In conversation with . . . Will Greenwood

Will Greenwood, MBE, World Cup winner and England's joint second highest try scorer, welcome.

It's my pleasure. I've got ten minutes – shoot.

As a youngster you were an all-round sportsman, why did you stick with rugby?

Basically, at University, in the first two terms I played economics and read rugby, I didn't do any work. So, I needed to do some work in the summer so I gave up cricket or I would have been kicked out and never went back.

Your first club rugby game was for Preston Grasshoppers 4th team v Vale of Lune. What was it like to play against the 50-year olds who knew the 'dark arts'?

The warm up for the game was a schooner of sherry, so I played the first half half-pissed. As for playing against the old guys, it was slow and physical. You learn how to look after yourself. You try to stay away from anything that had a shadow.

In your early days, I picked up that you had a talent for reading the game, finding spaces – you had a rugby brain. Where did that come from?

Cowardice

Surely cowardice doesn't give you the ability the 'see' a game?

When you are 6ft 3, 11 stone wet through you really don't want to get in amongst the rough stuff. Space is your friend. The brain would be trained to locate or potentially see opportunities for space two or three spaces ahead. Where does it come from? Self preservation!

Perhaps then, that could be coached, because what I'm thinking is if we help young people to develop rugby brains, we'll have some good kids in the future.

The junior stuff that they do now is great, the multi-functional multi-ruled, fun is much more in tune with finding and using space than giving it to big lads to run over people. I'm hopeful, confident that the RFU and the grassroots rugby are doing the right things for all of our kids.

So how did you end up at Waterloo?

My dad told me I was going there.

And you don't argue with your dad.

Correct. It was not a very long conversation.

Is that where you first met Austin Healey?

Yep – met him at the gym I think around 1990. He was lifting some massive weights and I just watched him lift some massive weights.

Do you have any memories of games that you played with us?

I've got to think – Austin was there, Paul Grayson, Biff Handley, Nick Allott, David Blyth – great lads. I remember long trips to West Hartlepool and back and then going into Liverpool. I woke up in a few places I shouldn't have done and got myself home.

Did you never fancy playing in the forwards? I know that you were a 'Lanky Lancy' but did you never fancy playing as a flanker?

Refer to the answer above where the answer was cowardice.

You bridged both the amateur and professional game, which do you prefer and why?

Great question. Look – if you are a top-class international footballer then the professional game is what your hard work and talent deserves. It was a wonderful time when I was a professional from where I started to where I am now at Maidenhead, the local club, the community, the Tuesday and Thursday nights, the escapism from life and work and just being in touch mentally with my 8 year-old self. Both amateur and professional have a role to play depending on what age you are and what level you are. I had a lovely combination with rugby.

You have also talked about the need to have confidence, so what would the 47-year-old you give to an 18-year-old starting out in senior rugby?

Good question. Physically and mentally, I would say just make small incremental changes, don't worry about being a first team player yet or gaining a County cap. Every time you take to the training field and every time that you go to the gym, try to finish each session better than you started. If you do that every time, over the course of six months you'll make dramatic improvements both physically and technically.

Changing the sport, where does your love of the round ball game come from?

I've always enjoyed playing football, even out on the village field. As to watching it, I used to go with my uncle Ian to Maine Road – not that often, but it was in the early 1980s. The first team that you support is the one that you stick with. I have had a good rollercoaster with Manchester City for 25 years and more.

And they are not doing so badly now.

My kids don't understand, have no comprehension of how shit we were.

Final question, have you got any thoughts about the future of rugby union in the northwest?

I think it is absolutely vital that the Rugby Football Union make sure that there is a northern powerhouse. When I look back at the great England team of 1991, the team of 03 and this World Cup team in 2019. I see a lot of lads who came from north of Birmingham from schools in the north west and north east of our country. I think it is important that we are represented in the professional leagues, both men's and women's, because you cannot be what you can't see. If kids grow up not seeing great rugby locally then it is very difficult for the sport to retain its importance.

Will Greenwood – thank you very much