

Inside Out – Rob Knox

Schools and junior clubs like Barkers' Butts once proved a conveyor belt for Coventry Rugby in the past. Mark Forster talks to Rob Knox, the lone Cov kid in today's first team squad, about his journey from one Butts to another.



SOMETIMES the gods of rugby conspire to serve up a romantic chapter in this game of ours. Because it surely can't be coincidence that Rob Knox marked his 100th appearance in the blue and white of Coventry on one of the biggest days in recent club history.

The popular winger led the side out in front of a record National League One crowd on the last day of the 2017/8 season, the day when Coventry would be crowned champions.

And scored a memorable try to help sign off a rare promotion year in style.

Not bad for a lad from Coundon who once had dreams of playing for the Sky Blues.

“All through primary school I was football mad. I played football up until about 14 or 15,” he says. “I was part of the Coventry City academy for seven or eight years, but I got to the point where I wanted to play with my friends and they were all playing rugby.

I went along just to be with my friends.”

Today, he's part of Coventry's Championship team, eager to cement his place in the club's pantheon of greats.

That he is the sole survivor of the pre-Rowland Winter era speaks volumes about his abilities, attitude and approach. He was moved from centre to the flank and has worked hard to ensure his natural footballing ability fits in with the team.

“I’m still getting started as a winger,” he says. “When Rowland came in and said for me to go on the wing, I had no idea about what it involved. I’m still learning, but it’s good that the coaches give the wingers licence to go out and get involved. I’m just happy that I’m still a part of the team.”

It is a measure of the man that he wants to be learning and improving, with nods to head coach Nick Walshe and strength and conditioning guru, Max Hartman.

But while he’s a product of the Coundon Court School production line that gave Coventry a former captain in Rob Hardwick and rugby the skills of Leon Lloyd and muscle of Jim Hamilton, he’s a pretty humble chap.

“At school I played scrum half. I pretty much played there all the way through, or at times as fly half. Then I went to Barkers’ Butts and was a 13 or 15,” he remembers. “I went from playing at Barkers’ to the Cov first team. My debut was against Cinderford in November and it was raining pretty hard. I had played for Barkers’ the week before and we were seven leagues apart.

I hadn’t taken my studs and on the coach all the guys were talking about how bad the pitch at Cinderford was. I had moulds and was worried how I’d get on with them. I scored a try in the corner and had a few nice touches. A few of my friends had come down and it was great, but I remember being so nervous.”

Barkers’ Butts, the club of former Coventry great John Gardiner, in recent memory helped shape the rugby talents of Hardwick, Lloyd and Hamilton, as well as another Cov favourite, Danny Grewcock, and a certain World Cup winning flanker in Neil Back.

Knox says that while he learned to love rugby at the club, it was his centre partnership with Callum McBurnie at Coventry that taught him most about the game.

“In my second season at Coventry, Morgs (former head coach Scott Morgan) asked me if I had ever played 12. Callum was great, especially for me, coming from Barkers’ at that age.



I’d never been taught how to play the game at that level. I was just chucked in at the deep end. Callum taught me a lot at centre. By the end of my second season, I felt pretty comfortable playing inside of him, knowing what he would do. I had never been taught how to defend properly. I knew how to tackle, but not the positioning.

Heath Stevens (first team captain) is one of the best defensive 13's I've played with. Callum was, too. It was really enjoyable playing alongside him. It helped me lots.

I probably surprised myself in my first year at the club, then I had an injury which stopped my progress. I rushed back. For about a season and a half I was struggling. I scored a few tries against Henley Hawks and thought the problem was fixed, but it went again.

It held me back."

He worked hard to get back to fitness, put a few pounds of muscle on, improved his pace and forced his way back into the starting line-up.

"Everything's fine now and I'm probably enjoying being on the wing more than being in the centre," he adds.

Surviving injury and the changes that came when Winter arrived is one thing, but leading your promotion-winning side out in front of 3,758 supporters, the majority baying for a Coventry win, must have been something special.

Not forgetting that he's a Cov kid.

"To be honest, it was in the back of my mind that it was my 100th appearance, but I think that was a day more for the club, for the fans,' he says. 'I didn't want to think about it, really. That day was something the fans had looked forward to for a good few years. I wanted to be a part of that.

I remember I got the ball and I think I went round James Tincknell, who's ex Cov. I asked him after if he had let me score it."

Lest we forget, that last home game of the 2017/8 season was a day when Coventry wanted to bow out with a win, but there were still a few nerves around, given the slip up to Darlington Mowden Park at the Butts Park Arena the week before.

Knox is a footballer with all the skills. Balance, power, pace, footwork, an eye for a gap and good hands.

But while he insists *"I'm pretty lucky, getting the breaks I did"* his record speaks otherwise.

Because he enjoys rugby and wants to be part of a successful Coventry era.

Last season he and fellow winger Max Trimble both notched up 17 tries for the season, joint third in the National League One try-scoring table. That equalled a 22-year record set by Andy Smallwood, but in a vintage year, the record was well and truly smashed by full back James Stokes with 21, while bulldozing hooker Scott Tolmie bagged 19.

And Coventry were well represented in the top seven, with former Cov man Sam Baker and Stokes tied at the top, and former Cov winger Dom Lespierre tying with Tolmie in joint second place.

Knox says: "I'm trying to get faster at the moment. I like going to the gym, which helps. The coaches know what the players' strengths are. I like the competition. Guys like Scott Tolmie, who is really quick for a big lad and carries really well, or Stokesey and Max.

I love training and being round the lads."

The arrival of former Gloucester powerhouse David Halaifonau and the Bulumakau brothers has strengthened the competition and Knox says he's relishing the battle for a starting berth.

When I suggest he could become one of the select few who have scored a century of tries for Coventry he admits it would be nice.

With 57 five pointers in the bank he wants plenty more. *"I always enjoy going round opponents. The Championship is a lot more physical and a lot quicker in terms of the ball being in play. We've only just started and there's a lot more to come.*

I would love to join the 100 club. Hopefully I'm around long enough to get enough opportunities to get there.

We get given situations in training and it comes back to expressing ourselves. If it's on, have a go. We're encouraged to play what's in front of us. It's a big factor in how we were so successful last year.

Everyone wants to play."

Coventry has been blessed with great wingers. Of the 15 players who scored 100 or more tries for the club, nine plied their trade on the flanks.

Ricky Melville scored 281, Harold Greasley 181, David Duckham 147, Peter Jackson 127, Nobby Bolton 122, Rod Webb 118, Simon Maisey 109, Paul Knee 105 and Johnny Kaye 100.

In the professional era only Kurt Johnson has come close, falling agonisingly short on 99 for Cov, although he did notch up 10 with Orrell before heading to Coundon Road.

Could Knox be the first of the Butts Park Arena players to hit three figures?

If he does, he'll pay tribute to others ahead of his own abilities.

"Nick Walshe is great to go and talk to if I need help with something. He is so calm, he gives us the licence to play."

"I've always been a fan of watching the Fiji Sevens team because they always look like they are enjoying themselves and how they express themselves. That's what we are encouraged to do. It's great."

Knox certainly seems to enjoy himself in a Coventry shirt, on or off the pitch. He's proving an inspiration for future generations eager to wear the blue and white.

He's been praised for his role in the community rugby department, one of a number of players going out into schools and working with youngsters at rugby clubs in the area.

"I'm at Sherbourne Fields School with Sam McNulty," he says. "It's my third year there. It's great, really rewarding. It's one of the happiest places I go to."

Sherbourne Fields teaches children with a range of disabilities and medical complaints and has a long-standing relationship with Coventry Rugby.

Knox, McNulty and several of the teaching staff are looking to start wheelchair rugby at the school as part of a wider project in the city.

"It is so good to get the children involved," says Knox. "On a personal level, it's nice to get away if I've not had a good game or I've been injured. I'm learning so much."

There's that word again – learning

Knox has long since graduated and has no regrets about following his passion for rugby.

"A couple of lads I played with at Coventry City Academy are top class footballers now, but I'm glad I chose rugby. I love playing for Coventry. That's what I want to do."



And score, of course.