

A Winter's Tale

Fresh from signing a new long-term deal to keep him at Butts Park Arena until 2022, the architect of Coventry's return to the Championship is planning to continue along winning ways.

In an exclusive interview for Coventry Rugby Supporters' Club, Director of Rugby, Rowland Winter talks about his hopes for the blue and whites in the Championship and his love affair with rugby and success.



If there was a hint of Machiavelli's Prince in Rowland Winter's move along the A14 to Coventry, there's a splash of a King of Legend in there, too.

For Winter, who has penned a four-year deal to stay at Butts Park Arena, has fashioned a new era – or culture in his words – akin to the romantic Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

And all because he succumbed to the romance of rugby and Coventry Rugby in particular.

"The fans at Coventry are amazing, the majority gave me great welcome and

helped to get me up to speed with their views on the club. I felt their pain, when the fans were doing their part, the club was under-performing. I wanted to make things right. It was easy to fall in love with everything about the club."

Now he is hunting the Holy Grail of success in the Championship and to create a lasting legacy that ensures Coventry's winning ways run from top to bottom, with a new stadium in the offing and the commercial benefits that could bring.

But when he hit 'send' on an E-Mail gamble to club saviour Jon Sharp, the situation at BPA was very different.

Despite a proud history to rival the very best, Coventry had suffered in the professional era and had nearly gone under several times.

Coventry was the rugby equivalent of Bridget Jones, waiting for a Mark Darcy.

Although Winter could have been mistaken for a Daniel Cleaver, at first, a love 'em and leave 'em type on his path to glory until his arrival at Butts Park Arena.

“Everytime I’ve won something at my previous clubs, I’ve left,” he admits.

He’d taken clubs to new heights and then quit for a fresh challenge at a higher level. From Northampton BBOB RFC, to Bedford Athletic to Cambridge. Trophies and titles, but no long stays. Until now.

Leading Cambridge back to National League One was his crowning glory at Grantchester Road, but by then he was already looking to the City of the Elephant and Three Spires.

“I could have stayed at Cambridge but I am not sure I could have taken the club any further, it was time for someone else, and I needed a new challenge. I wanted to be a Director of Rugby in the Championship.”

‘We got the culture right at Cambridge. I was happy there. It’s a great club. But probably the worst characteristic I’ve got is impatience. When I think I can’t achieve anything more at a club I’ve been at, I need to move on. I’m best when I’m challenged, back against the wall, I thrive under pressure.’

Winter, a driven man with goals galore and strong ideas for success, considered his future options among the teams already in National League One.

“There were a few clubs that interested me, but Coventry stood out. It worked well for me geographically, I’ve got four young kids who are settled in school, and Coventry was a sleeping giant with its history, the fans and I knew it was the club that would see me as a Director of Rugby in the Championship. I emailed Jon and asked for coffee, so that I could explain how I was going to make Coventry successful again.”

It was a gamble, but it was bigger gamble for Coventry and Jon was the man who took it. When I looked at Coventry my aim was to be in the Championship asap and then create a team to win that league. The main annoyance was to get out of National League One !

All of my plans for Coventry, from a playing, business and commercial point of view, were based on the idea of us being in the Championship. I knew I could get us there

if I had a certain amount of leverage and control, but my real job starts now, now we've gone up.

Next season will be tougher than last. We are going to need a different set of skills and characteristics as a squad. Our teamwork, our culture and environment will be tested a bit more. Our retention and recruitment has focused on getting people who are good at problem solving, better at adapting out there – winners.

The squad changes over the last two years have been as much about character as about good rugby players. It's getting the right person to fit into the progressive culture and environment we have created. The key thing for me was the player profile, getting the right age, personality, ambition, experience, and mindset. Someone who had been used to winning but still hungry to win more.

At Coventry, we don't want anyone to be content, we want winners who succeed and then immediately move onto the next target, to have that relentless drive, we want people who are prepared to work harder and harder.

I've driven thousands of miles meeting players and agents. The good thing now, is that people want to play for Coventry. That wasn't always the case. Lots of the key players and agents didn't want anything to do with the club when I came here. That is very different now."

There is a palpable sense that Coventry is a great fit for the ambitious Winter, still only 33, and that he is perfect for the club.

It's more than just the rugby. He brings an energy, an infectious enthusiasm for the brand, the history and the future; the very sport itself. He's a revolutionary with echoes of Jimmy Hill, the man who changed Coventry City from under-achieving Bantams to top-flight Sky Blues.

And Winter's in no doubt what lies ahead for followers of the 1874 vintage.

"In some ways, what we've achieved so far is a bit of an irrelevance because the real work starts now. Last season was great, and we've built some strong foundations but nothing more. We must now kick on.

We have now got to establish ourselves in the Championship and get amongst the big boys at the top end. Once we have done that, I know we have the potential and capability as a club, to win the Championship. I know how long I expect that to take, but that depends on other factors, some of which are outside of my control."

One of those factors is the lack of a stadium, although the club is working on projects to deliver a 12,000 seat arena over several phases. The prospect of Coventry's

successful bids to become City of Culture in 2021, a European City of Sport in 2019 and other regeneration cash pots could help bring those dreams a step forward.



Winter's interests in man management and psychology allow him to spin a culture of success, on and off the pitch.

"Some of the best lessons I have learned is to know your players, to know their backgrounds and interests. Only then can you build an informed support structure for them and an environment where they will thrive, and where you can challenge them to develop. Make sure that they know, that I will work harder than them and harder for them."

Very much a hands on DoR, Winter stresses: *"The more hours we can get with the players, the more we can effectively influence them."*

I like to encourage all the players to have something else in their lives apart from rugby. We've helped some of the current squad to further educate themselves, gain new qualifications, find a hobby, such as learning to play the piano or speaking Spanish. It means they have something else to talk about. In modern day rugby, lots of players leave the academies where they teach the same skills, lift the same weights and you can produce these great athletes, promising rugby players but with no hobbies and nothing much to talk about.

It was important to get players doing something else. It means they contribute at a better level to the team than they did before. They become more interesting. As the All Blacks say 'better people make better rugby players'."

As well as the first team and development team, plans are underway for an U18's Academy squad next season, with an U16's squad to follow.

“Within the next four years, I would like to see a veterans team, an amateur team, a ladies team and a better pathway for younger players.

‘Nirvana for me would be to have lots of home-grown players out there, having been part of our culture over a number of seasons. The environment would be natural and the opportunities would be endless.’

Culture. It’s a term that surfaces regularly. For Winter, success is not just about winning rugby, but winning attitudes and helping change the sport, not just teams.

Culture and family, for family looms large in Winter’s life, too. From the influence of his teacher parents to his wife Domanie and their children.

His wife, or at least her family, were responsible for his move into rugby coaching in a big way.

“They were all heavily involved in Northampton BBOB. At that point it was very much a social side, a great club but I was completely naive, completely inexperienced. I had some ideas, the theory, and I volunteered to take on a coaching role. I would turn up for training sessions and the idea of warming up beforehand for most of the lads was to have a couple of cigarettes.

I was young and enthusiastic but very much in at the deep end. I had my Level 2 coaching certificate and I was coaching because it was something I enjoyed and wanted to do.

A lot of lessons I learned at Northampton BBOB I’m using now. About 90 per cent of the squad were tradesmen, they would be working hard all day so training sessions had to be about fun, it had to be an enjoyable place to come to, players had to want to buy in. I guess the main success I had there was going from a few at training to 40 or 50 guys turning up.”

Northampton BBOB moved up a league because of an RFU restructuring and in the 2008/9 season, under Winter, the first team progressed to the finals of the Alliance Cup.

“We were well beaten, but we’d got to the final. The following season we won the Lewis Shield. I guess the legacy of those years is that the club did much better. We built a gym, opened it up to the public, and they now have four teams running. It’s a good set up.”

For the romantics, had the gods of rugby not intervened, Winter could have been playing rather than coaching. He first got into rugby thanks to his father, Tom, and progressed through the County and Regional age groups at Northampton.

“My rugby introduction was mainly my dad; mum and dad were both big rugby fans, both teachers by profession. When I was six or seven dad took me round all the local rugby clubs, being a teacher he knew he wanted somewhere with a good set up.

That was at Olney Rugby Club and dad coached me there through till I was 18.

My talents were always around speed, competing nationally at Athletics mainly at 400m. I wasn't keen on defending, tackling, or standing out on the wing in cold weather.

From quite a young age, in conversations with dad on the way to training sessions I'd try and get him to do the games and drills I liked. I would influence the sessions as much as possible and try to be his assistant coach without the title. I was keen to learn.”

When he was 15 the anterior crucial ligament (ACL) snapped in his right leg *“effectively retiring me in the long term”*.

It meant his playing involvement in his school's first XV ended, not that the teenage Winter could be stopped from playing a part.

“I got involved in helping out wherever I could. I took the water bottles on. I ended up organising the rugby training sessions at lunchtime when the teacher couldn't make it.

We won the county cup without a teacher really being involved.”

He had finished sixth form before his knee was operated on, enjoying time abroad before heading to Sheffield Hallam University to study sports science, Winter still had aspirations to play and knew Hallam had strong ties to Rotherham Titans.

But *“by this time I'd snapped my left ACL and it was game over, in hindsight it's not a bad thing as I wouldn't have got close to the Championship as a player, so it allowed me to kick start a coaching career 12 to 15 years before most do.*

At some point I was always going to go into teaching. I was ideally looking for an independent school where I could become a rugby master.

After I finished university, I went travelling again with some mates, and when I was in Bali I was running out of money and Saints were advertising for a community coach. I was interviewed by phone from my hotel room in Bali, while my mates were absolutely hammered. It was a great job to start off with, and I thought I could earn some money while I learned more about coaching and then maybe find a school.

Suddenly, while I had all the theoretical knowledge from my degree, I was picking up ideas from watching Saints train in the early days under Jim Mallinder (the coach who put a poor Northampton Saints outfit back into the Premiership, into Europe and to fresh glories before his sacking last season).

I was going out, delivering tag rugby to schools. I was coming up with ideas to make the community department more money. I volunteered for anybody who wanted a coach, I just volunteered to get experience and knowledge.

I was out four evenings a week, all day Saturdays and Sundays, long days. I loved it.

I wanted to challenge myself and move up a league or two and Bedford Athletic had been relegated from National Three to Midlands One. I contacted the guy in charge as I knew they were looking for a coach. At that stage a lot of players had gone, they had three senior players left, a really good history, but the culture and playing set up was poor.

I had no real track record, but I thought I could take some of what I had learned and put it into practice there. We developed a home-grown squad by promoting most of the colts early, and after a year or so of building we got promoted back into National Three. That home-grown team are still playing for them now, which is great.

I got the opportunity from there to work with the Midlands U20's. Jon Phillips, the former Saints and Bedford lock, asked me to work with the backs. I had just had my left ACL reconstructed a few days before, so I coached the sessions on crutches and then had to coach the whole team at the England Counties divisional tournament because JP couldn't make it. We ended up winning it, and lots of players progressed on to England."

The backs in 2012 included a young Heath Stevens, Dave Brazier and James Stokes, three of Winter's record breaking squad last term, as Coventry cantered to the National One League title.

The fates of rugby conspiring to help Coventry back into the big time?

On Winter's watch, few would bet against it.

Winter Wonderland

"If You ask my wife, she'd tell you I was obsessed. I go to bed at 1am and get up at 6am."

Rowland Winter's appetite for work, and success, means he puts his heart and soul into rugby, while remaining a devoted family man. That much is evident in the way he talks about his family – they are hugely important in his life.

But he enjoys his work and devours autobiographies on and biographies by winners. He looks to other teams and other sports for winning attitudes, cultures and approaches. Anything for that winning edge.

He's been involved in the England RFU set up, Northampton Saints, Midlands U20's and Eastern Counties.

At the moment, he is ambitious to tackle a number of goals and targets at Coventry, which is why he's signed a long-term deal.

While he acknowledges the Championship will be tough, his record so far is telling for a 33-year-old. Supporters will hope the best is yet to come with a return to rugby's top table and all that can mean.

Winter, for one, is hungry for more to add to his previous successes.

Northampton BBOB – Finalists Alliance Cup 2008/9

Winners Lewis Shield 2009/10

Bedford Athletic – Finalists East Midlands Cup 2011

Champions Midlands One 2012/13

Cambridge – Champions National League Two 2015/16

Coventry – Champions National League One 2017/18

His win rate in the national leagues with Cambridge and Coventry stands at 74% overall; 70% in his two years at Cambridge and 78% in his two seasons so far at Coventry.

In the four seasons before his arrival at Butts Park Arena, Coventry's win rate was 56.3%

And he has championed exciting, high-scoring rugby. His record in the National Leagues is 3,981 points for – an average of 33 points a game – and 2,422 points against – an average of 20.

At Coventry, the 'points for' record stands at 36 on average under Winter.

The article above was written on behalf of the Supporters' Club by Supporters' Club Member – Mark Forster.