

## **“I don’t know where I’d be in life or as a person without rugby”**

*Former semi-professional Ospreys player Phil Jones sits down to discuss the highs, lows, and challenges of breaking into the world of professional rugby, and what happens when things don’t always go the way you hope.*

Over 200 miles away, in South Wales on the other end of my Zoom call, I’m met with a fresh-faced, six-foot, broad-shouldered Phil Jones sporting newly box-dyed peroxide hair. The 22-year-old former semi-professional Ospreys player and Business Management student chuckles at his hair, explaining how he thought he’d join in on the lockdown trend. Ten weeks in and I’ve seen far worse.

Training for high-performance rugby doesn’t come without sacrifices. For most, marking an 18<sup>th</sup> birthday means a night out with friends, and at university, being part of a society is simply a given. But for Phil, social life had to take a back seat: “The hardest part for me was turning 18 and the student nights on a Wednesday. Your weekly training schedule is building up to a game on Saturday so it doesn’t fit, it was hard missing out on stuff like that”.

Growing up in the Gower in South Wales, an area of outstanding natural beauty, home to vast green woodlands, endless beaches, and beautiful bays, Phil has spent most of his life surrounded by rugby. At the age of 7, he started playing for the under 8s team at his local club, Fall Bay RFC, after his Dad’s best friend started up the first-ever junior section of the club. When

Jones began his time at the local secondary, Gowerton Comprehensive, he threw himself into the rugby teams as a fly-half. Being from South Wales, Phil explained how: “Everyone plays rugby or at least knows someone who’s involved in a club. For me, all my mates were playing rugby and 95% of my friends now are players. I don’t know where I’d be in life or as a person without rugby, it’s always been a big part of everything I’ve been doing”.



*Phil Jones pictured playing for the Ospreys last year*

Transitioning between playing for fun and considering a career was a moment Phil remembers clearly: “When you’re 15, you go to Swansea trials where they pick a team out of the schools in Swansea. Then, they pick the Ospreys team (one of the top professional rugby union

clubs in Wales) for their under 16s". Seeing some of his older friends achieve this in previous years was a huge motivator, as well as pressure to achieve similar feats: "Quite a few of my mates had gone into that Ospreys team and the fact they had started being involved with the Ospreys, it felt like if I took it seriously that could be me in a year". Phil explained how, when he hit 16 he started physically developing which was when he went to the gym as a way to build up strength and resilience: "Going to the gym was triggered for performance. That's when I started eating properly, driven by the goal of wanting to progress as much as I could in rugby. I wasn't training for the sole purpose of looking good, I wanted to take rugby seriously".

Phil signed a development contract with the Ospreys in 2016 and was picked to play for their under 16s academy team, then, for the under 18s which allowed him to play for Swansea RFC, a Welsh premiership union team. At 17, Phil started playing for the club and remembers the transition from playing with boys his age to grown men overwhelming: "In one of my first games for Swansea I was 17, and another guy was 44 and had been married, divorced and had kids by the time I was born. I was still a boy, it all happened quite quickly, it forced me to grow up". Whilst playing for Swansea RFC, Jones also transitioned to the next group in the Ospreys Academy where he trained and played until this past season. Jones' contract with the Ospreys allowed him the opportunity to play for the Wales 7s team in 2017, travelling to Dubai and Cape Town for the World 7s

tournament; a competition held every years with games lasting a total of 14 minutes with seven players.

## **"It's not always about winning or losing, it's about the experience and memories with the people you're close to"**

Very few of us can say we've met our heroes, let alone worked alongside them, but Phil has been lucky enough to train with Dan Biggar, fly-half international Welsh rugby union player. Both Biggar and Jones grew up in the Gower and attended the same tiny primary school. For Jones, this made it: "A little bit more real that there was an opportunity for someone like me to go on and play rugby to a decent level". As Jones became older and progressed through the academy, he had the opportunity to interact with Biggar: "I think that just reinforced it for me, seeing how good a person and player he is, I really looked up to him and respected him. He hasn't had it easy off some of the critics, but the way he carries going on about it, he's always been someone I've looked up to".

Having met one of his heroes, travelled the world and played for one of the best clubs in Wales, what is Jones' favourite part about playing rugby? Surprisingly, he

focuses on the camaraderie: “If you’re the underdogs in a game and you win, and the boys are all together afterwards, those are the best moments. It’s not always about winning or losing, it’s about the experiences and memories with the people you’re close to”.

For any aspiring player, their biggest fear is that career halting injury; in 2018 that’s exactly what happened to Jones. With two shoulder operations causing a setback of over 12 months, Phil knew he was running out of time: “The hardest part for me was knowing I was going to miss almost a year out of the three or four year period of my contract. You start to put so much pressure on yourself, you know you’ve got less time to put yourself in the window to be able to get to the next level. You can talk to as many friends who have gone through the same thing, have the best physios and strength conditioning coaches but until you have to deal with it yourself it’s tough. It can be hard to manage, the pressures of achieving at a high level, to give constant high-performance play can be a lot to handle”.

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So what’s next for the fly-half player? Jones has recently completed his four-year Business Management degree at Swansea University, which is something he was encouraged to do by Andy Lloyd, previous manager of the Ospreys Academy. Now, he faces a new and exciting chapter in his career: “My contract isn’t at the Ospreys next year so it’s time to start looking at different paths”.



*Phil pictured in October 2019 playing for Swansea RFC at their home ground at St Helens, Swansea*

With normal life temporarily paused, and uncertainty surrounding the future, Phil is using this time to reflect on his goals moving forward: “If I could continue playing semi-pro rugby and then pick up a role in a business that would be my ideal scenario. I love playing for Swansea, but sometimes the right opportunity might not be there and then you have to start thinking about other options”.

Phil has recently signed with Plymouth Albion RFC for their upcoming season. Let's hope we're not in lockdown for another ten weeks or who knows what colour his hair will be when he debuts at The Brickfields. •





