



LAND OF MY FATHER

What rugby means to the Welsh
By Dan Davies

The author, aged four (front row, third from right), with the Wimbledon Strollers rugby team, 1975. His father, Clive, has the ball

“This is great stuff.” The game is less than four minutes old when a high ball lands in the Barbarians’ 22: “Phil Bennett covering.” The diminutive outside-half of Llanelli and Wales is facing his own posts, shepherding the erratically bouncing egg towards the try line. He is being pursued by onrushing All Blacks and enveloped in the rising din of a packed Cardiff Arms Park.

Bennett adjusts his feet, plucks the ball off his bootstraps and wheels sharp left into a small expanse of open field. A step left (off of which foot it’s still impossible to tell) neutralises two New Zealanders: “Brilliant.” Then another more extravagant step, this one executed with a glance right, a dip of the shoulder and a shimmying of feet that launches him abruptly in the other direction, sends four more opponents down a blind alley: “Oh, that’s brilliant.”

The ball is fed to JPR Williams, who shakes off a high tackle and passes it on to hooker John Pullin, the only Englishman to be involved in the move. Pullin finds John Dawes, former Welsh captain and the man who 18 months earlier had led the British Lions to a historic first series victory over the All Blacks in New Zealand. The elegant centre from the London Welsh club makes it to just short of the halfway line before feeding Tom David, another Welshman, on his inside. Reaching out of the tackle, David slings the ball on in hope and it is gathered mid-stumble by the onrushing Derek Quinnell, also of Llanelli and Wales: “Brilliant! Brilliant by Quinnell!”

Emerging from a channel to Quinnell’s left, Gareth Edwards, the imperious Welsh scrum-half, is now approaching top speed. “*Ei roi i mi*,” [Give it to me] shouts Edwards, head back and stride lengthening, and Quinnell duly shovels it to his Wales teammate, who accelerates past three chasing All Blacks before diving over in the corner: “What a score!”

Cardiff in the mid-winter of 1973, and the final flourish has just been applied to the defining masterpiece of the second “Golden Age of Welsh rugby” (the previous had come to a close more than 60 years before). The greatest try in the history of the game has seen the ball travel the length of the field in 23 seconds, passing through just seven pairs of hands, six of them belonging to Welshmen. “That really was something,” cries a breathless Cliff Morgan in the commentary box. Bill McClaren’s illness means even the lyrics to this

hymn to flowing rugby, Welsh rugby, are delivered in the distinctive sing-song of the Rhondda.

In the crowd is Clive Davies, a 29-year-old Welshman and father of two. He is locked in a wild embrace with the men around him having just experienced what he still describes as one of the greatest moments of his rugby life.

The poet and novelist Owen Sheers recently spent a year as the writer in residence at the Welsh Rugby Union. At the beginning of his new book, *Calon [Heart]: A Journey to the Heart of Welsh Rugby*, he asks, “Why should the Welsh, a predominantly working-class nation, have chosen to identify themselves through the lens of rugby union, a predominantly upper-class sport? What is it about the game that speaks so powerfully to the Welsh psyche?”

It is a question I put to my father, 40 years after he witnessed Edwards crossing the line to confirm Wales as the centre of the rugby universe. “Being a

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“Imperious” Welsh scrum-half Gareth Edwards, pictured in 1971

sentimental race, you forever milk the highs but suffer terrible troughs when things go wrong,” he says. “But in a nutshell, it’s a passion, or *hwyl* in Welsh, something I think only Wales and New Zealand have.”

Through my young eyes, rugby, and its place in the soul of the Welsh people, is what defined my father. When I was just hours old, he led a procession of his teammates through the spare room of our small house in south-west London where my mother, still discombobulated from the rigours of childbirth, was propped up in a single bed. These were men I would come to know well in the years to come: the vehicles they arrived in at the club car park, the smell of their kit bags, the numbers on their backs, their naked body shapes through the steam of the showers in the changing rooms. These were men my father repeatedly told me he would do anything for once he crossed that chalky white line on a Saturday afternoon.

A few months later, in the January of 1971, Wales recorded their first Grand Slam in the Five Nations Championship for nearly 20 years. With Barry John, Bennett’s predecessor (and an outside-half of such sublime talent he was nicknamed “The King”) suffering the effects of concussion, it was left to bearded wing-forward John Taylor to attempt a last-minute conversion from the touchline to clinch victory over Scotland. Improbably, it sailed between the posts, being described later by one journalist as “the greatest conversion since Saint Paul”. Following the Triple Crown win of 1969 and the shared Championship with France a year later, it opened a glorious era of Welsh dominance.

Taylor, like Gerald Davies, the winger whose try he converted that day, played his club rugby for London Welsh. Based at Old Deer Park, bordering the gardens at Kew, it was a club studded with Welsh internationals. Many, like Taylor and Mervyn Davies, were teachers; or trainee doctors, like JPR Williams, the club’s full-back who sported a distinctive mane of shoulder-length hair. Taylor, Davies and Williams would be among seven London Welsh players picked for the triumphant Lions tour to New Zealand later that year.

My father played a handful of first-team games alongside some of these now legendary names, having joined the club as a 17-year-old in 1961. Back then, the long clubhouse was packed on Saturday nights with young men who, membership policy dictated, had to be of Welsh parentage or have played for a



Gareth Edwards, after scoring what many consider rugby union’s most famous try ever, is carried aloft at the end of the Barbarians’ 23-11 victory over the All Blacks, Cardiff Arms Park, January 27, 1973. All Black captain Ian Kirkpatrick is seen far left

Welsh club for two seasons or more. The majority were Welsh speaking.

“The atmosphere was quite magical,” he recalls. “It would not be unusual to be in the same drinks round with a British Lion and a sixth team reserve player.” One night, four of them piled into a bubble car, leaving Old Deer Park and heading to the Saturday hop at the London Welsh club on Grey’s Inn Road. Improbably, given the size of their transport, one of the passengers was Geoff Evans, the British Lions’ second row forward.

Born in Pencader, a small village in rural Camarthenshire, my father moved to London with his parents when he was five years old, arriving for his first day at a new school speaking not a word of English. His father, the man I was named after, was the youngest of eight and the first to make the break from home, a two-bedroom worker’s cottage in Glangwili, securing a job in the menswear department of Harrods in 1949. The store was a Welsh stronghold, populated by the “Taffia” whose tentacles reached across swathes of west London.

London was a shock at first for an only child from the sleepy farmlands of west Wales, and rugby did not become a factor in my father’s already-defined sense of nationality until his teens when he joined a rugby-playing secondary school in Wimbledon. My father says his earliest heroes were players such as Cliff Morgan, the great Welsh fly-half of the Fifties and latterly a commentator, winger Dewi Bebb and Dai Watkins, who

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led the Lions in two Tests against Australia in 1966. It was at school that he struck up friendships with boys who became the men he would share rugby fields with for years to come.

Many of my earliest memories feature the smell of liniment, heifer-like thighs and the sound of studs on concrete in the squat block housing Wimbledon RFC’s changing rooms. He had joined the club in 1969, reuniting with some of the faces he knew from school. It was a world that I was part of every Saturday from the age of five, wondering at the vernacular of the pre-match banter, the assortment of strappings and bandages, and soon afterwards, absorbing the game from my patch of muddy ground near the touchline.

Unlike my father, I was not born in Wales, though through this formative and shared experience of rugby, I grew up

feeling Welsh. Like him, I did not play the game until I was older (aged 12), although there was a doomed plan to introduce me to the mini-rugby set-up at London Welsh when I had barely learned how to walk. My mother still has the tiny boots and the red shirt with the club’s badge, a dragon flying a pennant, sewn on the chest.

Instead, my rugby education was achieved via osmosis, listening to my father telling his teammates they were unbeatable before we jogged out of the changing rooms and down to the pitch in the far corner. His was like any other amateur rugby team, made up of builders, teachers and small business owners. There was even a burglar, one who memorably possessed a Kojak-style police siren, which came in particularly useful when the convoy of cars to an away game was being held up in traffic.

The rugby club was a safe place where sons spent afternoons chasing after balls kicked into touch or playing games of their own on the scrubby five-a-side pitch with its shrunken wooden goalposts. Sensing the importance of rugby in my father’s world, I watched more than most. If nothing else, I wanted to be able to talk to him about the game in the car home.

The memories are like crudely spliced sequences of cine film: being on the edge of a circle of snorting men clutching a paper plate of orange segments at halftime; his sly slaps to the back of the props’ heads and the whispered lies about their opposite numbers being responsible; the chipped kicks to the

corner for his wingers to run onto; penalties and conversions launched from his mud-caked right boot. Most memorable of all was the day he sank to his knees and kissed the mud after his Wimbledon team finally achieved what had previously been beyond them, beating a side from London Welsh.

I also witnessed the darker arts. In my mind's eye, I can still see my father and an opponent trading punches as he prepared to run up for a kick at goal. They were both sent off and the fracas continued on the touchline before the red mists suddenly cleared and they were shaking hands. He considered it a game to be played to the limits, and sometimes beyond, but any enmity was always forgotten in the bar afterwards. On the way home, the familiar reminder of our oath of omertà: "Don't tell your mother." By that time, she was at home looking after another son, one my father had tried, and failed, to name Gareth Edward Davies.

It was a man's game, played by men who seemed huge to me at the time. My father was big, far bigger than the 5ft 8in Gareth Edwards, his idol and then the prototype for a scrum-half. Occasionally, it was frightening. At one away game, I can recall being aware that play had stopped on the far side of the field and the familiar outline of my father's wide torso and thin legs were nowhere to be seen. I can still recall the sickening moment of realisation that it was my father on the

grass, the rising panic that he wasn't getting up and the arrival of an ambulance on the pitch. He was taken to hospital, me riding in the back with him, with what was wrongly suspected to be a ruptured spleen.

Blood was spilt. His best friend Owen, a whippet-like winger and fellow London Welsh alumnus, suffered a sickening compound fracture of his arm that finished his playing career. In 1979, another of his teammates snapped and landed three punches that reduced the face of an opponent to a blood-splattered mess. It led to a court case and a jail sentence, the first ever for an offence committed on the rugby field. My father, the team's captain at the time, was initially thought to be the culprit. He wasn't. Later, he was pursued down the

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Dan Davies on his seventh birthday, wearing his miniature Wales rugby kit with pride, in the family's back garden, Putney, 1977

street outside his office by a Thames News camera crew.

The *hwyl* that coursed through my father on the pitch was equally evident in his fervour for Wales on Five Nations weekends. During his playing days, Wimbledon matches were made morning kick-offs, meaning we either headed to the clubhouse at London Welsh or, more often, home to watch the great Wales sides of the Seventies continue their domination of the Five Nations Championship. In later life, the sitting room would be his for the day. I can remember falling out with him from time to time but all differences, however keenly felt, would be forgotten come the national anthems.

Six Welshman featured in the Lions Test side that clinched the 1974 Series in South Africa. They were members of a truly great Wales side, one gilded by the half-back pairing of Edwards and Bennett, fortified by the Pontypool front row of Charlie Faulkner, Bobby Windsor and Graham Price, and given wings by Gerald Davies and JJ Williams, the wizards out wide. Leading them in his familiar white headband was Mervyn Davies, the totemic number eight who died last year. Another Grand Slam was completed in 1976, followed by the Triple Crown a year later and a third Grand Slam in 1978.

All our school holidays were spent in Wales, visiting my father's relatives and fishing the rivers of his childhood. At the Pembrokeshire County Show one year, he pushed me forward to meet members of the 1978 Grand Slam team, who were guests of honour. I still have the dog-eared poster signed by Derek Quinnell, Ray Gravell and Phil Bennett, not to mention the mental souvenir of my father dabbling at his eyes as they scribbled their names.

A fourth consecutive Triple Crown arrived in 1979, but the end was in sight for that wonderful team. Edwards, Bennett and Gerald Davies retired at the end of the series, leaving an eight-year-old boy in shock. Not long afterwards my father followed suit, at the fifth time of asking from my mother. The Eighties would prove to be an altogether more sobering decade for Welsh rugby, one that opened with Paul Ringer being controversially sent off for a late tackle in a match against England at Twickenham; a game that full-back Dusty Hare sealed for the home side with a late penalty.

DAN DAVIES

It was soon my turn to play. Like my father before me, I joined a rugby-playing secondary school in Wimbledon and discovered the game was something that came naturally. Within weeks, I had been made scrum-half and captain, and was singled out for playground punishment by the boy I'd deposed.

Despite having never lived in Wales and not speaking the language, my faith in the power of blood, the apprenticeship of those Saturday afternoons on Surrey touchlines and the desire to make my father proud combined to briefly imbue me with abilities no boy my size had any right to possess. For a short period, my school reports gave hope to my dreams of one day playing for Wales, and running out at Cardiff Arms Park knowing my father was in the stands.

On Wednesday afternoons, he'd leave work early and arrive at playing fields across London to impart the passion and pride that he once carried onto the field. He kicked every ball and sold every dummy and my friends loved him. Our games teacher was less enamoured; after one defeat, he told the hapless man that he was clueless and wouldn't coach a decent rugby team as long as he had a hole in his arse.

In 1984, we went to Twickenham to witness a Welsh victory over England. It was a flash in the pan, much like my early promise. Wales spent the first part of the decade in a state of transition, which mirrored what was happening in my own life. My friends were all becoming men. I, on other hand, was still a boy. It is ironic that the incident that underlined this painful truth still ranks as possibly my finest hour on a rugby field. Late in a game away to our main school rivals, our opponents were awarded a five-yard penalty. It was tapped and taken by a prop forward at least three times my size. As he launched himself at the line, I threw whatever I had at him, nearly chopping him in half in the process. It was the perfect tackle, other than for the fact that when our heads met each other my tongue was lodged firmly between my teeth. Like my father before me, I never wore a gum-shield.

His face was the first thing I saw when I came round from the collision. The lower half of my face was numb and it felt like all my bottom teeth had been crushed. My mouth was filled with thick gobs of blood. I had bitten clean through my tongue, a fact evidenced by my inability to formulate words. Taking a quick look, my father told me to get up and play on. There were only five



Dan, with rugby ball, his sister Lisa, father Clive and pet dog get in some tackling practice on Putney Common, 1976

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minutes left. I did what I was told and we scored two late tries to win the game, both scored by a winger who looked old enough to have boys my size of his own. "Don't tell your mother," my father said on the way home, but there was not a lot I could do about the gaping wound in my mouth, or the fact rugby was becoming a health hazard.

Clive Davies will be 70 later this year, although to me he will always be the bearded firebrand from those Saturday afternoons of my childhood. We have enjoyed the "Third Golden Age of Welsh Rugby" together, celebrating over the phone the three Grand Slams of the last seven years and the run to the World Cup semi-final. After an equally long period in the doldrums, he is as delighted to see London Welsh

back in the top-flight, albeit with far fewer Welsh speakers in the ranks. These are successes that have been earned in the era of professionalism, a natural progression, but to my eyes, one that has diluted some of the joy, poetry and parochialism of what came before.

I was too young to be taken by my father to watch the legendary Welsh sides of the Seventies, but in 2009, I got us tickets to see Wales play England at the Millennium Stadium in Cardiff. It was his first visit to the new cathedral of Welsh rugby that rises like a national monument from the heart of the capital, and a rite of passage for us both. I met him off the train and we walked through the city, drinking in the pre-match atmosphere while trying to find somewhere for a pint. Later, as the Welsh national anthem reverberated around the ground in the minutes before kick-off, I glanced to my side and saw him crying.

I only played rugby for four years, but through my father, and the example he set, the game has instilled many of the qualities I hold dearest in life. Camaraderie and friendship, is how he describes what it meant to him. To that he could add pride. Men such as Jonathan Davies, Ieuan Evans and Gareth Edwards, the scorer of that try 40 years ago, have all said the same, and these are the players who stirred the *hwyl* in the hearts of a nation. On the occasions I've been fortunate enough to enjoy drinks with such Welsh rugby heroes, I've made a point of telling them all about my father. 🏉