

SPACEMAN

The countdown is on for Luger's re-entry and a device used by Russian cosmonauts is his key weapon in beating injury jinx

DAN LUGER is ready for England's World Cup blast-off here next week, equipped with a medical gadget invented for Soviet cosmonauts.

For one of the more injury-prone players in the sport, the piece of apparatus provides some insurance against further damage ruling him out of contention during a tournament stretching over 48 matches in six weeks.

Luger spent £1,500 on the device which looks as nondescript as a television remote control. 'You drag it across your skin and it sends electrical impulses into the body,' he said. 'They stimulate any nerve or muscular damage.'

'I've used it for problems with my neck and groin and there's no doubt it speeds up recovery. It was designed specially for the Russian spacemen and if it was good enough for them, it's certainly good enough for me.'

He bought the Skenar machine after paying a severe price for responding to the crisis before England's last World Cup-tie — the quarter-final against South Africa in 1999 — which was nothing compared to the crisis caused by Jannie De Beer's bombardment of five drop goals.

Despite pelvic trouble, Luger took the pain-killers and played, never realising that it would be eight months



PETER JACKSON reports from Perth

before he could do so again.

'They said, "Oh, you'll be back in two weeks", and they kept saying that for months,' he said. 'It just never seemed to be getting any better. That's when I first heard about the little machine the cosmonauts used.'

For Luger, the next weeks are all about space exploration of a terrestrial kind. Avoiding any more accidents, like the one which shattered his left knee on England seven-a-side duty in the Far East 18 months ago, would be a step in the right direction.

Never one to do things by halves, Luger has fought his way back from not one knee reconstruction but two, blows which would have finished him 10 years ago. Another accident, a training-ground collision with hard-headed Neil Back, put paid to his Lions tour two years ago with a fractured eye socket.

The cumulative effect of his recurring absences can be counted in 20 caps but he has lost a stack more to boot. Once the best wing in the country, that title now belongs to Ben Cohen.

Josh Lewsey's belated emergence and Jason Robinson's automatic place in any

of the back three positions leaves Luger in no doubt where he stands, on the outside looking in. Iain Balshaw's rediscovery of his old self simply increases the challenge involved in crossing the line from the supporting cast to the starting team.

Luger was relieved to be on board the England flight, which landed here in the early hours of this morning, after the most traumatic period of his life following the death of his friend and fellow Harlequin, Nick Duncombe.

No player was hit harder than Luger by a tragedy which put his rugby in perspective while not diluting his desire to succeed.

There was no guarantee that he would get the chance, not after failing to start in six of England's last seven matches. It is a sequence extended by the back ailment which forced him to make a late withdrawal from the final dress rehearsal against France at Twickenham four weeks ago. Born in west London to Croatian and Czech parents, Luger ought to be at the zenith of his career at 28. All he asks is a clear run to build on 22 tries in 34 Tests and make a lasting name for himself.

'There is massive competition for every place in the team,' he said. 'I was a bit worried when I hurt my back and I began to think the same old thing was happening to me yet again.'

'Everything is fine now. With



'Dan maintains his Sputnik device keeps him free from injury!'

injuries, I've learned to adopt the attitude that they are out of my control. I've also learnt that there are always positives, although sometimes it can be hard to appreciate what they are.

'When I did my knee the last time it was tough to imagine playing again at any level, never mind find the good points.'

'Did I think about jacking it all in? Yes I did, for two minutes. Then I started to look for positives. If it had to happen, at least it happened at a good time if you follow what I mean. It was better for me to have had the operation last year than this year because that would have put me out of the World Cup.'

'I consoled myself with the thought that I would get back, that I would get the chance to play in the biggest tournament of all. I'm not in the team at the moment so it's a case of taking the chance when it comes.'

'Winning the World Cup is the big thing, the only thing,' he added. 'It's going to be mighty tough but we're going there to win it. I can't wait.'

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Power surge: Dan Luger is aiming to get into World Cup orbit for England

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