

Inside Out – Phil Nilsen



Phil Nilsen might live up to his Asbo nickname on the pitch, but he's enjoying a new lease of life at Coventry Rugby. He tells Mark Forster he came to the Butts Park Arena because of the club's ambition – and he's still a few of his own.

He does the hard yards, the hard hits and the hard commute.

And Phil Nilsen wouldn't have it any other way.

The move to Coventry Rugby Club came at the right time and helped rejuvenate the 33-year-old hooker, fearsome on the pitch, friendly off it.

"I left Yorkshire Carnegie at the end of my testimonial," he says. "I left on my own terms. I felt the club had lost its ambition.

I'd been there many years, through name changes, promotions, relegations, different coaches, new owners.

It was a really difficult decision for me, but coming to Coventry was the best decision I've ever made.

I had other offers from Championship sides, Premiership options, but I wanted to be at an ambitious club."

Dropping down from the Championship to National League One had the potential to backfire, but Nilsen never had any doubts.

"When I met Rowland Winter (Coventry's Director of Rugby) we agreed the contract there and then. He had the ambition for Coventry. I definitely think I'm rejuvenated as a player, I started to enjoy the game again, started to enjoy my life again.

It's a good feeling."

Remaining in Leeds, where wife April is a doctor and his three 'Vikings' are in school, Phil has a gruelling commute several days a week.



“The commute doesn’t really bother me. Leeds is a big city and I would spend more than an hour driving to train on the other side of the city when I played there.

‘I’m probably at home more than when I was at Leeds.’

‘Daddy daycare’ is one of the times he looks forward to, when April is at work.

He praises the compact training sessions at Coventry with helping his appetite for rugby and spending more time with the family. “You get in, get everything done, weights, reviews, units and you’re not hanging around doing nothing.”

Nilsen does a lot of his weight training at home, evidence of the dedication to the cause, which helped Coventry win a long-awaited promotion last season.

That was a highlight for the Sale-born hooker, bouncing back to English rugby’s second tier and embracing the values Coventry Rugby embodies.

“I played against Coventry many years ago. They had a reputation then as having a hard, nasty pack. As far as the history goes, that’s something that Rowland filled me in on.

To be part of that history is amazing. The old school lads are still there to shake our hands. That is special. And we have Gully (Tony Gulliver, first team manager, who played 381 times for the blue and whites) to talk to.

I’ve played in the Championship and the Premiership, this club is well supported. From my experience, more success will bring more supporters in. We want more success.

It’s fantastic to hear the Coventry roar. The people, the supporters are great, the noise they make is great. It really helps. To have that connection with the fans is something special.”

With his thumping tackles and appetite for the ruck and roll, Nilsen has quickly become a fan favourite.

I wasn’t able to be at the Championship opener against Jersey at Butts Park Arena, but I heard the thwack on the radio as Nilsen put in a ferocious tackle or two.



I was at the Mennaye Stadium when a battered and bruised Nilsen, stung by the disappointment of defeat, still had the decency to shake hands with supporters and thanked them for travelling down to cheer on the team.

Nilsen is less a student of the game than a professor. He understands the mental edge needed to succeed, but also looks at ways to improve, be the best and to beat the opposition.

He prides himself on his fitness: *“They might be younger but not fitter. I’m getting older, but I think it comes down to mentality. I have a job to do and I need to do it and do it well to continue doing it.*

I do my weights at home. It just suits me better. I’m not always as heavy or big as other players, so my ability at the set piece is fundamental. The way I play the game, I have to be very good set piece-wise to even get a place in the team.

If you want a pack with edge, you need to find players that bring it. It’s something that players have in them. It’s the one thing you can’t teach.

But there’s no point having that edge if you’re not good technically. The Championship is very different to National League One. You’ll get teams who will look to win a penalty, kick to touch, maul, drive, trying to win the penalty and go again. When winter comes it will be more a case of that. We have to be able to deal with it.

We have a dangerous backline and I think we are trying to evolve both styles. The environment at Coventry makes a huge difference, being able to flick that switch, from having a laugh and chat to going full tilt, banging your head against the wall.

I’ve been around environments that haven’t been positive. It’s easy to fall into a negative rut. That’s not the case at Coventry.”

Nilsen says forwards coach Louis Deacon, a former England international, has helped the pack thrive, both collectively and individually.

“The environment at Coventry was perfect, exactly what I needed. The attention to detail is fantastic. Louis Deacon understands what the players need, the systems, being able to adapt a system around a player.”

There is a healthy rivalry with Scott Tolmie, with both enjoying starting berths in the number two shirt last season. The recruitment of Darren Dawidiuk over the summer from London Irish and with several terms at Gloucester on his CV, means competition is harder than ever.

“Scott is a great bloke. And now we’ve got Dukes as well. We are all different players. It’s good to have players in a position that play different styles. And being a replacement isn’t bad, because you need that bench to win the game.

Scott works hard, always doing his extras. For me as a player, you always need that competition.

For me, 30 minutes of a game is a big period. You can completely change the game in that time, positively or negatively. The game is tougher now and I understand the need to rotate players, keep the squad fresh.

But I always want to be starting. I’m very open and honest with the club that I always want to start. I’ll always do my best, whether I start or I’m on the bench.

I’m naturally fit and I like to get involved, be in the thick of it. People think about tries; it might be when a winger scores in the corner, but it might be someone who cleared out a ruck to win that ball that provided the platform, made the difference.

Knowing I’ve played my part in a try, that’s a really good feeling.”



A bad feeling is defeat, but Nilsen insists the reverse against Cornish Pirates had its positives. *“I think we’ve shown already that we’re better than some people thought. The Pirates game was a big disappointment, but looking back, I think we got some of our game right, but we gave points away, left points out there. The focus for us as a team is to do what we do well on the pitch.*

I’ve been a hooker for 13 or 14 years now. I’ve seen a lot of changes, the scrum laws have changed. I play my game as an extra back rower. In the set piece my basic job is throwing at the lineout and hooking at the scrum.

There is less impact in the engage now, you have to strike for the ball. There is a lot more pressure in the scrum as a result. It’s about building pressure. It’s a big tactical battle, the scrum. For a second in the scrum, you lose the hooker, then it’s about



getting all 16 feet on the floor. There are the angles you push at and for me, it's being able to have the mental toughness, the determination to succeed and knowing what to do."

Nilsen has continued to move forward during his career. In more ways than one. He got involved in rugby when a friend's dad took him to a training session at Trafford RFC when he was 10 years old.

"I played a lot of sport when I was a kid. Rugby just seemed right for me.

I started off at full-back, then outside centre, then number eight. At school I played number eight and the centre. Two or three of us were the best runners, so the ball didn't get passed much, but it was about winning.

I moved to hooker when I was about 20. Stuart Lancaster (then coach of what was Leeds Tykes) moved me. I was too small to be a Premiership six or eight, and I wasn't quick enough to be a seven. So he tried me at hooker."

Nilsen has tremendous respect for Lancaster who was fired as England coach after a dismal 2015 World Cup campaign, when the hosts went out in the group stages.

"Lanny scouted me, he started the academy at Leeds. He provided a platform for us to learn and become better. He was a hands-on coach who would have one to one sessions with us, to give us feedback.

He's different to Rowland, who is very good at organising people, very good at managing. It was unfair how Lanny got treated.

I also know Sam Burgess (the rugby league convert also blamed for England's faltering campaign) from being Up North," he says. "He did his best and you could see he really wanted to be involved. It wasn't right, how the media handled it."

Nilsen doesn't hold back, on the field or off it, but he's hugely positive.

He credits wife April 'his best friend' with being a 'massive support'.

"She was hugely supportive when I left Leeds. It was a difficult decision for everybody. She backed me. She's the one who helps me get things sorted. Her main strength is organising the tribe and telling me to man up on a daily basis. She's amazing."