effort trying to reduce the risk of injury as much as possible. Tony's a big advocate of that and has been as long as I've been here."

By the beginning of the play offs the strategy seemed to be working and whatever the team achieves at the end of each season, the guys behind the scenes, like Ross, deserve their credit.

"When someone forces you into that position with a 100 kilo bloke on your neck it's just like having a car crash."



Ross advises the rest of us how to exercise and still avoid injury!

Don't do anything you're not used to too quickly. Disuse, misuse or under-use of muscles cause injury. So build up your exercise gradually.

Going from jogging to the pub to doing a half marathon is like trying to lift 150 kilos in a snatch at the first attempt.

Start with an achievable six week plan.

Keep moving during the day. The more you use your body the easier it is to maintain.

Warming up is more important than cooling down. You need to get your body ready for more blood flowing through the tissue. See a physio - the biggest risk is the history of previous injuries. So get it assessed.

And limit the pints and chips! Healthy nutrition really can accelerate recovery.