

David Pulsford – the Superstar Rhymney Sprinter/Rugby Player

*Clive Williams tries to uncover the versatile
Gwent sportsman's dilemma - athletics or rugby?*

There's a long line of great Welsh rugby wingers who were also outstanding athletes - Olympian and British and Irish Lion Ken Jones immediately comes to mind as does another great Lions wing, J.J. Williams. Usually sports stars such as these are quite clear as to where their preferences lie, as in the case of both, where rugby clearly took preference.

But one Welsh athlete/rugby player who was Britain's finest junior 220 yards runner and scored more points in a season than anyone else in British rugby the decision was not as clear-cut. And his name may not be as familiar as the afore-mentioned, but he was clearly an outstanding sprinter and an extraordinary points scoring rugby machine.

However, should he stick with athletics where he first showed his sporting talent at national level or play rugby? That was the agonising decision that the multi-talented 21 year-old Dai Pulsford had to make after suffering an injury in late 1957 which ruled him out of the Welsh team for the following year's Cardiff Empire Games. He had also been in the pre-games squad for the 1954 Games in Canada when still in Rhymney Grammar School.

Having been selected to attend the squad sessions for the 1958 team following his 440 yards win in the previous summers Welsh championships, he suffered a stress fracture of the foot probably caused playing rugby. However in those pre-all singing and dancing medical back-up days for top athletes the injury took time to heal and reluctantly he had to withdraw from contention. After this setback he chose rugby after missing the chance to run in the 1958 Welsh championships to attempt to retain his title and so consolidate his chances of selection for the biggest sporting gathering to hit Wales then or since. But by his own admission he may have made the wrong decision. There is no doubt that he never reached his potential as an athlete.

Vancouver calling?

As an 18 year - old schoolboy he was one of the "possibles" for the Welsh sprint relay team for the 1954 Vancouver Games after finishing third in the Welsh 100 yards championship behind winner John Gilpin. Legendary 1948 Olympic sprint relay silver medallist Ken Jones just pipped Dai on the line for second. However, as it turned out Wales didn't send a relay team to Canada but Jones did make the trip and went on to win the bronze medal in the 220 yards in Vancouver. That showed Pulsford's enormous potential, which he first showed the previous year when he won the AAA junior 220 yards title to become the UK's finest at that event. But more of that later.

Looking back, Dai says that he may have made the wrong decision in concentrating on rugby, as his lecturer at Monmouthshire Training College at Caerleon, the much respected Ray Thomas had high hopes of him achieving athletics greatness. In fact Dai's preference for rugby in College - and not always for the college team - probably alienated Thomas, who was also a senior Welsh AAA official.

But as ever in these situations in Wales it was fundamentally the social scene - and that injury - that helped to sway him towards the oval ball where he became a phenomenal points scorer both as a try getter and as a place kicker.

Only one of four wings on display not to be capped.... and a record 360 pts in a season

Dai had a senior Welsh trial whilst playing for Pontypool in 1961 and in that game held just across the mountain from his Rhymney home in Tredegar, of the four wings on show that day, three went on to win over 60 caps between them - Stuart Watkins, Robert Morgan and another sprinter/rugby star Dewi Bebb. Dai also played for Newport for a short time - scoring three tries against Llanelli in season 1959/60 - but most of his playing days were spent with his home-town club of Rhymney during pre-league days when The Brewers were amongst the strongest of the so called “second class” clubs in Wales.



A press cutting of Dai in action for Newport

There is little doubt that if he had continued to play for Newport or Pontypool - both of whom were “first class clubs” and amongst the strongest in Britain at the time - he would have been capped for the senior Welsh team. Press cuttings at the time were littered with headlines such as: “Pulsford inspires Pontypool; Pulsford’s pace ends a record; Pulsford heading for a record year; Pulsford in sparkling form for his county and Pulsford grabs three tries and jolts selectors”. That doyen of rugby writers J.B.G.Thomas commented that with more first class games, “Pulsford would challenge for a cap”.

He scored a remarkable 360 points in the 1964/65 season which probably made him the top points scorer in British rugby that season, made up of 38 tries, 93 conversions and 20 penalties. As Phil Atkinson, author of *100 years of Rhymney Rugby* says: “He really was an outstanding player - we are unlikely to see his like again and don’t forget that a try was only 3 points in those days”. Even Rhymney’s close rivals Bargoed, the 2014/15 Welsh Championship winners were envious. Rob Butcher their secretary and WRU board member says that Pulsford is a Rhymney legend. Praise indeed!

Amongst many of Dai’s rugby honours were playing for the combined Pontypool and Cross Keys team against the 1960/61 Springboks, numerous appearances for the Monmouthshire County team and invitation teams such as Crawshay’s, Public School Wanderers and Welsh Academicals.

Offers to go North flood in, but Mary's having none of it

He was the subject of several offers to go "North", the first coming in September 1958 from Wakefield Trinity who offered him £3,000, a very significant sum then along with a house and a job. But he had just qualified as a teacher, and thought it over with wife Mary and they decided that as they had been both born and brought up in Rhymney they didn't want to leave. As Dai said: "what was the point in going up there - I had a house and a job here - there was no point". After that he had several other offers over the years, all of which he turned down, always citing his love of Rhymney - and Mary as the reason. Also he says with a glint in his eye: "Mary flatly refused to go, so that was that". Phil Atkinson again: "Mary and Dai were the Posh and Becks of Rhymney at the time and going North would have been inconceivable". Later-on one unnamed club offered £7,000. And even Cardiff-born rugby League great Gus Risman, who had gone North before the second world war, turned up at Dai's Rhymney house on one occasion trying to entice him to league. Another great Rhymney sprinter and rugby player the late Berwyn Jones who was part of the British sprint relay squad that set a world record in 1963 went to Wakefield Trinity in 1964 for £6,000.

A soccer star in the making – Fratton Park callingor will it be Millfield School!

As with all great sports stars, he was multi-talented. Born in 1936, he first showed his all-round sporting talent on the pitch – but not as a rugby player but with the round ball! As a 14 year-old in 1949 he was capped by the Welsh Schools in their under 15 match against Ireland at the then Swansea Town's Vetch Field. A press cutting remarked that he was tall and well-built for his age and that his solid defence as a centre half was a big factor in the Welsh teams' 4-3 win. He was also selected for the game against England at Wembley the following season, but had to withdraw because of illness. To further underline his versatility he won a Welsh Boys Clubs' cap in 1952 as a goalkeeper and turned down a trial for Portsmouth citing as the reason that he wished to qualify as a teacher and be an athlete!

Such was his sporting talent, that his family also considered sending him to Millfield School probably Britain's most famous sporting school, where amongst others, Welsh superstar Gareth Edwards studied.

Wins first Welsh championship at 16

The first indications he gave of being an outstanding athlete came in junior school, but it was when moving to Rhymney Grammar School and coming under the important influence of PE teacher David Llewellyn in his mid-teens that his sprinting prowess came to light - along with his other sporting talents - and that's where his problems started. What should he concentrate on! As he said when I met him recently: "I really thought of myself as a runner in those early days and that was where I got my real enjoyment, but rugby in particular started to take hold and after some early successes I got swayed by the camaraderie, but still had a feeling throughout my rugby career that I may have returned to running".

Winning the Welsh youths (15-17 year olds) 220 yards in 1952 as a member of nearby Abertyswg Athletic Club aged 16 was his first major success on the track. Another title winner that day in the shorter sprint was West Mon Grammar School's Gareth Curtis, someone who he would have a friendly rivalry with on both track and rugby pitch in the years ahead. In fact the following year Dai took the 220 yards Welsh title again as a junior (17-19) beating Curtis into second place. And it was this year of 1953 that he really made his mark as a sprinter.

British junior champion in a thunderstorm

The setting was Cardiff's Maindy Stadium, the only purpose-built athletics track in Wales at the time - all other competitions before 1951 when the track was opened were held on grass tracks usually laid on rugby pitches just for the day.

It was the first time that the AAA (UK) junior championship had come to Wales and here was Rhymney's David Pulsford showing his mettle against Britain's finest junior sprinters. Unfortunately, the weather was atrocious. It poured down all afternoon and this undoubtedly affected performances. In describing the event in the South Wales Echo, D.J.P. Richards, the respected athletics historian and statistician said that the "rain came down in sheets". But this didn't deter our man from Rhymney as he defeated by three yards the pre-race favourite and English Schools Champion Jim Spooner to take the 220 yards title in 22.9 seconds an excellent time given the conditions. Future England senior international Jim Railton was third. Spooner had clocked 22.6 to win his English schools title.



Picture: Phil Atkinson

Clive Williams, editor of The History of Welsh Athletics presents David with a copy

John Young and Robbie Brightwell are Dave's successors

David's successors in winning the AAA junior 220 yards title, included the eventual England rugby superstar John Young who won in 1956 winner and Britain's 1964 Olympic captain Robbie Brightwell who took a silver medal in Tokyo as part of Britain's 4 x 400m relay team. Those are the sort of circles that Dai Pulsford operated in! Young was Britain's fastest sprinter in 1956 and went on to win his first cap for England against Ireland in 1958 and went on the following year's British and Irish Lions tour of New Zealand. Brightwell won the European 400m title in 1962 and remains to this day one of the sports iconic figures.

Prior to his Welsh and British title wins in 1953, David had been in record breaking form on the track. Firstly in the Monmouthshire championships in Newport he took both the junior 220 and 440 titles in new record times of 23.6 and 53.3 having already won the Monmouthshire schools 220 yards title at Monmouth in a record 22.7. And then in the Welsh schools championships he took the 220 yards in a championships best of 23.4 ahead of Curtis. And remember all of these performances were on grass. A soggy grass track could affect times by at least half a second over 220 yards.

Olympic silver medallist Ken Jones beats Pulsford by a whisker

So he went into the 1954 season as one of Britain's leading junior sprinters. 1954 was Empire (now Commonwealth) Games year and little did the 18 year-old Rhymney schoolboy expect to be in the reckoning for a place in the Welsh team for the trip to Canada. But in the Welsh Championships at Maindy on 19th June he almost beat Ken Jones for second place in the 100 yards, both clocking 10.4 secs behind the winner John Gilpin of Exeter who clocked 10.2. Jones had been seeking his eighth win in the event, but certainly didn't anticipate such a tough fight from a schoolboy! Dai was named in the provisional sprint relay squad, but funds were tight and reluctantly, the Welsh Commonwealth Games Council had to limit the team to just six athletes, two of whom, Bob Shaw (440 yards hurdles) and Jones (220 yards) returned with bronze medals. Jones also reached the final of the 100 yards in Vancouver finishing 6th in 9.8 secs and just one month earlier he had beaten Dai by a hair's breadth in the Welsh Championships. That's how good Dai Pulsford was!

Number two in Britain at 440 yards

His third place in the 100 at the 1954 Welsh senior championships came as a bonus, as his main focus that year was to retain his AAA junior 220 yards title. He had entered for both the 220 and 440 at the championships in Perry Barr, Birmingham and warmed up for his title defence by winning both events at both the Monmouthshire and Welsh junior championships. In the former, a local press report said that he was the star attraction as he took both events on a wet grass track equalling his championships record of 23.6 in winning the 220 and clocking 53.4 to win the quarter. In the Welsh championships on 3rd July at Maindy he was the first to achieve the 220/440 double in these championships since their inauguration 20 years earlier. Firstly he set a championships record in the 220 with 23.3 before taking the 440 yards with 52.3, the second fastest winning time in these championships. The next athlete to score this double was another great sprinter/rugby player, Newport's Allan Skirving who achieved the feat seven years later. Skirving is best remembered for scoring a try in Newport's 1969 win over the Springboks and toured with Wales to New Zealand and Australia the same year. Coincidentally, another Rhymney schoolboy and fine rugby player, Dennis Perrott won the Welsh junior 440 yards title two years after Dai.

The Monmouthshire championships held a week before the AAA event in Birmingham was his last chance to show that he was in good shape to defend his 220 yards title. But he told me over 60 years later, that he was having doubts about this because Jim Spooner and Jim Railton both of whom he had beaten to win the title the previous year were running close to 22 seconds and he felt that this was beyond his capabilities. Instead he felt that he had a better chance of winning the 440 yards. As it turned out he was spot on, as another athlete set to gain British senior international honours Mike Ruddy took the 220 title in a record 21.9, with Spooner second in a personal best 22.0 and Railton a distant third in 22.5, all times faster than Dai had ever achieved. Railton had earlier won the 100 in a record 9.9. But Dai was going to be disappointed as he could only manage a silver in the 440 as Harold Smith the English

Schools and Midlands champion took the title in 50.1 with Dai second 3/10 th's behind. Still he was "only" second best in Britain.....

All in all, 1954 had been a good year. Think of it, an 18 year just being pipped by an Olympic silver medallist in the Welsh 100 yards championships and a British silver medal in the 440 yards, hardly two compatible events. And for good measure he retained his Welsh schools 220 title with an excellent run of 22.8 on the grass track laid-out on the rugby field of Girling's in Cwmbran. In retrospect an excellent year – especially as he married his childhood sweetheart Mary!



David Pulsford

National service, home to Mary as often as possible and just a little athletics

And to 1955, and National Service with the RASC in Aldershot. Dai says that he did very little athletics, but played a bit of rugby! Whilst stationed in Aldershot he freely admits that all he wanted to do was to get home as often as possible to see his young wife and he did this most weekends, managing to bypass the numerous obstacles placed in his way from doing so. He probably used the dexterity he became famous for on the rugby pitch to great effect.

He did manage to finish third in 440 at the Army Championships in 1956 in 51.0 secs and represent the Army in the Inter-Services championships. But apart from some local competition, that was the sum total of his athletics activity, although he did enter the Welsh Championships at 440 yards, but didn't run.

Caerleon and Ray Thomas

On leaving the Army, he started student life as a trainee teacher in 1956 at Caerleon and this rekindled his athletics - and rugby - enthusiasm and started a love-hate relationship with the afore-mentioned Ray Thomas who was through and through an athletics man. Thomas undoubtedly saw star athletics potential in Dai and wanted to keep him away from the rugby pitch to steer clear of injury. But Dai was having none of it! Covertly he played (and starred)

for Rhymney at weekends as often as possible (allegedly under assumed names!) whilst playing mid-week for the College team.

Welsh senior champion at 440 yards, but disaster strikes a few months later

And so to 1957 with that nagging doubt in his mind - should he be an athlete who played a bit of rugby, or vice-versa à la Ken Jones? Well after a season where he scored over 100 points for Rhymney for two successive years, despite not being available for all games, and after a few races in College, he arrived at Maindy Stadium Cardiff on 22nd June for that year's Welsh Senior Championships. Drawn in the second heat of the 440 yards, he wins effortlessly in 51.6 secs – with the second placed runner some distance away in 54.3 secs. Former Army colleague and winner for the past two years, Tony Ford had a much tougher race, narrowly winning his heat in 50.5 ahead of Bristol's G.H. Davies.

The final was clearly between former Army champion Ford, now stationed across the road at Maindy Barracks, and the 21 year-old Pulsford, whose only previous appearance in these championships had been three years earlier as a schoolboy when he surprised everyone with his third place in the 100 yards, finishing just a whisker behind the legendary Ken Jones.

With Ford going for a hat trick of wins Dai knew that he would be a tough nut to crack. But crack it he did taking the Welsh senior title in 50.3 seconds with Ford over a tenth behind in second with Davies third.

Injury start of athletics decline and rugby preference and bye bye to the Empire Games.

His fine Welsh title win in 1957 should have made up his mind to concentrate on athletics, but an injury to the lower leg later in the year probably put paid to his athletics career. He is wary as to how it was sustained, but highly likely that it occurred playing rugby rather than on the track. After all these years he is still uncertain what the injury was - he now thinks it was a stress fracture - but after two operations at the Royal Gwent Hospital in Newport he “more or less” decided to concentrate on rugby, whilst not completely closing the door on his athletics career.

Before the injury, he showed that his 1957 Welsh title win was no fluke as the following month he partnered the 1954 Empire Games 440 yards hurdles bronze medallist Bob Shaw in Wales' match against the AAA (effectively England) on grass at the Steel Company of Wales ground at Margam clocking 51.0 for second place. The race was won by John Salisbury the 1956 Olympian and 1958 European champion who was destined to finish fourth in the 440 yards at the Cardiff Empire Games for England.....and Dai should have been there!

The fact that he had been chosen amongst the possibles for the Welsh team after his Welsh title win, should really have made the decision for him to concentrate on athletics, but that injury put paid to any thought of Empire Games selection. Writing in the South Wales Echo in September 1958, their respected rugby writer Malcolm Lewis said: “Pulsford is a first-class athlete as well as a brilliant runner with the ball.....he was considered No 1 choice for the 440 yards for the Welsh team at the Empire Games, but unfortunately that injury ruled him out of the team”.

He recovered sufficiently to run in the 1959 Monmouthshire Police Sports at Abertillery Park - always one of the major meetings in Wales at the time. But Phil Atkinson says that the injury cleared up very slowly and probably the inclination for the more intense training required for athletics was a decisive factor in settling for the oval ball. Abertillery Park was a major venue for athletics at the time and another Welsh rugby and athletics superstar, Gordon

Wells set a Welsh triple jump record there of 14.52m in winning the Welsh title in 1949. It was the third best leap in Britain that year.

Sprint champion of Rhymney

Remarkably, Dai was educated at Rhymney Grammar School and Monmouthshire Training College, Caerleon the same educational establishments as fellow Rhymney sprint and rugby league superstar Berwyn Jones. In one of his last races in 1959 before giving rugby his 100% attention, Dai beat Berwyn in a 220 yards handicap race at the meeting to celebrate the opening of the Glebelands track in Newport to become the sprint champion of Rhymney! What was more remarkable about this run was that Dai was the backmarker off 14 yards with Berwyn having a two yards start over his Rhymney compatriot.

Although Berwyn was yet to achieve international sprint stardom in 1959 he was still mighty quick and ran 10.0 secs for 100 yards at that year's Welsh Championships two weeks after his Newport defeat by Dai. Of course Berwyn went on in 1963 to achieve cult status in British athletics with his herculean effort on the anchor leg holding off the following year's Olympic 100m champion Bob Hayes to help the British sprint team to their world record equalling performance of 40.0 secs.

Two weeks after his win over Berwyn in Newport, Dai ran in his last Welsh championships where he could only manage fourth in the 440 yards. Says Dai: "I didn't feel right that day, I should have won as the winner Bill Griffiths ran half a second slower than my time when I won in 1957".

Who knows, if Dai had stayed in athletics he definitely had the ability to rub shoulders with Berwyn and his international athletics colleagues throughout the world. But for a home loving man where even Pontypool was sometimes a world away, he probably made the right decision to concentrate on rugby!



Berwyn Jones (1) wins the Welsh Games 100 yards at Maindy Stadium Cardiff in 1962 from Robbie Brightwell far left. Aberdare's Ron Jones is no 4.

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