

## Inside Out – Rhys Davies

When it comes to watching Coventry at Butts Park Arena, the ex-players will nod in appreciation at the skills they recognise most. The grunt and growl of the front row, the snaffling instincts of the loose forwards, the passing, kicking and sidesteps of the back division. Rhys Davies tells Mark Forster why he'll keep an interested eye on the officials.

GETTING his head wrong in a tackle ended Rhys Davies' playing days as a centre.

But ironically, the broken neck that resulted kickstarted his rugby career with whistle and, later, a flag in hand.

He's refereed at National One level, run the line in the Premiership, European Cup and one minor international match and is now the referee liaison contact at Coventry Rugby.

It was a potentially life-threatening injury that gave him a new lease of life and took his rugby to a bigger stage, not that he knew about it at the time.



*'I slipped at home,' he remembers. 'When I went to A&E the doctor went bonkers. I had broken the C4 bone in my neck four or five years earlier when I got my head on the wrong side in a tackle, but didn't know I'd broken anything.'*

The 56-year-old had already survived in rugby longer than many of his team-mates had expected.

*'I fell into the game by accident. I was a football player until I was about 24 or 25. The council pitches we played on were often waterlogged and games were getting cancelled. I was very into my fitness and went to the local rugby club because they were still training and playing.'*

*'That was Wigston Old Boys, a club that merged with Westleigh to become Leicester Lions. They invited me to turn up and play and I was asked back the following week. We played what was then Kibworth Rugby Club in that first game, and I got battered and loved it. It just happened.'*

*'I didn't know at the time that my team-mates had got a book going to see how long I would last.'*

He laughs at the memory, before talking how lucky he was to rise through the ranks as a referee.

*'That was 20 years ago. Someone suggested I keep involved with the game and become a referee, so I gave it a go. I was lucky in that time and was on the national panel in four years. I was 40 at the time and that just doesn't happen now.'*

*'Nowadays, the powers that be aren't really interested in you if you are more than 28 or 29 years old. I got to referee what is now National League One and National League Two.'*

*'Then I started suffering with sciatica and I was asked if (i.e. told) I would run the line instead. I did that in the Championship, then had two years in the Premiership. On one occasion I got sent over to Georgia to run the line there against Spain. I've had some great memories.'*

Davies has two key pieces of advice for any would-be whistlers out there.

Be fit and play the game first, to gain a better understanding of what goes on. Experience with ball in hand counts for more, in his opinion, than textbooks and lessons.

*'The game has become brutally physical over the last 10 or 15 years,'* he says. *'It's the Jonah Lomu effect. As a referee you need to be as quick off the mark as a back row forward and as quick as a winger to keep up with play.'*

*'The game has changed.'*

As might be expected, he appreciates the hard yards of the referees and touch judges, or assistant referees as they are now called. He, along with Coventry Rugby and Coventry Rugby Supporters' Club organised a four-week series of talks about the laws of the game and refereeing, calling on people like Premiership referee Christophe Ridley to talk to fans.



Davies, like most in rugby, is horrified that a referee was verbally abused following a recent game at Butts Park Arena.

*'I'm absolutely disgusted by the abuse. It shouldn't happen, but sometimes, in the heat of the moment things get said. But five minutes after the game? A game their team had won?'*

*'We talk about the core values of the game. One of them is respect. That's aimed across the spectrum of rugby, including the spectators.'*

*'Generally, I don't think I've encountered anything from players. The truth of the matter is that when people have paid their money to watch the game, they feel they have a right to criticise the referee as much as the players and, during the game, from the stands, that's okay.'*

*'But post-match, personal abuse is not acceptable.'*

*'As a ref, you understand that people don't know what they are talking about at times. The referee will always know whether they've had a good match or not, just like the players and if you have a sensible discussion with them, they will be more than happy to explain why they gave certain decisions. They see the game differently, they're watching the ball, understanding what is happening and what might happen.'*

*'The worst thing you can call a referee is a cheat. They are human, they have a passion for the game.'*

Davies talks of relationships, of friendships, or the making of acquaintances in the sport.

*'I was talking to two people who had never played rugby in their lives and used to watch football at Coventry City. They came down to watch a game at Butts Park Arena and were made to feel so welcome, they came back and are season ticket holders now. That's what the game is about.'*

*'I bumped into (former Leicester, England and British Lions prop forward) Graham Rowntree in the village barbers recently. He recognises me and had a good chat. It's always 'hello ref.'*

*'That's why rugby is phenomenal.'*



Being in charge of games at iconic grounds, with thousands of supporters roaring on their side, is another fond memory.

Welford Road, Coundon Road, Franklin Gardens, Kingsholm, Twickenham – four or five times – Rugby School's main ground at The Close, Cambridge University's Grange Road and Oxford University's Iffley Road have been among the hallowed turfs where he has plied his trade with whistle and flag.

*'When there's a big crowd, you don't so much as hear the noise as feel it,' he says. 'It moves you as a ref, so I know that the players really appreciate it. It's the same for Coventry players now at Butts Park Arena.'*

*'I don't think you ever grow out of wanting to play. When we won the league last year, I felt like saying to Rowland (Winter, Coventry's Director of Rugby) 'I've got my boots, give me a couple of minutes'. We'd won it at the time, but the game still gets you like that.'*

It's interesting that Leicestershire man Davies talks of 'we' in relation to Coventry, given that his first love of the big clubs is Leicester Tigers. It was also a club that helped him grow into the role of referee.

*'As a player you focus on your own club. As a referee you don't really have any allegiances, though I used to go into my old club after a game and have a chat. Coventry was 20 to 25 miles away. I was a Leicester boy.'*

*'We used to go down to watch the Baa Baas fixture (the annual game against Leicester) and it didn't matter who you were aligned with, who you were sitting next to, we were all there for the rugby.'*

But there are connections. He used to play in a side that included Paul (JJ) Deacon, dad of Leicester legend Louis, now Coventry's forward's coach.

*'People might not know that Dusty Hare (the former Leicester and England full-back) was at the Butts Park Arena watching the Bedford game. He helped me no end in my early refereeing days by talking to me about what the players were trying to achieve at the top level.'*

*'He totally brought the laws and the application of the laws into perspective for me.'*

*'Having the coaches talk to us is important. When I started the scrum was about crouch, hold, engage. It was about winning the hit. Then the lawmakers changed it and I was taught to keep the players waiting. Dusty asked me why.'*

*'Then Steve and Stuart Redfern, the former Tigers' props who were coaching, asked if I had ever played in the front row.'*

*'They got me in a front row onto a scrummaging machine. It felt okay, so then they got the second row involved behind me. I didn't realise the front row were on a knife edge balance. I never held players back after that.'*

*'It's about listening. It's about learning and not being afraid to talk to the players afterwards. The scrum is a very technical aspect of rugby and front row play is probably the most technical of all.'*

*'I'm a learning and development man. That was always what I enjoyed about refereeing. You had a framework, the laws of the game but it is a framework, not a set of rules. Rules can't be broken but laws can be bent.'*

He talks of the humour inherent in the game and stresses that referees can be more like coaches, telling players what they are doing wrong and encouraging them to get things right.

But he has been caught out.

*'I learned so much from a set of front row forwards because I bought them a pint when they got the better of me in a game. It was Darlington Mowden Park against Hull Ionians. The front row employed a soft hit, didn't engage, which made it look as if the opposition had gone too soon. I gave a free kick and they were all celebrating. It dawned on me that they had played me. I bought them a pint and talked with them after the game.'*

*'I had them again two weeks later and I told them to meet the hit. They laughed that they never should have accepted a pint from a referee.'*

Although he has fond memories, has enjoyed working with the best referees and players English rugby can talk of, Davies admits he didn't like the Premiership.

*'If I'm honest, 'did I enjoy the Premiership?' It was a privilege that was probably wasted on me. I absolutely did not enjoy it because it was a different game to the one I loved. I would be sitting on the edge of the bed on a Sunday morning, knowing I didn't enjoy it. I did two years then spent another three or four in the lower leagues.'*

*'At the time the lad doing the fourth official job at Coventry wanted to retire and go travelling. It came up and I went for it. It's nice for me, because I get the chance to meet old mates.'*



*'The role is more of a referee liaison official. I will get an email telling me who the officials are and I get in touch with them, making sure they can make the game. On match day I will welcome them, get them a coffee and have a chat, hopefully about old times, and make sure they are made welcome and comfortable and have everything they need. If it makes 50/50 decisions swing into a 51/49 in our favour, it's worth it.'*

And his advice when people are unhappy with a referee's performance?

*'Talk to them in the bar afterwards. Be polite and ask why they made a decision. They will be more than happy to explain. But don't abuse them.'*