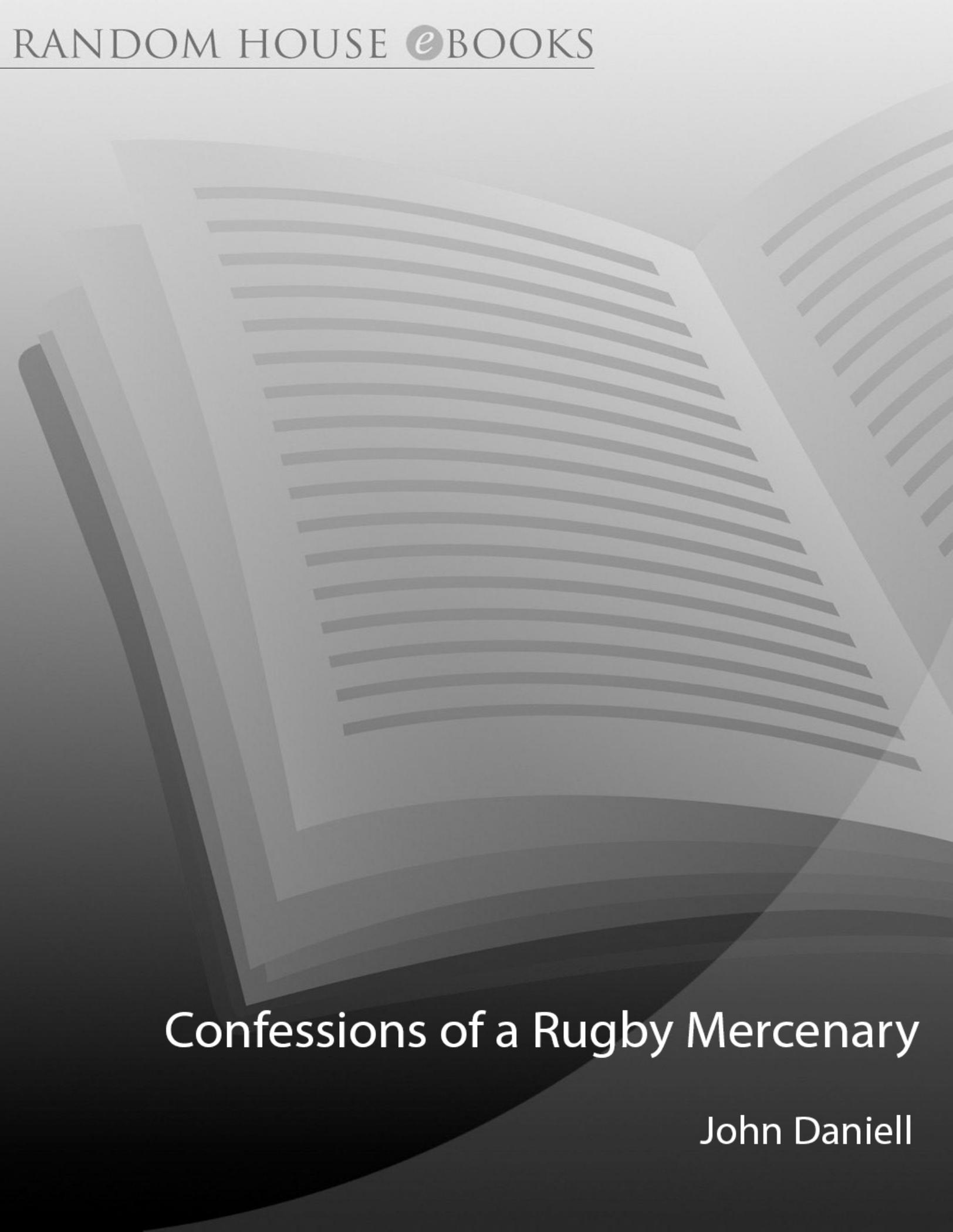


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# Confessions of a Rugby Mercenary

John Daniell

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## About the Book

**‘We do this for money and for the love of the game - but mainly for the money’**

JOHN DANIELL is a rugby mercenary. A brutal word for an often brutal game.

In 1996, when Rugby Union turned professional, John emigrated to France where he played for a decade in top competitions. His team ricocheted between fear and ecstasy, as they battled to save themselves from relegation and their careers from the scrap heap.

Now he lifts the lid on the dark world of the journeyman player, where losing a home game is considered a crime, coaches and club owners will do anything to win, and agents ruthlessly manipulate players.

His compelling confessions are both shocking and funny, taking you behind the scenes, onto the field, and right into the heart of the scrum.

## About the Author

John Daniell was born in New Zealand, and educated both there and in England. After studying English at Oxford University, he worked as a journalist for Radio New Zealand and Capital Television. His early rugby career included playing for England Schoolboys (1990), New Zealand Under 19s (1991), New Zealand Colts (1992), Marist St Pats (1992-97), Oxford University (Blue, 1992-94) and Wellington Lions (1994-96). In 1996 he turned professional, playing for French clubs Racing (1997-2000), Perpignan (2000-2003) and Montpellier Hérault (2003-2006). Currently a free-lance journalist, he has been published in *The Observer*, *The Sunday Telegraph* (UK), *The Evening Post*, *The New Zealand Listener*, and French publications *Rugby* and *La Semaine du Roussillon*. He lives in Montpellier, France with his girlfriend, Marion Chaulet. He has a daughter, Chloé.



- Agen** . . . . . Sporting Union Agen Lot et Garonne
- Bayonne** . . . . . Aviron Bayonnais
- Biarritz** . . . . . Biarritz Olympique
- .
- Bourgoin-Jallieu** . . . . Club Sportif Bourgoin-Jallieu
- Brive-la-Gaillarde** . . . Club Athlétique Brive Corrèze Limousin
- .
- Clermont-Ferrand** . . Association Sportive Montferrandaise Clermont Auvergne (Montferrand)
- .
- Castres** . . . . . Castres Olympique
- Montpellier** . . . . . Montpellier Hérault Rugby Club
- Narbonne** . . . . . Racing Club Narbonne Méditerranée
- Paris** . . . . . Stade Français
- Pau** . . . . . Section Paloise

**Perpignan** . . . . . Union Sportive Arlequins  
Perpignan  
**Toulon** . . . . . Rugby Club Toulonnais  
**Toulouse** . . . . . Stade Toulousain

**CONFESSIONS OF A  
RUGBY  
MERCENARY**

**JOHN DANIELL**



# Introduction

MERCENARY IS NOT a pretty word. It sounds like a cold-eyed thug ready to change his loyalty for money. I am a mercenary, and so are most of my friends. If, as George Orwell said, serious sport is war minus the shooting, we are its soldiers, playing out make-believe conflicts in front of partisan crowds. We do this for money and for the love of the game, but mainly for the money.

As a rule we are known as professional rugby players. This is a bit like calling a spade a shovel: you could be forgiven for thinking they are the same thing, but if you have to actually work with one you soon see the difference. To understand what makes them different (professionals and mercenaries, not shovels and spades), you need to know about rugby.

These days rugby may look like an organised career move, but I fell into it for want of anything else to do. My degree in English literature hadn't proved to be the instant passport to a high-flying career in journalism I had hoped. I had done some work for a regional television station, but the station had quickly gone bust. After finishing a temporary job as assistant producer for Radio New Zealand's Morning Report, I was looking for something to turn my hand to.

Foreign shores looked attractive. Friends from university were fetched up in far-flung, exotic places such as Paris, Moscow and New York. I applied to the Australian High Commission for a job organising a forum in Nauru, a remote island with a population of 11,000 people and a landscape scarred by a century of phosphate mining. The

job hadn't previously featured on my ideal career path, but I was gutted to miss out. Various other possibilities turned out to be dead-ends. I was stuck in the young person's Catch-22 where all jobs require experience and there is no way to acquire experience because you can't get a job.

And then rugby went professional. It felt like winning Lotto without even buying a ticket. At 24, I already had fifteen years' experience of the game, and given the limited time span of a rugby career I could even be said to be approaching my peak. Rather than struggling to get on to the bottom of the ladder in some other rat race, I could slot in somewhere in the middle of the newly created, and apparently relatively lucrative, rugby market.

Of course, no one starts out playing rugby because of money. Like any sport, you get into it because it looks like fun, or you are press-ganged by an overbearing father. As is often the case in New Zealand, I started playing at school. Wherever you start, part of rugby's attraction is the reassuring sense of belonging to something bigger than you. You make friends with team-mates, and have a role to play in a group that needs you to perform well. Representing your school or your club or your town against all comers, you share the joy of victory and the bitter taste of defeat, discover the benefits of hard work, learn how to complain about the referee and the unfairness of it all, and generally grow up.

So far, this is much like any other team sport. The magic of rugby, though, lies in its peculiar emphasis on two basic pillars—inclusiveness and interdependence. Compared to a relatively simple game such as soccer, rugby's rules are complex enough to need a variety of different body types and skills. In a rugby team there is a place for everyone: fat kids (or 'big-boned children', if their parents prefer) prop the scrum; the tall and ungainly like me are predestined to

play lock; rangy, athletic types become loose forwards; the more dexterous, intelligent players run the game from the halfback positions; nimble runners find themselves in the outside backs. If you are scrawny, slow, dull-witted and uncoordinated, you may find your participation limited to bringing on the oranges at half-time; the writing is on the wall. You could always become a referee.

Put simply, the aim of a rugby team is to get hold of the ball, and to organise so that one player places the ball behind the goal-line to score a try. Equally important, of course, is preventing the opposition doing the same thing. All this requires teamwork, certain special skills and physical courage. I am not going to get involved in rules or tactics because that would take up a book in itself. Yes, you can kick the ball between the posts as well, but that isn't really the heart of the game. History buffs will tell you the reason a try is called a 'try' is that when the game was first played it was worth nothing: putting the ball behind the line merely gave you the chance to *try* for a shot at goal. But the game has moved on since then.

The nature of rugby as a contact sport—'collision sport' is perhaps more appropriate—means physical courage is important. In terms of injuries, rugby is right up there at the top of the table. Throwing yourself at someone running at full speed is, under normal circumstances, verging on the insane, and not something that comes naturally. For young men this is, of course, part of the attraction: the danger raises the stakes, and by facing up to it you get to prove to your peers that you are reliable and brave. Your mates have to prove themselves as well—each player must provide his own particular skills if the team is to be successful, and strong bonds of mutual respect soon form. The performance of the team becomes a source of pride, reinforcing the sense of belonging to the community. Rugby players—including women—are often seen as macho, and

there is a pleasingly primal element to the game that appeals to unsophisticated but deeply rooted parts of our nature.

Rugby associates itself with old-fashioned values: virility, self-sacrifice and pride. One of the great rugby clichés is about having ‘pride in the jersey’. I groan inwardly whenever I hear this, but it is a kind of shorthand for the bedrock on which the game is built. This is where mercenaries part company with professional rugby players. The idea behind having pride in the jersey is that when you pull on your team colours you are representing not only yourself, or you and your mates having a muddy-kneed run-around, but a whole community. You are supposed to feel a debt of honour to all those who have gone before you, and to the people who will be supporting you because you represent them. The French refer to this as *l’esprit de clocher*, which my dictionary bluntly defines as parochialism, but the sense is more romantic. Literally, a *clocher* is a church’s clock tower. Symbolically, it stands for everything a good Frenchman holds close to his heart—his family, his friends, his town—the roots of an existence.

You can only really have pride in the jersey if the jersey, and what it stands for, mean something to you, otherwise it’s just another jersey, black, white, red, blue, multicoloured or whatever. I spent three years at my secondary school in New Zealand thinking of the First XV as heroes, and then I became one of them. There was a purity and intensity to the thrill of playing for that team I have seldom felt since.

The biggest kick for a New Zealander, of course, is pulling on the black jersey. In 1992, I played for the New Zealand Under 21s against Australia. The night before the game my team-mate Mark Mayerhofler said we should be ready to die for the jersey. I can remember thinking this was a bit strong—but then he went on to be an All Black

and I didn't. The next day, with 20 minutes to go, I comprehensively bugged my shoulder in a tackle. The other lock had already gone off so there were no more replacements, but I was really feeling it. The team physiotherapist had a look at my shoulder and said, 'The coach wants you to tough it out.'

This is the sort of thing young men dream of: twenty minutes to go, a hard-fought victory beckoning against the hated Australians in front of thousands of people, and New Zealand needs you to tough it out. But when you are actually on the field, unable to lift your arm because you feel as though you have been shot with an elephant gun, your thoughts run more along the lines of, 'Fuck this for a game of soldiers.' No one's paying you. There's every chance that if you keep playing the injury is going to get worse; at the very least it will hurt like hell at every moment of contact. But of course you stay on. It's New Zealand against Australia. Pride in the jersey. You love it, really.

If you think this sounds as though I am trying to present myself as a hero, you're probably right, although anyone else in the team would have done the same thing—in just the same way as we had all spent the long hours training and playing to get ourselves to a level of performance where we were good enough to be chosen for the national team. This was 1992, four years before rugby went professional. None of us imagined we might make money out of it. When I started playing for Wellington in 1994 it was the same thing—long hours of training, games eating up the weekends, and all for what?

In reality, there was a raft of different reasons for participation. Playing for a top team conferred social status. You had the opportunity to prove yourself, and enjoy the fun and the camaraderie of team spirit. And there was the sheer pleasure of doing something well. But at bottom

there was one thing that justified all the necessary energy and drive and ambition and—although the wholesome idealism of it pains my cynical soul—it was pride in the jersey.

Finally, in 1996, we started getting paid: we became professional rugby players. At first this didn't seem to change anything. We were still playing for the same team. The training hours were the same (we didn't make enough to give up our jobs). We just got a cheque at the end of the month.

But then things did change. That season I had what I can best describe as a 'complicated' relationship with the Wellington coach, Frank Walker. At the beginning of the season he asked me to captain the side. I felt this was a bad idea—I was inexperienced, and there were plenty of players better qualified for the job. However, being a sucker for flattery, I allowed myself to be persuaded to take the less glamorous, but equally less onerous, role of vice-captain. Then, after a good series of wins, we lost one game, and as we were going into the changing-room for the next game Frank sent the team manager to tell me that it wasn't worth my while getting changed: I was being dumped.

My chances of a Super 12 contract—a full-time professional salary—for the coming season instantly went west. But if I looked hard enough there was an upside: although I no longer had any hope of fulfilling my ambition of playing for Wellington in the Super 12, I was also free of the emotional and contractual ties that had bound me to my home town.

Before the advent of professional rugby, a player played for the team in the town where he lived. You lived in that town because you worked or studied there, or simply because you were brought up there and it never occurred to you to move. In any case, you made it your home for reasons other than rugby. However, the arrival of

professionalism meant you could choose a team (providing they would have you) and that team's hometown would become your home: all you had to do was play rugby for them.

Of course, this meant 'pride in the jersey' went out the window. You could find yourself wearing colours that meant nothing at all, alongside team-mates you didn't know and who didn't speak the same language as you, in a town you previously didn't even know existed. You would be doing this because the team's management had agreed to pay you a sum of money large enough to make you want to move there and run around doing all the things that you used to do for love and not for money. You would have become a mercenary, like me.

Having decided I was fresh out of rugby-playing luck at home, I went to England and had an interview with Dick Best, director of rugby at Harlequins. He said some nice things and offered me £20,000 a year, plus a £1000-a-game win-bonus for all championship games, including the Anglo-Welsh league. All up, it amounted to around £30,000 a year. As this was about NZ\$90,000, and considerably more than a Super 12 contract, it looked pretty sweet, although I later found out that I could have hoped for more. Some crazy figures were flying around in the early days of professionalism in England.

I had a similar interview at the London Wasps Rugby Club with Nigel Melville, who said much the same things and came up with much the same offer, contingent on my getting a work permit. This quickly became the sticking point. In order to play in England, you had to have a British passport or have played for your country in the last 18 months, in which case you were considered expert enough to be able to pass on useful pointers to your team-mates—although, as there was no distinction made between

playing for New Zealand or Croatia at international level, this was a bit of a loophole.

Meeting neither of these criteria, I left for France, where clubs were then allowed two foreign players, and found myself in contract negotiations in a smoky room just outside Paris with Christophe Mombet, the coach of Racing Club. Racing, Mombet said, usually paid players between 5000 and 10,000 francs a month. It was a pittance compared to what the English clubs were offering, but they would throw in accommodation as well. I said I wouldn't come for less than 10,000, there were smiles all round (damn, I obviously went too low), a handshake and the deal was done.

If this sounds like a bleak story of a wayward young man selling his soul for a few dollars, of the corrupting power of market forces, and of the road to disillusion with a once pure and noble sport, well yes, there is an element of that. As singer Cyndi Lauper pointed out, 'Money changes everything.' But there are plenty of upsides. Rugby's global marketplace gives players the opportunity to see different cultures from the inside and make new friends, while being well paid to do what we love.

There is something of a French Foreign Legion flavour to a team made up of individuals from so many disparate backgrounds: Montpellier, the club for which I was playing when the events described in this book took place, has, as well as New Zealanders, Georgians, South Africans, Samoans, a Muslim and a Jew, an Englishman and an Argentinian, all united for a common cause. And while the relationship between a player and his new club seems more of an arranged marriage than a love match, over time the right amount of goodwill on both sides can lead to it becoming highly beneficial for all concerned. For all the martial metaphors, poorly controlled aggression and

bloodthirsty crowds, serious sport, if it is warlike, is, crucially, *minus* the shooting.

The truth is that the lot of the rugby mercenary is hard to beat, and the rich rugby culture of France is as good a place as any to get your knees muddy and your hands dirty. My grandfather spent a few years on the fields of France wearing the drab khaki of our country's colours in World War I, and God knows we have it sweet compared to his generation.

When I signed up to play rugby in France, the flow of players from New Zealand was just a trickle. Today it is more like a flood, as top All Blacks such as Tana Umaga and Byron Kelleher take advantage of the spoils to be had from donning French club jerseys. This is one of the great sea changes of rugby in our time, with revolutionary implications for the game not only in the southern hemisphere but around the world. Unless you are a power-broker at the IRB or a big wheel in a national union, whether or not it is good for rugby is a moot point: it's happening, and we had better get used to it.

# 1

## Montpellier, Chez Moi

THIS IS MY third season playing for Montpellier, a medium-sized town—about 200,000 people, swelling to 400,000 if you count the outlying agglomeration—in the south of France, a few miles inland from the Mediterranean, in the middle of the bulge of the gulf of Lyon. Just a few weeks before I arrived in July 2003, Montpellier Rugby Club was crowned champion of the second division, winning entry to the first division, or Top 16 as it was then.

A club's accession to the first division, once the hangover wears off, is typically followed by a mad scramble for more money to sign up players and boost squad depth and experience for the following season. The Ligue Nationale de Rugby lays down the dates for the official transfer season, which runs for about a month through June into July, during which time contracts are officially ratified. Most clubs will have started looking for players in January or February, and will have signed pre-contracts with most of their new recruits by May. So by the time the little club from the second division arrives, delighted to have earned the right to sit at the same table as the big boys, they realise that the big boys have already chomped through the best parts of what was on offer, and all that is left are scraps.

As chance would have it, I was one of those scraps. I had come to the end of my second contract with Perpignan, a

town 100 miles further down the Mediterranean coast, just north of the Spanish border. Although a smaller town than Montpellier, Perpignan had a bigger club. This club had just made it into the final of the European Cup, and its ambition was to become part of the small circle of genuine heavyweights—Stade Français in Paris, Stade Toulousain in Toulouse, and, more recently, Biarritz Olympique in the Basque country on the Atlantic Coast—who have been consistently at the top of the pile in the French professional game. As a result, there had been an end-of-season clear-out of those players not considered up to scratch and, along with fourteen others of the 30-man squad, I had found myself out of a job.

This wasn't entirely unexpected, and through various agents I had been tarting myself around since late December—with decidedly mixed results. I had had one solid offer from Montferrand, but hoping for something better I had put them off and they had found someone else. I had really wanted to play for Stade Français in Paris, but a barrage of wheedling phone calls had met with nothing but silence. As far as the ten or so other clubs in the first division went, I felt like Goldilocks. The big ones were too big; after my experience with Stade Français I didn't bother trying Toulouse, who were in even less need of an aging journeyman. But the small ones, who were at least decent enough to appear interested, were too small.

Things were getting desperate—in fact they had been desperate for a while—when Montpellier, who looked as though they might be neither too big nor too small but just right, appeared on the scene. As far as the rugby went, I was well aware that Montpellier would struggle, but there are other things that you look for in a club. *Midi Olympique*, the French rugby weekly, had conducted a survey of players' preferred clubs, taking into account several quality-of-life factors as well as rugby. Montpellier

had figured in a highly respectable fifth place, behind Toulouse, Biarritz, Paris and Perpignan, but in front of bigger names such as Castres, Clermont-Ferrand (Montferrand) and Bourgoin.

The day I was to sign in Montpellier, Biarritz, having just realised they were a lock short for the coming season, called to see if I were interested. After a few hours of indecision I decided I would be better off playing a relatively important role in Montpellier than sitting on the bench—or worse, as an afterthought—in the star-studded Biarritz team, and there was more chance of my girlfriend finding work in the economically dynamic town of Montpellier than the beach resort of Biarritz. On top of this, Montpellier were obviously keen to have me, and as already mentioned I am a sucker for flattery, although I have to admit I was disappointed that the ferocious bidding war for my services, for which I had been hoping, did not materialise.

The agent who would have signed me to Biarritz told me that I had made a mistake, and that we were going to spend a difficult year being steamrolled up front and torn apart out wide. It was with these comforting words ringing in my ears that on a sweltering July morning I rolled up to a ground borrowed from the local army barracks for the first day of training.

At Perpignan the first few weeks of pre-season training had taken place out of town on a borrowed ground, but the rest of the time we had trained at the stadium itself, or at the annexe next door. The stadium complex had also included the weights room, and, brilliantly, all our laundry had been done on site. Montpellier, I discovered, had more of a gypsy flavour. On any given day we might be at the stadium, or the military barracks, or just out of town at another borrowed field, or doing weights at any one of three

different places. And if it rained all bets were off: you could be anywhere, or training might simply be cancelled. The strip worn for the game and the coloured bibs that we wore to distinguish ourselves at training were washed once a week, but after that we were on our own as far as laundry was concerned.

To be fair, Montpellier is a very young club, and by the time you read this a brand new state-of-the-art stadium with annexe grounds and wet-weather training pitches should be up and running. In any case, running around like blue-arsed flies trying to find the right ground does wonders in inducing humility, particularly in those of us who suffer from a hopeless sense of direction, as does dealing with the pile of reeking gear that has fermented in the kitbag you forgot to empty into the washing-machine.

Arriving in a new club is always difficult. For a start, there are all the obvious, non-rugby-related difficulties that revolve around moving to a new home. And then, as with any new job, you have to prove yourself to your new colleagues, while treading carefully through the potential bitchiness caused by your taking the place of someone who was part of the tight-knit community, and the widely held (and not entirely unfounded) suspicion that you are being paid more than the guys who got the team to where it is now.

French rugby is, of course, a small world, and if you're lucky you will already know some of the team, having played with them in another club. At Montpellier, there was at least one friendly face with whom I had played in Paris several years earlier. Unfortunately, there was also a senior player with whom I had an ongoing vendetta, having spent a winter afternoon a couple of seasons earlier trading cheap shots with him while we were wearing different jerseys.

As I tried to fit in, I spent some time worrying about the coming season. It was clear there was some genuine talent at Montpellier, but not nearly as much as there had been in Perpignan. This was logical, given Montpellier's late arrival and small budget: while it is not an absolute guarantee of success, money buys talent, pace and physical presence, so the smaller a club's cheque-book, the less it gets. To their credit, Montpellier had signed on for another two years nearly all the players who had played the season before, so that, having played their way into the first division, they would have the opportunity to show what they were worth. The club had then added a handful of experienced players who, like me, were coming to the end of their careers.

When I say 'to their credit', the club had acted honourably but not necessarily wisely: they could easily have jettisoned half a dozen players of limited potential, and signed the others for only one year, which would have been long enough to head-hunt replacements for those who hadn't adapted. Coming from a club like Perpignan, I was used to a culture of ambition that—in the spirit of the age of the mercenary—had little time for honourable gestures. While ruthless ambition can be short-sighted, there is something to be said for it when you are staring down the barrel of relegation.

The positive side of keeping on the same players is that the group clearly having the confidence of the club president is good for morale, and the social fabric is less likely to tear than if individuals were to try and pull in different directions, as often happens when things get difficult. Every club likes to think of itself as a family with tightly knit bonds, but in Montpellier this had been closer to reality than at most clubs. Players who had retired often stayed involved in some way, through coaching or in a less official role, and this made for a good atmosphere. You got the feeling the club looked after its own, and you were not

simply a piece of meat to be junked when you passed your sell-by date. Understandably, this is increasingly rare in the professional world.

Obviously, though, a good atmosphere is no substitute for results. Two teams would go down to second division at the end of the year, and in the eyes of most pundits Montpellier was odds-on favourite to be one of them. To bridge the talent gap that existed between a good second-division side and the kind of team that could expect to be still in the first division at the end of the year, the coach decided to try bringing everyone up to scratch through drawn-out training sessions that in the summer heatwave seemed never-ending and often counterproductive: more quantity than quality. The team made progress, but I wasn't sure it would be enough.

The first few games of the year were friendlies, and not very encouraging. Luckily for us, 2003 was a World Cup year, so while the big teams' stars were battling for world supremacy in Australia, the rest of us played out an unimportant French cup competition, which allowed us to get to grips with the harsh realities of life in the first division without actually having the knife at our throats. The results were not promising—one win from six games—but not as bad as I had feared. The team took great pride in throwing everything into *le combat*, a good starting point but not really enough. It is possible to grind out a win simply through dogged defence and a good kicking game, but you have to be extremely good at both to pull it off on a regular basis. Top-level rugby is not really a choice between the rapier and the cudgel: *everyone* has a cudgel, so you better have one too, and the bigger the better. But you would be well-advised to have a rapier as well, and to know how to handle it.