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PROFILE

Keith Rowlands

(Captain of Cardiff—
Wales, British Lions and Barbarian)

A Giant of a Man

By TONY LEWIS

THE massive physical proportions of Keith Rowlands, 6ft. 5ins. and over 16st, belie a calm nature a distaste of intimidation on the field and a delight in working out the tactical niceties of rugby football. This is not to say that he can't or doesn't look after himself in a game—anyone who saw Cardiff repel the Neath assault recently will know that he can be as aggressive as the next man—but he genuinely believes that if he wasted his time intimidating opponents it would be against the interests of good football. So wrote Shakespeare in *Measure for Measure*; 'O! it is excellent to have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous to use it like a giant.' Keith Rowlands would have added—'In the interests of good football.'

In many ways his has been a normal progress on the rugby field since his early days in school. But let's start with a real eye-opener. Five caps for Wales, a British Lion, a Barbarian, member of the Triple Crown side of 1965; but never has he been a reserve for Wales! Something wrong somewhere.

For his caps have been spread out; France and Ireland in 1962 and 1965, then Ireland again in 1963. He has either been right in the picture or right out of it. After the Triple Crown year he was on the brink of retiring but the captaincy of Cardiff was offered him for the 1965-66 season. Then as everyone knows he is captain again this year, when history has been made at the Arms Park and Cardiff beat the Wallabies. The time was now ripe again and critics were just beginning to fit his name into a possible Welsh line-up when he broke his leg against London Welsh. So the only honour that has eluded him, that of being an official Welsh reserve has once again passed him by!

Not unlike many of the players I have interviewed for these profiles, Rowlands, began as a schoolboy by being non-stop kicker of a soccer ball. Indeed his first recollection of experiment with the oval ball was on a piece of waste ground in Llantrisant where his father was a police inspector, and Sergeant Jeff Scott, a captain of Pontypridd, used to take the young Rowlands out and hammer passes into his chest. The initiation was important because he was soon off to one of the keenest rugby schools in the country, Cowbridge Grammar. There the headmaster the former Welsh international Idwal Rees and his sportsmaster, another international Les Manfield, gave schoolboy players expert assistance. Rowlands was immediately marked down as a No. 8 and played all his schoolboy and secondary schoolboy rugby in that position.

'It's amusing to think that I played for the Welsh Secondary Schools, after I had left Cowbridge and was in Aberdare Grammar School, and was No. 8 behind two 2nd row boys who later became international No. 8's. I mean Derek Morgan and Alun Pask.'

It is interesting to know that Keith Rowlands at school leaving age wanted to study law, a long removed from his present day job as a representative for Guinness. But it was more than a casual decision to enrol as a law student at Kings College, London. But much to his regret, and personal disappointment as he looks back, rugby tangled with law, and rugby won. After a year and a few months of studying unsuccessfully in London, but playing rugby with every success for London Welsh, he was forced to leave to do National Service, he joined the Welsh Regiment in Cardiff, in November, 1956.

Captain's qualities

Qualities of leadership which have since been apparent in the Cardiff rugby context were quickly spotted by the Army and Private Rowlands was sent for officer's training to Eton Hall in Cheshire.

His actual unit was Brecon and his participation in first class rugby was limited. But he did squeeze the odd game in, and this has won him some money in side-bets, for not many could guess that he played about six games for Pontypool.

His superior officers at Brecon were delighted to welcome an established back-row forward to their ranks because it was widely considered that the unit had a particularly strong chance of winning the Western Command Trophy. 'You've never seen such training,' jokes Keith. 'We used to stand a few yards apart and lob huge poles at each other. They took it so seriously.'

They got through the first round, and the training stints increased, but suddenly what was progress for the whole of the back row, Parry-Jones, Pugh-Evans and Rowlands in the shape of officers training, was a deadly blow to the unit's chances in the Western Command competition. But the sorry story doesn't end there, for ultimately Brecon met the Officers' Training base at Eton Hall, and the three match winners who had been trained and toughened up by the South were the stars who defeated the Brecon boys.

The two years in the services were static years as far as rugby was concerned. During the first year Rowlands was largely occupied with training, and in the second found himself in the same position as he is today, flat on his back with a broken leg. Yet one factor emerged as a result of this injury, which was to shape his career. While he hobbled about without taking exercise his weight increased. Actually it did more than just increase. He quickly rocked the scale at 19 stone—a long way from 14st 10lbs. Never again was he to drop below 16 stone, and never again did he play permanently out of the second row.

The Road to Cardiff

Although Keith Rowlands was happy enough in the Army, he couldn't rid himself of an undercurrent of disappointment over the failure of his law studies. And while in Army uniform—a brand new one to contain his increased poundage—he rethought his future, set law once again firmly in his sights and gained an acceptance for the legal course at Aberystwyth University College, beginning in the winter of 1958.

Now geographically there was only one club he ought to join, and that was Llanelli. But no sooner had he done this, and played a number of games, than illness struck—virus pneumonia—and plans to

attend the University were scotched, and the law took a back seat forever.

Rowlands took a post with a Finance Company for three years, starting at Swansea, but after moving to Cardiff. He showed an extreme club loyalty to Llanelli during this time, travelling down from Cardiff regularly. But inevitably his interests gravitated to the city where he worked and in 1961 he joined the Cardiff Athletic Club. From this moment his rugby playing took on a fresh new impetus.

Not that he found a place waiting in the Cardiff team. Indeed he was committed to the 'Rags' for the first thirteen consecutive games of the season, the men in possession being Maldwyn Gough and Graham Davies. It was only an outburst of impetigo which hit the second row men, that gave his first chance against Northampton in November, although he had joined the club with the status of a Welsh trialist. **'Rags' to riches.**

His rise from Cardiff's second string to British Lion and international standing, took about five months on the face of things, but in actual fact, came like lightning, all within the space of ten days. He had won his place in the Cardiff first team, but the Welsh selectors overlooked him when they announced the trial teams.

Wales fared badly—a nil all draw at Twickenham, and defeat at Murrayfield. Then came the famous selection of the side which never played because a smallpox scare persuaded Welsh and Irish officials put the game off until November of the following season. The second-row choices were Roddy Evans and Brian Price, but both these were dropped without playing (along, of course, with Waldron who was picked for his first cap), and in the next selection against France, at Cardiff, Keith Rowlands wore the Welsh jersey for the first time. He partnered David Nash.

This was on the Saturday. On Sunday he left for Berlin with Crawshaw's touring team. Then returning to play for the Barbarians for the first time, at Leicester on Wednesday he found waiting for him at home, an unopened letter from the British Lions selection panel which informed him that he had been selected to play in South Africa during the summer. The team was officially announced on Thursday, and in that short space, from the time the Welsh team had been announced to this Lions selection, Keith Rowlands had achieved the three honours which many may wait years to win.

'I'm very emotional about this sort of thing', he admits. 'You know what I mean, playing for Wales and going up into the stands the day before to steal a look from the seats where my wife and parents would be sitting.'



ROWLANDS LEADS CARDIFF TO A 14-8 VICTORY OVER AUSTRALIA

'Like this Australian game. I think winning that meant more to me than anything I have achieved, any moment in rugby. We watched them play and analysed their weaknesses, or peculiar habits which we could turn into weaknesses. We noticed that Catchpole always took the ball from the line-out running to the open; so we forced him to move the other way to the touchline where he was less happy.

'Lenehan, we saw, came into the line only from set positions, and he kicked from set positions. Once we knew this we made him a target for our blind side wing who knew exactly what was intended. It worked, but to be fair I think the Australians are a good side within their limitations.'

One of the mysteries of Keith Rowlands' rugby career at the top, is that he has played for Wales 5 times (has each time disappeared from favour with the selectors for long periods. He partly explains this by pointing out that a Lions Tour can take the best out of a forward. 'I played in eighteen out of twenty four matches in South Africa, the second highest of anybody. I hit a high peak of performance

but it really took it out of me. Do you know, I just went through the motions of playing for the next two years. But I admit I was surprised not to get a trial in 1965/6 after playing in the Triple Crown side the season before.'

Captain of Cardiff

He is now 30, and his chances of reappearing in the Welsh jersey are clearly slim, for it will be three months before his leg mends. But for the moment he is so dedicated to the captaincy of Cardiff, it really seems to be the most worthwhile thing that has ever happened to him in the game. 'I feel tremendously proud to look down the list of Cardiff captains, especially those who have done it in two successive years, like Gwyn Nicholls, Winfield, Percy Bush, Jack Matthews, Tanner, Lloyd Williams, Dai Hayward and others. I enjoy thinking about the game. I suppose this began on the Lions tour when players from all countries sat together and took the game apart. It was all new to me then, but it stimulated me no end.'



"MY GREATEST MOMENT IN RUGBY"—KEITH ROWLANDS

In the Cardiff Club the captain has absolute authority, but two years ago when the suggestion of a coach was put forward, Keith Rowlands supported it, on the sole condition that they got the best coach. He is now quite certain that in Roy Bish they have the right man. 'We can share ideas. Anybody for that matter can put forward ideas. Ultimately I can decide or adjust them. But a coach has given purpose to our training. We are fitter; everyone practices the basic skills, and if injuries crop up in the first team, there is a reserve available who can fit into the side, with a complete knowledge of our basic planned moves.'

'Unfortunately this sort of team training can't exist in the Welsh team. They don't spend enough time together. We and other clubs approach the game rather professionally when you consider the planning and training, but a national side just play bounce of the ball rugby. I haven't seen any set back-row moves by a Welsh side for many years.'

'The English Selectors have made the first move, haven't they. They had a teach-in after the trial. We play a lot of unopposed rugby, so that we can put our plans into action and see how they ought to work. I believe it's about time the Welsh team did something along these lines.'

Law changes and the future

What changes would Cardiff's captain make in the laws of the game? He would firstly define the space between the two packs in a line-out—say two feet. Double-banking he thought was a sound idea. It made for better rugby; less loose ball at the scrum-half's feet, less indeterminate possession.

He believes it ludicrous that a penalty kick should

cancel out a try. 'I would like to evolve direct and indirect free-kicks, and make the direct ones only worth 2 points.'

Then he would ban kicking direct to touch from anywhere outside the 25. He considers that the Welsh Floodlit Alliance has lost its way. It's not the scoring spectacle it was intended to be and games are still played tightly without an effort to run the ball around.

So now Keith Rowlands is propped up on crutches with a right to feel sad. But there is a carrot dangling on the horizon, in the shape of the Cardiff tour of South Africa. A return to the country which gave so much pleasure as a Lion, where he first became aware of the fine art of Richard Sharp, whom he rated particularly highly, and the superb all-round ability of the finest second-row forward he has played against, Avril Malan.

'Cardiff will cut their training to one day a week now, and then we will build up to two or three times a week before we leave. We mustn't be stale. It must be rather, a rejuvenation.'

Rowlands has no regrets, but he still harbours a humorous boyhood fascination with the back-row of the scrum. To him they are loveable villains, terrorists and destructors, and he will never forget the drama of Aberavon's Peter Jones coming into the dressing room and saying to the outside-half in his stammering way. 'I.I.I'll b.b.b.bloody 'ave you, th.th.this afternoon,' and walking smartly out.

'Peter was great, so was Dai Hayward,' Rowlands believes, 'Yes I always wish I had been a back-row forward, sometimes'.