

FORMER BLUES PLAYERS

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By Marie Davies



JAMES PERCIVAL

SECOND ROW

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James only played for one season at Goldington Road, but had a long and very successful rugby career. His current work as a rugby agent keeps him in touch with Bedford Blues, but we will learn of that connection later.

James answered my questions in detail, with some very interesting additions, so for the second time this season, this is Part 1 of a double edition 'Where are they now?'

James writes:

I was born in Wordsley in the West Midlands, but grew up in Kidderminster. Dad was in the military before becoming a company director and Mum was a secretary, which basically made her the official referee for the endless punch-ups between my older brother and me. She definitely earned her whistle!

Growing up, I gave football a go, but they quickly stuck me in goal after realising my tackling style was more demolition than defence. My nickname was 'Pancake' because I had the habit of flattening people. I was more interested in studying than sports.

When I was twelve, my school hosted a parents' evening regarding an upcoming school trip. All the families were seated in the school hall, politely pretending to listen to the presentation. I'd always been a big lad - loved my food and wasn't hard to spot in a crowd. Halfway through the evening, a man walked up to us, looked me up and down, and asked "Does he play rugby?" My Dad laughed and said "No!" Rugby wasn't a thing in our family-we didn't even know what a ruck was!

The man suggested I give it a try, and my parents probably thought "Why not?! - might burn a few calories off him."



PLAYING FOR WORCESTER WARRIORS



The man was Ken Farmer, a coach at Old Halesonians RFC and he told us to come and watch their next match, which was an away fixture. It involved a long drive to Wales to a place called Newport. It was absolutely pouring with rain - proper sideways Welsh weather - and I was expecting to watch from the sidelines. But before I knew it, I was handed a muddy ball and told 'You're on!' I really didn't have a clue! The only instruction I remembered was 'Pass backwards.' So when I somehow got the ball, I sprinted towards my own try line and proudly put it down. I thought I'd scored! Turned out I'd just gifted the opposition a free laugh! The Welsh lads weren't exactly gentle either - playing against the English was their favourite hobby. However, somehow, despite the chaos, I was hooked from that very first 'backward' try.

Throughout my rugby career, I have been fortunate to have some incredible influences, not only in developing me as a player but also as a person.

Nigel Redman 'discovered' me and believed in my potential. He gave me the chance to play at a higher level and was one of the best coaches I worked with, allowing me to express myself. He was my Worcester Academy coach, then my England U21s coach and later returned to Worcester as my Forwards Coach.

Dean Richards was a huge influence during my time at Harlequins. We worked hard, but also enjoyed life together as a team. Training felt like a group of mates having fun in a park. He brought so much to rugby culture and player development.

Richard Hill was a pivotal influence when he came to Worcester. Work hard, give 100% and you will earn his respect. A big moment for me was when he asked me to be captain.

Phil Larder, a hard-nosed Northerner and a former World Cup and British and Irish Lions Defence Coach, was also a great influence. His unique way of motivating players was that during pre-season, he would shake



hands with those who did something well. I once cheekily told him that I would make him shake my hand by the end of the season. At the end of that season, I was awarded the Phil Larder Defensive Award, which read 'James Percival, who played each game with every fibre of his body'. So, I didn't get a handshake - but his recognition was far better!

Years later, I remain in contact with them all, which means a lot.

As I mentioned, rugby wasn't a major part of my life early on. I only became fully involved when I joined the Worcester Academy setup at sixteen, and I stayed with that pathway until I eventually moved on.

After a successful U21s Six Nations and World Cup campaign with England, I signed for Northampton Saints under Budge Pountney - a dream move for any young player. The pre-season went well, and I had been told I was likely to start the opening game of the season - the East Midlands derby against Leicester Tigers. Then came our final pre-season friendly against Munster in Ireland. In one ruck, everything changed. Three days later, after a scan, I was told I'd broken my neck, ruptured the ligaments of my spine and that my rugby career was over.

To be continued...



JAMES IN ACTION FOR HARLEQUINS