



THE
DEATH
OF RUGBY

Neil Back MBE with Dean Eldredge

THE
DEATH
OF RUGBY

Neil Back MBE with Dean Eldredge



Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Dedications.....	9
<i>Contributions</i>	
Sir Clive Woodward OBE.....	11
Martin Johnson CBE.....	14
Jonny Wilkinson CBE.....	15
Chapter One – We’ve Only Gone And Done It!	19
Chapter Two – The Hand Of Back	33
Chapter Three – Of Bottlers And Nearly Men	44
Chapter Four – All Good Things Come To An End ..	56
Chapter Five – The Weight Of The World On Our Shoulders.....	67
Chapter Six – Dad’s Army	87
Chapter Seven – Changes	115
Chapter Eight – Farewell	135
Chapter Nine – Once, Twice, Three Times A Lion ..	150
Chapter Ten – Leeds.....	168
Chapter Eleven – The Death Of Rugby.....	179
Chapter Twelve – The Long Road Home	208
Chapter Thirteen – A Life Less Ordinary	223
Chapter Fourteen – Back To The Future.....	237
<i>The Back Row</i>	
Richard Hill MBE	248
Lawrence Dallaglio OBE	250
Statistics And Honours.....	253
Bibliography.....	256

Dedications

THE reason for revisiting my professional career, and picking up where my last autobiography finished, was to tell the story of my time as head coach of The Rugby Football Club (2011) Ltd, for the people affected by the actions of Michael David Aland and his associates during that emotional season.

I could have easily written a whole book about our year with Rugby, and for me, chapter 11 is why this book has been published, but I wanted as wide an audience as possible to read this and to understand what happened to us, so everything else in my career from 2001 onwards is included.

I know that I don't owe anyone anything, but I feel like I do. This book, *The Death of Rugby*, is dedicated to the players and staff of the club during the 2011/2012 season, as well as the supporters, local community and businesses who supported us during that period.

I have listed all of the players as follows: Nick Adams, Joss Andrews, Sam Bennett, Joe Bercis, Alex Bibic, Will Brock, Robert Brown, Ben Buxton, Adam Canning, Beau Carney, Dave Clements, James Collins, James Daniel, Matthew Davies, Neil Davies, Paul Davies, Harry Ellis, Frankie Fenwick-Wilson, Jon Fitt, Ben Gollings (player-coach), Steve Goode, Phil Greenbury, Ade Hales, Gareth Hardy, Oscar Heath, Leigh Hinton, Stuart Lee, Emyr Lewis,

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

Matthew Mountford, Nigel Mukarati, Tim Murphy, Dan Needham, Ben Nuttall, Dan Oselton, Sam Overton, Stewart Pearl, Santiago Pulgar, Allan Purchase, Sam Raven, Jack Riley, Michael Rust, Wayne Saunders, Joey Shore, Fraser Tait, Callum Tucker, Simon Tunnicliffe, Andy Vilks, Peter Wackett, James Wadey, Nick Walton, Danny Wright, Jack Young.

And the staff: Brad Ainslie, Geoff Buck, Alan Collins, Milly Dahl, Clive Davies, Martin Dundas, Mark Ellis, Fred Empey, Richard Gee, Lauren Gollings, Nadio Granata, Thomas Hames, Andy Key, Steve King, Fred McKenzie, Rhys Morris, Jon Newcombe, Charlie Parker, Blake Sporne, John Tarrant, Steve Tucker and Glen Thurgood.

I want to thank you all for your unwavering professionalism in extraordinary circumstances, as you helped us to succeed against all the odds and deliver an unbeaten season of 31 wins from 31 games, gaining automatic promotion and cup success, while laying solid foundations for the club to go on and deliver our shared vision, which we all know, all too painfully, didn't materialise. I hope this book, in some way, will shine a light on what happened to you all and will bring us some closure.

Sir Clive Woodward OBE

England head coach 1997–2004

‘**G**REAT teams are made of great individuals’ – this is one of my favourite lines in sport and you need look no further than England’s World Cup-winning team of 2003 for evidence of its truth. As head coach, I was lucky to work with a remarkable group of players and Neil was one such player – truly remarkable.

When I started as England’s head coach in 1997, I was determined to break away from the stereotypes of English rugby. I wanted to play an all-court game that could get 70,000 England fans at Twickenham on their feet going nuts. This meant playing with relentless speed, keeping the ball alive and attacking the opposition with and without the ball. To play the game like this, your back row has to be at the heart of it and Bucky took to it brilliantly.

He was the quickest loose forward across the ground and his sevens experience gave him the passing game, handling skills and spatial awareness that put him ahead of his time at openside flanker. On top of this he was unbelievably fit, playing 80 minutes of flat-out rugby without being the slightest bit distressed. That is just gold dust for a head coach. With the ball in hand, he was the complete rugby player who I fancy could have played as well at scrum half or centre. But

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

it was Backy's sheer bloody toughness which took his game to a whole new level.

I think it is no exaggeration to say he was the player in the game that everyone was afraid of, even Johnno. As gifted as Backy was with ball in hand, it was what he did on the ground that made him the toughest player in the game. Backy's courage and grit was just something else and when combined with his speed of thought and dynamism to get into the right place at the right time to chop down the opposition, or steal the ball, it made him a number seven unlike any other.

In 2003, I was lucky to have a number of fine players to choose from; Lewis Moody, Joe Worsley and Martin Corry were all outstanding in their own right – but my starting back row, barring a real drop in form, was always Richard Hill, Lawrence Dallaglio and Backy. Between them they exhibited everything you are looking for. Pace, power, stamina, handling skills, line-out capability, ferocious tackling, strength in the contact area, tenacity over the ball, poaching skills par excellence and flinty temperaments. Together they were a mighty force and the best back-row combination I have seen in the game.

At a time when the likes of New Zealand, France, South Africa, and Australia all had great back rows, the way Backy, alongside Lawrence and Hilly, fronted up, snarled, smashed and raced across the field was amazing to watch and something the whole team fed off. The game that stands out most to me is the 2003 semi-final against France. Imanol Harinordoquy, Olivier Magne and Serge Betsen were a great trio for France in the back row – but Lawrence, Neil and Richard tore them apart. Our pack smashed the French that day, with our back row totally unplayable. When the final whistle blew, the three of them just left the field with no ceremony or celebration, the performance spoke for itself, their job well done. We were in the World Cup Final and the rest is history.

SIR CLIVE WOODWARD OBE

Neil's career boasts countless Premiership titles, two European Cups, a grand slam among three Six Nations Championship wins, three Lions tours including a series win against South Africa, and a World Cup triumph. That is some career, for one of the nation's great players. But as long as I've known Neil, whether he be in Leicester's, England's, the Lions' colours, or in his recent coaching roles, it is his love and dedication for the game and his family which has shone through. For this my admiration and pride in Neil will only continue.

Martin Johnson CBE

Leicester Tigers and England captain

I FIRST really noticed Backy in an England Schoolboys trial in 1987. It was my first real big game of rugby and I really wasn't sure if I was good enough to be there. During a pause in the game a blonde head appeared in our forward huddle and started to vigorously encourage and berate us all in equal measure. The thing that struck me most was not just his passion, but the fact that he had one of his teeth knocked out and either hadn't noticed or just wasn't that bothered. I found that to be deeply impressive.

Neil didn't stop being deeply impressive over the best part of the next 20 years and I can honestly say I never saw him play anything remotely close to a bad game. He set standards for fitness and professionalism that we all strived to equal and was an integral part of hugely successful Leicester Tigers, England, and British & Irish Lions teams, and is one of a unique group of players who have won European and World Cups, and played on a winning Lions tour.

Neil is one of the greats.

Jonny Wilkinson CBE

England and British & Irish Lions

RUGBY is a brilliant way to learn about life. It is also schooling in team values, mainly what it means to take responsibility for your own actions and how best to use the power we all have to influence the success of the group. It can, at times, seem to be a school of hard knocks though. At other times it can feel like a complete celebration of all that is good about the world and the people whom inhabit it with us.

Every school needs teachers qualified to preach such a strong message and if the sport of rugby is the headmaster in this case, then Neil Back is the more than able deputy.

For me, Backy was always the enforcer of our team and individual standards. After the players had decided upon what was and what was not acceptable in terms of performance, on and off the field, guys like Neil made it their mission to make sure that expectations were heavily respected and met.

He did this by setting examples for others to aspire to. First, with obvious passion, he made it very, very clear how he believed things were going to have to be, then, more importantly, he more than backed his words up with actions

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

which motivated and inspired others to believe just as fiercely. Whereas he was vocally the enforcer of exceptional standards, he was, through the way he went about his business, the re-enforcer of everything it takes to be a winner.

The incredible Martin Johnson was our leader, but Neil was his right-hand man and he illustrated to us all exactly what the word ruthless looks like when put in a white rugby shirt, with a rose on the chest.

A more professional athlete and competitor I do not believe you will find; he pushed back the barriers of daily intensity to such an extent that it could strike fear in you if you didn't know him better. Yet, as with all the purest champions, it was the sheer regularity with which he dominated the game in his position, which underlined his excellence. On the field he was machine-like; unbreakable, unstoppable and simply horrible to play against.

Off the field, there is a very endearing human side to him. This only drove me to respect him more as I realised that this consistency of performance and fierce, no-nonsense attitude was something that, as for all of us, had to be worked on daily and resulted from his sweat and sacrifices.

People sometimes ask me to recount the most treasured memories of my time in the game. At the top of the list, not surprisingly, there are a few which involve Neil Back.

My favourite will stay with me as perhaps the greatest mark of respect a man could be awarded in rugby. It happened when we were heading back into the changing rooms at half-time in the Stade de France during the Six Nations Championship of 2000. I had completely drained myself of energy during the first 40 minutes trying to unload all I had into every tackle and Backy, as the messiah of all things defence and determination, popped up next to me, put his arm around me and spoke.

'Great workrate. You're a man after my own heart Jonny!'

JONNY WILKINSON CBE

I suddenly felt completely re-energised. As he sprinted off past me (always first into the dressing room!) he wouldn't have seen the schoolboy smile I was trying to suppress, reach right across my face. When Neil Back puts you in the same ball-park as himself then you know you've pretty much made it.

1

We've Only Gone And Done It!

AUSTRALIA 17 England 17. Extra time in the 2003 Rugby World Cup Final, and a quick glance at the clock at the Telstra Stadium, Sydney, told us all we needed to know. It was our kick-off and there was time left to win this, but equally, there was time left to lose it. Ninety seconds remained and we kicked long down the middle of the field, but not too long, so we could still apply pressure.

George Gregan passed to Mat Rogers inside their 22, with Lewis Moody, who had replaced Richard Hill, putting Rogers under massive pressure. None of this was new to us though. We'd already completed hundreds, if not thousands, of drills with Phil Larder, our defensive coach, working on a strong defensive line, with one player applying huge pressure to the kicker by focusing on closing down their kicking foot, not just the ball. So, if you missed the ball, you at least smothered the man, in a legal fashion. Consequently, rather than taking a line-out in our own half, we had one around 30 metres

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

from their try-line, as Rogers sliced his kick, so 'Moodos' had done his job.

This was our moment. There was little communication at this stage, as we all knew exactly what we needed to do. We had a pattern called 'zig-zag', where we aimed to move up the field between the 15s, to get us in to position, either to make a line break and score, to get a penalty, or to provide Jonny Wilkinson with the opportunity to kick a drop goal.

I was tired, but I knew that this was what all the sacrifice was about. Hundreds of people, the players, staff and families, had all given everything over a number of years, building up to this moment. We just had to focus. We had a team call, where if you made a mistake someone would shout out 'next job', to ensure you moved on, forgot about it and focused on the next play, but making a mistake was the last thing on our minds at this stage.

From the line-out, most people would have bet on us throwing the ball to our captain, Martin Johnson at the front of the line-out, as there would be a higher percentage chance of us retaining and securing possession in the Australian half, and we could build an attack from there. Ben Kay, who was in the middle of the line-out, made the call for Steve Thompson to throw to the back, meaning there was one last lift, one last effort for me. Lawrence Dallaglio was the front lifter for 'Moodos' and I was at the back. Thommo hit just below double-top, with a near-perfect throw for Lewis to catch, and immediately get the ball away off the top to Matt Dawson for us to launch an attack.

Mike Catt, who had come on for Mike Tindall at inside centre at the end of normal time, burst forward with the ball in hand and smashed in to the Australians, with Will Greenwood in support from the outside and myself from the inside. Front jumper Johnno had joined the move as soon

WE'VE ONLY GONE AND DONE IT!

as the ball went over his head from Thommo's throw and we were pushing forward with all of our remaining energy. The drill had happened in the blink of an eye, but had been executed perfectly. If the hosts didn't know already, we were threatening and we were ready to strike.

The great thing about our team was the familiarity we had with every move. It was almost autonomous. Our communication had evolved from verbal to visual, as we'd worked so hard together for so long, analysing previous games and facing similar situations, so much so that game scenarios were ingrained in to all of us. We knew what we had to do, and we knew we could do it even under the most intense of pressure. Catty looked after the ball like it was the most precious thing he'd held in his life, and we all gave him the support he needed. At this stage, one of the props would normally come in to have a sniff at the contact and both arrived, probably looking for a breather, but they ensured that the ball was ours.

Jonny was waiting. Probably 38-40 metres out, so it would have taken a huge drop kick from him. The Australians were offside and were edging forward, so it could have quite easily been a penalty for us, but we knew, with the way the game was being refereed, that we wouldn't be given a thing. Sir Clive Woodward had introduced a mantra to the ethos of the team, T-CUP (Thinking Correctly Under Pressure), and this passage of play was one of the best examples of this. Matt Dawson could have taken the obvious option and passed the ball to Jonny for him to drop kick us to glory from distance. Instead, he followed T-CUP, and also the great work we had done with Dr Sheryll Calder, on visual skills and scanning a situation, and with ProZone, and Daws got his head up and saw the space. George Smith was ready to put pressure on Jonny, as the Australians were expecting the kick, but Daws had dummy passed and was gone in a flash and broke through

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

their defensive line, with me, Will and Jason Robinson close by, and we gained crucial yards.

After Matt's break, I found myself in the scrum half position. We'd all practised passing skills intensely over the years, and I, probably more than most, had worked closely with the nines who had played for England. Sometimes when we went in to wide areas, I would cover that role for Daws, or for Kyran Bracken, or Andy Gomersall when they played, so I was used to being there. I knew that Jonny was in the pocket and we had great blockage around the contact area, but before there was time to think, this great, imposing hulk of a man, Martin Johnson, appeared. In that moment he could have just become an extra blocker, allowing me to pass to Jonny, but that wasn't what our team was about. We always found a way to put the best people in their best positions, and there was never a more crucial time to do it.

Daws was our best passer, and a hugely experienced scrum half, and we needed him on the ball to make the final pass. Johnno took the ball off a short pass from me, and probably only gained us a matter of inches, but what he enabled us to do was to bring Daws back to his feet, to scrum half and set us up for a shot at glory. At that moment, under massive pressure, everyone seemed pretty cool and there was no real rush. We were set and we were ready. When I look back today at video footage, the Australians were up, they were offside, but as I've said, we couldn't count on this and we had to make something happen ourselves, rather than look for a decision from the referee.

Having cleared Johnno out, bent on one knee, I'm powerless. There's nothing left to do, but to trust in my teammates. These guys, these warriors, who I would run through walls for. I can see Daws shaping to pass, and I can see Jonny waiting, and I can hear nothing. Over the years we had all learnt from those painful defeats, those nearly moments,

WE'VE ONLY GONE AND DONE IT!

especially the grand slam attempts, in order to not make the same mistake more than once. We'd got to the stage where we were doing things and making decisions on instinct, and we had a track-record to support that. We'd already beaten the Australians at home in autumn 2002 and again away in the summer before the World Cup, so there was no reason why we couldn't do it for a third time. The World Cup Final is just your next game, and it's about winning. We had incredible levels of expectation on us as we were ranked number one in the world, and then the criticism such as the Aussie press labelling us as 'Dad's Army', and I was definitely one of them at the age of 34 during the tournament!

When the ball left Matt's hands on its way to Jonny, there's the blur of the crowd in the background, and I'm still on one knee. Jonny takes the ball cleanly and kicks with his wrong foot, although in fairness, he could always kick with both feet. I still can't hear a thing. I'm in a bubble, and yet there is so obviously noise everywhere. People forget that Jonny has already missed three drop kicks and this is his fourth attempt, but it's Jonny, and this is everything we have been building towards. If you give a man of his calibre enough chances, then he will make you pay.

I'm still looking at him and Jonny makes contact with the ball. Good contact, perhaps not the best he's ever struck, but certainly the most important. I can see the referee, André Watson, and as the ball sails towards, and then clearly between the uprights, I see his arm lift to acknowledge the score, but I know it's over anyway. I turn my eyes to the scoreboard and the time. We're ahead, but there's time left. Time for Australia to come back again. I'm sprinting to get in to position to receive the kick-off, and the referee will give them the time to try and build an attack, I'm sure of that. Twenty seconds remain, but it doesn't feel as if we are getting back as quickly as we normally would. We were fitter

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

than people gave us credit for, but we were obviously tired, both physically and emotionally. This was it. The Webb Ellis Trophy was within touching distance, but we weren't there yet. For all the euphoria in the stands, and on the other side of the world in the pubs and the living rooms across England, we are just shouting at each other to get in to position. On the biggest of stages, all we need is to execute the basics of rugby, just one last time.

Australia raced in to place and kicked short, to give themselves a chance of getting the ball back for one last assault on our defence. Nearly 100 minutes of going toe-to-toe with each other, two of the best sides in the world, and there's just one more battle to face, one more challenge to win and we're there. The short kick from the Aussies reaches our loose-head prop, Trevor Woodman. I always say that what Trevor did, right then, securing possession for us by cleanly catching the ball, was just as important as Jonny's winning drop goal, if not quite as memorable. Whether they kicked to Trevor intentionally I'm not sure, but with no disrespect to props, especially if they've been on the pitch for over 99 minutes, they wouldn't be your first choice to take a crucial catch in a World Cup Final. Australia certainly kicked short deliberately though, and with five seconds remaining it was the only option they had to force an error or recapture the pill.

Once Trevor claimed the ball, we were like bees to a honeypot. We all swarmed to him to help retain it. We knew that we just had to win the ball, keep it and kick in to the seats, over the touchline and the trophy would be ours. Catty, who had a superb game against Wales in the quarter-finals and France in the semi-finals, was ready and waiting in the pocket. The management team's introduction of Catty in the Wales game at half-time was a real masterstroke, and his kicking game was perfect that day. This, together with the fact he had previously been used to take the pressure off

WE'VE ONLY GONE AND DONE IT!

Jonny against France, kept Mike Tindall out of the number 12 shirt for the semi-final.

With the stadium clock past 100 minutes, Catty received the ball from Daws and with one true, sweet kick to touch, he cleared the management bench, reached the seats in the stand, and all I can do is look to the referee. I still remember to this day thinking, 'The game's not over until the referee blows the final whistle.' I didn't have to wait for long. Ben Kay has a double-take to check that the whistle is gone, and we all leap for the sky. England, our team, our country, our staff, all of us together – are the world champions. Everything we have worked for over the years, the final professional piece of the jigsaw of possible trophies to be won, is no longer a dream; it is right in front of our eyes as a reality.

No one can ever really have a perfect game; players, management, the referee, but this was as close as I had to a perfect feeling. Looking back, for example, we, or should I say Clive and his staff, removed Phil Vickery on 80 minutes. Phil was absolutely smashing their scrum, time after time, but he was being penalised unfairly by the referee. Only he can answer why he was doing that to Phil. So Jason Leonard replaced Phil, and using his previous experience told the referee that at scrum time he would not go forward, back, up or down, but just stay in there and not scrummage, so he couldn't be penalised. That takes real discipline to do, but Leopard (as we called him) did it perfectly and we didn't give any further penalties away! That's what I mean about a perfect game being difficult to achieve. Phil had a great 80 minutes, he was tremendous, but because of someone else, the referee, he had to be replaced and that was hard on him, but Leopard's experience was just what we needed. We had an incredible level of trust in each other; in ability, but also in character. I'm probably giving Australia too much credit for picking out Trevor, for example, but I never doubted for

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

one second that we would hold on to the ball, and that Catty would smash the ball and us to victory.

Once I heard the final whistle, I just went ballistic. My emotions were all over the place. I jumped in to Johnno's arms, and for the first time ever I was taller than him, as he lifted me up. It was just unreal, incredible, and so difficult to explain. We were so disciplined throughout, that the final whistle was like a huge release for us all. I knew, personally, that this was going to be my last World Cup, as I was 34 and I wasn't going to be playing four years later at the age of 38. I'd been fortunate enough to play in two World Cups previously, reaching the semi-finals and the quarter-finals, so this was my way of completing the jigsaw. As a club and international player, I had won everything I could win, apart from the World Cup and now we were world champions for the next four years.

Around 30 seconds later, I turned my attention to my family. In the heat of the moment, and my focus, I remembered that I didn't know where they were. At Leicester Tigers or England games at Twickenham, I knew exactly where to look, and I would wave to them, but on this day, of all days, I hadn't a clue where they were. My four-year-old daughter Olivia and my 14-month-old son, Finley, along with Dorian West's wife and children, were the only kids at the ground from the players' families, alongside my wife, Ali, and her sister Linda, who was a great support during an emotional time for us all. It took me a couple of minutes of staring and searching, but I found them. I just wanted to share this achievement with them, as they had always been there for me, supporting and motivating me. Perhaps I should credit Dr. Sherylle Calder, for giving me the sharpness of eye to pick them out? It was like looking for a needle in a haystack.

In sport and business, and in life in general, there is always sacrifice, but I can only tell my own story. I'd missed out on so much family time over the years in pursuit of sporting

WE'VE ONLY GONE AND DONE IT!

achievement, and I'm not moaning about that, it was my choice and was something that we all bought in to as a family. I missed the Uruguay game in the group stages of the tournament to be at the bedside of Olivia, who was very ill, and she joyfully came in to my arms on the pitch, but Finley didn't know who I was. That was the price of being away on tour and missing out on getting to know my son. I mean, he was so young, it was an 8pm kick-off, then extra time, and there were no real provisions for families, so he wasn't in the best of moods and to be fair to him, he regrets it a bit now! But that moment hit home for me. I guess the fact I was a sweaty, smelly, blood-stained, horrible man with a thug's haircut, didn't really help in endearing me to my son. But the sacrifice was worth it. If we hadn't won the final, I think it would have been the worst trip Ali had ever been on. Two young children, although she had her sister Linda to help, all the travel, firstly over to Australia and then while we were out there, the accommodation which was provided wasn't great either, so I think if we hadn't lifted the trophy I would have been in serious trouble with the missus!

In a matter of moments, I went from the euphoria of winning the trophy and celebrating with everyone, to bawling my eyes out. We all knew what we had been through to get here and crying was just a release. I couldn't have been happier, and all I wanted to do was celebrate and share the moment with my family. We had beaten Australia 20-17, on their own patch, to win the 2003 Rugby World Cup; the first northern hemisphere side to do it in the history of the competition. Against all the odds and the doubters, we were the best in the world and no one could take that away from us. We had the medal and the cup to come, but I didn't need them to know what we had achieved. Rugby, for me, was always about enjoyment, working hard and winning. My mantra was always to never fail through lack

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

of effort, and I was always driven to succeed at anything I put my mind to.

I stood on the pitch, holding my daughter Olivia, who had attended her first game at the age of just two weeks, having been born the day before we met up for the 1999 Rugby World Cup. I remember thinking back to her birth, which fortunately I was there for, but then had to dash off to meet up with the squad. I'd been up all night and was shattered, arrived and booked in to the hotel after a two-hour journey and went to my room and dumped my bags before going to the toilet. The phone then rang to tell me that I had to go to reception to meet drug testers and give a urine sample. I went down to reception, tried to explain the circumstances, and even asked the testers to sit with me while I slept, so when I woke I could give the sample. Thankfully, Phil Larder and Clive sorted the situation with me, and I was able to give the sample the following morning. I suppose it shows my mindset after the final, that I was thinking back to key moments in my life, and everything seemed to be flashing in front of my eyes. It really was like an out-of-body experience.

Typically, Johno, being the great leader of men, calmed everything and lightened the mood. He also showed more emotional intelligence than John Howard, the Australian Prime Minister of the time, who was about to present him with the Webb Ellis Trophy on the podium in the centre of the pitch, with the eyes of the stadium and the world on him. You would think that with a young child on there with him, he would have been aware and engaged, but he was emotionless. I suppose he was disappointed with losing. Johno turned to Olivia and said, 'Shall we go and get the trophy?' and she replied, 'Yeah, I'll do it Johno!' which is when I stepped in and suggested we let Johno handle this one on his own. He epitomised what our team was about, and what rugby should be about as a team sport, not about

WE'VE ONLY GONE AND DONE IT!

the individual. I couldn't express how proud I was to be stood behind this man who had led us so well, who we all respected so much. There were plenty of guys in that team who captained their club sides, and who could easily have been England captain, but there was only one Johno. To his credit, Jonny Wilkinson understood that as well. He was the star of the team, but he put the hard yards in as everyone else did over the years, and we suffered and eventually triumphed, together. I trusted all of those guys and as I looked them all in the eyes, as we waited for Johno to lift the trophy, I knew what a special moment this was and how I would have done anything for any of them.

As I look back now, I can appreciate and understand, having been a coach myself, how Clive and his staff must have been feeling at this moment. All of their work and sacrifice, just like ourselves as players, built up to this crowning glory. I can also appreciate the challenge he must have faced in trying to get articulate messages across to the players, in pressure-cooker atmospheres and he must have felt powerless at times, either sat in the stand or stood on the sideline. I was pleased for him, and for his wife, Jayne, who was great in the background with the families and was always supportive. I'm sure that Clive, himself, when Jonny's kick sailed over, wasn't thinking that we'd done it. He would have been anxious and thinking how long is left and eager to see us all get back in to position. No one would have heard a thing at the time, but Clive had done everything he could over the years leading up to the final. In fact, Jason Leonard was quoted as saying after the final that Clive didn't really need to be there. That is the greatest accolade you could pay to a coach, in saying that their job has been done, their preparation complete and that was how we all felt with Clive at the helm. We were in control of our own destiny and he had helped to make everything as certain as possible. I'm not taking anything away from him

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

and the changes he made during the game, and the things said at full time, to prepare us for extra time, but we knew what we needed to do. We got in to a huddle before extra time and I think that anything said to us by the coaching staff, like 'play in their half' or references to territory, or possession, was kind of met with a 'no shit' reply. As I say, we knew what we had to do and the staff had created that culture, along with the players, for us to take responsibility ourselves.

My words to my family, for challenges we achieved throughout life, were, 'We've only gone and done it!' and they were the first words I said as I reached the touchline, and we celebrated. I looked at Ali, who was in tears, and hugged and kissed her and Linda, and I held Olivia, with her hair in bows and an England flag painted on her face, and it was hard to know what to say, and Finley, bless him, didn't really know where he was. We were all overcome and I suppose I felt relief more than anything. We'd dealt with the pressure and the expectation.

I was privileged to be in this position. I didn't want to sound greedy, but having won everything else I could in the game, I just wanted this. I wanted it for my family, for my parents who had supported me so much. My mind wandered back years, to my first coach, Jack Carnell. I joined my first junior club when I was around four years old, and my older brother played, as well as my next-door neighbour's son, and they were slightly older and I was encouraged to go along. Jack played until in to his 70s, he was around 50 when he coached me, and is sadly no longer with us, but he made rugby enjoyable, about praising each other and skill acquisition. In fact, the tackle technique that he taught me I used throughout my playing days, and I still use that as a coach today. I thought back to presenting one of my first international shirts to Jack, and you think back to all the people who helped you, and you almost have to pinch yourself to believe where you are.

WE'VE ONLY GONE AND DONE IT!

We had some group photos to take, and it was time for me to return Olivia to Ali. We were still on the pitch, but Ali needed to get the children back to the hotel. I arranged to meet them later, a lot later. I got my hands on the Webb Ellis Trophy on the pitch; held it, kissed it and said a few private words to it, which was great. I didn't want to touch it until then, until it was ours for certain. Then it was about spending time with each other, the players and staff, so we could be together and celebrate the achievement. I'm not just saying this, but everyone involved was as important as Jonny, Johnno, Clive and the rest of us; and the supporters were something else. We had to try and focus and block the noise out of our minds as it could have become a distraction, but we all knew they were there, and it felt as if we could hear them back home in England too.

In the dressing room, we were able to celebrate privately. I think Prince Harry was there, and the then Sports Minister, Tessa Jowell was there too, and Moodos told her in no uncertain terms that the photos were for those involved, and not her. There were a lot of people trying to get involved in photos, and I realise that in some way, the Sports Minister would have made a contribution to our sport, but this was our time and Moodos wasn't having any of it. We sipped some champagne, drank a few beers, went along to a media function and it wasn't until around 1am that we finally got to our after-party and I was reunited with Ali, as Linda had offered to take care of the kids with a friend, so we could celebrate as a couple. It was hard for Linda, as they had to get a cab and communication was down in Sydney as the phone networks were overloaded. I think they had to get a ferry too, it was manic for them trying to get the kids back to the sanctuary of the hotel, but once we knew they were safe and settled we could enjoy this amazing, once-in-a-lifetime evening, or early hours as it was. We were with the team and the management, and we had a good drink, until around 6am.

THE DEATH OF RUGBY

We had to leave as Ali was boarding a flight at around 11am to go back home to the UK, and we were walking through the streets trying to get a taxi, while keeping in the shadows and trying to avoid being mobbed by everyone who was still out celebrating.

I couldn't resist speaking to one fella though. This England fan was stood outside a bar, with his replica shirt on, with my name and number on his back. I tapped him on the shoulder, he turned around and nearly fainted. We had a laugh and then we were jumped on by his mates and had one last celebration with the fans. I finally navigated the streets and cabs of Sydney, got Ali home to the hotel to pack for her flight, and I had my next challenge to face – more drinking and celebrating, before we returned home ourselves, as the world champions.