

FORMER BLUES PLAYERS

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?



by Marie Davies



CHRIS CZEKAJ

Full back/wing. 2017-19. 29 appearances. 7 tries. 143 appearances for Cardiff Blues. 9 International caps for Wales.

Chris or Czeas as he is commonly known was born in Cardiff and got his surname, (translated is 'Wait'), from his Polish grandfather who settled in Wales during World War II.

Chris has been capped internationally in every Wales age group from U16s to the U21s. In 2005 he gained his first international cap and scored a try against Canada in Toronto. Chris also played for Wales 7s and the Barbarians.

Chris writes:

'I started playing rugby when I was seven years old. My parents took me to Llandaff R.F.C. to try to get rid of the excess energy I had. My father played a bit of rugby when he was young, but there were no other family connections to the game.

I went to St. Joseph's Primary School and Corpus Christi High School in Cardiff and played in both rugby teams. The team at Corpus Christi, where I played at No.13 and on the wing, was particularly successful.

My parents were a big influence throughout my rugby career. Growing up, they took me to all

training sessions and matches and played a huge part in my success. Carl French, my teacher at Corpus Christi was very active with Cardiff Schools Rugby when I was there at U15s, so he was also very influential in my rugby development.

I was involved with Cardiff Blues at every level of the rugby pathway through school and college. I played for Wales U19 in the World Cup in Durban and in the same year was called up to play for the Wales U21 team in their World Cup in Scotland. I was part of the first Rugby Academy at Cardiff Blues, initially run by Bedford's Mike Rayer.

I went on to play Academy Rugby alongside playing for Cardiff RFC coached by Mike Rayer. Highlights of this period in my rugby life were playing for Wales U21 when we won the Grand Slam in the Six Nations in 2005. Following this, I played two senior games for the regional side Cardiff Blues, then went on to be called up by Wales to go on tour to Canada and America where I won my first cap in Toronto, scoring a try.

2017-18 SQUAD. CHRIS, BACK ROW 4TH FROM LEFT



CHRIS PLAYING FOR BEDFORD



COACH CZEKAS



BEDFORD'S RICH AND CHRIS

A few years later, while playing for Wales in Australia I broke my femur in five places. I was initially told that I may never play again but managed to get myself back on the field in fifteen months. (There is no doubt that this was a determined, remarkable recovery on Chris' part.) I am proud of the way I reacted to my injury and to this day I fall back on the mindset I adopted to enable my return.

I played for Cardiff Blues for nine full seasons, under Dai Young initially. Gareth Baber took over for a period as well as Phil Davies before I left in 2014. A highlight was winning the Amlin Challenge Cup v. Toulon in Marseille in 2010.

In 2014 I left with my wife and son to play for US Colomiers in France. They are a ProD2 Club ten minutes from Toulouse. During my first match at home for the club I suffered a severe concussion, which resulted in me being unconscious for several minutes and fitting on the pitch. It is safe to say it wasn't a very good start to my time in France. However, we enjoyed three years living in the South of France in the sunshine. This was fantastic for my family and my young son was fluent in French after one year.

I wanted to come back to the U.K. to play so was looking for a club. As I had known Mikey for a number of years I messaged him directly on Twitter to see if there was a place for me at Bedford. A few months later he offered me a contract.

I had the most enjoyable two years of my rugby career at Bedford. There's a fantastic culture there and I was finally enjoying playing rugby again. Stand-out games were Nottingham at home during season 2017-18, when I scored a hat trick and won Player of the Match and our victory in Jersey in the same season when the team performed so well.

While at Bedford I was also part of their Community

delivery in local Primary Schools, which offered me the chance to start my coaching journey. I made so many good friends at the club. I recently caught up with Rich Lane when he played for Bristol Bears v. the Dragons at Rodney Parade.

Off the field, I have fond memories of our tour to Bruges in Belgium, which really bonded the team together and helped us massively during tough fought matches.

After Bedford, I moved back to Cardiff and signed for Merthyr RFC in the Welsh Premiership, which for me was a transition year into retirement from rugby. Initially, I found a job at a recruitment agency, but then moved on to being a Rugby Development Officer for the WRU, based at Bishop of Llandaff High School, but I have recently moved to Cardiff High School.

Alongside this, I have set up the Chris Czekaj Rugby Academy. I offer 1:1 or small group skill sessions for ages 9 through to adults. It has been running for a year and has proved very successful.

I hope to develop as a coach, with a view to coaching professionally one day.

MIKEY - maybe at Bedford one day!!

We send Chris, his wife Kat and son Ellistan best wishes for the future from all at Goldington Road!

