

FORMER BLUES PLAYERS

WHERE ARE THEY NOW?

By **Marie Davies**

JAMES PERCIVAL

SECOND ROW

2006-2007. 14 APPEARANCES.

James continues his story...

After being told my rugby career was over, I was flown by helicopter, where a specialist gave me a glimmer of hope - maybe, just maybe, I would play again. That was all I needed.

A year later, after endless rehabilitation, frustration and sheer determination, I pulled on the Northampton Saints shirt again for a pre-season friendly. It wasn't quite a fairytale return - I was told I'd be heading to Bedford for the rest of the season - but to me it meant everything. I was back! Also, it turned out to be one of the best moves of my career.

There are so many highlights from my time at Bedford Blues. I quickly realised that turning up for training in my Saints shirt wasn't my best choice. Jon Phillips, Matt Volland and Martin Hynes made sure to let me know straight away. Playing alongside Jon was a huge learning curve for me. He wasn't one to help or teach, but I learnt what it meant to be a leader and enforcer on the field. Matt Volland's recognition and friendly smile were earned through hard work and commitment, and that left a lasting impression on me.

When I arrived at Goldington Road, Rob Crowle asked me if I could bake cakes! He's never let me live it down! Even to this day, he makes me bake or buy cakes every time I see him. Inside jokes like this brought the team closer together.

Also, I'll never forget the sight of Martin Hynes eating cheese and pickles and sharing hilarious stories on the homebound coach trips.



PLAYING FOR GRENOBLE



2006-2007 TEAM. JAMES BACK ROW, 6TH FROM LEFT

Mike Rayer, a man of few words, was another who was a great influence. He cared about his players and, like all the best coaches, expected you to be fully committed and work hard - no exceptions! Not every player is naturally talented, but Mike taught me that hard work can take you further than you ever thought possible.

I feel incredibly lucky to have arrived at Bedford when I did. I played alongside young talent like Dan Cole and Tom Youngs, and the training and atmosphere at the club were second to none. Even though I was only there for one season, Bedford made me more welcome than any other club I've been a part of.

After my time at Bedford, I moved to Harlequins, where I played for four seasons. However, after Dean Richards left the club, I never felt quite the same. When the opportunity arose to return to my boyhood club, Worcester Warriors, I jumped at the chance. Worcester was a dogfight every week, but I thrived in that environment. Throughout my career, I had always been the underdog, and it suited me.

Once again, Richard Hill, our coach, left, and Dean Ryan came in. Unfortunately, we were relegated from the Premiership. It felt like my duty to help the club bounce back, but deep down, I knew that after Richard left, things had changed. Despite that, I pushed forward, and after we beat Bristol in the Final, I made the difficult decision to leave the club one year before my contract ended. I wasn't sure where I would go next!

Eventually, I moved to France to play in the Top 14 with Grenoble, and later finished my playing career at Tarbes in the South West of France at the age of 35, 20 years after I was told my playing career was over. Not bad, really!

I then transitioned into coaching at Tarbes and received offers to coach in Pro D2. To be a top rugby player, you have to make sacrifices and often be incredibly selfish.

However, it was time to commit more to my family. I'm happily married with two amazing daughters, and I wanted to be there for them.

Throughout my playing days, I tried to give other players the same opportunities I was given by connecting them with coaches I knew. That's why I fell into becoming a rugby agent. It allows me to give back to others what rugby gave to me, and I enjoy coaching them on the skills I learned from other players. I like to think the respect I earned in the game enables coaches to trust my opinions when I send them a player. I am very happy that Bedford's current squad features five of my recommendations.

A big thanks to everyone at Bedford Blues for always making me welcome to this very day! It's a special club built on special values!

