

# Stephen Jones

A Thinking Man's Game: My Story

Stephen Jones  
with Simon Roberts



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## FOREWORD BY MARC JONES

**S**tephen and I are brothers. He was born when I was five and a half years old, and growing up we spent a great deal of time in each other's company – almost always playing sport. As soon as Stephen could stand, I would ask him to kick a sponge tennis ball towards me in our living room, so that I could practise my goalkeeping. I guess kicking started early for him.

As we grew older, the games became more competitive and we would play for as long as possible. When it got dark in the back garden, we would turn the lights on in the house so we could keep playing and use any torches to hand. Failing that, we would take the ball indoors – needless to say, Mum's ornaments never lasted long!

Stephen has always been a talented sportsman, achieving representative honours in cricket, football and athletics. But it was in rugby that Stephen most wanted to succeed and, from 16 onwards, that is where his sporting energies were channelled. Around the same time as Stephen signed his first professional contract with Llanelli, I embarked on a PhD in sport psychology and, as a sport psychologist, it has been fascinating to observe his success from the perspective of someone who is interested in what it takes, mentally, to succeed at the highest level.

Stephen shares many qualities with other elite athletes. He is incredibly determined, and this determination to succeed pervades his lifestyle, his attitude to training and playing, and how he responds when the going gets tough. He is a perceptive person and, having observed what it takes to succeed, he has certainly grown less tolerant of mediocrity as he has grown older.

Like other elite athletes, Stephen has talked about how this determination comes from a fear of failure. However, fear of failure is only one part of the story. Some sportsmen and women never truly fulfil their potential because they are afraid to fail, while others, like Stephen, use the fear of failure as a stimulus to realise their full potential and attain real and sustained success. This is not just a play on words; the distinction is crucial and provides the basis for an enjoyable and successful career. As a rugby player, success can come in different forms and, while fame, money and adulation are nice, Stephen has always considered it important to gain the respect of his fellow players and coaches. He is also acutely aware of the history, tradition and standing of the teams he has played for at club, regional and national level and he cares about being part of a group of players who deliver success for these teams.

Of course, there are difficult moments in the careers of all sportsmen and women, and Stephen's is no exception. Indeed, his senior international career for Wales began in the 1998 game against South Africa in Pretoria. Wales were without a host of first-choice players, who were missing through injury, but Stephen gained his first senior international cap. I remember the build-up to the game and discussing the match with Dad beforehand. Despite Wales not having won a single game on the South African leg of the tour, we fervently believed that Wales would win. This supremely insightful analysis was followed by a 96-13 demolition. Like many other Welsh rugby fans, we had (and still have) the incurable optimism that no matter what the circumstances maybe, just maybe, Wales can win.

It was great to see Stephen establish himself in the Welsh team and I vividly remember the game against Ireland in 2000 when Stephen scored his first try for Wales. I was at the far end of the field from the action, but it gave me the perfect perspective of the try. I saw Stephen collect the ball outside the 22 and break the first tackle. As soon as he did,

he accelerated comfortably away from the covering Irish defender and it was obvious he was going to score. So often tries happen in an instant, but on this occasion I knew my brother was going to get the try for Wales and I could really savour the moment. Even discovering that the covering Irish defender Stephen so comfortably outpaced was the veteran second row Mick Galwey did nothing to dampen the memory.

Welsh rugby as a whole did not get to grips with professionalism as quickly as other countries, and the structure and environment left Welsh players ill-prepared to compete at the highest level. It was very difficult to see someone close work so hard to achieve so little, and at times it seemed as though this would never change. Yet Stephen never lost his faith that things would improve. He kept telling me that the Welsh squad were working really hard; he could see the progress in training and in games and he was convinced the good times were around the corner.

When Wales won the Grand Slam in 2005, I was so pleased for him. I knew how hard he, and the rest of the team, had worked to make it happen in the face of disappointing results. Of course, the Grand Slam did not lead to continued success and when Stephen was captain of Wales the results were not good.

During this time, Stephen was singled out and subjected to a sustained period of personal criticism in certain sections of the media. This was a difficult time for him. He loved playing for Wales, and he wanted to be captain and achieve success for them. Obviously, Stephen is not the only sportsman, let alone captain of Wales, to experience this, but it was tough to see him go through it all. It can be difficult to know what to say to someone in that position, but I do know Stephen deeply appreciated the support he received. I guess he would have expected support from his family and friends, but I know he was also very touched by

the support he received from rugby fans in Wales and beyond through a number of letters and messages of goodwill sent to him at Stradey Park. It must have been a difficult period for Stephen, because during this time he actually looked paler than normal – something I had previously thought impossible! But instead of letting this experience knock his confidence and dampen his desire to play for Wales, Stephen responded by working hard to regain his Welsh place and contributed to the 2008 Grand Slam campaign. This is an example of the determination and resilience that is typical of him as a person and a player.

An autobiography often gives an insight into the person, not just the public persona. However, Stephen is really one of those people with whom ‘what you see is what you get’. Whenever I think of Stephen, I smile, because when we are together we laugh a lot. He has a real zest for life. Admittedly, he can be guarded with the media, but the Stephen you see on the rugby field is a reflection of him as a person. He is intelligent, committed, fair, brave, proud, talented and good-humoured.

Writing this foreword has given me the chance to reflect on Stephen’s career to date and, after doing so, I wanted to find a way of summarising his achievements and his qualities as a person. While league titles, Welsh Cups and Grand Slams are fantastic achievements, I always think his worth as a player can best be summed up by the fact that Gareth Jenkins, Graham Henry, Steve Hansen, Mike Ruddock, Sir Clive Woodward, Warren Gatland and Ian McGeechan have all selected him as their first-choice outside-half.

Being a rugby player, though, is only part of who Stephen is, and while I am very pleased for him that he has achieved so much success, most of all I am proud of him as a person. He has dealt with the roller-coaster ride of Welsh rugby without changing. He is the same humorous, generous and

caring person he always has been, and that is, by far, his greatest achievement.

*Marc Jones*  
*September 2009*

## INTRODUCTION BY SIMON ROBERTS

**Who is Stephen Jones?** That was the question an old friend asked me when I told her I had been asked to help write this book. It was a great question, one I hadn't even considered, but it resonated with me long after the cup of coffee in the Cardiff bar had gone cold. It was an incredibly perceptive remark and left me plundering my own memory banks for the answer for days, weeks, even months.

I had known Steve – or Jonesy, as most people know him – for more than a decade. He was somebody I respected, not because of his undoubted rugby intellect but because there was a brutal honesty at his very core. But who was he, really? Here was somebody who didn't crave adulation from the wider world, but respect from his peers. In fact, he was somebody who had positively shunned all the trappings and decoration that were on offer, or had been thrown at him, as Wales fly-half. It simply never interested him. It was always about achievement, not recognition.

It wasn't even about emulating all the greats who had worn probably the most famous shirt in world rugby (along with the New Zealand number 7), the Wales number 10 jersey. Those who sit in the stands, their living room, the rugby club or any bar where you watch a game, and even the professional cynics in the press box, will never truly understand what kind of pressure, even burden, that must be.

Let's reel them off: Carwyn James, Cliff Morgan, Dai Watkins, Barry John, Phil Bennett, Gareth Davies, Jonathan Davies and, of course, Neil Jenkins. That, surely, underlines what I am talking about. Don't get me wrong, Steve has always respected the great players who have gone before

him and the mantle he inherited, but he simply, for whatever reason, never compared himself to any of those legends. He was simply Steve, or Jonesy, who had a job to do for his teammates. Doing the job for them was more important to him than living up to any kind of legacy bestowed upon him.

Even now, I am not sure he realises or appreciates who he is or what he has achieved. Two Grand Slams – only Bennett has won as many Grand Slams wearing the number 10 jersey for Wales – two Lions tours, three World Cups and 80 caps for Wales. He has captained his country and is the second-highest points scorer in the history of Welsh international rugby. His Test career has spanned more than a decade. Jonny Wilkinson, England's World Cup winner, even deferred to him and wore the number 12 jersey while Steve played fly-half for the Lions in New Zealand in 2005.

It requires a certain kind of humility, mental toughness, self-belief and sheer bloody-mindedness to be able to break your job down like that, and not get caught up in all the hype and expectation that surrounds Welsh rugby. The message was always simple and to the point: 'It's not about me, mate. It's about the team.' How many of us, in whatever job we do, have the ability to do that? I could reel off the good deeds he has done for people, which he has never publicised, that were above and beyond the call of duty, but it's simply not his style to say, 'Look at me.' I just hope when he swaps his boots for his slippers and the endless bowls of pasta for a rare steak, he allows himself the time to reflect on what he has achieved in a truly remarkable career.

Even in his darker moments, and there have been a few, he asked himself the searching questions before he challenged others. Then, while most of us would settle for the quiet life and blame everybody else, he would blame himself if he hadn't challenged the players and coaches around him and just settled for second best. It requires a

certain type of courage to turn around and do that, but it also shows the respect you have earned when those very people listen to you. At times he even seemed to relish the tough times more than the success that came his way. Being written off, proving people wrong and diving deep into his own reservoir of resilience was, sometimes, the real battle that had to be won.

For me, that is why the Stephen Jones story is such a fascinating one to tell. Neil Jenkins, Ceri Sweeney, Gavin Henson, Iestyn Harris and James Hook have all competed with him for the Wales number 10 spot and he is still there. Even now I am not sure I have really got under his skin. After all, some truly talented rugby players have tried and failed, so what hope was there for yours truly?

All I know is that this is a bloke I would want next to me in the trenches and he would have no qualms in telling me if I had let anybody down. That is all you can ask. He is also bright enough to understand that you never give everything away – you have to keep something back for those you truly care about, but ultimately for yourself. For that, I have the utmost respect for him. There is a life outside rugby, even for a most passionate Welshman, and Stephen Jones is certainly that. He definitely appreciates, even in a rugby-mad country like Wales, that there is more to life. This is his story.

*Simon Roberts September 2009*

# CHAPTER 1

## GRAV

Adversity doesn't build character, it reveals it.

- *Vince Lombardi, legendary American football coach*

**O**n **15 November 2007**, I experienced one of my toughest days on a rugby field ever. It wasn't facing the All Blacks, being captain of a Wales side beaten by a record score by England in Cardiff, or picking up the wooden spoon with the national team, it was being a pall-bearer at Ray Gravell's funeral at Stradey Park.

It was, and still is, a moment in my life that sums up rugby – a game I love and would play for nothing – but it also put it into perspective. God knows I hadn't done that in the early part of my career. I thought playing rugby was a matter of life and death. It pervaded everything I did, and defined me. Just being on the losing side after a game felt like the end of the world, but it never really was. It was only as I got older that I really appreciated that. Grav's funeral, though, did represent what the game, particularly in Wales, does for every community and for the country by bringing so many different people from different walks of life together. Rugby *isn't* a matter of life and death, and I do hope everybody appreciates that. Some things are much more important even than rugby.

Grav, as everybody knows, was somebody I loved. He wasn't just a Scarlets, Wales and Lions rugby legend, he was also a Welsh legend. Being asked by his wife, Mari, to carry his coffin at Stradey Park on that incredibly emotional day

was one of the biggest honours in my life. Dwayne Peel, Simon Easterby, Gareth Jenkins, Delme Thomas, Derek Quinnell and I all carried him into the ground, which was Grav's second home. Even now I cannot describe the range of emotions I felt that day.

To see the place packed to the rafters with former Scarlets, Wales and Lions teammates of Grav's and a complete cross-section of the Welsh population, including great poets, singers and, of course, the very people who had taken him to their hearts – the Welsh public – was a fitting tribute to a great man. The funeral was shown live on television and Rhodri Morgan, the First Minister, was there. It was the closest thing we have had to a state funeral in Wales, but it was more than that for me. It was a day when all the people who loved this larger-than-life character could say goodbye to him and show how much they loved him, celebrating the incredible life of a great man.

I am not afraid to admit there were tears when I learnt about Grav's death, and keeping it all together on the day of his funeral was unbearably tough, but I just didn't want to let him down, or Mari and his two girls, Gwenan and Manon.

I can still remember taking the phone call at home from Stuart Gallacher, then Scarlets chief executive, who told me Grav had died. It completely floored me. I think his death came as such a shock because Dwayne Peel and I had been to see him in Glangwili hospital not long before and he had been in great form. He was his usual positive self, cracking jokes with us, his fellow patients and staff, and trying to put us all at ease. He was coming to terms with having his lower leg amputated due to diabetes, but you would never have known he had just been through the trauma of a major operation. All he wanted to talk about was rugby – the Scarlets and Wales – and our families. He hardly mentioned himself. That was Grav all over.

Here was somebody who had been one of our greatest ambassadors and he had passed away in Spain, miles away

from the country he loved so much. Everybody thought he was on the road to recovery and had been amazed by his resilience after the operation. Nobody expected him to die. I fully expected to see him around Stradey and that he would always be on the phone, telling me some great story or handing out another great piece of advice. But he was gone, just like that. I couldn't believe I wouldn't talk to him or get one of his famous big bear hugs or giant pats on the back ever again. The sadness was overwhelming.

Grav and Peely went way back. Peely's grandfather, Bert Peel, was the Llanelli physio. He is a figure who has gone down in Stradey Park folklore. He used to play all sorts of mind games with Grav when he was in his pomp as a player, just to get him on the field. They were a real double-act, and Peely grew up with all the stories about how his grandfather would pass Grav fit to play. The most famous one I know is when Grav went down injured during a game, clutching his knee, and Bert ran on and immediately applied the ice-cold 'magic sponge' to Grav's head.

'It's my knee that's injured!' Grav said, pushing the sponge away.

'No, Ray, the injury is in your head,' Bert replied.

Grav always regaled us with stories during our visits – there were so many, you could probably publish a book full of them. I can still remember the way he dismissed two big wingers we were about to face in a game with a simple put-down: 'I have seen bigger wings on a blackbird.' It was said with the usual glint in his eye and a hint of mischief.

Grav was just one of those special people who, no matter what, had the rare ability to make you feel on top of the world or ten feet tall after you had talked to him. Even now I miss the big slap on the back that would nearly knock me off my feet, or bear hugs that would leave me gasping for breath. He was, quite simply, a one-off.

He loved people – not just rugby people – and loved life. He loved being Welsh and would make sure everybody knew

he was proud to be Welsh, but he was never a parochial Welshman. Watching him do a post-match interview on TV with a non-Welsh speaker always brought a smile to my face. You could see the player or coach he was about to interview look on in absolute horror as he asked his question in Welsh, and then their absolute relief when he asked the same question in English.

Everybody knew Grav was a proud Scarlet. Of course, his 'West Is Best' catchphrase has gone down in legend and is emblazoned across one of the stands at the new Parc y Scarlets. People loved and respected him because he wanted everybody to do well – as long as you didn't beat his beloved Scarlets! He made no attempt to hide his bias towards the Scarlets and his heart-on-sleeve approach to life is what made him so popular.

I can still remember when Llanelli played the All Blacks in 1998 at Stradey and Grav, who had been part of the famous Scarlets side that had beaten New Zealand in 1972, walked into the dressing-room before kick-off to talk to all the players. He didn't say a word, just started crying and had to walk out. He came back moments later and the same thing happened again; it brought a smile to all the boys' faces and broke the tension, but it also showed how much the Scarlets meant to him.

He got a real kick out of being around coaches and players because it kept him in touch with the game he loved. The smell of liniment, sweat and tension in the dressing-room before a game was like a drug to him. He probably didn't realise it, but for me he was a very real link to the great history of the Scarlets. He might not have been the greatest player to play for the club, but he was the greatest Scarlet by a country mile. Whenever I step onto the field, I remind myself I am representing him and the other legendary players who have worn that famous and very special jersey. It is a responsibility I feel very deeply and take very seriously indeed.

When I was Wales captain – or anytime, for that matter, when I had felt the world was against me – Grav would always leave me the same message on my mobile phone, '*Ti yw'r gorau,*' which translated from Welsh into English means 'You are the best.' He almost had a sixth sense about when to leave a message; it would always be timed to perfection and was the ultimate pick-me-up. That was the kind of man he was. I don't think he ever knew how much that meant to me – and how much it would have meant, I am sure, to everybody to whom he did the same thing. It was something he didn't have to do, but he did it to make sure you knew he was thinking about you and that he was on your side.

Everybody knew he'd had more than his fair share of personal battles, but he never showed it if they caused him any kind of pain. He was such an incredibly positive person. He was always supportive and always looked for the good in everyone. One thing is for sure: the world is a poorer place without him.

Grav represented all that is good about rugby. He was passionate about the game and didn't want to let his teammates down. He would knock seven bells out of the opposition during the match but would always have a drink with them afterwards, whatever the result.

In my rugby career I have been so lucky to come across so many good people. The game may have changed out of recognition because of professionalism, but rugby does have its own set of unique values and I hope it never loses them.

Rugby is a team game and its team ethos and camaraderie are what make it so different from so many other sports. It's why I love the game. I would never have been any good as a tennis player or at any other individual sport. Snooker player Matthew Stevens is an old school friend of mine, and I have nothing but admiration and respect for him, but winning and losing on your own just

doesn't appeal to me. I like to be part of a team, where you win and lose together. I love the banter, the constant mickey-taking and, as I get older, I even love the challenge of trying to build team spirit in a side that is struggling on the field.

Rugby's great appeal for me is that it teaches you to rely on the man next to you, and he, in turn, must be able to count on you in the heat of battle. It's a physical test, but it's also a test of your character, mental toughness, selflessness and honesty. Sometimes you have to take responsibility and some pain for your teammates; other times you have to challenge people around you and be big enough to have the same done to you.

One thing I have learned about the game as I have got more experienced is that there are no short cuts. If you want to be part of a successful rugby team, sometimes you have to go through a lot before you can taste victory. And the old cliché that you learn more from your defeats than from your victories is just so true. You learn more about yourself, your teammates and ultimately your team when things aren't going well. You might even find out things about yourself you didn't know and don't like. Sometimes you realise you are not as good as you think you are.

Scott Johnson, Wales's former skills coach, is another rugby man for whom I have huge respect and admiration. Johnno is a typical Aussie and, just like Grav, a larger-than-life character. His arrival in Wales back in 2001 coincided with the beginning of my rugby education. Technically, he was outstanding. He taught me the basic principles of the game and how to implement them, and made me realise I knew so little about rugby, really. Before he arrived my approach was based around trial and error on the pitch. Johnno opened my eyes to the different styles of rugby and showed me there was more than one way to skin a cat. He taught me to think outside the box and to ask myself the question: 'Why?' Why

are we doing this? Is it because this is what we have always done, or is it because it is the right thing to do?

He made a big impression on how I thought about rugby and this had a dramatic effect on my game, but he made an even greater impact on me off the field. He taught me valuable lessons about achieving balance in my life outside rugby. Throughout my career, especially in the early days, I would have terrible mood swings if I lost a game of rugby. I would dwell on a defeat for days and be a real nightmare to be around. Johnno has been touched by tragedy – he lost his first wife to cancer – and probably because of that he has got life, and rugby in particular, in perspective. He works hard, but knows where and when to take a break from the game. It doesn't have to be all-consuming. He would always have something else to talk about other than rugby. It might be a book he was reading, a country he wanted to visit, a film he had seen, the music he was listening to or another sport he followed. He taught me how to switch off from the game. Despite all that has happened to him, he is another incredibly positive and supportive bloke.

Rugby is the national sport of Wales and it can be overwhelming. I used to obsess about every little thing on and off the field. Johnno managed to put all of that into context for me; he taught me how to forget about the Welsh rugby goldfish bowl and to stop seeing playing for my country as a burden and to enjoy and revel in the responsibility. He reminded me how lucky I was to be wearing the red jersey and how every man, woman and child in Wales wanted to swap places with me when I stepped out onto the field for those big games. He taught me to get away from the game and to get off the emotional roller coaster, to stop talking and thinking about it every minute of every day. I cannot tell you how important or valuable that has been to me. It has been the biggest personal challenge of my career.