

Christians Who Play Rugby

Nineteen sports chaplains were in attendance at the Rugby World Cup to offer pastoral care, a quiet prayer, or simply a cup of coffee. Dave Chawner, British coordinator for Rugby Union Chaplaincy stated: 'At least 25% of the squads involved in the tournament had some sort of regular prayer and/or Bible study'.¹

A surprising number of international rugby players are committed Christians. The legendary Michael Jones, widely recognised as one of the greatest players of all time, was so committed to his faith that he even refused to play games on Sundays. Jones says: 'Although I am truly honoured to represent New Zealand on the rugby field, my first allegiance is definitely to my Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. People easily forget a player after he stops playing, but one thing I'd like to be remembered for is that I was a person who put God first before rugby'.

Once asked how a Christian like he could be such an uncompromising tackler, Jones famously quipped back with a Bible principle: 'It is better to give than to receive'!

One of the crowd favourites of the World Cup-winning All Blacks was Brad Thorn. He is another legendary figure, a 'dual international' who has played both rugby league for Australia and rugby union for New Zealand. Thorn became a Christian after asking a fellow team mate (Kangaroos front-row forward Jason Stevens) on a trip to the UK in 1997 why he didn't get involved with all the money, girls, and alcohol that come with top level rugby league.

'Jason stood out from the rest of the team', Thorn said. 'On tour we would cut loose and he didn't. When you are in a group, everyone says you are weak to not go on the beers, weak if you haven't slept with a woman. It's the opposite. Character is involved.'

Christianity doesn't prevent this big man from highly physical performances where he delivers bone-crushing tackles and aggressive driving charges. 'Before I play, I say a simple prayer, honouring God through the way I play, 100% aggression and physicality, but showing respect to your opponent afterwards whether I win or lose.'

Comparing rugby and religion, Thorn says: 'The things that help you be successful in football are to be humble, because that's how you learn; to persevere; to sacrifice for others, because the team's more important than yourself; to show courage; to show wisdom; and to be honest with your teammates. All of these things that are Christ's real nature seem to be the key things that make you successful in football'.²

Another player in the 2011 World Cup, Springbok Pierre Spies, shared his story in a recent book, *More Than Rugby*. One of the most imposing and explosive loose forwards that South Africa has ever produced, Spies makes no secret of the personal importance of his Christian faith. On his website he states: 'My message to you is that God has a plan for your life. He has a passion for you. Once you have decided to follow Him and live for Him, He will do more for you than you ever could have imagined'.

Inundated with invitations to appear as a guest speaker, Spies uses every opportunity to inspire young and old, not with talk of sport, but of life, faith, family, and love. He married the girl of his dreams, Juanne, in December 2008 and their dedication to Christ and Christian values serves as an example to young and old alike.³

Scottish representative in the 2007 and 2011 Rugby World Cups, Euan Murray is another player who has put his faith first and sport second by declining to play on Sundays. 'There is something far more important in life than the result of a game', he says.

These and many other players make no secret of the fact that they are devoted Christians, and that their religious faith has helped them not only in the arena of rugby, but much more importantly, in the great game of life.

Notes

¹ *Challenge Weekly*, 31 October 2011, p. 3

² *Challenge Weekly*, 29 August 2011, p. 16

³ www.pierrespies.co.za