

THE ROAD BACK

World Cup winning hooker Steve Thompson is a man who likes to get away from it all when he gets the chance to take some time off from the demands of playing for Leeds Carnegie in the Aviva Premiership Rugby competition or on international duty.

Thompson returned to the Premiership this season after three years in France where he developed a love of hunting in his spare time, a passion he has continued since moving back across the Channel to Yorkshire.

The unusual pastime should not come as a surprise when you consider that, following England's most recent tour to Australia the 32-year-old tackled the fabled Route 66 on a Triumph motorbike.

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Not content to just put in the miles, he chose to adopt a striking Wild West look, hence the deliberate lack of grooming and the beard sported for the clashes with the Wallabies.

"I did Route 66 - riding from Chicago to Los Angeles with a couple of mates," he said. "I grew the beard for a while and I'm one of those people who can't just grow it in a week. It took me three months!

"Nearer the time, I shaved it down so all I had

left was a handlebar moustache. I had these nice motorbike goggles, a short hairstyle and my handlebar moustache - the complete look."

Thompson was planning the trip for a long time and decided he should learn how to ride a motorbike in order to give it the proper Easy Rider treatment. "It's one of those things a lot of us have talked about for ages," he said. "We'll be having a few beers and saying, 'Come on, let's go and do Route 66 on the motorbike'. I got my licence last year and thought, 'Why not?'. If it's ever going to happen, now is the time to do it.

"I went straight there from the car. There wasn't a lot of heavy drinking on the tour though. I couldn't turn up at Leeds obese after spending time in America drinking and eating burgers."

He moved to France in 2007 but initially took a non-playing role after being forced to retire because of persistent neck problems.

Further medical opinion suggested he could return to action, leading to an England recall last year. Now, with one eye on his World Cup prospects, he has decided to return to English rugby.

"I don't think I'd be in this situation but times change and it is a new challenge," he said. "Playing for England is a massive pull. I really want that. I have come through the injury and I want to keep challenging myself and play at the highest level. I want a World Cup place.

"At one stage it looked like Leeds were dead and buried but they came through. I went up there and was really impressed with the setup, with Backy and Andy Key. They have the mentality and hardness that Leicester are known for, but they are doing it in their own way."

Thompson is adamant that his time across the Channel and his learner frame mean he will resume his Premiership career a better player than when he left Northampton.

"For one thing, my neck works and my arm works," he said. "I am more experienced now. I have played in a different culture. I've been playing in a top league in France and I've experienced some different coaching styles.

"I have never been as fit as I am - I've certainly never been as light as I am now. With the new rules, the game is getting faster and I have had to get a bit lighter.

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"At my heaviest I was 138kg and I am down to 112kg. When I was playing before I was between 115-124kg. Like Simon Shaw said, a lot of players got into the gym-monkey situation, working out to try to get as big as they can.

"Look at someone like Lewis Moody - he is like skin and bone but he carries the ball well. Joe Worsley is quite big - he has got a massive head! - but he is one of the best ball-carriers and tacklers in the world. Big isn't always best. You have to be agile and that is what I'm trying to be" ▶



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