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FRINGES

LIFE ON THE FRINGES OF
PROFESSIONAL RUGBY

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INTRODUCTION

Athletes, maybe even more than other people, depend on the myths they can tell about themselves

— BENJAMIN MARKOVITZ

We all tell our own story. Look at a block of flats and you'll see 1000 souls all starring in their own drama, telling and retelling their own lives.

I moved to France to continue my professional rugby story. I'd given England a bash and hadn't made the top division. This was a bit of a last go, a chance to do something different, live somewhere I'd always wanted to live.

French rugby always held a romantic appeal for me. The *laissez faire* approach to life, learning the language and the thrill of '*joue*' when everything comes off miraculously.

Famous French wins against the All Blacks in 1999 or even heroic defeats like the World Cup Final in 2011, the European dominance of the swashbuckling Stade Toulousain in the 2000s with home-

grown players slinging the ball everywhere, their insouciance combined with the sheer joy of playing so expressively.

My years there did give me these experiences. I learned the language, threw the ball around and lived with a degree of insouciance for a while. Later things began to rub against me, shaking me out of my complacency and I began to question what I was doing there. The team began to think the same thing.

This story is about the things I learned or didn't learn over my career. How professional rugby works. And what you do when you realise that what you're doing isn't enough for you anymore.

What I'll tell you about in this book is not necessarily right and others who were there could disagree. The events I describe are true to the best of my recollection and how I feel about these things may be tempered by time and perspective, a gradual shaping of my own history. I'm now retired from playing and don't necessarily miss it.

I'm not beholden to sensitivity or reputation in the way that a higher profile player is, although I will withhold some details to save potential embarrassment or just to do right by some of my former teammates. My gay teammate doesn't need outing by me, even if he was happy for everyone at the club to know about him. My teammates taking drugs don't need naming, even if they may not still be playing. To know that these things happen in the context of professional sport is insight enough.

Some of the insights may be easy to dismiss as things that only happen at a lower level, not at the more rarefied echelons of the game. I can tell you that many of these things are universal and that money doesn't make people essentially different. It just gives them greater resources to indulge their similar impulses.

Where top players vary from the likes of me is in the diversity of their experiences. They play the same teams every year. They visit the same stadiums every year. They play against the same guys by and large every year. A guy like me has a far more diverse range of

rugby experiences and in this book, I'll attempt to communicate them to you.

I gained an English Literature degree before embarking on my professional rugby career proper and have always fancied the idea of writing a book. Infrequent attempts at writing things up to this point have been me paying lip service to this idea but perhaps not really believing in it. The pages of a book are an easy place to fail and I became someone scared to fail, both on the field and away from it.

Simultaneously I've regarded myself as something of a scholar athlete, finishing my studies and continuing to learn while I've been playing, most notably by learning French. This book is partly me justifying my self-proclaimed status as a Platonic scholar athlete, partly a way of showing you what's behind the curtain of professional rugby in another country.

Stories can keep us alive and moving forward, even as they exert a pull back into the past. In sport you're always looking back at where you've come from, what you've just done and at what's coming next weekend, but you never feel more alive than you do in the moment, on the field, where you can forget about everything else. That's why we all play.

Crafting your own story is something we do every day, with everything we do. Here I'm writing my own history. Moving to France wasn't an attempt at writing history; I just didn't have a job and felt that this could be my next adventure. That adventure became something unique and special, being a part of building a new bastion of rugby in a non-traditional rugby region. Now that adventure is over but I get to tell my version of it here. I hope that you enjoy it.

YEAR ONE - CROSSING THE CHANNEL

WHEN THE BALL I PASSED HIT MY WINGER IN THE FACE, KNOCKING him over and halting the session, I looked around at the desolate training pitch in the French public park, at my motley collection of new teammates in a random array of training attire and thought I'd made a big mistake.

I'd signed for a year at Stade Rouennais; a project team with wealthy owners and lofty ambitions in the north of France. The aim was to create a new rugby power in the non-traditional rugby region of Normandy. Judging by our first session, this aim was not a realistic one.

Realism was something that was beginning to permeate my view of rugby as a career path. I'd spent a couple of seasons as a second division player for Plymouth Albion in the RFU Championship, the second tier of English rugby, taking a short break in Sydney before pitching up at the Cornish Pirates, and was now beginning to take stock of my options.

I'd been an ambitious young player, deferring my plans to pursue professional rugby to attend university and get the security that came

with a degree. The utility of my English Literature degree is up for debate but credentialism and the need to justify my decent school grades played their part, as well as my desire to leave home and experience the university lifestyle.

Upon graduation, I immediately decamped to Plymouth for two seasons, fabricating a holiday so I could spend a week in the gym sweating out my final university excesses before arriving for pre-season. After two years in Devon, I headed to Australia for a couple of months, which turned into almost a year, before heading back to the UK where I saw the Pirates as an opportunity to restate my claims of being a good enough player to reach the Premiership.

Rugby is not a good option as a career path. Even if you avoid serious injury, your career will be over in your thirties and the average Premiership salary is about £150,000 a year. There are only 500 or so of these contracts, making getting one extremely competitive, and I'd wager that this average salary is heavily skewed by the top end of the market where some guys will be receiving up to half a million pounds per season for their efforts. A select few are now getting more than that.

There is also the matter of your position. If each team had 4 players in each position then you need to be in the top 50 players in yours to get a deal. With hundreds of thousands of registered players in the UK, as well as talented foreign players being readily available, the odds are not in your favour.

The Championship is far less well remunerated while offering you little to no job security. Most deals are one year long and are liable to be snatched away from you if injury suddenly makes you unavailable for any substantial length of time. As an outside back in my mid twenties, I was no longer a 'young' player but almost a mid-career professional and unless something changed for me quickly, my youthful dreams of the top level of the sport would remain just that.

Demographics are against you in rugby and securing a contract in the Championship that pays you a liveable wage is no mean feat.

Extending the statistics quoted above means that you're probably in the top 100 players in your position in the country if you're playing in the Championship, yet this is not enough to guarantee a living. Many contracts are less than £20,000 a year while some are as little as £6,000. You can be in the top 100 in your profession and feel like a failure. I'd tended to earn reasonably in the Championship through incentivised contracts and keeping my living costs down but I by no means felt like I'd 'made it'; to me that meant getting to and staying in the top division, with all the advantages that that brings.

I'd not enjoyed my time at the Pirates; accumulated fatigue and a raft of players and coaches moving on had disrupted one of the more exciting teams to play for over the previous few seasons. This French offer had come out of the blue, when I'd been seriously questioning for the first time whether professional rugby was a sensible choice for me anymore.

Essentially my options were go to France, find another RFU Championship contract or consider whether playing rugby any longer was a sustainable option.

Choosing to take a leap into the unknown, I packed two bags, made sure I had my boots and gum shield and caught a flight to Paris.

We were quickly thrown into training and I'd just knocked over this poor chap with my pass. I'd pitched up at far flung rugby clubs before but this was an offsetting experience, testing my capacity for optimism. Limited funding and poor facilities were par for the course at Cornish Pirates but the paucity of this first training session, in amenities and quality, was a shock.

When arriving anywhere new you are always a little wary, expecting surprises and trying to keep an open mind. What awaited me in France was not quite what I had imagined and keeping an open mind was harder than I'd thought.

For this session we had made our way to some playing fields opposite the football stadium, situated on the outskirts of the city but easy

to find from our accommodation. France is replete with *les stades*, ranging from an actual stadium like the Stade de France to public facilities all over the country. Most of them are open to *le public* who can come and use the facilities and we would often have people running around the athletics track that surrounded the playing surface at our home ground. The *stade* hosting this training session was at the lower end of the sophistication scale.

The training session was also at the lower end of this scale consisting of a melange of A and B team players. The winger who tried to catch my pass with his face was nicknamed 'Lapinau' owing to his physical resemblance to a startled bunny and he went down like he'd been shot after letting the spinning ball fly right between his hands.

I hadn't been expecting to find Toulouse quality players and facilities but this first training session was really quite something. Beyond the football stadium lay the motorway which would take you to Paris. I did briefly consider continuing on after training and going home but that moment of darkness passed.

The football stadium itself had a melancholic air; Le Stade Robert Diochon seats around 12,000 people with one large stand on the west side of the field reaching up and up, giving a good view of the field and accommodating a reasonable number of corporate boxes, a necessity in modern day professional sport. The other sides of the ground are smaller but probably closer to the field, which is surrounded by the metal cage typical of many European sports grounds.

FC Rouen were once a reasonable side, spending much of their professional history in what is now Ligue 2. To cut a long story short they made it back to Ligue 2 after a period in the lower divisions before getting relegated and suffering serious financial trouble, casting the club to the nether regions of French football where they currently reside. At the time of our arrival the stadium was locked up and not used, the football club playing their matches on what would once have been an adjacent training pitch.

We didn't even train on these, instead crossing the road to the public *stade* and setting up a session where the quality was frankly embarrassing.

I really thought I'd made a bad call.

WHAT WAS I THINKING? THE ALLURE OF FRENCH RUGBY

THE FIRST GAME OF RUGBY I EVER WENT TO WATCH WAS BATH VS Toulouse at the Rec, under lights on a Friday night in the Heineken Cup. Bath were recently the European champions while Toulouse were soon to begin their dominance of the competition.

Emile Ntamack, only remembered by a later generation of fan for being smashed by Jonny Wilkinson, scored a hat trick as Toulouse put on a show. I can't remember much of the game but they were exotic, Peugeot emblazoned across the front of their long-sleeved cotton jerseys and playing alien rugby. Their backs were aligned incredibly deep, the openside winger having to run about 20 metres before he caught the ball.

I was a Bath fan, born in the area and playing my junior rugby for Bath. Later I became an academy player and wore the shirt proudly, even if I never made a competitive appearance for the first team.

Even with my blue, black and white fandom, Toulouse were the team I found truly exciting. They became the best team in Europe, based around a core of homegrown players and supplemented by the odd foreign import. They were full of handsome mavericks like Frédéric

Michalak and Clement Poitrenaud who enjoyed a glamorous image not previously associated with rugby, posing for photoshoots, wearing diamond earrings and playing courageous rugby full of soul and self-belief.

I watched all the games that I could on television, even the away games in Europe where they weren't necessarily too concerned with the result. I remember them outscoring Llanelli at Stradey Park where they basically decided not to bother defending, inviting Scarlets to engage them in a shootout. My brother and I went to the 2008 final in Cardiff where they narrowly lost to Munster, Cedric Heymans setting up a wonder try in defeat.

They embodied what was best about rugby for me, playing attacking rugby without compromise, even in the face of adverse weather conditions or a mountain of accumulating evidence that they should change their approach. They believed in themselves and their abilities and every game there would be a small moment that no other team could have pulled off.

Poitrenaud was the ultimate expression of their philosophy and he is the man who defined the line between their genius and madness when he famously failed to touch down the ball over his own line in the dying minutes of the Heineken Cup final, seeing Rob Howley snatch the ball away from him and score the game winning try in one diving motion.

It will be what he's remembered for, even with his raft of caps and medals, but I remember a European group stage game away at Northampton when he stepped past three defenders to escape his own corner and hare away up field when putting the ball straight out would have been the orthodox option. He continued to back himself throughout his career, despite having committed one of rugby's greatest ever cockups and for that, I loved watching him play. Seeing him inculcate a new generation of Toulouse players with the same ethos in his new capacity as a coach and precipitating their recent revival is a small joy.

They made me set playing in France as a faraway goal. A pipe dream to pursue one day. I even uncharacteristically boldly sent a video to their club email address when I was at a loose end, hoping that I could get a junior contract or a trial. I didn't.

Nevertheless, I always thought that I would go to France one day and could exercise my desires to play rugby in that off the cuff way. The free way. The French way.

I did get there in the end. It wasn't glamorous like Toulouse. Rouen had no reputation to speak of and no players that I had ever heard of. They were based in the rugby oblivious north rather than the hotbed that is the south and had no idea who we were or why they should care. They were unprofessional, unprepared for what was ahead for them and unexpectant of success.

How did we end up there? Through an old contact, former Bath and England scrum half Richard Hill. He'd accepted the job at Rouen and phoned me out of the blue.

'What are you up to at the minute Ben?'

I'd recently trained at Bedford for two weeks having left Cornish Pirates and was seriously considering whether playing rugby was still the best use of my time. The only other interest I had was from London Welsh and although I was keen on the idea of moving to London and seeing more of my mates, Welsh was not a very stable place and neither was their interest.

'Not much Richard.'

'That's what I wanted to hear!'

He explained his proposal; a year in northern France at this new team before trying to then move southwards to a more established club. I was all ears, partly because it sounded fun, albeit a little risky, partly because I could also use this interest to potentially push Welsh along a bit.

Part of the risk was that a year playing in the French 4th division,

even though some of the games would be against fully professional teams, would essentially signal the end of my time in England as a serious rugby player. Ambitions of achieving future rugby excellence would rely on a good year in France and a quick move to a more storied French team. To be fair though, hitching to the Richard Hill bandwagon would be the best way for me to do this, his prospects of swift upward mobility being much more likely than my own.

My relationship with Richard goes back a long way. He is a big figure in the game having captained the national team in the early 1990s and was an integral part of the Bath side that dominated English rugby in that period. He was known as a tough player, a nasty little chap who would stamp on his own forwards if he felt that they were obstructing the ball from coming out, using his fast pass to get the Bath backs moving.

The reason I knew him was because his son Josh was in the same year as me at school. Josh played school rugby with us and was an outrageous physical specimen due to his ability as a gymnast; I once saw him flagpole off the side of a school minibus at the age of about 13 while we were waiting to go to some athletics meet. At a predominantly academic school, this was not commonplace.

Josh and I both played junior rugby for Bath and Richard used to come and help the assigned coaches for the age group we were in. They were incredibly fortunate to be able to learn from a rugby man of his experience and he was coaching professionally the entire time that I knew him. When I first met him he was coaching Ebbw Vale in Wales, coming to our games on top of Lansdown on Sunday mornings and taking Josh for a warm up of hundreds of passes. My mum's abiding memory of him is him taking notes on our U14s rugby matches, standing there with fingerless gloves and a beanie to both avoid the cold and be able to write down stats for our players. Even at that level of rugby he was always assiduous and meticulously prepared as well as being very fit for an older chap, banging out press ups between drills at our training sessions.

In my very limited experience of high level rugby and coaching, it

seems that the actual coaching of players takes a back seat to the mental and social side of management. Good players don't have that much more to learn and even if they do, many think that they don't. I listened to a podcast with Paul Clement, a trusted assistant manager for Carlo Ancelotti at PSG, Chelsea, Bayern Munich and Real Madrid where he coached several great players. He said that training sessions tended to be 'one for them, one for us', meaning that for every tactical session working on team shape or organisation, they would have a session where they would basically just play games or compete in some way.

This is obviously at the top level of a sport and some of the best work a coach can do, the sort of work that can make their reputation, is to take a smaller team with a lower budget and a less talented squad and get them to achieve above their assumed capacity. Memorable instances include Jose Mourinho winning the Champions League with Porto or the rise and rise of Exeter Chiefs in English rugby.

Hilly had done something similar with Bristol and although the team that he put together that made the Heineken Cup knockouts had some great players in it, he had spotted and signed them before others had. He'd then managed Worcester for several years and had left before signing to come to Rouen.

Hilly is an intelligent guy and spoke fluent French already having learned in his youth. This wasn't his first job in France, having spent a year or so coaching a lower division French team previously, meaning that he had an existing knowledge of the French rugby landscape and the potential pitfalls involved in working there. The reason he was moving to Rouen was partly that he fancied it and that it was a project with potential but also, crucially, it was the only offer that he'd received to oversee another team.

He'd been at Worcester in the Premiership and had come to Fédérale 2 in France. Something often overlooked is that although being a top professional player is very competitive, there are probably 500 or so contracts spread across the 12 Premiership teams, it's even more competitive to be a Director of Rugby. There are only 12 of those

jobs. These jobs are not limited by age like that of a player and don't often open up. He needed a job and ended up in Rouen, bringing us, equally unable to find an attractive gig at a better level, along for the ride.

This shared reason for coming kept us close in the first season and meant that the relationship we had with him was closer and more relaxed than it would have been with another coach. He'd often come out to eat with us and our families and it was fun to see his own family when they came to visit.

Being an RFU Level 5 coach means that in some respects he's a Jedi level trainer and you could see from his use of training aids that he had a love and compulsion for detail; we'd come out to train and find a smorgasbord of cones, colour coordinated and carefully placed all around the field, waiting for us. He was very detailed and would typically analyse the games himself on the bus back, doing statistics and planning the coming week's training. His work ethic was above and beyond what was expected of him from the presidents as he became an evangelist for the project, spending his evenings educating coaches and presenting to potential sponsors, all the while availing himself of the opportunity to eat around the region. He certainly compared well to the previous coach who apparently would turn up right before training was due to start and leave immediately afterwards.

Hilly's contacts also meant that we had an array of guest coaches come to visit, often taking sessions or even whole weeks of training. Phil Greening abused us with 'collision fitness', John Callard came to improve our kicking game along with a selection of less heralded but no less useful other coaches, including a procession of Frenchmen that we'd never heard of. He'd also commit to his own education by travelling around France to observe other teams, bringing back drills and technical pointers to integrate into our sessions, not always successfully due to the discrepancies in technical quality between us and the likes of Racing Metro.

London Welsh weren't moved to make me a concrete offer by my

tale of French interest, instead advising me to take it. I struck out for Europe where players and coach were in the same boat; somewhat unwanted back in England and embarking on an adventure in a foreign land where they did not know our game or our names. The seeds of all this were sown watching *les Rouges et Noirs* play that Friday night game all those years before.

WELCOME TO STADE ROUENNAIS RUGBY

STADE ROUENNAIS RUGBY WAS A NEW TEAM, FORMED FROM THE ashes of the former Rugby Club de Rouen after their dissolution due to financial issues. The club had been purchased and rebranded by a pair of local businessmen who became co-presidents with the aim of creating a new rugby bastion in the north of France.

The team was based at an old *stade* right at the edge of the city and had been promoted the previous year from Fédérale 3, our arrival coinciding with preparations for Fédérale 2. This is technically the fourth tier of French rugby.

The league is amateur in theory but contained a wide variety of expectations. There were teams with full time players, aiming to move up the divisions and there were resolutely amateur outfits that were just concerned with having a good runaround and a pleasant time. The recruitment of an English coach and some foreign players was a move designed to help Stade Rouennais bridge the gap between these alternatives. The resistance or otherwise of the existing squad would be crucial to the success of the plan.

Hilly took us out for pizza the night of our arrival, eaten outside one of the cafes in the old town centre before dropping us at our accom-

modation on the other side of the river in the depths of Rive Gauche. Our flat was sparse and bare, a tiled floor paved the way into the living area giving it an additional coldness, although this was of some succour to me when my flatmate Luke cooked some prawns purchased at the wrong time of the week, causing me to spend a night using our floor as a way to keep cool in between bouts of vomiting. We then learned to heed what day the catch of fresh fish came in (Friday).

Initially we did not have a cooker, the kitchenette equipped only with two electric hobs, making mealtimes somewhat basic until our petitions for something more versatile were listened to. The apartment was kitted out with proper shutters, giving the gift of absolute darkness for afternoon siestas and helping to keep some of the noise from the busy crossroads outside at bay.

The beds were ok, with cheap mattresses from Ikea having been purchased for our arrival and Richard had bought us some bedding emblazoned with Union Jacks in a thoughtful and tasteless nod to home. I had brought some more to my liking with me but they did get the odd outing if guests came to stay, us rigging up a spare bed in the living room.

We were part of a small core of full time professionals, the majority being part time and working jobs in the day. We would meet for weights in the mornings which was usually followed by skills training. Anyone else that could come would be included and we would also work coaching some of the younger French guys. The level of these sessions was not great but was another area where we could potentially have a big impact.

Hilly would stress we be collectively conscious that the existing way of doing things had to be both respected and adjusted, not discarding their rhythms and inclinations but placing greater emphasis on skills, detail and speeding up the sessions which could contain a lot of talking. Some of the habits around training, including diet and lifestyle preferences, would take longer to adjust.

Weights sessions in particular were not well attended and we would

frequently be the only squad members participating, quite a departure from a full-time rugby environment where you are all there jostling for space. We trained in a well-appointed public gym which didn't open before 9am, giving our mornings a leisurely air. Sometimes Olivier Bartheaux, the team's conditioner, would arrive late, leaving us sat around stretching, waiting for the day to begin. The lack of full time players and the late opening time of the gym meant that we were often some of the only people in there, training alone, at a total remove from both normal society and the rugby environments that we'd previously belonged to.

A big part of our own adjustment would be learning the language. It was in our interest, and that of the team, to learn as quickly as we possibly could and one of the presidents told us this almost immediately upon meeting us, saying that we should be fluent by Christmas. This was ridiculously hyperbolic and did not come to pass but we were certainly under no illusions regarding the necessity of learning the lingo. Without it, we were in for a lonely time out there.

There were five English playing arrivals at the club including myself. Two of the guys, Ed Carne and Pierre Alex-Clark were already fluent in French having spent several years playing in France and, in Pierre's case, having a French mother. Both Pierre and Ed had a great breadth of knowledge regarding France and Pierre would sometimes drive to visit his grandparents a couple of hours south of Paris, bringing us back *sanglier* (wild boar) that they'd hunted.

The other new Englishmen were Joe Ellyatt and Luke Cozens. Luke had already had an abortive stint in France, spending a season at Grasse in the south; he and I played our junior and academy rugby together at Bath and had been coached by Richard as young players. Luke, commonly known as the Bean due to the shape of his shaven head, was a very skilful fly half with great passing skills and game sense but what set him apart was his kicking. He'd won a competition on the Rec when we were teenagers, the trophy for which was a metal cast of Jonny Wilkinson's boot, and he could hammer over goal kicks from anywhere in the opposition half, sometimes from further beyond. He's now the all-time top points scorer for Stade

Rouennais. Luke had bounced around several teams and was about to have a great time rediscovering a bit of his enjoyment for the game at Rouen and, even if his sharp tongue and manner would not always endear him to our teammates, he became a popular and recognisable figure around the city.

Joe was younger than us and had also been through the Bath Academy while studying at Bath University, before moving to Rotherham to play full time in the Championship afterwards where he'd not had much fun. A hardworking and athletic back row with good looks and fox-coloured hair, he proved to be excellent for Rouen by combining his work rate with pace and aggressive play that would often make up for the lack of endeavour around him. His endeavour would be displayed on his face, usually adorned by some sort of decorative wound picked up during *le combat*. Joe was one of our main players during my time in France, both on the field with the consistent level of his play, and off the field where I'd like to think that his appetite for fun is unsurpassable; being able to party for longer than him would be quite frightening.

With a training schedule some way from onerous and a fair bit of free time, it was in our interest to get started with learning the language and Joe, Luke and I were to have lessons once a week with the former Club Secretary, a nice old fellow called Jean-Pierre Botrel who was somewhat of an Anglophile having studied in Leeds and being married to an English lady called Chris.

These lessons were basic in nature with our mixed ability group working through an old school textbook, doing the accompanying listening comprehension and role play exercises. The bits where we would tend to learn the most were when JP would loosen up and hold more everyday conversations with the group, throwing the occasional question around the circle to keep everyone honest. We soon asked if we could have another lesson each week and were delighted that he agreed.

Even if the lessons were not part of the deal, the opportunity to relax in his well attended garden, eat his home grown cuisine from the

vegetable patch and admire his paintings, was too good to pass up, even if we would be given the odd bit of heavy lifting to do in exchange.

JP believes in the ideals of rugby; as a young man he was taken in by families affiliated with Headingley Rugby Club, fed, watered and helped out. He told us that paying it forward to younger rugby nomads was something that he owed to his own experiences of the sport. That this was of benefit to us, a new generation of cross-Channel chancers, was a large slice of luck, even if I now want to reciprocate in some way myself in the future.

One of the great appeals of living in France for me was learning the language and I'm certainly convinced that it's nigh on impossible to learn a language properly without having a real fluent speaker to talk to. If you're physically in the country then so much the better. We had a good environment in which to learn with actual lessons allied to being in a French speaking working environment where the initial language requirements were quite easy to attain.

Textbook or school French is all well and good but often crumbles on first contact with the enemy. Some suspicious Frenchmen will regard you adversarially and can use your obvious lack of comprehension to avoid helping you out, particularly if you want something that they regard as tiresome or unnecessary. Textbook French doesn't prepare you for slang, loose grammar, abbreviation or crucially, regional accents.

Our scrum half Gabi confused me greatly with his Perpignan accent, rendering me unable to understand the simple word '*moins*' (less), pronouncing it wildly differently. Before going to France I'd not considered that there would be regional French accents, not previously having had to confront the notion. Foolish, seeing as France is a far bigger country than England, but understandable I'd like to believe.

Rugby playing French is somewhat basic and the same words tend to come up over and over again. Drills and exercises are fairly common throughout the rugby world so once you realise what's happening,

the words become easy to remember. If you don't understand what's being asked of you, you can always just stand and watch the first group go through the drill, the canaries in the coal mine. The sessions were held in French but sometimes none of the assembled nationalities would understand what was being asked of them, leading Hilly to express his exasperation in the time honoured fashion of rugby coaches. You can speculate as to how that goes.

During training, communication was much easier for us as backs. All the English players save Joe played behind the scrum and tended to be selected as the centre of the backline, from flyhalf to fullback or with Ed on the wing. This meant that calls and in game feedback could be easily delivered along the line between us before being translated to a shrugging Frenchman on the end.

Joe had a much rougher time of it, especially as our forward pack was not well organised (this would be a recurring theme) and he would stand there oblivious as people argued during lineouts, unable to understand much of what was being said let alone contribute. This training ground loneliness probably accelerated his learning as he was forced to adapt to survive, picked it up quickly and became a leader in the team later in our time there.

We were best served by keeping our heads down in training for the most part and letting Hilly dictate a bit due to the potential local sensitivity to our arrival. When new players arrive, they seem exciting and fresh in the eyes of others and are obviously there to play. Inevitably you're there to take someone's place and they might not be amenable to that. The French guys were largely very hospitable but we acted respectfully nonetheless.

This integration was more difficult for Luke; playing fly half thrusts you into a leading role and he likes to get things clear, knowing that it is usually the ten's head on the chopping block if things descend into chaos. He's not known for holding his tongue and lacking language skills, didn't immediately endear himself to some of the more old-school players.

Playing rugby in the UK is quite a homogenous experience. I played

for second division English clubs where my teammates were largely English. There would be the odd Irishman, a smattering of real local players and the occasional Pacific Islander but the squads were largely composed of identikit British players.

The Premiership sees a little more diversity but the same applies. There will be a few South Africans, the odd New Zealander and maybe even an Eastern European, but even if they are foreigners, most are English speakers.

The Stade Rouennais changing room by contrast was a veritable UN, peopled with players from all over the world, rugby playing nomads who had found themselves in the backwaters of French rugby at a team that had only recently come into professional existence.

The team was captained by Alex Tudori, a handsome, dark haired former Perpignan second row and Romanian international. He'd been to two World Cups and had played against the All Blacks but was now combining rugby with work at one of the president's businesses, his rugby involvement decreasing as his years advanced. He was backed up by another Romanian, Vili Hordila, a grey-haired and fashionably attired fullback. They would usually claim the back row of the bus for away trips, abusing everyone further forward and talking in Romanian when they didn't wish to be understood.

Our other second rows were Vincent Lointier, a local guy and Michel K, an enormous Polish guy who probably should have taken up another sport that could use his frame to its full advantage. Our front row were club stalwarts for the most part, gnarled French props with bald heads and quick tempers, joined by a very hairy Georgian in Otari Toradze. Bouly the forwards coach would turn out occasionally and the other senior guys Pierre and Thomas were supplemented by Jeremie Clamy-Edroux, a local player who could play both sides of the scrum. His arguments with Hilly over what could be expected of him professionally were hilarious, saying that he'd behave like a pro when he got paid like one rather than the other way around. Anthony Vigoroux, a flamboyantly dressed

hooker, partial to whole ensembles in one colour, had passed through Toulouse and Perpignan and was now preparing to enter the police force. He combined his excellent lineout throwing and top level experience with a solid understanding of English, making him important to the team while he was still available.

The back row was a great strength of the team with Joe augmenting a good group. Amar Sy provided speed and springiness in the line-out, Fabien Vincent support play and ball pilfering while there were contrasting options at number 8 with Greg Hanocque playing a more considered style and the late to arrive Feleti Kamoto bringing Tongan power and offloading ability.

There were local French players in the backline, the best player being Romuel Berthe, a hardrunning centre and Polish international. There was speed and nous on the wings, sadly not all at the same time, in French wingers Johanny Labitte, former France judoka Polo and Julien Drut while we also had a Fijian legend in Fero Lasagavibau, a once brilliant back three player winding down to retirement, long after his peak as a player for Fiji and the Auckland Blues.

Our first preseason friendly was against what Hilly would call 'a bunch of cabbages' where we had already scored 30 or 40 prior to half time. During the first half, we were awarded an eminently kickable penalty and our captain Alex Tudori elected to take the points. This did seem somewhat strange and Luke motioned for the corner, asking Alex (who did speak some English) if that was a better shout.

He disagreed and motioned for the posts before Luke just kicked the ball out in the corner anyway. We then scored from the resulting driving maul. This was of little consequence to our long haired number eight Greg, a Frenchman who made constant references to his Viking heritage and who had played some decent rugby at Auch previously. He shouted blue murder in the changing room at half-time, stressing the importance of respecting the post of captain and not just doing whatever you want. Ironically Luke was at that very

moment doing whatever he wanted by not listening, unable to understand what was going on anyway.

Despite these teething problems, we felt welcomed by the group with a big part of this being the daily ritual of handshaking and air kissing everyone that came to the club. This small gesture of respect initially seems a bit much but you come to relish the daily *bonjour*, developing your own little variations with specific people as you get to know them better. It's a pleasant way to start the day and is taken very seriously. You must look the other person in the eye, unless you're kissing their cheek, and failure to properly shake someone's hand, forgetting to shake their hand, or trying to shake their hand for a second time appears rude and disrespectful.

This ritual isn't confined to rugby clubs; when the French arrive at their place of work something similar occurs and it goes a long way to making everyone in the office feel valued. It's certainly something I think we could bring back to the UK as mornings feel far more awkward without saying hi to everyone.

Greeting is a real leveller and you're expected to greet everyone, whether they're the president or a volunteer serving lunch and one of our presidents rubbed everyone up the wrong way with his lack of respect during the ritual. He'd often turn away at the moment of handshaking, declining to look people in the eye or even face toward them. Eventually, when we had become more comfortable and started to care less about what they thought of us, Joe left him hanging as he turned away, his hand flapping around in space like a fish gasping for air. Great mirth erupted and he was embarrassed but I doubt he altered his behaviour afterwards.

The co-presidents were Marc-Antoine who owned a construction company and Philippe who ran a financial services business. They had taken over the team in the lower divisions when it was in danger of going out of existence and had invested to the point that the club had achieved promotion into Fédérale 2 before we joined them.

They had designs on taking the team into Pro D2 and establishing Normandy as a place that rugby was played. Traditionally rugby is a

southern sport and the north lacks the culture and player base of France's warmer climes.

The teams in the south had the budgets and supporters to sustain large well remunerated squads and attracted big sponsors as a result, Toulouse being the obvious case. The tide in France is turning towards a new breed of investor to whom money is no object. Even Mourad Boudjellal, the Toulon president partly responsible for the Galactico culture in French rugby through assembling the incredibly successful side of recent vintage, has begun to balk at the salaries commanded by various players.

The trend is now towards the larger cities where the Parisian teams and Lyon have begun to make their financial might tell while Montpellier have one of the wealthiest investors in Mohamed Altrad. These clubs are now paying transfer fees for players, something that wasn't previously unheard of but now, the scale of them is increasing and rugby's first million euro transfer cannot be too far away.

This culture of the president has filtered down the leagues where ambitious businessmen would like a vehicle to market their various business enterprises. There are more places in the top divisions in France than in their English counterparts with 14 teams in the top division and 16 in the second compared to 12 and 12 in England. Pro D2 is extensively televised and even Fédérale 1 has some regular television coverage on Eurosport. Given that there is no shortage of rugby clubs in France, many have taken one over and attempted to get up into the higher reaches of French rugby. Our two presidents were merely the latest.

We did not meet these guys before signing for their team but were swiftly introduced to them on arrival. Marc Antoine was suave and well dressed, speaking English confidently and telling us what to do immediately. Philippe was more awkward and less charming; his own expensive clothes did not hang naturally on him.

I first had an inkling that there was some discontent between them when I introduced a visiting parent to Philippe as the vice-president. This was how he came across but it was an error on my part. He

quickly corrected me, insisting that he was the 'co-president' and that they were joint partners in the venture. They had different allies in the club and were followed about by a cast of characters keen to court their favour.

Marc-Antoine seemed like a lonely sort of guy. Wealthy, handsome and a successful businessman, you nevertheless got the impression that he was quite insecure and always eager to impress you. He had a lovely wardrobe with a range of velvet jackets that people laughed at but secretly coveted.

He could laugh at himself somewhat too. One day he sported a safari style coat and I just said, 'English Patient' to him to which he chuckled. You felt that Philippe, with his ill-fitting expensive outfits would not have found such a comment funny in the slightest.

Marc Antoine had a glamorous partner with whom he shared a tempestuous relationship; Hilly was often invited to dine with him and would listen to him pour his heart out over various arguments that they'd had. Providing relationship counselling to a man who is effectively your boss is quite an odd dynamic to be a part of but you find in France that your remit easily goes beyond what you thought it would when you signed up.

Philippe was a keen golfer and kindly organised memberships for some of the lads at the Vaudreuil club where he was a member. I'm not a golfer but the boys would go down on days off to play a round and even played in a club tournament one year. Our winger took advantage of their extremely generous beginners handicap to win the tournament and take home an array of prizes, politely applauded by the members as he made off with their stash of golfing goods and rendering Philippe jealous.

Our presidents were evidently guys who liked to present themselves as alphas with their designer clothes, expensive cars and a shared love for extended bouts of public speaking, something that we witnessed first hand soon after our arrival.

Our official welcome came at the season launch party, hosted by the

Hotel Bourgtheroulde in the centre of town. Although most of the talking would be handled by the presidents and Hilly, we were expected to contribute to the evening by walking out of the hotel, taking a microphone and addressing the crowd of sponsors, players and supporters in the courtyard below before descending to join them for canapés and champagne. As this was our first week at the club, the prospect of speaking French in front of a large group felt daunting so we arranged some stock questions and answers with Hilly to ensure we weren't stood there dying on stage.

One man who did die on stage slightly was a fellow new signing, Argentinian scrum half Carlos Danil. Having already spent time in France, he spoke very good French and was combining his rugby commitments with a job at the wealth management firm belonging to Philippe. He told the assembled crowd that he was ready 'to bleed for the shirt', disturbing the bourgeoisie and striking an odd note. This pride in the jersey stuff didn't ring true due to him having not yet played a game.

Argentina has become a top rugby nation, often peaking at World Cups where the lack of expectations and the focus on the bigger teams has seen them catch out some luminaries of the sport. They seem to regularly knock out Ireland and in the 2007 tournament they dispatched host nation France twice, in the opener and in the 3/4th place playoff.

They've produced some fantastic players and now run a de facto national team in the Super Rugby competition while some of their better players continue to play in Europe where they can command a far higher salary. There are many Argentinian internationals in the French Top 14 including classy winger Juan Imhoff, playmaker Nicola Sanchez and flanker Facundo Isa while one of my rugby heroes Juan Martin Hernandez spent almost his whole career in France.

Despite the increasing competence of Argentinian rugby, I'd never had a teammate from there until Carlos. Foreign player restrictions in England mean that teams are more likely to take a New Zealander

or similar and the fact that there are just fewer Argentinians playing rugby must also account for some of this difference.

Carlos was signed at a similar time to us and lived with Joe. Combining rugby with employment meant that he lived in a different rhythm to us and so he found some of Joe's lifestyle choices slightly difficult to deal with, his heavy brows and dark eyes giving him the air of someone who is permanently tired before any lack of sleep is factored in to the equation.

Due to having an actual job, he was justifiably not best pleased when people would come home drunk after Sunday matches and spend time in his living room making noise and playing music while he was trying to get some shuteye. Concurrently to this he would demand silence in the afternoons that he was at home so that he could sleep, making him an awkward customer to deal with socially.

He also had some odd eating habits where he would eat one food-stuff at a time, getting up between each component of the meal to cook the next. He'd eat a plate of peas, then a steak, then some potato and so on. I've never discerned whether this is an Argentinian custom or just one of his.

Carlos had been signed ostensibly to be the starting scrum half and possessed a reasonable pass. His decision making wasn't up to much though and he would often do bizarre things when a simple pass would have been the best thing to do. This didn't endear him to Hilly who, being a former scrum half was always harsher on scrum halves, and he began to despair of him. During one game, he was hooked after the first twenty minutes due to the paucity of his play.

An early hooking is absolutely catastrophic and the ultimate marker of a coach having no confidence in you. We had rolling subs in that division so he was put back on the field later but didn't do much better. After this he wasn't really taken seriously and he began to play more and more for the B team.

Carlos was an identical twin and his brother Guido came to stay one weekend. Guido played fly half for a team in *Fédérale 3* and during

his stay he came down to the training ground during the day to do some kicking practice while his brother was at work.

Unfortunately for him he was spotted by Hilly on the field.

'Carlos, why aren't you at work?'

'I am not Carlos, I'm his brother Guido,' Guido replied in his heavily accented English.

This perplexed Richard and he wandered off for a bit to consider this turn of events before coming back.

'Alright Carlos, very good. Now seriously, why aren't you at work?'

'I'm not Carlos, I'm his brother Guido. I'm visiting for the week.'

This really got his goat and he wandered off before coming back one final time and going at him harder.

'Right that's it Carlos, enough of that shit. Why aren't you at work?'

Guido had to go and get his various pieces of identification to prove that he wasn't his identical twin brother so that Hilly was satisfied.

This was about the most notable thing that Carlos did on the field at Rouen and he wasn't actually there.

Later on, he was told that it might be in his interest to find another team and the club were probably keen to save the small amount of money that they were paying him to better cover another position; they wanted to bring a hooker called Robin Becquet back from New Zealand to shore up the front row. The younger scrum half at the club, Gabriel Cremadeills, had had a good start to the year and looked lively off the bench, meaning that there wasn't much point keeping Carlos around to play in the B team.

To be fair to Carlos, why should he move mid-season when he was fairly stable at Rouen? He had a flat and a car provided and was earning some reasonable money. The problem wasn't his to solve.

Unfortunately, when the club have provided you work with one of

their own businesses, workers' rights are something of a secondary concern and he was summarily fired from his job. He suddenly found himself out of work, sharing a flat in Rouen with a relative stranger, receiving the use of a car and a few hundred euros a month to play terrible rugby.

Carlos was an odd chap and not a good rugby player but he was essentially a nice guy. He could speak at least three languages and had the wherewithal to hold down a financial services job on another continent. He is smarter and more adventurous than most other guys I've met but he was suddenly in a very precarious position, on the far side of the world from most of his family and without any substantial income.

This is the sort of predicament that is not uncommon in the outer reaches of professional rugby. You're reliant on the club to tether you to wherever you've pitched up and if they change their mind about you, there's not much that you can do about it. Any sort of legal advice is expensive and certainly not going to be provided to you by the club while there is no players union to speak of.

In the UK, there are people who have similar experiences and even in the Championship, a full time professional league, the players union won't begin to represent the interests of the athletes there because according to them, 'it would be opening Pandora's box'. The issues are myriad and too serious for them to even begin to address them, meaning that some of the game's most vulnerable players, subject to similar risks and stressors to their top flight brethren but without the financial rewards that those players enjoy, go about their work largely uninsured and without protection.

It's something that deserves to be addressed for the long-term health of the sport and for the sake of those who give their bodies and their formative adult years to it. Unfortunately, someone is always willing to take this chance and can find themselves burned by it. Just like Carlos Danil.

He wasn't to know that at the beginning of the season though and full of hope, excitement and champagne, the evening turned into a

big night out with coaches, players and staff moving on to the Irish pub together, the president shouting drinks for everyone. Although we couldn't make much sense of the conversations going on around us, there was a buzz around the team before the season began and I felt more positive about joining the club.

ROUEN

ROUEN IS A RATHER LOVELY CITY ON THE BANKS OF THE SEINE, about an hour and a half north west of Paris and 40 minutes or so from the Normandy coast. Famous for being the site of Joan of Arc's execution, Rouen is split across the river with the Right Bank or Rive Droite being the affluent town centre, replete with cathedrals, ornamental clocks and traditional Norman architecture, while the left bank or Rive Gauche is the grimier, immigrant dominated area where the rugby club and our accommodation was based.

It's a large city with about 500,000 inhabitants, the urban sprawl having swallowed up previously separate smaller settlements and extends right out to the main motorway that takes you to the French capital.

It's not a lively place although a large university and renowned business school means that there is a sizeable student population and the requisite bars to water them. Rouen's geography makes for a concentrated centre, a large hill borders the north of the city while the river severs it down the middle, dividing it in two.

Cities on rivers tend to be constructed along its lines but Rouen seems to ignore its river. The metro crosses the Seine but there is no

option to continue along its banks. Building along it was evidently an afterthought as there are some newer commercial developments on Rive Droite but they are not well integrated into the town itself. This is partly due to the large road that continues along the riverbank and probably due to some poor town planning. The prefecture and law school are based out of the town centre and although not far away, involve crossing one of the major roads into the city which gives it a detached air. You have to drive down to this part of town and it's something of a bolt on.

Rouen was my new home and with our club car, a little white Clio with two seats rather than four to qualify for a certain tax break, and our own feet, we set about exploring the city.

Early in our tenure, the demands of training (and most of the games) were not great so we filled our spare time with extra gym, extra French lessons and extra drinking sessions.

Rugby players can usually make their own fun when they sniff opportunity and while the standard and expectations were low, we headed out as often as we could, partly to escape our rather dreary little flat but also to try to join in with the French way of life. We were new to the city and needed practice speaking as well as being keen to explore.

The French are big socialisers and the terraces outside Rouen's cafes and bars were usually busy until relatively late. In the UK, most people start early and head home whereas those on the continent head straight to bars and restaurants and remain out for a while, tending to nurse their drinks rather than hammering them like us Anglo Saxons. The vibe is more of a civilised *apero* rather than the hurricane of a British happy hour.

Rouen's compact centre means that the various bars and nightspots are not far from each other, conveniently within an easy walking distance. Later when we acquired a motley selection of bikes, our reach was even greater as we could easily hop on and cruise off if the bar we were in wasn't up to snuff.

Biking around meant that we got to know the city centre extremely well. It's focused around the spectacular cathedral, with a cobbled shopping street leading west to the Gros Horloge, a beautiful archway that houses the eponymous big clock, before carrying on through to the Place du Vieux-Marché where the church L'église Sainte-Jeanne-d'Arc commemorates the spot where Joan of Arc was burned at the stake.

This is a bit of a sore point for the people of Rouen as it was the English who put her to death; something that the lads would rib us about. However, I learned in the Joan of Arc museum housed in the archbishop's quarters to the side of the cathedral, that the French were concerned of her growing influence with the populace and so handed her over to us to do the dirty work. Explaining that won't get you very far though so it's best to take responsibility for something that happened almost 600 years ago on the chin. The city has other Jeanne d'Arc memorial sites, including the Tour de la Pucelle where she was incarcerated awaiting trial.

The first place of pilgrimage that we discovered was the Irish pub O'Kallaghan's. It is in a great spot opposite one of Rouen's larger churches and across from the Mairie or Town Hall. It seems ridiculous that an Irish pub would be a prime destination but this is common in European cities. Subsequent European jaunts gave me the opportunity to conduct a limited and unscientific study on the subject and I found that Irish pubs are reliable destinations for a younger clientele across the continent.

This one isn't even cheap but attracted a large student and young professional crowd. When we became better known and had made some friends around the city we could reliably bump into them here on Thursday nights. Right next door was a good and lethal cocktail bar, the name of which always escapes me and the two crowds tend to commingle.

We became conversant with the various bars around the city, ranging from Chester's with its mad patron setting the bar on fire if you bought a big round, the Taverne de Thor, an Irish pub

rebranded as an unconvincing Viking tavern, the Panda Bar or Bambou, hidden away in a Rouen backstreet selling 3 euro happy hour pints and the Delirium Cafe and le Berthom with their lethal Belgian beers.

As a sporting city Rouen's pedigree is very mixed. There was no great history of rugby to speak of, despite nearby Le Havre being the first rugby club to be founded in France, while the football team had gone under with financial problems, the most recent owner of the team being stabbed to death as a consequence of some dodgy business dealings. In a fun bit of serendipity, Rouen is the birthplace of French World Cup winner David Trezeguet, whose Argentinian father played for the football club in the 1970s; Trezeguet scored the winner in the Euro 2000 final, qualifying to play for France by virtue of his father's short period in Rouen.

Apart from this bit of luck, Rouen's sporting excellence has been largely carried by the ice hockey team the Rouen Dragons who are multiple European champions, playing in a small ground attached to the leisure centre on the Île Lacroix, a thin piece of land in the middle of the Seine. We would later get the odd ticket and go to support them, the cramped arena and concrete walls making for a bouncing atmosphere and they would typically win, leaving the local fans satisfied.

We tried various initiatives to join forces with some of the other sports teams but these were usually a bit awkward and lacking in enthusiasm. We bumped into some of the American basketball players in the town centre on a night out soon after our arrival and we got chatting. Excited about our new adventure, we asked them how they found living in Rouen and if they were learning French.

'No way man, I fucking hate Rouen,' one of them drawled, his socks and sandals combination marking him out as a foreign interloper before he even opened his mouth. When we later went to watch some basketball, we saw that this disdain seemed to extend to his teammates and I think he got out of there as quickly as he could.

The foreign basketballers were a good corollary to us; taking the

opportunity to play professional sport wherever they could. The European basketball scene is pretty extensive, even if the top level is obviously the NBA, and you can make a living playing sport if you're prepared to move anywhere. The ice hockey guys were on some good money, in the hundreds of thousands per year but us and the basketballers were of a similar ilk, jobbing pros looking for a break somewhere.

Rugby is becoming more of a global game. Previously your options for a professional contract were limited to the UK and France but now there are websites advertising opportunities all over the place, many advertising match fees and part time employment as sweeteners. You can play in the Americas, across Europe, Asia and the Antipodes and I've been proposed contracts in Italy, the US and Sri Lanka with terms ranging from the good to the derisory. The thing it can do for you is get you a local network wherever you go and if you can make a positive impression, either on the field or by being a good bloke, you can open doors that would be otherwise closed.

Many young players don't realise the opportunities that are available in rugby to do something like this. There are countless places to go and play professional or semi-professional rugby around the world and teams will give you a place to live, a car and a means of employment, whether that's coaching, personal training or potentially working with a sponsor.

You can get away from home, earn a bit of money and see somewhere different, maybe even learning a new language. Ed Carne had done this himself. Ed had already arrived in Rouen and was fully installed downstairs from us in the Rue Méridienne when we got there. The other English guys already knew each other to some degree as we all either hailed from Bath or in Joe's case, had been to university there. Ed took a bit longer to get to know.

Ed is an interesting demonstration of what is possible through pursuing rugby as a career path, having taken a big left turn away from English rugby at a young age. He was a guy who didn't have age group caps but he had lived and worked in Italy and France,

learning both languages and even picking up a bit of Fijian; a far more rounded set of skills than if he'd remained sloggling it out for Redruth as they descended the English rugby ladder.

Ed is from Hereford but spent many of his formative years down in Cornwall, playing rugby for Redruth as well as representative rugby for the county. These pursuits are largely amateur but Redruth were once in National One, were a tough opponent at their place and had some money to pay a few players, including a future teammate of mine at Rouen in the large form of PJ Gidlow. I played against Redruth a few times and they continued to field some decent players with former England 7s ace Rob Thirlby and his brother turning out for them while later they had future British Lion Jack Nowell and Jersey fly half Aaron Penberthy play as youngsters.

Ed played for them, never having an opportunity at playing in a higher division but through an agent, managed to get to an Italian club where he spent a couple of seasons. Off the back of this experience he signed for USON or Nevers Rugby in the somewhat nether regions of France. You're far enough away from Paris to feel isolated, in the centre of the country and without much in the way of nearby entertainment.

Nevertheless, Nevers sounded like a land of milk and honey to us having been bankrolled by an ambitious wealthy businessman, and they were well on the way to achieving what Rouen had in mind. Ed had signed for them in the lower divisions and seen a couple of promotions in his time there before he began to play far less as they recruited more storied individuals. Nevers are now flying high in Pro D2, their facilities and setup ready for their goal of promotion to the Top 14 and they also have another Rouen old boy in their ranks in Zack Henry.

Ed arrived in Rouen with a plan. He had spent a long time playing rugby around Europe and would have a year in Rouen while completing a qualification in Management at Northumbria University through the RPA (Rugby Players Association). He would then go home to seek employment when the season ended.

Several guys leaving Rouen have spent time in Hong Kong and there are rugby contracts to be had all across Europe, in Asia and in the Americas. I know another guy who is a coach at a school in Santiago, Chile. If you're a young school or university graduate you can do a lot worse than get out and explore the world using rugby as your passport.

One of the things is that you need to be a bit of a self-starter and take a chance on something as you probably won't have the opportunity to go and vet it for yourself before you go there permanently. This is what had happened to us with signing at Rouen and how Ed got out to Italy. An agent had phoned him and said:

'Everyone wants that rose on their chest but for most that is a big ask. If you go out to Italy, in three years you could be running out at the Stadio Flaminio'.

Asking around other acquaintances of mine uncovered that this was not an uncommon pitch to green English youngsters. Indeed, I'd received a similar one myself, probably from the same bloke and I declined, at that point set on heading up the divisions. To be fair, I was then on an upward trajectory.

Ed did go to play some international rugby during our time at Rouen, qualifying for Singapore by virtue of having been born there, playing in some matches for them and having a great time. He was a versatile back, able to play from 12 out to fullback, tall, fast and determined and he had a good year for us, opening up a lot during our time there, despite being initially a bit peeved at having Joe cluttering up his spare room. It's a classic manoeuvre that what you're sold, your own apartment, is never quite what exists when you arrive and you tend to have to make a bit of a fuss to actually get what you've signed up for. This was certainly the case at Rouen.

A FLYING START

THERE IS A REAL JOY IN LOOKING LIKE SHIT AND BEATING AN immaculately turned out opponent. We only played one preseason game due to a cancellation; we hammered an awful team, looking oddly cohesive and enjoying throwing the ball around; but it all felt a bit undercooked and we had no idea what our first league games would bring. We won our first two games against Auxerre and PUC before receiving our first decent opponent in Beaune, a team from deepest wine country, at home.

When they turned up it looked like a real mismatch. They had a rock star bus and all got off dripping in Puma kit, enormous headphones and snapback caps, looking like a real bunch of pumpers. They also had a couple of obvious Kiwis meaning that they had done some of their own recruitment and weren't just a collection of vineyard workers. Their appearance and demeanour actually did spur me on as it appeared that they thought that they were going to wander in and dispatch us easily. Looking at us in our mismatched attire with only the club polo shirts having arrived, standing around with several of the squad smoking and drinking coffee from disposable plastic cups I couldn't blame them to be fair.

In rugby, there is a tendency to judge the other team on first impressions. 'They look massive' is a common refrain or as with Beaune, if their kit is smart they make an impression one way or another. You basically see them as being more professional than you; or more arrogant. It's easy to talk yourself into how a team is and how they will play, based on nothing more than a brief sighting of them walking into the ground and this is only exacerbated by the Chinese whispers effect of the vague snippets of information that your teammates have about the opposition.

We played some phenomenal stuff that day, slinging it around and scoring 40 odd points, delighting our viewing public and allowing the stadium announcer to repeatedly play the snippet of local song that greeted a home try. Hilariously the Puma crew had to head back home with their tails between their legs and their sunglasses in their pockets. Sometimes looking village can be an advantage and it feeds in to the plucky underdog narrative; we've got no kit or any mod cons but we're good. Good fun. It offers plausible deniability if you lose too. 'Look at us! We don't even have any kit!'

Our ground did not give a forbidding impression but le Stade Jean Mermoz, colloquially known as le Mermoz, was something of an anachronism with an old-world charm, its stone benches ringed around half of the ground, the recessed pitch having the air of a forgotten amphitheatre. Tall coniferous trees lined one end of the ground on the far side of the small road and the covered stand was bolted on to the dilapidated clubhouse where a small terrace allowed drinkers a good view of the field.

I came to love the ground, even when it was redeveloped during my time there, losing some of its charm as it was moulded by professionalism. On a good weather day, warm or cold, the place seemed inviting and the people there were usually good for a laugh or two, even if many of them were probably at our unwitting expense in the first season.

In terms of pre-match preparations, we were fortunate to have an English coach, turning up for home games about 90 minutes before

kickoff for relaxed *bonjours* and maybe a coffee, then meeting in the changing room to discuss strategy, about half an hour dedicated to individual warm ups before a short team warm up of about 25 minutes. This is an atypical experience in France, especially in the lower divisions.

Many teams will meet early at around 9am to have breakfast together before doing a light training session. After this they will hang around and eat lunch together and then wait to be able to prepare for the game. The belief is that by spending time together, you strengthen the team bonds and allow the players the time to mentally prepare for the match.

To me this seems absolutely ludicrous and I would be bored out of my mind by the time kickoff came around. We didn't have to subscribe to this idiocy but my experience of rugby in France would be drastically different if we'd had to put up with this. At our home games, we were responsible for our own morning routine and pregame nutrition, able to roll into the ground not too long before kickoff and keep a bit of a buzz going before the game began.

Away games were a different matter. If we stayed the night somewhere, usually a budget hotel, we would eat breakfast and have the morning largely to ourselves, maybe with a quick strategy meeting and a few lineouts and backs moves in the car park before lunch. If we travelled on the day we would stop somewhere for lunch before arriving at our destination.

Lunch is, without fail, *crudités*, a sort of melange of cold meats and various salads including beetroot and shredded carrot, chicken and pasta, the quality of which varied quite wildly, and a dessert of yoghurt and fruit followed by coffee. This meal would never differ. Ever.

After the first friendly game or *match amical*, we were introduced to the concept of *le troisième mi-temps* (the third half) in earnest. French rugby sees the traditional post-rugby drinking as such an integral part of the sport that it is linguistically part of the match, probably more so than the warm up. The club barman Patou recognised early

on that we were up for integrating ourselves into this tradition, helped by not having to shoulder the burden of going to work the next day, and he regularly plied us with drinks without the expectation of payment. He was relieved of his position of barman after a few months when the clubhouse moved into a portakabin at the far end of the pitch, the club unable to reconcile the glaring holes in their accounts with his protestations of innocence.

I was also quickly introduced to the delights of Ricard, foul smelling aniseed pastis, diluted with water to make a deadly concoction masquerading as apple juice. After being made to down two on the bounce by the forwards coach Grégoric Bouly, I gladly vomited off the back of the stand, allowing him his fun and relieving me of further consequences the next day.

All in all, we were proving to be popular acquisitions, both for our play and our willingness to drink, and the club, expecting nothing, had won its first three league games, sitting pretty at the head of the *poule*. In the spirit of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, it was probably fair that we didn't have to pay for any beer.

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Ben

