

Mister Brown's boys

JULIE STOTT asks St Helens stalwart Jon Wilkin whether Saints can end their recent silverware drought in 2013

The term rollercoaster is bandied about a lot in sport, but if any club had a right to claim that description as its own last season it was St Helens.

Expectations were high following a sixth successive Grand Final appearance and their move to the superb new Langtree Park stadium. Nor did comfortable early wins over London and Salford, followed by a draw at Hull KR, hint at problems ahead. But then came four agonisingly close defeats to Catalan, Huddersfield, Hull and Bradford, none more cruel than the 32-34 blow inflicted after the final hooter by Dragons' goalkicker Scott Dureau; his touchline conversion coming after winger Daryl Millard finished off a sensational last-gasp try that will live long in the memory of anybody lucky enough to witness it.

The run plunged Saints from second to ninth and brought the axe crashing down on Aussie coach Royce Simmons. From there on in, the club revived under interim bosses Mike Rush and Keiron Cunningham, inspired by thrilling wins over Leeds and Warrington in their first games in charge.

Eventually, the pair did superbly to lift Saints to third but ultimately the club knows that 2012 was a failure. The Challenge Cup dream ended at the quarter-final stage and Old Trafford was denied them in the play-off semis by Warrington. For the first time since 2005, Saints fans were left with no-one to cheer on Grand Final day. And for the fourth year running they didn't have a trophy to celebrate.

England forward Jon Wilkin, below, is convinced that he's seen enough already this winter to know that Saints are about to turn that tide of disaster, revival and disappointment in their favour. The close-season arrival of new coach Nathan Brown can be the spark that lights Saints' embers.

"We can draw on that turmoil and on those dark days," he says, ahead of his testimonial game with Wakefield on Sunday 20 January, and a season launch televised clash with Brown's last club Huddersfield on Saturday 2 February.

"There are a few of us still playing who have won competitions with Saints and we need to remind some of the young players what that's like. Some of us have won all the trophies you can win and that feeling of achieving something special with your mates is indescribable. Ultimately,



Man in the spotlight: Can new St Helens coach Nathan Brown work his magic?

SWPix.com

"For the first time since 2005, Saints had no-one to cheer on Grand Final day. For a fourth year running, they didn't have a trophy to celebrate..."

that is what drives us on. We want them to know what it feels like to touch and smell a trophy."

Wilkin still has a soft spot for Simmons and regrets how the players contributed to his downfall last March. "Everyone was upset because nobody had a bad word to say about Royce," he says. "It was a shame that we as players could not do it for him."

The sparky wit and enthusiasm of Rush, though, allied to the huge experience of Cunningham, clearly worked wonders on the players. Many fans longed for the pair to be kept on, with some wondering why the club had announced so early that Brown would be taking over.

Released by the Giants in July after a surprisingly public display of player unrest, Saints resisted the chance to bring Brown in early. But the pressure is now on the laid-back Aussie. Not only because of the Rush effect, but also the clamour for the Saints' trophy drought to end.

But Wilkin, 29, is in little doubt that the club has chosen wisely. "What Saints did last season was necessary in the short term to fix a problem," he says.

"All credit to the club for making a very difficult decision. Nobody wanted Royce to leave but it was for the best. Mike and Keiron came in, but we always knew that it wasn't a long term thing and in the back of our minds knew Nathan would take over."

Wilkin is adamant, however, that this latest upheaval will not rock the boat but rather have the opposite effect.

"I have played in teams that have all the ingredients to be a great team and maybe not achieved what they should," he says. "I have also played in teams where everything was in place and victory was inevitable, but the point I want to make is that coaching is a very difficult job. A coach's job is so varied and I think we are blessed in getting Nathan. I'm convinced he will do well."

"If I had to pinpoint one thing it would be his attention to detail and the way we are going to play. I am not saying that has been lacking in previous years, but Nathan has certainly taken it up to another level."

"There is a misconception that rugby league is a simple game, but there are huge varieties and intricacies in the requirements of each position. Nathan's thoughts and principles on the game are cutting edge and that aspect has been very enjoyable."

"I've been playing rugby league since I was nine years old, but I've got a constant thirst for knowledge about the game and Nathan is feeding that. In just two or three months he has taught me a lot. We are all hoping that Nathan can build this club."

"At the start of every season, every team dreams of winning something, but in reality only five or six clubs can. St Helens is definitely one of those."

