

FOREWORD

“Have a word with Lloyd will you, get him sorted out - he’s a good lad he just needs a bit of advice.”

This, or words to this effect, was my introduction to Leon Lloyd in the Leicester Tigers clubhouse, sometime around the spring of 1996. I remember my reply was rather short and to the point. I told him he either wanted to come and play for the biggest and best club in the country, or he didn’t.

In my defence, I was tired and hungry post game and didn’t think I needed to spend too much time trying to persuade a skinny youth that his best option was to try and join the current champions of England - he’d either get it or he wouldn’t.

I’ve since laughed with Leon about that first meeting and luckily for everyone, he got it.

It was decided that Leon would move in with me for a few months while he found his feet - and he duly arrived on my doorstep with his bags of clothes and two cardboard boxes. I couldn’t help noticing one was full of tinned and dried food

“My Mum insisted - so I don’t starve”

The other had at least a dozen different bottles of aftershave in it, not top of the list of items required to make it as a professional rugby player - it was going to be an interesting few months.

“I’ll just have something to eat; my Mum’s made me a curry”

That was Leon's response to an invite for him to join a training session down on the track with Graham Rowntree and myself. It was a tough session, three sets of six repetitions with limited rest in between, three sixes. We called it the beast, we dreaded it, but it was a regular part of a training week.

Leon looked great on the first one and not bad on the second. He wasn't keen on the third, but got through it and by the fourth rep all colour had drained from his face, as realisation dawned that we were only around a quarter of the way through and he may be seeing his Mum's curry for the second time that afternoon.

As I said at the start: "You either get it or you don't."

Leon certainly got it quickly and halfway through that season, our World Cup winning Australian coach, Bob Dwyer, pulled me aside - unprompted - to say he was going to put Leon in the first team on a regular basis. He told me that during the last match he heard him shouting from the side line, to far more experienced players on the pitch, about their positional play - and what's more he'd been correct in everything that he'd said. He trusted him and thought he deserved a chance.

He deserved his chance in Rugby and he took it, scoring a memorable try as a seventeen year old in the Pyrenean town of Pau's volatile Stade du Hameau, to give us a famous European victory and onward to domestic and European honours - and international recognition with England.

"You either get it or you don't" and while other young players didn't move on from their Playstation and social life, Leon, as you'll realise, was a bit different. His quick learning wasn't just in Rugby, he had his eyes open to the world around him and the world on the outside of the bubble that can be professional sports.

I always sensed he appreciated things a little more than most players; he understood how fortunate we

were to play rugby and be well paid for it; that tough days in rugby are not as tough as days for people with poorly paying jobs - that they may have no love for - who struggle to make ends meet and who can only dream of the life and opportunities of a professional sportsman. He started his own business while still in the middle of his career, understood that contacts made whilst being a high profile rugby player could stand him in good stead when he wasn't - and that all the attributes of being a good teammate in Rugby can crossover into the real world of work.

He has progressed, post Rugby, to impressive appointments in business. I often smile when we catch up and speak about what he's doing and where he's been and we'll end up saying: "Not bad for a kid from Cov".

I just hope he's got enough aftershave.

Martin Johnson CBE

LEON LLOYD



Martin Johnson CBE with the World Cup in 2003

CAREER ASPIRATIONS AS A KID

I remember playing football in the garden and emulating big Cyril Regis in the 1987 FA Cup final, that was my dream and nothing was going to stop me from achieving it. I am not sure if it was childhood naivety, or a built in desire to want to perform on the big stage in front of thousands of fans.

Never did I see myself as having a big ego or needing to be recognised when I've done something a little bit better than what was expected of me. I quickly realised that, by making smaller gains, I received lots of regular yet small rewards. But when I made a significant improvement or achievement - whether that be on the sports field or in the class room - I noticed that I still received only a little reward, no matter how many seconds I was quicker, or by what percentage my grades improved. So, I decided at a young age, why make large sacrifices to achieve that little extra, when my natural ability guaranteed me the small improvement needed to get the same outcome at the end. Lower my aims and achieve my goals – oh how that attitude soon changed!

The words 'lack of concentration, easily distracted' still echo in my ears some twenty years since leaving school. I don't doubt I was much different to many of you, when you were growing up; after watching 'Karate Kid' I wanted to start karate, after watching 'Top Gun' I knew that a career as a fighter pilot was what I was destined for. Then there was an 'Officer and a Gentleman' and of

course I discovered WWF - American Wrestling. I could do that, in fact I could be good at that too..... I then spent weeks thinking of the perfect name and costume. One film that threw me off my career aspirations for some months was 'Dirty Dancing'; I think the less said about those dark months the better!

As a child, it is only natural to expect that you will be affected by your environment. If your parents or siblings are avid supporters of a certain team, sport, or hobby, until you develop your own hobbies and opinions, you will no doubt tag onto theirs. At no stage did I want to play rugby and certainly not to a professional, international standard. Besides it wasn't a professional sport back then. I wanted to achieve things in whatever I was doing at the time. I liked running so I joined a running club. I didn't mind the odd confrontation so I started judo to help channel my aggression. I also enjoyed football, so I played in the Sunday league. Looking back at it now, I can say that I was never going to realise my dream of scoring the winning goal for Coventry City in an FA Cup Final for many reasons – and I don't think that my own ability, or lack of it, would have entered my mind.

I was a quick runner over short distances, so it made sense to focus on doing things that helped showcase the one bit of talent I thought that I had. It was a sports teacher, Mr Neil Parker, who forced me to play rugby - and through his persistence I am pleased to say that it changed my life and what I am now able to provide for my family.

My parents were very proud by nature and my background - and path into rugby - was certainly unorthodox. Growing up in Coventry was great, as I had very strong morals thrust upon me at a very early age. I knew that no one was ever going to give me anything and I had to earn each little thing that I wanted. You must always look after your mates and back them up,

even if they might be in the wrong on that occasion - and regardless of the circumstances that may be involved. Never take a backward step or show any sign of weakness. These may sound exaggerated to those of you who might have had a different upbringing, or grew up in a totally different environment, but there were some unwritten rules where I grew up and you either knew them, or were taught them so quickly that you didn't forget them easily. But that's another book!

As soon as I realised that the dream was over and the WWF or Coventry City FC were not going to come calling, I decided to stop playing Sunday league football. Instead, I somehow ended up joining the other lads from school who played rugby on a Sunday. I couldn't understand why they would choose to do that instead of football, but what did I know. Little did I think it would be a life changing decision.