

A close-up, high-angle portrait of an elderly man with light-colored hair and green eyes, looking slightly to the right. He is wearing a white shirt with dark blue horizontal stripes. The background is dark.

THE IRON CURTAIN

MY RUGBY JOURNEY
FROM LEAGUE TO UNION

PHIL LARDER
AND NICK BISHOP

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Prologue

I AM sitting on the grass as dusk begins to fall, with my back leaning against one of the goalposts at Stadium Australia. I do not know what the time is and cannot even remember the date. I'm exhausted, battered and bruised from a game I haven't even played. The anxiety and tension of the last two and a half hours has been almost too much to bear. After all the turmoil of the game, I need to look down at the medal on my chest and check that it is still gold.

My thoughts drift back to the final of the 1995 Rugby League World Cup against my old nemesis Australia. For years afterwards, the bitter memory of that loss followed me across my career and the pain did not diminish with time. I blamed myself and it tormented me. I thought it was the biggest game I would ever be involved in and I would be going to my grave knowing that I had blown it.

This evening I have finally caught up with my own personal white whale, in a World Cup Final against Australia in Sydney. The feeling of humility, the sheer good fortune of having been given a second chance is overwhelming. On the other side of the globe, the curse has finally been lifted, and I feel nothing but relief and exhaustion.

My phone rings and it is Jack Gibson, the master-coach himself. Jack does nothing to dispel the feeling that the past might yet be up for revision:

'Well done Phil,' he growls, and there is a pause before he adds threateningly '...but we almost did ya! Not bad for a game of union. You've done a top job. That England defence... well, Mass [Jack's coaching partner Ron Massey] and I are proud of you. If you are staying on next week, come and have a look at us. Be great to see ya.'

That's Gibbo, hard to impress and brusque to the point of rudeness. No-one's opinion on rugby matters more to me.

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I remember all those other Aussies who have [ironically] shaped the development of my rugby career by so generously ‘showing me the lot’. Gibbo, Mass, Frank Stanton, Peter Corcoran and Frank Johnson, who passed away ten years ago – God rest his soul. Nothing was too much for them. They had patiently guided me through a rugby universe that was so much more advanced than anything I could have possibly imagined.

My thoughts wash towards my first encounter with Clive Woodward at Shelley, the meeting which triggered my move across the ‘iron curtain’ from rugby league to rugby union.

‘Phil, I’m not too concerned about the Five Nations,’ Clive had said.

‘I want us to take on the giants from the southern hemisphere. They are the teams we must measure ourselves against. Beating the likes of Australia, South Africa and New Zealand, *that* must be our aim.’

Clive didn’t know it at the time, but he had me at *Australia*. Everything else faded out into the white noise of irrelevance after that. Immediately I was hooked. Mentally, I had always listed reasons by the dozen why we would never be able to overtake the Kangaroos in rugby league and argued myself into a state of complete submission, but in union Clive was now telling me that it was possible.

Clive had played at Manly, the suburb of Sydney where I first met with Frank Stanton [then coach of the Kangaroos] and Frank Johnson to discuss the future of British rugby league. We shared the Australian connection and now we’d achieved the unthinkable, beating them on their home patch and in front of their own people to lift the biggest trophy in our sport... How many England coaches have tried to do that and failed?

My reverie is interrupted by a scream in my ear and a microphone jammed into my face:

‘Phil, can I have an interview? It’s going live to the UK with Radio 5 Live.’

‘Sure,’ I blurt out automatically.

For the life of me, I cannot remember a word I say, and the whole interview passes in a dream-like blur, a vague token of the reality to which I know I will soon have to return. Later I will recall talking about the support we’d received, and that at least does have some real truth behind it.

Up in the stands, there is a familiar sight that offers some comfort. The English spectators who invaded Sydney on the week of the final brought with them some of the biggest red and white flags I have ever seen. I saw one being carried head high down on the beach at Surfers

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Paradise. At least 50 people were needed to hold it aloft. That same flag had been hoisted over heads before kick-off, now it has reappeared again after the game.

The spectators have been phenomenal, especially on the Gold Coast and here in Sydney. Little red and white flags fluttering vigorously wherever we go, slaps on the back and the inevitable photos to prove that 'I was there'; it must have cost them the earth, and I hope our win has made it worth their while. They do not realise how important they are, because whatever we achieve ultimately belongs to them. We are all England.

I join the boys walking round the pitch and we are waving at everyone. Even the Aussies smile back and applaud us. Finally I see my wife Anne, my sons Matt, David and his girlfriend Jamie in the crowd and my eyes begin to fill up. I hope that I have made them proud – and Anna and mum back home, and my dad looking down from the skies beyond all of us.

I remember my dad talking to me when I was still a teenager, worrying about what I would do when I left school, as my life opened up before me:

'Phil,' he said, 'don't make it too difficult for yourself, have patience and it will simply drop into place.'

'Take the time to find out what you are good at and what you enjoy doing... follow your passion in life. When you know, grasp the nettle, forget everything else and give it your all.'

Remembering those words and looking around at all the other England coaches and players who have done exactly the same, now passing the William Webb Ellis trophy overhead from one eager set of hands to the next, I begin to understand what a 'lap of honour' really means. The honour is not in the personal nature of the triumph, no matter how many demons you have to exorcise in the course of your personal life. It is in the passing of the cup, the sharing of the experience with the people you have learned to love as members of your real, extended family. That is what 'winning' really means.

Chapter one

Watershed moments

THERE is no place like the true home of Oldham RLFC, the Watersheddings. Of the Sheddings, the great Yorkshire fast bowler Fred Trueman is reputed to have said: 'Rugby league without the Watersheddings would be like a horror film without Boris Karloff.' No-one knows if Fred really made such a statement, but he wasn't far off the truth if he did. With the Sheddings, you got exactly what you paid for – a hard game of rugby league in the raw, unvarnished. There was never any effort made to tease the spectators into a heightened state of anticipation, no pre-match entertainment, no dancing girls. Even when the club adopted a mascot in the mid-90s he promptly drove an opposing fan who had invaded the pitch into the mud near touch with a great low chop tackle – and 'Braddy' meant it too! There were no frills, no corporate boxes or hospitality packages or picnics in the car park, and there was absolutely nowhere to hide from the biting cold that started with your hands and feet and seemed to work its way inevitably into your very core. There was none of the nonsense you get nowadays.

It was all about the match and everything was pared back down to the bone. It was a test of survival as much as enjoyment, and much depended on your ability to endure the unique climate of the Sheddings. It was always cold, bitterly cold when Phil Larder went to watch as a boy, then later to play there as a man – so cold even a referee [Robin Whitfield] wore a thick woolly scarf for an entire game back in the 90s. It was only when Phil went to his mum and dad's house from Huddersfield

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that he realised how cold it was in Oldham! More often than not the proceedings would be covered by a blanket of fog descending like some kind of divine punishment from the western escarpment of the Pennines – especially when the club were threatening to reach a Challenge Cup Final, God forbid. As the rugby league press officer John Huxley recalls, ‘The Sheddings was the only ground, along with Thrum Hall in Halifax, which was “at altitude”. It tended to experience some sudden and extreme shifts of climate as a result. I can remember matches which started in brilliant sunshine and finished in sleet or snow on the same afternoon. The cold would come down very quickly on to the Sheddings’ little knoll, like a vengeful fury.’

It was the only ground where you could get saturated without it ever raining. As the rugby league journalist Dave Hadfield put it in his tour of league country,

‘Watersheddings... had a grimness of aspect and an absence of creature comforts which made Thrum Hall seem like watching a match from a tart’s boudoir by comparison. Never has a ground been more aptly named, because I can never remember a dry day at Watersheddings. Its altitude could also have another effect on occasion. I remember going to watch a New Zealand tour game on a day when it was cracking the flags in Bolton, people were sunbathing in Bury and still in their shirtsleeves in Rochdale, but Watersheddings was frozen solid.’ [*Up and over: a trek through rugby league land*].

Upwards of 20,000 people would huddle together on the terraces in the wooden stands for the really big games – reputedly nearly 30,000 crammed into the ground for one cup-tie in the 50s against Huddersfield – squeezed in so tight nobody could so much as turn their head to look over a shoulder. This was only the beginning of the gladiatorial ritual. As Mike Ford [an Oldham and Great Britain rugby league scrum-half in his playing days and an international union coach for Ireland and England thereafter] recalls,

As a player, after you’d changed into your red-and-white hoops in the cricket pavilion, you’d have to walk a good hundred yards or so to get to a small holding room or cellar underneath the main stand. That cellar was Alex Givvons’ underground kingdom – and believe me, you didn’t want to cross Alex, or forget to give

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him a pack of cigars as the fee for passing through his territory. You'd end up going on the field in any old odds and sods of kit, your socks wouldn't match or your shorts would be big enough to fit Jim Mills... But it was a test just to get as far as Alex.

You had to push through the spectators, who were already shoulder-to-shoulder, to get to the cellar. It became a very intimate experience because you were face-to-face with the people you represented and who were there to support you... You could see the looks on their faces and they'd make little comments to you both before and after the game. If we won well, it was great to see all the flushed faces and feel all the back-slaps and hair-ruffles as we passed through – but woe betide us if we lost badly! We'd get it both barrels as we struggled to find a seam in the crowd to get back from the tunnel back to the pavilion, and sometimes players were held to account physically by the supporters... so it was by turns warm or punishing, but always a very personal experience. Sheddings was unique, a complete one-off in this respect.

Whether they'd been squeezed together more for warmth or local expectation, that crowd would move in ripples like a muscle flexing and the stands would creak and resound with the pounding of a thousand hobnail boots. They would lurch forward as one to curse the referee when he penalised Oldham unjustly, or freeze like statues when the opposition scored. The pressure would only ease at half-time, when you were carried away from the stands involuntarily to queue for the delicious hot oxtail soup they served from the corrugated shack in the corner of the ground. Then the human caterpillar would bear you back to your spot on the terraces for the second half.

On occasion, the monster would show mercy. Phil Larder recalls one championship decider between ourselves and Hull FC. There was a bit of commotion and a few voices were raised before the game:

'There's young lads tha' can't see!' Suddenly I felt myself being hoisted into the air until I was flat on my back. I could just turn my head enough to look across the sea of caps, enough to see other small boys just like myself, being passed down overhead from the back of the stand to the front of the terracing. What an amazing feeling! Looking back on it now, it represents to me the sense of togetherness that gave the Sheddings its character,

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however cold it got. The kids watched that game in a privileged position, sat on the side of the pitch next to the wall because the ground was full to overflowing, watching tackled players whizz past into touch or cutting a trench through the mud towards us. The smell of liniment was only inches away.

The monster had a conscience after all. As time wore on, bits lost or torn off the stands were neglected, or replaced by odd ill-matching materials so that the Sheddings did indeed start to resemble Frankenstein's patchwork creation. Legend has it that one Oldham supporter was thrown off the top deck of a stand by a Warrington man, who then chucked his crutches after him apologetically.

The ground was like a living curse, and the curse was nowhere more active than in the Challenge Cup. Even when Oldham were at their peak in the 1950s and 60s, with many a Great Britain international in their ranks, Wembley remained the great taboo. In one semi-final against Swinton, they were ahead and the referee had his whistle in his mouth when the curse struck. A Pennine fog came down swiftly like the hand of God and the game had to be abandoned. Oldham lost the replay. In another semi against Warrington in 1990 they scored a try to draw level and had a kick to win it at the death. The ref disallowed the try for a mysterious offside and ORLFC lost 10-6. A win would have taken them to Wembley the day before Latics played in the FA Cup Final. As he walked off to a barrage of abuse the ref said calmly: 'You've already got one team at Wembley haven't you?' That man was the scarf-wearer back in the day, Robin Whitfield. After that, the Oldham fans resigned themselves to the inevitable in song,

'Wemb--ley, Wemb--ley,
Most famous place in London
That we have never been.'

Curse or no curse, Watersheddings had a meaningful place in the local community. For more than 40 years it was also the home of the local cricket club and other legendary rugby league figures like Don Vines and Jim Sullivan moved on to success in sports other than rugby there. 'Buller' played baseball after an illustrious career as probably one of the greatest full-backs to play rugby in either code. He played for Great Britain before his 18th birthday, while Vines [an Oldham Rugby League man] became a 'heel' or villain in professional wrestling, fighting 'the Outlaw' at the Sheddings in a grudge match after playing prop for Wakefield and Great Britain in the late 50s and early 60s.

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The ground was a civic institution and a centre of sporting activity in the area, and the success of the rugby team had a positive spill-over effect on the other sports based at the ground. As *The Athletic News* noted as far back as 1887, ‘In 99 cases out of every 100... football helps cricket over the stile of financial embarrassment.’ When the Sheddings quite literally began to fall to pieces, and Oldham RLFC were forced to sell it to pay off the club’s debts in June 1994, it was a dark day for not only local rugby supporters but the community as a whole. John Huxley recalls that, ‘The Greyhound stadium was adjacent to the rugby ground, and cricket and baseball were played at the ground itself in the spring and summer. The lounge bar at the club was where all the good and great of Oldham used to come and commune – men like “Rocky” Farnsworth and Frank Disken “the Maharishi of rugby league”, who famously once brought two southern union men [Rosslyn Park’s Bob Mordell and Adrian Alexander from Harlequins] to the club in the early eighties and who first introduced Phil to Dave Alfred, a future coaching colleague in union, in 1984. Socially, Watersheddings was a hub for the local community and one that was never satisfactorily replaced when Oldham RLFC had to move across town to Boundary Park.’

Not that you’d guess it now, now that the whole place has been re-developed as a new-build housing estate, all neat lawns and detached living. They’ve left the old wooden entrance gates there as part of the perimeter fence but they stick out like a sore thumb – beyond the sense of sheer oddity they only give up their secret to the genuine Oldham supporter, one who has known the history of sport in the area for 20 years or more.

The one solid reminder that this is in fact a burial ground full of rugby memories, and particularly of the many crushed Oldham dreams that lie just beneath the surface of the tarmac, is a small blue plaque that commemorates its significance to the community. It is one of many in the borough which remember events and people as diverse as the Peterloo massacre of 1819, Bradbury sewing machines and Joseph Lees, the originator of the fish ’n chip dinner in Market Hall, Albion Street. The plaque reads modestly,

‘On the site of the housing development to the east of this park was the famous Watersheddings rugby ground, which served the Oldham club from its opening on 28 September 1889, until the last first team match on 19 January 1997.’

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For Phil Larder, the name 'Watersheddings' evokes a string of memories that he can count like rosary beads. Most of the touchstones of his rugby life happened there, whether it was as either a spectator, or later as a player for Oldham.

I often revisit them in my mind and they have not lost their significance over time. I grew up in an era when rugby league was thriving and was the number one winter sport in the north of England. Soccer's Oldham Athletic played at Boundary Park but could not compete with the passion generated by league or the numbers of spectators the Sheddings attracted. Oldham was very much a rugby town. All my pals played sport at every opportunity whether on the old disused bowling green in the centre of Moorside or in the school playground, but although we enjoyed playing both soccer and cricket, it was rugby league that we lived for.

It's different now. Oldham finally left the Watersheddings in 1997, only five years after the Latics secured promotion to soccer's Premier League. They bounced around in exile for the next dozen years, playing home matches outside the borough and even suffering the ignominy of being kicked off Boundary Park, a home they shared with the Latics for a while, in 2009. Now they play in the third tier of the rugby league on an old disused piece of ground in Limeside with a stand made out of old spars from Wembley stadium and old seats from Wilderspool.

What a way to go out! I'm very thankful I played in an era before league in the area was on its uppers, and when rugby was still the lifeblood of the town; before sporting interest rolled comfortably downhill into Boundary Park, and the easy sunshine of soccer replaced the Pennine growl of the Watersheddings, with Alan Davies emerging suddenly from the endless fog to deliver another brilliant try-scoring pass to his wing. Give me that, any day of the week.

Back in the late 50s and early 60s, more than half of the Oldham team were Great Britain internationals, and Great Britain were at the top of the pile then, the best team in the world. We could beat Australia, and we could do it regularly. I was at Moorside junior school and I would walk from my house with my school mates to the ground, which was only half a mile or so

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away. I'd be wearing my worn Oldham jersey, all the others would be in their soccer shirts. Eight or nine of us would plant ourselves on a set of steps at the back of the double-tiered stand near the Pavilion end of the ground. We'd beat our shoulders and rub our hands at the thought of the treat in store, and at just the right moment we'd open the shutters at the back of the stand and look out on the players as they walked down to the stadium from the Pavilion. We'd catch a glimpse of our favourites waiting to come out from below the stands. 'There's "Rocky" Turner!' one would say; or I'd shriek, 'Alan Davies just winked at me!' and those moments were treasured in the memory, better than autographs and more warming than Bovril... The games themselves were often thrilling, because Oldham played a brand of open rugby that was exciting to watch, and they had won every competition in England bar the Challenge Cup. That kept us warm on even the coldest of winter afternoons, too.

Phil's mum and dad were also avid Oldham fans, which meant that he went to see as many away games as he did home. When Griff Jenkins took over the coaching, he moved the training to Counthill school. Counthill was a short gallop across the fields for Phil, so he ended up watching every game that Oldham played, home and away, and every training session too. Phil Larder was in rugby league heaven as a schoolboy, and his main memories are of those eager fog-bound journeys to and from a session or a match.

Although there were many great players in the Oldham team – Derek Turner, Bernard Ganley, Syd Little and Frank Pitchford just to name a few – my idol was a man who played right centre for both the club and Great Britain, Alan Davies. I watched every move that he made, or thought I did, whether he was playing for Great Britain in partnership with Wigan's captain Eric Ashton, or for Oldham making strong powerful bursts, drawing his man and cleverly creating scoring opportunities for his winger John Etty.

Alan, the son of a miner, was born in Leigh on the outskirts of Wigan. He was a hard running centre with a great eye for a gap, but what thrilled me above all else was his ability to run on that outside arc, pull both the opposing centre and wing into him before making a perfectly timed and weighted pass to put his winger away down the touchline. John Etty regularly topped

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the try-scoring charts of the day, but it was mostly because of Alan Davies' skills.

I wanted to be just like him. A couple of years into my career with Oldham, I remember stopping off at my parents' house on the way to play in the Lancashire Cup Final against St Helens at Wigan's Central Park. There in the living room, was a framed photograph of Alan Davies in his pomp, with a well-wishing underneath it... It hadn't been there before and it took me by surprise. It was only at that moment that it dawned on me that I might be worthy successor to the number 3 jersey that Alan had worn with such distinction, and that I was now becoming a part of the living fabric of Oldham Rugby League history, just like him. It was quite a humbling moment.

League has always historically been more focused on providing a good attacking, try-scoring spectacle than its cousin union. It does not allow either set-pieces [like lineout or scrum] or a contest at the tackle to interfere with this aim. Even back in 1888 it was noted that: 'The acme of good play is when a skilful three-quarter finishes up a dashing run by dodging a full-back and planting the ball over the line. In the North, no other part of the game is applauded more than this...'

Phil did not realise it at the time, but Alan Davies – and the way he was watching Alan Davies – was to have an important impact on his subsequent career in rugby, and in both codes. John Huxley says that:

In the late 60s and early 70s, Phil Larder took over the role played by Alan Davies in the previous generation of Oldham players. In Oldham's renowned open, handling style of game, Phil was the elegant passer and very clever 'sniffer' of opportunities for the wing outside him, a Welshman by the name of Mike Elliott. They were a great combination both on and off the field, and with Phil's endless midfield coaxings, Elliott became the top try-scorer in club history with 153 tries. Phil wasn't in Alan Davies' class as a player mind you, but he helped carry the torch on for the kind of football the Oldham supporters loved and respected.

Mike Ford recalls watching Phil Larder playing for Oldham as a boy:

Phil was exactly like Alan Davies when he had the ball in hand. He was one of the best in the league at setting up the winger

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outside him. He was quick, very quick, and he could also step his opponent when he moved out on to the winger. Unfortunately, as a defender Phil wasn't the best and we were looking through the cracks in our fingers when attacks went to his side of the field... so it became a case, for us Oldham supporters, of hoping that Phil's creative contributions would outweigh his defensive lapses!

Like most spectators, Phil's eye as a spectator had followed the team in possession, so when Oldham played Wigan and Oldham had the ball he would watch Alan Davies; but when Wigan were in possession, instead of watching Alan Davies defend [and Davies was a great defender] Phil found himself drawn to what Eric Ashton was doing with the ball.

Defence was an afterthought. My problem was that I had never received any rugby coaching. I went to a soccer-playing school and only played a couple of games of rugby as a kid for Werneth, a team built by rugby league historian Tom Webb. Everything I did, I had learned from being a spectator watching Oldham RL.

A rugby ball has a hypnotic effect on the spectator, so that he or she will tend during a game to follow the team in possession. It is entirely natural and pervasive even in the present day [with its saturation TV coverage], that live spectators, armchair critics and media commentators tend to follow the man who is doing something with the ball, rather than the man who is trying to stop him. Because of the nature of narrow angle TV coverage, the ball is everything. The 'unseen work', what people are doing away from the ball and out of shot [which is just as important, if not more so from a coaching point of view] tends to be neglected. A long way into his rugby future as a coach, Phil would always ask his analysts for film footage from behind the posts, as well as looking in from the sideline, so that he could assess the contribution of players away from the ball. One of the stiffest challenges he would face when he switched codes was to persuade the management, coaching staff, players and spectators of the essential contribution that a well-organised defence – the contribution of the people 'out of shot' – can make to the ultimate success of the team.

Phil's dad saw his son's future in union rather than league. Phil started playing first-class rugby union at Broughton Park and was a regular first team player by the time he was 16, running out on to the field alongside established internationals like Barry Jackson and Barry

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O'Driscoll. By the time he graduated from Loughborough University in 1965 [aged 20], he was approaching veteran status, having played for both Manchester and Sale and becoming a regular on the vibrant northern sevens circuit.

On the professional front, Phil had decided on a career in teaching. An opportunity opened up in Saddleworth comprehensive school in the year after Phil finished at Loughborough. Saddleworth is often known laughingly as 'the best part of Yorkshire' by Lancashire folk because it has a Lancashire postcode and was integrated into a new local authority in 1974 – despite being historically a part of the West Riding of Yorkshire! In fact the white rose and the red have argued over Saddleworth's soul ever since the Middle Ages. There are now two signs, less than 50 yards apart, one facing west to Yorkshire and the other east towards Lancashire. As one poor fellow put it, 'I live in a house between the two signs, so where does that leave me? In no man's land?...' The idyllic network of small villages with names like Dobcross, Diggle and Delph are still overshadowed by others of more ancient, even biblical menace further up the Pennines – Jericho, Shiloh and Blunder Ho. So the young Phil Larder found himself on the outskirts of Oldham, living and working on the border between two age-old antagonists. It was quite symbolic, because the tug of war he was experiencing between the two rival rugby codes at the time reflected that geographical divide.

I had been offered a post as the head of PE, and I took it without hesitation. I went on to work at Saddleworth for 16 mostly happy years, and one of my pupils in the 70s was Mike Ford, whose rugby career – playing for Oldham Rugby League and going on to be the England rugby union defence coach – was to bear a strong resemblance to my own. Mike was probably the best rugby player that Saddleworth produced during my time there. I will always remember one cup final when as a young fourth year student I promoted him to the senior team for the final of the Oldham Schools Cup. The winners would represent Oldham in a national competition. Our opponents and closest rivals Fitton Hill were unbeaten, but I remember Mike completely controlling the match with his kicking game and walking away with the man of the match award. Mike was like a master puppeteer even at that young age, pulling the strings to which all the players danced that day.

After an illustrious professional playing career in league he followed my example and switched codes to become a defence

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coach first with Ireland and later on with England. I've always felt there was a strong link there and I recommended Mike for the defensive role with Ireland when all the home unions 'went shopping' for an ex-RL defensive coach after the 2001 British & Irish Lions tour ended. Like me, Mike was a great attacker although his defensive qualities were better than mine. It was a case for both of us of crossing the great divide between codes: we both finished our playing days in league and then spent the most significant part of our coaching careers in union. It must be something in the water at Saddleworth...

Mike Ford himself has some vivid memories of Phil Larder the PE teacher:

Phil was incredibly competitive and intense, and even though we were just a bunch of teenagers I think he tended to view us and treat us as semi-professional athletes! There was the same level of support but also the same sense of expectation. When he took over the PE department at Saddleworth that intensity improved all aspects of all the sports in which the school engaged. Everyone could feel it. Sport suddenly became important, maybe even on occasion more important than your work in the classroom, and it became a form of expression for Saddleworth as a school. I think it was a unique situation within the schools in our area. Phil treated the boys as adult athletes. It was as if a professional coach had been injected into a school [non-professional] setting.

It didn't matter what sport Phil was teaching – and he taught soccer, cricket, cross-country and basketball as well as rugby in my time at the school – the intensity would always be there. When he umpired our cricket matches, he'd be as much on-field coach to the Saddleworth boys as arbiter, offering little snippets of advice... He'd say, 'Come on Fordy, he's moving too far across his stumps...' I'd adjust my line a little, clip leg stump or the batsman would get a tickle down the leg-side to the keeper, and the finger would go up. Phil would say out of the corner of his mouth, 'I told you they couldn't handle the ball coming back into them!' We'd feel under pressure and that there was nowhere to hide, but that brought the best out of us because we were always given every possible aid to success. I guess you'd call it a 'no excuse' culture nowadays.

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I can remember a big cross-country race, all the Oldham schools were involved, and there were teams of eight or nine athletes representing each school. There must have been well over 100 athletes competing in all, but the problem was that the race started in a very narrow lane in which only a few runners could line up abreast of each other. This meant that some of the boys would inevitably be starting well behind the line. All the other schools were out limbering up at least 30 minutes before the race got underway, but Phil had the Saddleworth team warming up in the nearby sports hall. He told us to wear our watches and make sure that we were near the start-line by 1.55pm for the beginning of the race. At the last possible moment, he called us out of the hall. We came trotting out resplendent in our green-and-yellow running kit and looking and feeling very much like the 'A' team, and took up position. The whistle was blown... I swear we must have had a 70 yard start on some of the kids at the rear!

But that was Phil, he wouldn't cheat or countenance cheating from anyone else in one of his teams, but he would maximise every little advantage going because he absolutely hated losing. At rugby our perennial rivals were Fitton Hill, and they had been generally the best schools side in the district. That all changed when Phil joined as PE head. In his first year we lost 9-12 and Eddie Barton was in charge of the Saddleworth team. Even though they were good mates, Phil took it to heart and made sure we didn't lose to Fitton Hill again in my time there... Once Phil saw a priority and his focus settled on a particular aim, nothing would stop him until he had achieved it.

I guess it was a sign of the link between us that Phil finished teaching at the school on the same day that I left it as a pupil. Before leaving I hadn't been able to decide whether I wanted to pursue a career in soccer or rugby league. Eventually I chose soccer, and found that Phil had already devised a programme for me to maximise my conditioning – a programme individually-tailored to my needs, with an athletics trainer, spikes, a nutrition course... – everything had been thought of and thought through in meticulous detail. Even then he would be fretting that the course wasn't sufficiently soccer-specific, or didn't contain enough sprint training... But that was Phil to a 'T' – intensely loyal to those in whom he saw potential, and who were prepared

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to work to make it happen, and professionally attentive to detail, even in a school setting. It was some education for a teenager like myself, and moreover it continued even when I was looking for work much higher up the professional scale as a coach in union. I always knew Phil's helping hand would be there whenever I needed it.

It was becoming hard for Phil to reconcile the demands of a new full-time job looking after a department at school, with playing rugby union in his spare time. Although he enjoyed playing the game, equally he couldn't afford the time away from work, and the long journeys down to places like Bath and Rosslyn Park were becoming a chore. They interfered with his school duties, particularly the management, refereeing and preparation of the many representative teams which are at the core of a PE teacher's role. In the winter, Saddleworth supported six soccer teams, three rugby league sides and four basketball teams, in addition to its numerous cross-country and badminton fixtures. Missing Saturday morning games because he was playing rugby in the Midlands or the south of England set a poor example to his young charges at school.

Although he did not always care to admit it to himself, Phil had never felt instinctively comfortable in the union code:

I felt that I was playing union like a league player and that I'd never really understood the game, even when I was enjoying it! In league I knew just what to expect, so I was back in my comfort zone...

It was therefore with a sense of relief that Phil received an offer to turn professional as a rugby league player for Leigh RLFC. Their coach, the former Great Britain captain Alan Prescott was very persuasive, but when Oldham threw their hat into the ring his mind was made up. The club scout Derek Foy had spotted Phil's potential at the Manchester sevens tournament but negotiations were protracted, with no less than four meetings with the committee.

On the first occasion I'd just grabbed some lunch from the school canteen before hurrying off to meet with the Oldham RLFC committee representatives in a local pub. They said that I could have anything I wanted to eat, but I was too bloated to accept! I knew better after that, and came 'empty' the next time.

THE IRON CURTAIN

Although league didn't become a full-time professional sport until the advent of Rupert Murdoch's Sky-sponsored Super League in 1996, it had always been semi-professional. At Oldham training was two evenings per week, the same as Phil had been used to in rugby union, and apart from the Cumbrian clubs [Workington, Whitehaven and Barrow] all the other clubs were no more than a stone's throw away. The extra money Phil was paid by Oldham allowed him to invest in a new house with his partner [and wife-to-be] Anne and to buy a new car. Furthermore he was able to save all his matchday fees and live off his wages as a teacher.

Some of the stars of the era earned a lot more than the average, as I soon found out. While I was signing for Oldham in the away dressing room of Cheshire club Davenport after losing in the final of their charity Sevens to Newport, in the changing room opposite, just a few feet away from me was David Watkins, the Welsh rugby union international and captain of the British Lions in Australia one year previously. He had captained Newport that day and was signing on the dotted line for Salford RLFC. Afterwards I had a pint with David and was well pleased to learn that I had commanded the same signing-on fee as him – at least until I counted the noughts on his cheque!

David Watkins was to prove my nemesis. After the first three games of the new season Oldham were undefeated and I had won two 'man of the match' awards playing in the centre. I was at the top of my game and I was feeling supremely confident I could handle the young Welshman, having already played against him in the final of the Davenport Sevens in the other code. After my start in professional rugby I was beginning to wonder whether I should have been the one with the extra nought on my paycheque.

In the event, Dai Watkins taught me the hardest of lessons, one that I would never forget – even though I probably ended up overusing it as an example in my frequent seminars on defence at the RFU! That Oldham-Salford match would shape my thinking about rugby and send out consistently powerful ripples throughout my later career as a coach. I had assumed that David would be playing at stand-off, but Salford decided instead to blood him in the centre, with their experienced league international Ken Gill filling in at number 6. So after the first few play-the-balls at the Willows we found ourselves looking across

at each other and it was obvious we would be in direct opposition for the rest of the game.

The first time he had the ball on my side of the pitch he ran directly at me, veering away on an outside swerve at the last moment. I was pretty quick back then and accelerated to keep pace but he almost got around me. As a result I was only able to make a weak tackle several yards downfield. As we both struggled to our feet our eyes met and there was a faint grin on his face – as if to say, ‘I’ve got your number now!’

On the second occasion Dai received the ball, I said to myself ‘I’ll stand a bit wider this time, to stop that outside break.’ He came towards me, I leaned in and suddenly he was gone – I’d been left flat-footed and he’d stepped me on the inside, rounded our full-back Martin Murphy – who was an outstanding tackler – and scored under the posts. It was like that for the rest of the game – if I positioned myself as I habitually did, on the inside half of his body, he could take me on the outside shoulder with his acceleration and swerve; when I adjusted and stood wider I could not handle his side-step. The ground was heavy but it was as if David skipped along the top of the surface while I was stuck in the mud.

He was at another level – sheer lightning... It got to the point where I wanted the ground to open and swallow me up. I felt that everyone in the crowd could see my own defensive frailties as clear as daylight, and that it was a personal humiliation. Moreover, I felt it was my individual inability to mark Watkins that had cost my team the game.

Salford hammered Oldham and Phil reluctantly had to admit that Watkins fully deserved that extra nought on his cheque. David Watkins of course went on to become an all-time great as captain and coach of Great Britain, which was a massive accolade for any player, but particularly one whose early background lay in rugby union. Moreover, Oldham has in the current era become virtually a feeder club to the Salford Red Devils in Super League with a number of its players dual-registered. With the ambitions of Dr Marwan Koukash as a sporting benefactor in the region, it may not be too long before both clubs exist under the umbrella of single ownership. As it turned out, Phil’s own difficulties with Dai Watkins, and the overall result of the 1967 match were both quite prophetic in relation to the very different futures of two great RL clubs 35 years later.

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The match helped change Phil's thinking about the game in both codes for good, even if he wasn't fully aware of it at the time. It wasn't until he visited Jack Gibson in Australia in the 1980s that this thinking began to gestate and take a solid form. But Phil did find himself looking at on-field issues more from a defensive point of view, and the experience with Watkins was far more informative than any defensive 'training' Phil had received previously:

I was aware that I was not a good defender, so I approached one of our coaches Alex Givvons, and asked if he could give me some defensive pointers or training. Alex looked back at me puzzled, then said 'Righty-o then' and took me out on to the pitch with our big second row, Bobby Irving. Then he just lined up Bobby ten yards away from me and had him slam into me at top pace! This wasn't what I had in mind. Because anyone can tackle a bloke running straight for you, it's just a matter of bottle. With England RU, we used to call 'coconut' when this happened because it was just like a coconut shy. You just had to knock the bloke off. But I wanted to know how to defend, not just how to tackle, and that was a team event.

The Watkins experience pushed Phil to see the shape of a bigger coaching picture. He was no longer observing just the great Alan Davies draw and pass, so in a sense he was moving beyond the experiences of his rugby 'nursery'.

When you have undergone a traumatic experience like I did against Dai Watkins, a certain cast of mind [like mine] begins to worry itself into the ground, working overtime to find a solution. For example, I was convinced it would have been very difficult for any defender to have handled Watkins man-on-man consistently, so when I began coaching I started looking for organisational solutions with defenders working in threes – with the middle man playing slightly inside the attacker but protected against both David Watkins' outside break and his side-step by other defenders on either side of him.

Was my humiliation against David Watkins the grit around which the 'pearl' formed?... the pearl of the defensive system I evolved with the England rugby union team in a new millennium? It's hard to say because there were many other factors involved,

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and I possibly over-dramatised the episode when using it as a teaching tool in my rugby union seminars subsequently.

But it was definitely a formative experience, coming so early in my league playing career. At some level, I realised that one man is not enough to stop a really talented attacker on his own. He has to have the support on his inside and on his outside, he has to have team-mates who will help him out. I began to distrust man-on-man defence and moved towards zonal thinking, and with England we always understood that the most important defender was the one protecting the inside shoulder of the player directly under attack. It was the responsibility of that inside defender to control the spacing and talk the man outside him through an attacking play.

I may not have stopped David Watkins that day at the Willows as a player, but I dedicated the rest of my rugby lifetime to stopping him as a coach. I played for 20 years in first class rugby union and rugby league. I trained regularly and I was never dropped from the first team. In all I must have taken part in well over 700 training sessions under the direction of a multitude of coaches – some good, some bad, but all of them passionate, enthusiastic and ambitious. Never once during that time was I, or the team of which I was part, subjected to a rigorous and coherent session on defence. That was the size of the task I was to undertake, unknowingly, when I first made the move into coaching.