



STAR POWER: Louis Picamoles in action for Montpellier

I'm no prophet, but rugby has to be shaken up

Born in Syria a penniless Bedouin. His mother raped, his brother killed by his father. Banned from school. Now Mohed Altrad is a billionaire club owner who's determined to shock Europe's elite...

HERE is a black-and-white image on Mohed Altrad's wall of a young Arab boy wearing a kufiyah headscarf. 'That could be me,' says the softly spoken immigrant from Syria. 'But it isn't.'

The grainy image is surrounded by technicolour photographs of modern-day France. 'There are no pictures from my childhood,' he adds. 'I wish there were. I only have the pictures in my mind: sand, camels, muttons, a small carpet to sleep on.'

The Montpellier owner is talking through his pathway from Bedouin to billionaire. The troubled journey of a tribe child who grew up to become one of the most powerful men in world rugby.

'There were no places in the desert to record birth,' he adds. 'I do not know my age.'

'I didn't live with my father. He raped my mother; this gave birth to my brother. He treated my brother very badly and he killed him. My mother didn't stay with him but he raped her a second time, one year after; this is how I came. Then my mother also passed away very, very early.'

'There were no hospitals. Life in the desert was temporary. Sometimes you had rain and flowers grew... but they quickly disappear.'

'I lived with my grandmother, neighbours and uncles. The Bedouin life was very simple. You sleep in a tent made of animal skin and all you need is some water, some bread and sometimes meat. My grandmother said, "Bedouin doesn't need school because Bedouin becomes a shepherd".'

Altrad defied his grandmother's wish to become a shepherd. Sword fights and shoot-outs with other tribes were common, but Altrad survived to find an entrepreneurial spirit before his 10th birthday.

'One day, this father who really neglected me — did everything nasty you can do — came and offered me a bicycle,' he says. 'A red bicycle. It was strange. I never really understood why he did but I was very poor, so I took it. I had no money for pencils, books, paper or

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

From **Nik Simon**

RUGBY CORRESPONDENT IN MONTPELLIER

shoes so I created a small business renting out my bicycle.

'This was my first business. School was how I got away.'

Leap forward 60 years or so and Altrad now sits in his estate in the south of France.

His life has been scripted like a Hollywood movie. He emigrated to France, went to university and made his fortune in scaffolding. Today he owns a Ferrari, a Lam-

MONTPELLIER v EXETER

1pm sky sports action

borghini, an aeroplane and — with five children — has rugby posts in his garden. 'I am two people now,' he says. 'The one you see here and the one who still thinks in Arabic.'

Conversation moves between meeting Barack Obama, discrimination in business — 'auditors dug into my accounts more than normal people' — and his tunnel vision to shake up the rugby world. Altrad's

rugby revolution starts at home, where he rescued Montpellier's near-bankrupt club in 2011.

He is an aggressive purveyor of free-market economics and, using the clout of his chequebook, has created a star-studded squad including Louis Picamoles, Ruan Pienaar and All Black Aaron Cruden.

'I am not a prophet but rugby needs new people to disturb the existence,' he says. 'I will fight.'

'We signed Aaron Cruden because he proved something with the All Blacks. We offered him €800,000 [£715,000] a year. His agent told me Bristol had offered more than €1million, yet he chose to join us.'

'Still people ask, "Why don't you recruit a French No10?" I say, "Which top-class French No10?"'

'In a perfect model, I would have 15 French players starting for Montpellier but there is no choice. If you want good players, you must train them. We have 450,000 amateur players in France but nobody is taking care of them. My proposal is to fund a foundation for these players.'

'There are presidents, vice-presidents — former players without business experience — who are very comfortable. AIG pay the All Blacks £13m, O2 pay England £11m, yet nobody in France said they need a sponsor for the national jersey? I am negotiating €7m or €8m, €5m towards the foundation.'

Altrad views rugby as a white-dominated sport. He contrasts it to French football, namechecking influential immigrants such as Raymond Kopa, Michel Platini and Zinedine Zidane, but is unapologetic for a football-like rise in wage bills. This, coming from a man who survived on €25 a month when he moved to France in the Sixties.

'The budget of Paris Saint-Germain is €700m,' he says. 'Our salary cap is €10m. Why would you forbid investors from putting in money? It's contradictory with the basic rules of business. The more stars you have in the clubs, the more you generate in television rights and ticket sales.'

'My business sells scaffolding, concrete mixers, wheelbarrows.'

'Rugby must sell a spectacle, so you need to invest and find the right formula. The one who has less money has to make more money. Our previous coach, Jake White, had a special way of playing: hit and destroy. Every week we had criticism. We lost a lot of followers. Now Vern Cotter is here and he is changing that.'

Hit and destroy could also describe Altrad's approach to business dealings.

Concerns were raised about his financial arrangement with French rugby federation (FFR) president Bernard Laporte. Investigations were launched and he was accused of acting unethically.

Magical May keeps up scoring run as

JONNY MAY'S hot streak continued as Leicester got their Champions Cup campaign back on track with a seven-try thrashing of Castres.

Following their 22-18 defeat by Racing 92 in Paris last Saturday, Matt O'Connor's men needed a big reaction and they duly delivered with a powerful display. May, who has been in

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By **Rory Keane**
AT WELFORD ROAD

prolific form since his summer move from Gloucester, has told his team-mates of his desire to emulate Jamie Vardy's feat during Leicester City's unforgettable Premier League title-

winning campaign. Vardy scored 11 goals in 11 consecutive games for the Foxes during that memorable season and May, who has scored seven tries in as many games, is looking to follow the lead of the England striker. On this form, he may just do it. Leicester held a deserved 9-3 lead thanks to three George Ford penalties before the

England wing sparked the game into life. Ellis Genge set the platform with a trademark bulldozing run before flanker Valentino Mapapalangi, on his debut, set fellow Tongan Sione Kalamafohi flying down the touchline with an audacious one-handed offload. When the Leicester No 8 chipped ahead, May won the race



Picture: VINCENT BARTOLI

“ I wanted to commit £10million to Gloucester and win the title, but I was told Bath resisted... their owner is an influential person

BURNING DESIRE:
Mohed Altrad says rugby needs investment

Altrad's response? 'A handful of prejudiced imbeciles.' He has no fear of the old order and his plan extends beyond the south of France.

Challenging the status quo, he sponsors the home-town club of Georgian prop Mikhel Nariashvili and is backing the campaign to open up the Six Nations.

'Why are Georgia not in the Six Nations?' he asks. 'Money. It is a

poor country which has always been oppressed by Russia. I sponsor the national team, local club of our prop and promised to do everything I can. Rugby is not very multicultural. Donald Trump is not so multicultural.'

There have also been attempts to spread the Altrad influence to England. The UK market has become the biggest branch of Altrad's business and his rugby

vision has followed. He made a bid to buy Gloucester last season — with a string of South African signings lined up — but his proposal was rejected by the governing body, in the face of opposition from West Country rivals.

'With Gloucester, the idea was to create a synergy between two countries,' he says. 'The idea was to create a hybrid pitch, invest in the academy, commit £10m and win the Premiership. I wanted to sign Jan Serfontein, Pat Lambie and Johan Goosen.'

'I was told there was a very big resistance from Bath. They didn't want to have somebody else nearby. Their owner, Bruce Craig, is an influential person. It's a pity.'

The thing with Bedouins is they never stop moving. So where else could Altrad's journey take him?

'I would like to take rugby to Syria but I don't know if it'll be possible,' he says. 'You have the Assad regime, the Russians, Al Qaeda and everything is destroyed. Every trace. It makes me sad.'

Although, you suspect nothing and no one will stop the young boy in the headscarf.

Tigers roar back in style

to touch down. England head coach Eddie Jones, who was sitting in the stands at Welford Road, nodded in approval.

The 27-year-old England crossed early in the second half to register his brace and his ninth try in eight games for the Tigers.

'The lad works incredibly hard on his

game,' said O'Connor, Leicester's head coach. 'There's a feeling in the group that if we can provide space and give him opportunities, he can beat defenders and put us in a good position to score tries.'

Tigers' other tries came from Ben Youngs, Nick Malouf and a Telusa Veainu

hat-trick but a knee injury to Matt Toomua and an ankle problem for Genge will be a worry.

● LEICESTER are in talks to sign Wallaby star Tatafu Polota-Nau in December. The Mail on Sunday understands the 77-cap hooker is close to joining the Tigers after the autumn Tests.