

JAMES, CARWYN REES (1929-1983), teacher, rugby player and coach

Name: Carwyn Rees James
Date of birth: 1929
Date of death: 1983
Parent: Annie James (née Davies)
Parent: David Michael James
Gender: Male
Occupation: teacher, rugby player and coach
Area of activity: Education; Sports and Leisure Pursuits
Author: Llyr James

Carwyn James was born on 2 November 1929 in Cefneithin, Carmarthenshire. He was the youngest of four children born to David Michael James (1891-1972) and his wife Annie (née Davies, 1893-1974). He had two sisters, Gwen (1914-1996) and Eilonwy (1918-2005), and a brother Dewi (1927-2015). His mother's family were carpenters and his father was a farm hand who moved from Cardiganshire's rural poverty to the Carmarthenshire coalfield at the beginning of the 1920s. The family continued to live in Rhydlewis until 1927 when Dewi was born and the family moved to live in Rose Villa, Cefneithin. Carwyn, therefore, was the only one born south of the river Teifi. He attended the village primary school fifty yards from his home, and went on to secondary school at Ysgol y Gwendraeth two miles away.

Rugby was an immediate influence; even his headmaster in primary school, W. J. Jones, had a full Welsh cap. As a boy, he was regularly taken along Heol y Baw by Lloyd Morgan, his father's best friend, to support Cefneithin RFC carrying the boots of Haydn Jones, the club's elegant outside half. He often referred to Lloyd and Haydn, whose fate reminded him daily of his privileges of opportunity and choice. One went to work underground at the age of 14 but pneumoconiosis forced him to retire at 30, having become a 'hundred percenter'. The other went to war but Haydn was killed in 1941 aboard *HMS Hood*, the Royal Navy's biggest vessel, which sank in 3 minutes.

In this mining community he enjoyed a traditional chapel upbringing. Yet he and his brother were different from the other boys. Because their sisters were so much older, they had, in effect, three mothers and were indulged. Their best friends were not miners' sons but two boys who lived on a nearby farm, Ffynnon y Cawr, and they spent every summer in Cardiganshire. Whilst every other boy in the village spent part of his summer holiday underground with his father, Carwyn and Dewi were with relatives in Rhydlewis. Although she admired the miner's bravery, Annie James was reluctant for her sons to follow their father into this difficult, dangerous environment.

At Ysgol y Gwendraeth, despite the attraction of English literature, Dora Williams's lessons instilled in him a love of Welsh language and culture. There was already a strong rugby tradition at the school, and in his final year he captained the Welsh Secondary Schools as outside half.

In 1948 he went to Aberystwyth University, to study Welsh, an immense privilege when **T. H. Parry-Williams** was professor and **Gwenallt** a lecturer. Both were profound influences on him all his life. An able and conscientious student, he also found time to captain the college both at rugby and cricket and to play for the town's first XV. After teacher training he spent his National Service in the Navy, not at sea but, like many other graduates, learning Russian at a centre in Surrey. His first teaching post was at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School in Carmarthen. He was then invited by Llandovery College to establish a Welsh department there; he felt that this was an ideal opportunity to combine teaching and rugby because there was already a very strong emphasis on sport with facilities to match.

He played 150 games over seven seasons for Llanelli. He was a talented outside half, combining a fine side step with a mastery of the drop kick. He also excelled at the seven a side game where skill could more easily overcome might and, in 1956, he captained London Welsh to victory at the Middlesex Sevens. He was unfortunate in having to compete for the Welsh jersey with **Cliff Morgan** of Cardiff, the British Lions' first choice in 1955 and, by common consent, one of Wales's best-ever. Long before substitutions were allowed, he was a travelling reserve more than twenty times. Finally, in January 1958, when he was 28 years old, Morgan's injury allowed him to make his debut against Australia at Cardiff Arms Park wearing number 6 (numbering was different then with the full back wearing 1 and the hooker 9 etc.). Appropriately, he kicked a drop goal in a 9-3 victory. Two months later, he played outside Morgan, at centre, against France but the game was lost and neither played for Wales again.

1969, a year of great political turmoil in Wales, was a new beginning for Carwyn not only in becoming a lecturer at Trinity College, Carmarthen but also going to Stradey Park, Llanelli as coach. His aim, from the beginning, was to simplify the game and to prove that his philosophy and that of his mentor at Llandovery, T. P. Williams, could be just as effective in senior rugby. This involved moving the ball swiftly from one touchline to the other to create space for the winger. This could not work without improved fitness levels and, to this end, he recruited Tom Hudson, a former English international athlete, to assist him. In training, he supervised endless fingertip passing drills, executed at full speed, so that this basic skill became second nature. This gave his talented squad the time and the means to think, think and think again on the field of play. Whether huddled around him on the training pitch or in the confines of the changing room, his players were encouraged to make up their own minds and, in making errors, they would learn and flourish. To him, discipline was not a constraint but a liberator. It was his vision not only on the pitch but also in the classroom.

The pinnacle of his coaching career outside Wales was undoubtedly with the 1971 British Lions. Wins in the first and third tests and a draw in the fourth gave the Lions their only series victory in New Zealand. With Doug Smith as manager and a Welshman, John Dawes, as captain, he succeeded in blending open rugby with the psychology he had developed at Stradey. He was well aware that many talented Lions' squads had returned empty handed and saw clearly from the beginning that his aim was simply to instil in greats, such as Gareth Edwards and Willie John McBride, the necessary self-belief. He had managed to persuade an initially reluctant Barry John, also brought up in Cefneithin, to go on tour and this astonishing coincidence, this rapport between coach and orchestrator, was fundamental to the tour's success. A year later, on 31st October 1972, the All Blacks came to Llanelli and were beaten 9-3. This time, he left the inspirational team talk to his captain, Delme Thomas. That game is as much a part of Welsh folklore as the Mabinogion that captured Carwyn's imagination as a young man. Winning teams tend to have gifted outside halves, and Carwyn was blessed in working so closely with two of the finest in Barry John and Phil Bennett.

At the General Election of 1970 he decided to contest the Llanelli seat as the Plaid Cymru candidate. His family were Liberals and Cefneithin was socialist, yet Carwyn had,

from his days at Aberystwyth, an affinity with Plaid Cymru and nationalism. Even though there was no hope of winning a safe Labour seat, polling over 8,000 votes was an achievement. After the Lions' success, he was offered the OBE but it was politely refused as it could not be reconciled with his uncompromising political views. He did, however, accept with great pride an invitation to membership of the national Eisteddfod's Gorsedd y Beirdd.

In 1974, when the Welsh Rugby Union was seeking a new coach for the national team, he duly applied. A committee known as the 'Big Five' was responsible for team selection but, in his view, the coach should always be sole selector and he knew, by imposing this condition, that he would be rejected by the WRU. Llanelli won four consecutive Welsh Challenge Cups between 1973 and 1976 when he had complete control over selection and tactics, and the WRU's unwillingness to change was a grave disappointment to him.

When he accepted an invitation to coach Rovigo in northern Italy in 1977, he was depressed and disillusioned. Yet new friends and the river Po's vast alluvial plain were a timely antidote to Wales's narrow mindedness. There was an opportunity not only to coach rugby but also to study another language, to write a weekly column, to teach at a local school and slowly to recover his self-esteem, his autostima. After winning the scudetto, the championship, in the second season, he returned to Wales in 1979. He co-authored a book on the Lions' tour to South Africa in 1980 and wrote his own book, *Focus on Rugby* that was published after his death.

He had long suffered from a painful skin condition, but thirty five years of chain smoking and a decade of excessive drinking had also taken their toll. He collapsed early in 1982 but the warning was ignored.

The move in 1974 to full time writing and broadcasting had been challenging and exciting yet a cultural uprooting. He was BBC Wales's first rugby analyst - he also helped Eic Davies to create the standard glossary of rugby terms in Welsh - as well as first rugby columnist of the *Guardian*, but there was a price to pay. For someone as much at home presenting the day's highlights from the National Eisteddfod as explaining tactics, happier in a classroom taking a sonnet apart than editing a rugby video, there was now an uneasy imbalance. His diary was full but there was a void, a lack of fulfilment, a lost content.

He never married, and lived with his sister Gwen, a retired psychiatric nurse in a bungalow which they had built for their parents in Cefneithin. After his death, rumours about his sexuality continued to swirl and one or two tasteless television documentaries simply added to the speculation.

On holiday in Amsterdam, at the Kras Nabolsky hotel on 10 January 1983, Carwyn James suffered a fatal heart attack. After a private cremation at Morryston, two memorial services were held, one at Tabernacle Chapel in Cefneithin and the other in Cardiff.

He was inducted into the Welsh Sporting Hall of Fame in 1999 and, during the 2015 World Cup, into the World Rugby Hall of Fame. In the foyer of the BBC Wales building in Cardiff, there is a bronze bust of Carwyn, unveiled in 1986 and bearing the words 'His world was Welsh and his Wales worldwide'.

Author

Llyr James

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Personal knowledge

Further Reading

NLW Archives: [Vote... Carwyn James](#)

Owen Martell, *Rhwng y rhuo a'r brefu - Carwyn y llew a'r oen O'r Pedwar Gwynt*, Rhifyn 3, Pasg 2017

Alun Gibbard, *Carwyn* (Y Lolfa Tal-y-bont 2016)

Alun Gibbard, *Into the wind*: (Y Lolfa Tal-y-bont 2017)

Alun Richards, *Carwyn* (Parthian Cardigan 2015)

Wikipedia Article: [Carwyn James](#)

Sound and Film

Archif ITV Cymru/Wales Archive: [Carwyn James](#)

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