

ENGLAND

This Volcano is ready to erupt

THERE are rugby folk who feel a little uncomfortable about the introduction of Lesley Vainikolo to England's squad. After years of northern hemisphere moralising about New Zealand's plundering of South Seas talent, little wonder it just doesn't feel right to many that a Tongan-born, Kiwi-raised wing should be bundled into the red rose ranks with such haste.

Still, in an age when no-one turns a hair about England playing a World Cup final against the Springboks with two South African born-and-bred players in their 22, then most at Twickers can probably deal with the idea.

England coach Brian Ashton, a rugby league fan who's never been able to resist a glamorous convert from the 13-man game, calls it the "x-factor", the "wow factor". Whatever it is, Vainikolo has it.

He had played only nine games for Gloucester before the RFU took advantage of the residency rules to draft him but they could have done it after just one. His first match against Leeds in September must rank as union's grandest debut as he ran in five tries.

Take a look on Youtube and be amazed at the first of those, as Vainikolo ploughs over the line with three Leeds defenders hanging off his 17-and-a-half stone frame like petrified rock climbers. That's the x-factor. That's

Gloucester wing Lesley Vainikolo could be our own Jonah Lomu — and it's about time we had one, says **Ian Chadband**

why they call him 'Volcano'. In 152 games for the Bradford Bulls, he scored 149 tries.

Those in union not in thrall to RL conversions reckon picking Vainikolo now is too much too soon.

If Paul Sackey fails to recover from mumps, there is now every chance the Gloucester man will start against the Welsh.

Traditionalists will then note how even in Australian rugby league he was perceived as a defensive weak link. They'll mention his supposedly dodgy knees and will wonder if, after a traumatic couple of months in which he's had to fly back to New Zealand following the death of an elder brother and his father, he can really be properly prepared, mentally, for the challenge ahead.

Like all rugby lovers though, they can hardly be anything other than transfixed by the idea that the



Sing when you're winging: Lesley 'Volcano' Vainikolo

publicity hasn't lied, that in this dreadlocked giant who's such a ruthless marksman on the pitch and such a gentle godfearing soul off it, an exotic cult figure has been ready-wrapped for Six Nations delectation.

A new Jonah Lomu? Henry Paul tells us we better believe it. "He's unstoppable. Those who compare him are spot on; England are getting their own version." So, sit back and enjoy the eruption.

CHANGING CODES ENGLAND'S RUGBY LEAGUE CONVERTS

HENRY PAUL

The last Kiwi rugby league star to represent England at union, the former Wigan and Bradford favourite rejoined the 13-man game in 2006 and is now playing his farewell season with Harlequins RL. First switched codes in 2001 and went on to win six caps — but never reproduced his league form.

JOHN BENTLEY

Originally a union player, he made his England debut against Ireland in 1988 but left to play league for Leeds, Halifax and Great Britain. When the 15-man game went pro, he joined Newcastle and went on the 1997 Lions tour to South Africa. He played twice more for England at union before going back to league.

ANDY FARRELL

Injuries delayed his union baptism but England's eagerness to have him involved saw him win eight caps amid feverish debate about his ability. Left out of the current squad at 32, most have given up on Farrell's international career — but the man himself and Brian Ashton are both adamant it's not all over.

JASON ROBINSON

The greatest dual-code international. Wigan's "Billy Whizz" topped a rugby league career in which he scored 184 tries in 302 games and played in the 1995 World Cup final by becoming a union legend with 28 tries in 51 Tests, including a fabled score in the 2003 World Cup final. Retired after France 2007.

