



WORDS: Steve James PICTURES: Danni Beach

# PASSION FOR THE GAME



Rugby prides itself on being a sport which embraces all comers, and Llanelli Warriors are a shining example of this inclusive ethos. *Rugby World* travelled to west Wales to see the team in action and discover what makes them so special

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**TRADEY PARK**, Llanelli, has been the setting for many memorable and uplifting rugby stories throughout its rich history, but none more heart-warming than this one: the tale of Llanelli Warriors, who believe they are one of only two teams in the world who include players with learning disabilities. 'Integrated rugby' is how they like to describe it, as 'able-bodied' players play alongside the disabled. Very rarely do you find that kind of interaction in any sport, and it is especially laudable in such a full-contact sport like rugby, given that most people's instinct is to wrap those with learning disabilities in cotton wool.



**Family practice:** Meredith Pugh is following the footsteps of his rugby-playing brother, father and grandfather

And it might surprise you to learn that the Warriors (or Rhyfelwyr to give them their Welsh moniker) are in their tenth season – and some season it promises to be, with a series of fund-raising events culminating in a two-week tour to New Zealand to watch the British & Irish Lions and to play three matches against local sides.

So where did this extraordinary journey begin? Well, in 1994 the only other similar side, Swansea Gladiators, challenged Heol Goffa Social Activity Centre – a day centre in Llanelli for adults with learning difficulties – to a match. A side was assembled from staff, clients and some friends and family to take the field at Gorseinon RFC. The weather was so inclement that one mother felt obliged to take a coat on for her freezing son as some of the players experienced their first taste of rugby union. The result was a 26-26 draw and the side was born. For that match they were called the Llanelli Barbarians. Gary James, then working at the day centre and now chairman of the club, explains: “For insurance purposes we had to give a name for the club and that was what first sprung to mind. That soon became the West Wales Warriors and then the Llanelli Warriors because Llanelli RFC have been so good to us.”

Later that season they played the Gladiators again, this time nearer home at the Llanelli Wanderers ground, and won 40-8. So an intense rivalry was ignited. Llanelli against Swansea has always carried that tradition, and now the teams meet at least once a season to play for the Challenge Shield. “There is no doubt that that is the big game of the season,” says James. “It is the one everyone is really up for, especially, it seems, the able-bodied lads – they are the ones we have to calm down if anything.”

In their second season the Warriors played the Challenge Shield match at Stradey Park, beginning an association which remains to this very day. Mind you, it helps that the Warriors’ fixtures secretary and playmaker at either scrum-half, fly-half or centre is Dean Gilasbey, head groundsman at Stradey. “I’m the head gardener,” he jokes, but he does his level best to ensure his team can use the training facilities there and sometimes the main pitch. The Warriors have played a number of curtain-raisers to major fixtures in front of thousands, and have played the return leg of the Challenge Shield at the St Helen’s ground in Swansea.

Watching the Warriors in action is a wonderful experience: humbling and inspirational in equal measure. I had the pleasure of doing so in their 90th match, against the veterans of Alltwen and Pontardawe. The bus was leaving from Stradey at 1.15pm, I was told. “We are very lucky that the Carmarthenshire County Council is very supportive and helps by lending us the minibus,” says James, now a social worker caring for four members of the team. “We have put in an application for a grant to them too.”



**Warrior spirit:** being part of a team helps the players build self-esteem

I was greeted by Gwilym Lewis, the club secretary – “the driving force behind the club,” says James. Funny that, but Lewis also said the same of James. Such modesty is often prevalent in stories like this. Both are exceptional individuals who deserve enormous credit for their determination to overcome prejudice, and their vision, patience and understanding. But it is instantly recognisable that Lewis, who has been involved with the team for seven years and takes a training session every Friday, is in charge as he frantically organises his troops as they arrive. The enthusiastic anticipation of the group is infectious, although I am surprised, being so deep in Welsh rugby country, to hear mention of former England prop Jason Leonard when some team members are discussing the merits of their front row for the day. Chairman James later explains: “That’s because a few years ago we went to Sophia Gardens, Cardiff to watch the England and Wales teams train before the International. All the players were friendly but Leonard really stood out – he was fantastic to the boys. What a top man.”

This is the fifth meeting with the veterans but never before has the fixture taken place in Pontardawe – it’s always been in Alltwen – so that inevitably leads to some confusion in the finding of the venue. There’s one cry of “Back on the bus, boys!” after we disembark at the wrong place, then we find the Pontardawe Recreation Ground. While the team prepare, it’s time to talk to James, normally the fly-half but not playing today due to a dicky knee – a problem no doubt exacerbated by a run-out for Burry Port 2nds the day before. Some of the able-bodied players do play other club rugby – Lewis appears regularly for Betws RFC – while there is an interesting debutant today in James Davies, a well-known Welsh rugby photographer, who swears unconvincingly that he has appeared for Cathays RFC in Cardiff.

But Gary James is especially proud of a couple of his team whose





Triumvirate: club secretary Gwilym Lewis is flanked by player/coach Dai Spriggs (left) and captain Colin Talcon

experiences with the Warriors have led them into mainstream club rugby: "Our No 8 David Newson, who has a mild learning disability, has played for Burry Port and Meredith Pugh has played on the wing for Cefneithin. They have gained confidence from playing for us and then gone on. That is very satisfying."

But the ethos of this team extends much further than that, with the benefits for the disabled players being far-reaching and varied. They become fitter for a start, but perhaps most importantly, being part of a team builds their self-esteem, creating increased confidence off the field. As Lewis writes in the match programme – which the Warriors produce for every game – "They learn crucial life skills and sometimes access to a whole world they felt excluded from." That is immediately obvious as I watch the match. Their togetherness is really special, their encouragement and helping of each other more heartfelt than most I have encountered in team sports.

The team captain is Colin Talcon, who was democratically elected by his colleagues. Everyone I meet tells me the same thing: "He is the happiest man in the whole world – always

Anywhere will do! Dai Edwards can play in the front row or on the wing



smiling." Indeed he is. And when he scores the first try of the afternoon, everyone else is smiling too. Beaming.

I find myself asking James about various players' disabilities, and discover that Talcon has cerebral palsy and others with conditions like Down's syndrome have played. But James is quick to point out that he would prefer to talk of varying abilities rather than disabilities. He is disappointed that I can't see lock John Horwood – who suffers from Asberger's syndrome, a form of autism – in action. His absence is rare, as he has made 84 appearances for the Warriors. But he is their best lineout forward and has often surprised opponents by pilfering lineout ball from them.

Another missing today is Dai Spriggs, the goalkicking full-back, who has received expert tuition in the past from Llanelli favourites Frano Botica and Stephen Jones. He once scored 20 points in a game against Llannon but has only just had his appendix removed. He prowls the touchline, helps with the warm-up and is unstinting in his advice for his team-mates: from the constant "We need quick ball!" to his berating of fly-half Gilasbey, "Why did you kick that, Dean?" when he felt hard-won ball had been wasted.

Also stalking the touchline is touchjudge Lewis Jones, 55. Visitors to Stradey Park will know that he also stalks the touchline there, as Llanelli's unofficial cheerleader, constantly urging more vocal support for his beloved Scarlets.

James says it is noticeable how the players are influenced by role models, whether in their own village or beyond. He cites the example of young Darren Davies, whom he calls the Warriors' 'Gavin Henson' with his hair normally spiky. But outstanding amongst the disabled players is Simon Jenkins, who relishes the physical confrontation. The Warriors' 'Simon Easterby' I reckon.

James continues: "We want to see these boys develop to their maximum potential in normal settings. We use playing rugby as part of our work in giving them valued roles in the community. But we don't want to be patronised. We want to be clapped off at the end of a game with respect, not pity."

James can rest easy: the Warriors might have lost 42-22 at Pontardawe, but there was respect everywhere. **RW**

## Stars back Warriors from the start

ONE EVENING while still living and playing at home in Llanelli, Craig Quinnell wondered why the floodlights were on at nearby Stradey Park. He strolled down to find the first Challenge Shield match taking place and ended up overseeing the after-match presentations. "It was just great to see them playing," he says.

Since then, a long line of celebrity interest has helped raise the profile of the Warriors. They have had games refereed by Rupert Moon, David Hodges and Ian Boobyer, and legends like Ray Gravell and Phil Bennett have always been supportive. The Warriors have also received generous coverage from local newspapers, radio and television stations.

Next year's New Zealand trip will bring more publicity, but it won't be the Warriors' first tour – they've been to Teignmouth in Devon and Southend: "They're not exactly hotbeds of rugby but we had a great time with all the usual shenanigans," says Gary James. He'd like to play against more integrated teams in the UK, but has not come across any. If you run an integrated team, or are interested in starting one – or if you can help the Warriors fulfil their dream of going to New Zealand – please contact Dean Gilasbey on 07768 030333 or Gwilym Lewis on 01554 777326. **RW**

