Jim Telfer

Looking Back . . . For Once

Jim Telfer with David Ferguson

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To Mum and Dad,
Frances, Mark and Louise

JIM TELFER

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Foreword by
HRH The Princess Royal

EDINBURGH AND LONDON

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Foreword

by Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal, patron to the Scottish Rugby Union

Jim Telfer is well known throughout the world of rugby both for his exploits on the field and as a coach with Scotland and the British and Irish Lions, and through my role as patron of the Scottish Rugby Union, I have had the pleasure of meeting him at games and various functions on many occasions. I am delighted he has chosen to write about his very full and colourful life in rugby, as he has given so much to the game and sought nothing in return other than the joy of seeing his teams and players achieve.

Our contact has not been limited to the rugby arena, however, and what is less well known, at least outside Scotland, is the great success Jim achieved as an educator. I was delighted to be asked to open the refurbished Hawick High School in 1993, at the time when Jim was headmaster at the Borders school. As a teacher, Jim knew that rugby has its place in education in developing an understanding of rules and working with others. Rugby demands a range of skills and risk-taking, and inculcates in its players a sense of responsibility by one’s self for one’s teammates.

He is often seen and portrayed as a rugged Scotsman who rarely enjoys himself, one who rarely smiles, and there is no doubt that he takes the fortunes of Scottish rugby very seriously. However, you cannot be a popular and successful headmaster and not have a sense of humour. Even his players know he has a highly developed sense of humour,

some might say slightly too highly developed. In October 2003, I had lunch with the Scottish squad in Sydney and wished Jim, Ian McGeechan and all the players good luck in the World Cup, which turned out to be Jim's farewell tournament.

I have known this unique Borderer for over 20 years and his commitment to rugby at all levels, be it in striving to develop rugby as a team sport in schools, or steering Scotland or the British and Irish Lions to success, has been inspirational. Jim deserves his place in rugby history as a leading innovator and coach, but his achievements as an educator should not be overlooked. I know you will enjoy reading Jim's autobiography and I wish him well, as we all do, in his retirement.

Introduction

by Martin Johnson CBE
British and Irish Lions (1993, 1997 and 2001)

Martin Johnson remains the only player to have captained the British and Irish Lions on two tours. He was part of the 2–1 series defeat in New Zealand in 1993, and in 2001 he led his side in the 2–1 defeat to Australia, so it is no surprise that he considers the 2–1 win in South Africa in 1997 to be among his greatest lifetime achievements.

A rugby player will look back on titles, trophies and successes on the field with some pleasure but what most players desire from the game is respect – respect from peers, from teammates and opponents, and from coaches – and not everyone achieves that.

If you won the respect of someone like Jim Telfer, it meant something, and in the British and Irish Lions success of 1997, every single forward, and most other players, I suspect, quickly made gaining his respect a priority. To be honest, I don't know if I ever achieved that, because he would never tell you – forwards don't go in for that soft stuff – but I would like to think that I did. He certainly won my respect.

I only knew of Jim Telfer, the veteran Scottish coach, by reputation before 1997 and although I'd come up against his Scotland teams, I had never worked with him before then. The Lions players knew he was quite a tough character, that he demanded high standards and worked players very hard. I have to admit, he was generally painted by players and

the media as some kind of ogre who you really didn't want to get to know. He was nothing like that.

For a start, he was not as hard away from the training field as we expected. He was straightforward and honest, but he listened and was a coach who showed respect to players. Rather than being an ogre, he was quite simply committed. He does not suffer fools gladly, nor does he like mucking around when there is serious rugby to be played and I have found that forwards coaches who have that strong, disciplined approach are the better ones.

But once on tour, travelling across the sometimes hostile rugby environment of South Africa, Jim Telfer came into his own. We started the tour very well and it was going along nicely when, two weeks away from the first Test match, we hit a week which was the major turning point of that whole experience. We were to play Northern Transvaal, Gauteng Lions and then Natal in just over a week, and we knew these games would be very tough. Having won every match up to that point, there was a momentum building with us but also in South Africa as the proud rugby nation urged each team to become the first to topple us.

We probably had become a bit too confident by the time we met Northern Transvaal – the Super 12 team also known as the Blue Bulls – and we lost the game 35–30; that knocked us out of our stride. Jim called us all together after that game and told the players in no uncertain terms that we were not good enough, that we were not playing at a standard to worry anyone and that we had a choice: adapt or go under.

He then took us down to Loftus for a forwards training session and gave the guys a really tough time. It was a no-holds-barred session which would make grown men wince. International players now would probably say they wouldn't do that a few days before a match but we all knew what it was about: this was a challenge and our character was

being put to the test. So everyone got on and did it – no moans.

We went out and beat the Gauteng Lions at Ellis Park with a great try from John Bentley and then really stuffed Natal, in a week when Paul Wallace and Jeremy Davidson came through to push their Test claims. We didn't lose another game on the tour until the final Test match and I believe that was because of what happened that week. Jim had forced everyone to stand up at a point where there was a risk the tour would fall flat, a time when players were questioning and perhaps doubting themselves.

There were a lot of first-time Lions on that tour and the squad needed someone to show the way and have belief in them. Jim pulled it together and pushed many of us to the level required to win a Test series and I don't think, as a team, we would have achieved that without him. He and Ian McGeechan were a great partnership – the quiet, thoughtful McGeechan and Jim with the big stick. It worked perfectly and both styles were needed on that tour.

There were funny times as well. The footage in the *Living with Lions* film of Jim and Ian sitting in the stand, with local supporters all around them hurling abuse, getting frustrated as they watched us in the Second Test is absolutely priceless. They were like an old married couple!

It is a great privilege to have played on and captained a winning Lions tour, particularly having suffered defeat in 1993 and 2001, and I feel it is fitting that Jim's career included such a high point, as he, also, had endured some hard times on Lions tours as a player and as a coach before then.

I think Jim is a guy who inspires loyalty, respect and hard work. People misread Jim when they say players live in fear of him: it is not fear but an acknowledgement of the passion in him which motivates players. Players in his charge quickly get to a point where they simply don't want to let him down.

Our paths have crossed many times since 1997 and we still look at each other with a glint in the eye, a smile – that is all it takes to recall the memory of what we achieved together. Jim Telfer is a wonderful person and a coach who deserves a significant place in the history of world rugby for what he has contributed to the game.

Preface

by David Ferguson

You may feel at times reading this book that Jim Telfer is a man quite full of himself, a strong character with a confidence in his own abilities which he is not reluctant to share. It is a confidence delivered with a seriousness which has jarred with some people over the years and made him enemies, and one has often wondered where this desire to convince people that he is successful stemmed from; it was, in fact, one reason for encouraging Jim to write his life story.

Jim Telfer is not a conceited man and all who know him will attest to that. But with them, he does not feel the same need to point out his successes. Having reached the end of his story, I do feel we have uncovered some explanations for this innate eagerness to convince. As you will soon discover, much of Jim's approach to his rugby career, his never-ending pursuit of improvement, has come from his upbringing in the remote Borderland.

Jim is the son of a Borders shepherd. The environment in which he grew up is one where people live straightforward lives: they work hard, take a wage and ask few questions, and praise is deemed superfluous. His upbringing also developed in him socialist leanings. He abhorred the class divides in rural Scotland and sought to break or shun them throughout his life, always from the perspective of the working-class underdog. He therefore grew keen to challenge authority and champion the successes of the working class, his own included.

Another, more latent contributor to his fiery exterior is the criticism he received towards the end of his career, some fair but much more wholly undeserved. That resulted to a large extent from the fact that his straight-talking, serious demeanour made him an easy character to attack, and there are always plenty of dips in Scottish rugby for those keen to begin the season of hunting for scapegoats.

Jim has taken much of this on the chin but, with an in-built defence mechanism that manifests itself in angry and often controversial outbursts, he would at times confront criticism without thinking of the consequences. He has, therefore, upset people and explains in this book some of his regrets.

But, one hopes, what comes through clearly is that Telfer is a man who has quite simply devoted himself to Scottish and British and Irish Lions rugby, seeking nothing for himself in the process. His background shaped a man who no longer needs to convince, someone who has given more to Scottish rugby than any other single individual, and whose commitment and determination may never be matched.

He made mistakes and he achieved incredible successes but he was always prepared to push the boundaries, push those working with him and push himself as hard as he could. The main reason I pressed Jim to write this autobiography was simply because I could not believe that there was not already a book among the countless publications on shelves around the world chronicling his near 50 years at the heart of rugby.

Now there is and it has been a privilege to walk the path to this point with a character as wonderful, honest and likeable as Jim Telfer.

It would not have been possible without the terrific support of Jim and his family – particularly Frances, his wife, and his daughter Louise – and my understanding wife Fiona and daughters Kate and Olivia. We are indebted to HRH the Princess Royal and Martin Johnson for their input. This book will, hopefully, take you on a journey much more vivid and

interesting than many autobiographies can and much of that is down to the number of people who have contributed to the chapters: Peggy, Frances and Kenneth Telfer, Derek Brown, Derrick Grant, Colin Meads, Gareth Edwards, Terry Christie, Richie Dixon, Andy Irvine, Willie John McBride, John Rutherford, Ian Landles, Finlay Calder, Roy Laidlaw, Ian McGeechan, Gregor Townsend, Gary Armstrong and Bryan Redpath. The tremendous statistical help from Michael Scouler, a Scotland and Lions devotee, and Jack Dun of Melrose has helped ensure as much factual accuracy as possible, while the work of many of Scottish sport's best photographers has ensured some great images. We thank them all for the great help.

We also acknowledge the indispensable assistance provided by the passionately written books on the Lions by Terry McLean, J.B.G. Thomas, John Reason, David Frost, Bill Beaumont, Ian Robertson, Andy Dalton, and Clem and Greg Thomas, and on Scottish rugby by Nick Oswald and John Griffiths, and John Davidson. Many others have helped ensure that a full and rounded story emerged, and the tremendous support and expertise of Mainstream Publishing, and, in particular, Bill Campbell, Graeme Blaikie and Claire Rose, turned the idea into reality. I must also thank my employers, *The Scotsman*, for their encouragement to pursue this project.

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A Difficult Birth

Kenneth James Telfer
Age: 13
Caps: many (mostly worn backwards)

It is good that he's retired now. It was nice having a papa that was well known, though I can't believe that he was famous for being a rugby player and coach, and I don't even like rugby. I prefer cricket and swimming, and outdoor sports like sailing and canoeing.

It can be annoying as well, now he's retired. Papa likes to give me homework to do – he always tries to get me to do lots of spelling and who likes that? And he checks up on me when it's not done. I particularly do not like him waking me up in the morning when I stay at the weekends!

He still watches rugby constantly but he has time to take me on a lot more trips now. He's great fun when we go away visiting places. We've been to bird sanctuaries, museums, safari parks and Disney World in Florida – he wasn't very brave because he wouldn't go on the rollercoaster. I always try to get him to go to Blackpool but he won't ever since he discovered there was a rollercoaster there!

But I am proud of what he has achieved and I am glad Jim Telfer is my papa.

In his year of presidency of the English Rugby Football Union (RFU), just after the game had gone professional, Peter Brook made a most profound statement when speaking of the need to commit to the exciting new sport that was appearing before us. He said: 'A woman cannot be half-pregnant.'

It was a strange metaphor but it set me thinking. It actually created a vivid picture of how I perceived the birth of professional rugby and the differences between the leading nations. If we were to think of rugby as a married couple, then pre-1995, they could be said to have had no children. Post 1995, a child in the shape of professionalism came along. There had been attempts before then to have children, with talk of professional circuses and 'shamateurism', whereby the child was born but hidden away and looked after by a sugar daddy.

In 1995, some families (unions) began planning for a birth while others ignored the signs. France and the southern-hemisphere countries had actually seen it coming for some time and planned for years to have a family, but the home nations had shunned the very idea.

When it came, I believed there would be no hiding any more and was surprised that rugby families acted differently from one another. The Irish family quickly accepted the new child. In England, the new baby was adopted by businessmen. The parents (the RFU) were allowed to see it from time to time and they gave it gifts (currently around £1.8 million a year). Only in Wales and Scotland were they at a loss as to what to do with it. In Scotland the couple – the SRU and the clubs – simply couldn't cope as they didn't have a solid relationship in any case. Some people in the country wanted to abort it, others wanted to push it back into the womb after it was born; we finally let it live but it was hidden away, starved and neglected.

In England, it was born into a rich family, with resources and love. In Scotland, it was born into a poor family with meagre resources and little love. When a child is born, a family changes forever, and the new opportunities and experiences it encounters as the child grows up are numerous and enriching. The Scottish family closed its mind to these opportunities.

In Wales, they eventually came to their senses. The parents accepted the child and it now has a chance of going from strength to strength. But in Scotland, we now have a ten-year-old child which is still only five in mental age and physical development.

To some, this metaphor may not seem appropriate, but as you read this book, hopefully it will become clearer how important children, family, education and ambition have been to me, both in rugby and away from it. I am not growing so senile with age as to believe professional rugby was my ‘baby’, but I do wish we had cared for it much better.

In other countries, it was a great adventure to have professional rugby but in Scotland, it was a chore. A couple of years ago I was on a radio programme with John Beattie, the former internationalist, now a leading broadcaster, and he asked me, ‘How long will it take for us to accept professionalism?’ I replied that it would take 15–20 years at the present rate of progress, and he was surprised it could be as long as that. I explained that we had wasted ten years and that even when everybody in Scotland finally comes together like a family to offer each other and the game support, it will take another five years to get to the level we want to achieve. I have often said that we need twenty-first-century solutions for twenty-first-century issues.

Until the culture changes, we will always struggle. Some people are only beginning to accept that professional rugby is here to stay, that it is both an entertaining spectator sport and a profession for elite players, and that amateur rugby can acquire great benefits from it.

Some old internationalists say, ‘I’m glad I played when I did because we got the best of it,’ but I feel sorry for them. They are not talking about the rugby they played, but about the socialising in the game. Saying that is an insult to young players of today, who are just as sociable, who respect and talk to their opponents and build up lifelong friendships. The

2005 British and Irish Lions, for example, when they left for New Zealand, carried the same hopes, excitement, enthusiasm and squad spirit as Lions squads before them.

In 1996, Scottish rugby could have taken great steps forward when we had the chance to separate the game into professional district rugby and amateur rugby, but that opportunity was not taken because some clubs would simply not accept it. In 2000, the Lord Mackay Report presented another opportunity and a greater one, with the Union split into an executive, installed mainly to run pro rugby, and a committee, in charge of club rugby. Yet the general committee and some clubs would not accept even that.

In 2005, we were given a third chance. Finally, Scottish rugby seemed to understand the split and the executive were handed complete control of professional and international rugby while a new council was elected to be responsible for running the amateur game. So, after ten years, if this opportunity is taken and all politics and personal gain are put aside, we will finally be able to move forward. Unfortunately, the main architects of the latest changes – David Mackay, the chairman of the executive board; Phil Anderton, the chief executive; and Ian McGeechan, the director of rugby – are all gone, the first two as a result of the vote of no confidence in Mackay in January 2005, which forced him to stand down and precipitated the resignations of three non-executive directors and Anderton. To me, this was something Scottish rugby could have done without. I do not fall into the camp of those who denigrate all the work of the general committee, but I believe they made a mistake there which harmed the game at that juncture. The one positive aspect to emerge, however, is a new structure of governance which, one hopes, will be a step towards a brighter future.

People in Scottish rugby must realise that the international side is the most important team in Scotland. It is at the top of the food chain; it must be nourished and that

can only happen if all the parts of the body have a strong, unified involvement and strive to make each part as strong as possible, working not in isolation but in harmony with each other.

Gavin Hastings made a very accurate statement just after one of the countless special general meetings of the SRU this year. He said, ‘To be perfectly honest, nobody gives a shit about Scottish rugby outwith Scotland . . . people outwith the country, and within it as well, will judge Scottish rugby on the success of the international team.’

It thus struck me as ironic this year when both Gavin and Finlay Calder, two of the players who led the clubs’ campaign against the districts in 1996 and 1997, failed to win the support of the clubs in seeking election to the new council. It often doesn’t pay in Scottish rugby to have reached the top! Journeymen are preferred, I sometimes feel.

The plain fact is that very few people outside Scotland and not many who pay good money to watch the Scotland team at Murrayfield care about who wins our domestic championships or cup. We may not like that but it remains a fact.

Before 1995, there were lengthy British and Irish Lions tours but there were not the numbers of supporters or the global attention the 1997, 2001 and 2005 tours attracted, because the top level of the sport has now joined the professional elite. It is more attractive, has become more accessible, and the commercial side has taken rugby far further than it has ever been before. This is not the same game or sport which club committeemen were part of a decade ago. The 2005 Lions tour to New Zealand was described by Sean Fitzpatrick, the former All Black captain, as ‘the greatest rugby show on earth’.

We hear people say the players were much better in the past, yet players now are fitter, stronger and more skilful at the top level than they were. Jonah Lomu arrived in the big

time in 1995 as a powerful indication of the changing nature of the game, and Jason Robinson, George Gregan, Richie McCaw, Martin Johnson, Joost van der Westhuizen, Olivier Magne, Tom Smith, Gareth Thomas and Brian O'Driscoll have proved there are many outstanding sportsmen playing professional rugby.

In fact, I am now coaching 15-year-olds and the skills of players this age have gone up enormously since I last worked with that age group 10 years ago. They know about defence systems and communicate far better, they have different styles of passes and kicks, they lift heavier weights and train much more.

Right at the start of professionalism, in 1996, a report by Roy Laidlaw and Douglas Arneil, as members of the Rugby Division which oversaw the development of the game, recommended to the SRU that they split the game into amateur and professional, largely because of what they had discovered studying rugby league at Bradford Bulls. If we didn't, they warned, our teams would be left behind and we would struggle to produce players capable of competing with the top nations in the world. Then, we had recently contested three Grand Slam deciders and won one, finished fourth in the 1991 World Cup and lost only to New Zealand in the last eight in 1995. We were ranked tenth in the world at the end of 2005.

In Scottish rugby, we accept mediocrity far too readily. The vast majority of people involved in the game, be they players, coaches or officials, though very valuable, will be hard-working journeymen. However, there has been and will continue to be real star quality coming through in Scotland. Yet too often obstacles are placed in the paths of the truly talented, almost as a form of keeping ambition in check, because that is the Scottish way. Nonetheless, everyone wants a piece of that young star and wants credit for him, while at the same time wanting to decide when and how he progresses, and ultimately holding him back.

Coverage of rugby has completely changed in the last decade. I got on well with the press and enjoyed the banter and the way some would write something nasty about you then cuddle up to you the next day wanting more quotes. I used to look forward to going to the press conferences because it was like a discussion about what we were trying to do; we were giving an honest appraisal of where we were. The criticism did not bother me, though I did not enjoy the effect uninformed reporting had on my family, particularly my mother and father. But it was different after 1995: more interest, more widespread reporting and more uninformed, salacious styles.

I remember being at a function at Jordanhill College in Glasgow, just after the game had turned professional, and I spoke about how much more intrusive the media had become. Ernie Walker, the former SFA chief executive and now a member of UEFA, said to me, ‘Welcome to the club, Jim. We’ve had this for 100 years and now it’s your turn to get some of it.’

It was quite a change from the men I remember growing up with, writers like Hugh Young, Jack Dunn, Reg Prophit, Peter Donald, Norman Mair, Harry Pincott, Bill McLaren and Bill McMurtrie, to name a few. They would simply write about the game quite positively and did not seem to be under any pressure to find exclusive angles or write about negative aspects. The editors and owners of the quality papers and many of their readers came from middle-class backgrounds and wanted to read about rugby. It was all quite straightforward.

But as soon as a sport becomes professional, the media and the public at large believe you are there to be shot at. We have also witnessed a lot of jealousy from people who were involved in amateur rugby and think it’s wrong to have people being paid now for doing what they did in their spare time.

Some of the things written in opinion columns, or worse, in letters to the papers and on internet chatrooms, especially about coaches, committeemen and officials, are appalling. The media has now travelled beyond traditional boundaries but with that travel it has also become very spiteful, narrow-minded and incredibly uninformed. Chatrooms can be like Chinese whispers to the nth degree: they lose all links with reality. The media had a chance to be different in terms of how they reflected a new professional sport, rather than follow the tired old route of football reporting.

I used to go into Murrayfield and ask my secretary, Carolyn, ‘Who are the press crucifying today?’ She would tell me to remember that it was just one man’s opinion and it was worth no more than that of anyone else. Now, when I read the papers, it is easier to take each opinion with a pinch of salt.

Having rarely been able to give my own opinion as Scottish rugby progressed through a turbulent period, I now have my opportunity. In 2003, working with Scotland players again but for the final time, I was a different coach. I sanitised a lot of what I did and said because some players then had the ear of the press and were more intent on exploiting it, almost hurrying to leave training to complain that this or that was wrong. So I stepped back and, to be honest, it did not feel right working in an environment where I could not be myself. That was when I knew I had to walk away for good.

2

Home in the Borders Hills

Peggy Telfer, Jim’s mother

Jim was a happy laddie. His grandfather was Jim and that is who we named him after, and Willie wanted William as his middle name. Jim quite enjoyed the farming but it was a hard life and I wanted him to enjoy his life more, so I encouraged him to look further afield.

He got on very well with his sisters and I don’t remember many rows. Jim was always very keen on the rugby and we encouraged him in that as well, though I never imagined he would play for Scotland and be Scotland coach one day.

I felt very proud watching him playing for his country; he comes from working folk and he has done well – though I wouldn’t tell him that. We were absolutely delighted to see him win his first cap and we went to watch him play for Scotland at Murrayfield.

Jim has a reputation now for always speaking his mind but he has surprised me with his comments at times. He was quite shy at home and his dad is so quiet, you see. We were both very proud of him when he became a coach of the Lions but I didn’t like watching that Lions video where he was swearing all the time. I was a bit upset by that but that must be what he’s like and how he gets the players moving on.

I am delighted that he is retired because he had a lot of hard times and people knocking him; it is difficult to see your son being attacked in the papers the way Jim was at times. Away from the rugby, he is very different, a very kind man who would do anything for anybody. He has done a lot with his life and it has been an honour for us to watch him rise up in his rugby and in teaching, where he worked very hard to realise his ambition of becoming a headmaster. Until he came along, us Telfers preferred to stay in the background!

My birthplace of Pathhead might have you believe that I am a Midlothian boy, starting out in life near Dalkeith on the

outskirts of our capital city, Edinburgh. But anyone who has spent more than a minute or two in my company will realise that I’m a proud Borderer to the bone.

I was born on 17 March 1940 – the same year as Pelé and Jack Nicklaus – and at that time, in these parts anyway, children were often born at home. Our family lived in a very remote place in the Borders, up the Bowmont Valley, which disappears south of Kelso into the Cheviot Hills. My father was a shepherd on a farm called Calroust Hopehead, near the village of Yetholm, where the burn runs right up to the border with England.

My mother tells me she was taken to have me at the farm of her aunt and uncle at Dodridge, near Pathhead. She had been brought up by them and they feared that we might be snowed in at our farm and unable to get to a midwife if one was needed. My father’s parents lived only a mile down the valley from us, which was in the middle of nowhere as well, so Dodridge it was.

Though my passport says ‘Birthplace: Pathhead’, I have never lived there. I have had a few homes around the Borders, however, and in Glasgow and Edinburgh during my teaching days, and they have all played major parts in shaping my life and views on society. But, really, it’s a case of ‘once a Borderer, always a Borderer’.

If you pay heed to the people who reckon I’ve been an explosive character all my life, then it is perhaps no surprise to learn that on the night I was born, a warplane crashed and exploded on the farm where my father worked. It was a very thick misty night and a Wellington bomber apparently lost its bearings, hitting the hill on the Scottish side, just above Calroust Hopehead.

My father was the first to find the wreckage and had to report it. He told me that one of the plane’s bombs exploded when it hit the hill, killing the four airmen in the plane. Hearing this story as a lad years later was fascinating and, even after we moved to Kedzlie and Wester Housebyres, my

sisters and I would get the bus back down to Yetholm to stay with my grandparents, and I would go looking in the hills for bits of the plane to collect as souvenirs.

My childhood was always linked with farms because of my father's shepherding work and it was as a result of this that I began to develop my left-wing politics, I think. We moved when I was four or five to Nether Tofts, near Denholm, and went to Kirkton School – which is not there now – and also Denholm School for a little while when the Kirkton teacher was off. We then moved to Kedzlie, near Earlston, and I was two or three years there. I still remember going with my father to the agricultural shows after he'd spent Fridays doctoring the show sheep up by putting white stuff (zinc oxide, I understand) on their faces.

But what sticks in the memory is seeing the farmer's sons during the holidays and not being able to understand why they were not there all the time. It was a while before I discovered that they went to boarding school and so could only come back in the holidays, when they'd spend time sledging and so on with my sisters and me. The wee socialist was growing, though, because I remember thinking, 'Hold on, my father works seven days a week, does not get a holiday at all, just a day off here and there to take the sheep to the sales, and yet his hard work is helping to pay for the farmer's sons' education.' I thought there was a real unfairness there.

It's a fact of life in the Borders, though. We used to spend holidays back with my grandparents at Calroust, and latterly down at Mowhaugh Schoolhouse. The landowner was the Duke of Roxburghe and they always referred to him as 'The Duke'. I always thought that was so unfair, that one man could own so much land. The shepherd and his family were clearly servants.

It has always been a part of me, ever since then, the feeling that life can be unfair, that some people have to work extremely hard to make ends meet whilst others are

given so much to start with. It might sound a naive sentiment in today's world but it stems from those early days which certainly shaped my strong socialist leanings and perhaps subconsciously filtered into my approach to playing and coaching rugby. As a coach, I would always try to ensure that everyone was treated the same and that only what you did on the training pitch or on the field of play – not your background – determined your standing as a rugby player.

Don't get me wrong, I was not a wee politician in the making or anything; I did not sit on hay bales philosophising or planning a route to No. 10. I was more interested in making catapults to kill birds or chasing rabbits at the harvest. I don't think I necessarily had the same opinions as my parents either, as my dad just tended to get on with life and never moaned much about things. At the same time, my mother and father have always been major influences on me and I think you appreciate that more the older you become.

My mother had gone into service at the age of 14 in the 'big house' – the local farmer's house. She had been quite good at primary school but, because there was no secondary school close to her house, she had remained at the advanced primary until leaving. She then went straight into work, which was quite normal at that time. My father became a young herd, which was a popular choice for young men, first near the border with England at Carter Bar and then on a farm near Langholm. I had four uncles on my father's side and three of them were all herds up the Bowmont Water. The fourth worked for a while on a farm and then moved to Edinburgh to work and still lives there. I had two aunties, also on that side of the family, and one of them still lives in Yetholm, with another uncle, not far from where I grew up.

My mother was an only child brought up by her uncle and auntie. Craig Chalmers' grandfather was her cousin and

they were brought up together as brother and sister, so there is a family link between us pair. The reason Craig is a Melrose lad is that his grandfather came to work as the gardener for the owner of Darnlee House, the large house opposite the Waverley Hotel on the way into Melrose.

I'm also related to Scott Aitken, who has just, in 2005, completed 300 games for Melrose. His mother is a sister of Craig's mother – their maiden name is Minto, which is Craig's middle name. Carl Hogg, the former Scotland back row, is one of my sister's sons. I can't go on or people will begin to believe that the whole of the Borders is actually related – though that's not something I could disprove.

I enjoyed living and growing up on a farm but my mother always said that if she had anything to do with it, I would never follow my dad. She wanted me to get a 'collar-and-tie job', as she put it. There was no future on the farm unless you were the farmer's son, she would tell me. I am indebted to my mother, particularly, for pushing me towards an academic career. I've got nothing against farmers – my sister married one – but my mother was right: it was not for me. She thought the best job for me would be in a bank, however, and that never happened either!

My mother was a strong character and she was always first around us. I remember two instances that summed her up. She used to come and meet us when we got off the bus at the road end, about a mile from our house, in the pitch black and she'd walk with us all the way home despite the fact that she was absolutely petrified of the dark. The other vivid memory I have is of my elder sister Elma dropping a ring into the embers of a coal fire. Immediately, my mother stuck her hand into the fire and pulled it out. She was burned quite badly but she saved the ring. I remember thinking, 'What a crazy thing to do!'

My father is a different character: quiet and straightforward, no great emotion. He was brought up just

to get on with life and I was too. I spent a lot of time with him, especially during the school holidays.

There were parts you liked and others you did not. I used to enjoy the lambing, the shearing and going to the sales. During the summer holidays, my sisters, Elma and Sheila, and I often went to our grandparents house at Calroust and we were supposed to help with the chores. But we'd spend most of the time chasing each other through the haylofts or going for walks up the surrounding hills. I remember what used to really turn me off farm work, though, was when my father and I used to go up and put the sheep on the turnip breaks, the strips of fields set aside for feeding them in the winter. We would put the hay in wire baskets and my hands would be absolutely frozen. That was murder!

The shepherd on the farm also had the job of killing the pigs and most of the workers had one. I remember watching my father hitting the pig over the head with a big hammer to stun it and before it came to, he would slit its throat with a razor-sharp knife and the blood would gush out everywhere. I don't suppose tackling big ugly New Zealanders would seem a problem after that!

I can't recall my dad giving me many rows, although I'm sure he did. There was one time when we lived at Nether Tofts. I had caught an ailing sheep and was riding on its back. My father saw me, his belt came off and whoosh – I got it. After that, whenever the belt came off, I knew I was in trouble. Getting the belt seemed to have a salutary effect on me but I suppose my father would now be taken before the European Court of Human Rights for such an act.

When I was a boy, unlike in these days of factory farming, there was always plenty of other children on the farms, so they were great communities to grow up in. The fathers used to join in with the sons, playing football and cricket during the summer nights. The football was usually a blown-up pig's bladder; we were not stuck for them on a farm. But sport was just sport then – something to fill in the time.

That began to change for me when we moved again. This time a particular change of farm would shape the rest of my life. It was when my parents took us to Wester Housebyres when I was about nine. We enjoyed living in the other places, don't get me wrong, but that move brought us close to both Melrose and Galashiels, and so opened up great new opportunities, in both sport and education.

I joined Melrose Grammar School, the local primary, and when I started, I was placed twenty-fourth in a class of twenty-eight. Within six months, I had moved up to fourth and I remained near the top for most of my secondary education. I just seemed to thrive among larger numbers of children, with more competition and being pushed harder. I'd been at Blainslie Primary School before that, a one-teacher school – Miss McQueen in my time – and there is no doubt that it was of great benefit to me to go from a small school to a large school; I relished it.

In sporting terms, I started going along to a nearby village called Darnick where they played rugby and I got into the Under-12s sevens team. Our coach was Bob Mitchell, whose son Brian played in the team. We won the local Boyd Cup on our first outing and then another parent, Ian Millar, took over from him. These competitions were played on the famous Greenyards pitch. The Darnick team graduated to the Jubilee Cup and then the Crichton Cup, like hundreds of Melrose youngsters before and since.

Around the time I moved to Melrose Grammar School, I also acquired the nickname 'Creamy'. There have been various explanations over the last 50 years as to where the name originated and people will still come up to me and say 'Hi, Creamy.' The most feasible one, I believe, is that I admired a horse called Cream Of The Border which ran in the Grand National in the late '40s. I must have talked about it a lot, because I was given the nickname by my school friends and it stuck. It caused me embarrassment when I taught at Galashiels Academy later and pupils used to shout

the name behind my back. The well-known rugby journalist Norman Mair, himself a former Melrose and Scotland forward, always refers to me as ‘Creamy’, as well.

I was actually a small boy for my age but I was lucky that at Wester Housebyres there were two tough older boys. The Morris Boys liked to scrap with the ‘toonies’ of Melrose and I used to back them up, usually when most of the fighting had been done. I liked being in their ‘gang’. When I started playing rugby, I was a hooker and very lightweight, but then I moved to prop when I started to grow a bit. There was a burn close to our house with large stones at the side and my first endeavours in weightlifting were trying to hoist those stones above my head. I had a focus by that stage and knew even then that if I was going to succeed in rugby, I would have to be strong.

Despite living on the farm most of the time, I used to spend many of my weekends with the Hastie family who stayed at Newstead and then Darnick, both villages just outside Melrose. They had also come from the Bowmont and knew my parents well, and they were a real sporting family, with three boys – Alex (Eck), Bill and Rob. Eck, known as ‘Moose’, played for Melrose and Scotland at the same time as me.

At that time, the school-leaving age was 15 but as my parents wanted me to go on, I went to Galashiels Academy for a few years and I was glad, because they were good years at a good school. Because my house was in Roxburghshire, I had the option of going to Hawick High School, but Hawick was more than 30 miles away by train so I went to Gala. One lad from the same farm, Jake Wheelans, did choose Hawick and he later became a stalwart of Selkirk Youth Club – always one to be different was Jake!

I really developed at the Academy, rugby-wise and academically. I played cricket and was reasonably good at athletics. I wasn’t a star but I captained my house, Eildon, in my fifth and sixth years, and then the school cricket and