Confessions of a Rugby Mercenary

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Extract

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Montpellier, Chez Moi

This is my third season playing for Montpellier, a medium-sized town—about 200,000 people, swelling to 400,000 if you count the outlying agglomeration—in the south of France, a few miles inland from the Mediterranean, in the middle of the bulge of the gulf of Lyon. Just a few weeks before I arrived in July 2003, Montpellier Rugby Club was crowned champion of the second division, winning entry to the first division, or Top 16 as it was then.

A club's accession to the first division, once the hangover wears off, is typically followed by a mad scramble for more money to sign up players and boost squad depth and experience for the following season. The Ligue Nationale de Rugby lays down the dates for the official transfer season, which runs for about a month through June into July, during which time contracts are officially ratified. Most clubs will have started looking for players in January or February, and

will have signed pre-contracts with most of their new recruits by May. So by the time the little club from the second division arrives, delighted to have earned the right to sit at the same table as the big boys, they realise that the big boys have already chomped through the best parts of what was on offer, and all that is left are scraps.

As chance would have it, I was one of those scraps. I had come to the end of my second contract with Perpignan, a town 100 miles further down the Mediterranean coast, just north of the Spanish border. Although a smaller town than Montpellier, Perpignan had a bigger club. This club had just made it into the final of the European Cup, and its ambition was to become part of the small circle of genuine heavyweights—Stade Français in Paris, Stade Toulousain in Toulouse, and, more recently, Biarritz Olympique in the Basque country on the Atlantic Coast—who have been consistently at the top of the pile in the French professional game. As a result, there had been an end-of-season clear-out of those players not considered up to scratch and, along with fourteen others of the 30-man squad, I had found myself out of a job.

This wasn't entirely unexpected, and through various agents I had been tarting myself around since late December —with decidedly mixed results. I had had one solid offer from Montferrand, but hoping for something better I had put them off and they had found someone else. I had really wanted to play for Stade Français in Paris, but a barrage of wheedling phone calls had met with nothing but silence. As far as the ten or so other clubs in the first division went, I felt like Goldilocks. The big ones were too big; after my

experience with Stade Français I didn't bother trying Toulouse, who were in even less need of an aging journeyman. But the small ones, who were at least decent enough to appear interested, were too small.

Things were getting desperate—in fact they had been desperate for a while—when Montpellier, who looked as though they might be neither too big nor too small but just right, appeared on the scene. As far as the rugby went, I was well aware that Montpellier would struggle, but there are other things that you look for in a club. *Midi Olympique*, the French rugby weekly, had conducted a survey of players' preferred clubs, taking into account several quality-of-life factors as well as rugby. Montpellier had figured in a highly respectable fifth place, behind Toulouse, Biarritz, Paris and Perpignan, but in front of bigger names such as Castres, Clermont-Ferrand (Montferrand) and Bourgoin.

The day I was to sign in Montpellier, Biarritz, having just realised they were a lock short for the coming season, called to see if I were interested. After a few hours of indecision I decided I would be better off playing a relatively important role in Montpellier than sitting on the bench—or worse, as an afterthought—in the star-studded Biarritz team, and there was more chance of my girlfriend finding work in the economically dynamic town of Montpellier than the beach resort of Biarritz. On top of this, Montpellier were obviously keen to have me, and as already mentioned I am a sucker for flattery, although I have to admit I was disappointed that the ferocious bidding war for my services, for which I had been hoping, did not materialise.

The agent who would have signed me to Biarritz told me that I had made a mistake, and that we were going to spend a difficult year being steamrolled up front and torn apart out wide. It was with these comforting words ringing in my ears that on a sweltering July morning I rolled up to a ground borrowed from the local army barracks for the first day of training.

At Perpignan the first few weeks of pre-season training had taken place out of town on a borrowed ground, but the rest of the time we had trained at the stadium itself, or at the annexe next door. The stadium complex had also included the weights room, and, brilliantly, all our laundry had been done on site. Montpellier, I discovered, had more of a gypsy flavour. On any given day we might be at the stadium, or the military barracks, or just out of town at another borrowed field, or doing weights at any one of three different places. And if it rained all bets were off: you could be anywhere, or training might simply be cancelled. The strip worn for the game and the coloured bibs that we wore to distinguish ourselves at training were washed once a week, but after that we were on our own as far as laundry was concerned.

To be fair, Montpellier is a very young club, and by the time you read this a brand new state-of-the-art stadium with annexe grounds and wet-weather training pitches should be up and running. In any case, running around like blue-arsed flies trying to find the right ground does wonders in inducing humility, particularly in those of us who suffer from a hopeless sense of direction, as does dealing with the pile of reeking

gear that has fermented in the kitbag you forgot to empty into the washing-machine.

Arriving in a new club is always difficult. For a start, there are all the obvious, non-rugby-related difficulties that revolve around moving to a new home. And then, as with any new job, you have to prove yourself to your new colleagues, while treading carefully through the potential bitchiness caused by your taking the place of someone who was part of the tight-knit community, and the widely held (and not entirely unfounded) suspicion that you are being paid more than the guys who got the team to where it is now.

French rugby is, of course, a small world, and if you're lucky you will already know some of the team, having played with them in another club. At Montpellier, there was at least one friendly face with whom I had played in Paris several years earlier. Unfortunately, there was also a senior player with whom I had an ongoing vendetta, having spent a winter afternoon a couple of seasons earlier trading cheap shots with him while we were wearing different jerseys.

As I tried to fit in, I spent some time worrying about the coming season. It was clear there was some genuine talent at Montpellier, but not nearly as much as there had been in Perpignan. This was logical, given Montpellier's late arrival and small budget: while it is not an absolute guarantee of success, money buys talent, pace and physical presence, so the smaller a club's cheque-book, the less it gets. To their credit, Montpellier had signed on for another two years nearly all the players who had played the season before, so that, having played their way into the first division, they

would have the opportunity to show what they were worth. The club had then added a handful of experienced players who, like me, were coming to the end of their careers.

When I say 'to their credit', the club had acted honourably but not necessarily wisely: they could easily have jettisoned half a dozen players of limited potential, and signed the others for only one year, which would have been long enough to head-hunt replacements for those who hadn't adapted. Coming from a club like Perpignan, I was used to a culture of ambition that—in the spirit of the age of the mercenary—had little time for honourable gestures. While ruthless ambition can be short-sighted, there is something to be said for it when you are staring down the barrel of relegation.

The positive side of keeping on the same players is that the group clearly having the confidence of the club president is good for morale, and the social fabric is less likely to tear than if individuals were to try and pull in different directions, as often happens when things get difficult. Every club likes to think of itself as a family with tightly knit bonds, but in Montpellier this had been closer to reality than at most clubs. Players who had retired often stayed involved in some way, through coaching or in a less official role, and this made for a good atmosphere. You got the feeling the club looked after its own, and you were not simply a piece of meat to be junked when you passed your sell-by date. Understandably, this is increasingly rare in the professional world.

Obviously, though, a good atmosphere is no substitute for results. Two teams would go down to second division at the

end of the year, and in the eyes of most pundits Montpellier was odds-on favourite to be one of them. To bridge the talent gap that existed between a good second-division side and the kind of team that could expect to be still in the first division at the end of the year, the coach decided to try bringing everyone up to scratch through drawn-out training sessions that in the summer heatwave seemed never-ending and often counterproductive: more quantity than quality. The team made progress, but I wasn't sure it would be enough.

The first few games of the year were friendlies, and not very encouraging. Luckily for us, 2003 was a World Cup year, so while the big teams' stars were battling for world supremacy in Australia, the rest of us played out an unimportant French cup competition, which allowed us to get to grips with the harsh realities of life in the first division without actually having the knife at our throats. The results were not promising—one win from six games—but not as bad as I had feared. The team took great pride in throwing everything into *le combat*, a good starting point but not really enough. It is possible to grind out a win simply through dogged defence and a good kicking game, but you have to be extremely good at both to pull it off on a regular basis. Top-level rugby is not really a choice between the rapier and the cudgel: *everyone* has a cudgel, so you better have one too, and the bigger the better. But you would be well-advised to have a rapier as well, and to know how to handle it.

We were happy enough smashing things up, but our swordsmanship wasn't what it might have been, so when we came to play our first championship game against the

swashbuckling European Cup champions Toulouse it looked like we were on a hiding to nothing. They had several players unavailable on World Cup duty, but were still, on paper, vastly superior to us. Two minutes into the game they scored an effortless try from broken play and it looked as if all our worst fears were to be realised. Then something extraordinary happened. Stung by the prospect of being slaughtered in front of a home crowd, we clawed our way into the game, first getting an edge and then dominating outrageously. Toulouse scored a couple of catch-up tries at the end, but the final score had everyone—especially me—scratching our heads and rubbing our eyes: Montpellier 50, Toulouse 31.

Rugby is not the sort of game where upsets often occur, so this result was a big deal and gave us all a badly needed confidence boost. As it turned out it wasn't, though, the foretaste of a glorious run in the championship. After we scraped a win in the next home game, reality kicked in and we lost eight on the trot, slipping inexorably down the table towards the relegation zone, before getting our act together in the spring and finishing a quite satisfactory tenth in our first season in the Top 16. The next season was much the same. Widely seen as promising candidates for the drop, we had a good start with an extraordinary win early on against Stade Français, a big team, 49–26, but a worrying dip in the winter brought us dangerously close to going down, only to finish strongly in eleventh place.

The season we are facing will again be a difficult one for Montpellier: the Top 16 has been squeezed down to the Top 14, but two teams will still be relegated, so eleventh, which

looked comfortable enough last year, will be stressful. The club has upped its budget to €6.6 million, from €5.5 million last year, and there is a little more talent around. As a result, as pre-season training starts everyone is feeling upbeat. At the training camp we agree that we should be aiming to finish the season between sixth and eighth in the championship.

From the outside this may sound unambitious. Surely, you may think, as professional sportsmen we should be aiming to win every game and thus the competition? A few years ago I would have agreed, but experience tells me that even banking on finishing in the top eight sounds like hubris. Montpellier is growing as a club, no doubt about it, but so are the other teams, and if you want to move up the ladder it means pushing someone off from higher up. Of the teams that finished in front of us last year there are perhaps two we could overtake—Brive and Narbonne—with the possibility of a third, Agen, should they have a bad year. That would have us in eighth place. To place higher than that would mean that one of the big clubs—the clubs qualified for the Heineken Cup, Europe's premier competition—would have to have a season way below par, or that we would have to have a blinder. Which isn't impossible, I suppose.

Equally, it's not impossible that we will have a shocker, be overtaken by the clubs behind us, and go down. But in all probability we will scrap our way through the season feeling threatened by the drop without it actually coming to that. In any case, that is as much as I dare hope for. In my last year in Paris when I was playing for Racing, the club went down and it makes for a hell of a season. Internal bickering, the

threat of financial meltdown linked to the lack of results, and a general feeling of guilt at poor performance and your own inability to change the course of destiny are all things I would rather avoid, particularly as I think this will be my last year of rugby.

We start back on July 8, a week before we are supposed to according to the *convention collective* signed between the players' union and the clubs, but since we went on holiday at the start of June, a couple of weeks before everyone else, no one makes a fuss. Professional rugby in France runs on an eleven-month cycle (twelve if you are an international called up to play on the summer tours to the southern hemisphere), with competition finishing in June and starting again at the end of August after six weeks of pre-season over July and August.

Rugby is supposed to be a winter sport, but with 28 French Championship fixtures, nine European Cup fixtures, about a dozen international games, and a handful of friendlies at the start of the season, hardly a weekend goes by without a major game of some sort, and top players can play upwards of 40 games in a year. By comparison, players in other countries play a maximum of 30 or so games, international and domestic competitions combined. The jury is still out on the effect the French schedule has on the players' health, but in the meantime money is the motor: more competition equals more revenue from television and sponsors, and nothing looks like getting in the way of this equation. The players who play the most are generally the ones who get paid the most, so they tend not to argue.

Pre-season traditionally starts with a battery of physical tests and this year is no exception. Fat tests, speed tests, weight tests and fitness tests are all performed and statistics compiled with scientific rigour, and there is much discussion and excitement about various individual performances: the wingers are all over themselves to be the fastest man in the team, while the props do battle on the bench press. As I am consistently among the slowest, weakest and fattest it is not a moment I relish, although I am reassured by the knowledge that everyone forgets about the statistics as soon as we actually start playing rugby.

The year gets off to a particularly unimpressive start, even by my low standards, when I pull up lame halfway through the 12-minute test (running as far as possible round a track in 12 minutes—something I can normally do reasonably well). A bad knee that I have been carrying since last year's pre-season blows up, promising to hinder my preparation. If I were to be cynical about it I would call it a blessing in disguise, because the coach steadfastly refuses to see that we are overtraining, and at my advanced age I could well do without the first month of endless running and full-contact, mortal combat-style training sessions. At 33, I am the oldest player in the team.

The bad knee means that I have to do my fitness work on a winch, a sort of bicycle contraption for the upper body where you 'pedal' with your hands. As an engine of physical torture, it is right up there with a rowing ergometer, and it is with little regret that I rule myself out of doing even this with a spectacular, some might say virtuoso, display of incompetence,

that has me slicing my hand open on the winch's revolving disc wheel when my sweaty palms slip off the handle. I narrowly miss cutting a tendon and am rewarded with total rest for two weeks, while everyone else slogs through the summer heat.

By the time I come back we are into the friendly games, just a couple of weeks out from the start of the championship. My injured knee is still playing up, so I tend to put most of my weight on my other knee, particularly when coming down to earth from line-out jumps. This is not a great idea—lifting in line-outs means you get up to heights that nature never intended, particularly when, like me, you weigh 110 kilograms and are not predisposed to feats of athleticism, so when you hit the ground you need both legs to properly brake your fall. Just before half-time against second-division Lyon, the inevitable happens when my supposedly good knee gives out, and although it doesn't hurt or even swell up there is an ominous clicking and scraping every time I use it.

This is a worry. If I was not unhappy about missing the grind of pre-season, I am less zen about missing the start of the season. I also have the unpleasant feeling that my body is starting to betray me. For years I have suspected that my mind was writing cheques that my body couldn't cash, and it may be that the metaphorical debt collector is now taking, if not a pound of flesh, at least a good handful of cartilage, and perhaps some other important tissue. Most of my generation have stopped playing, and I fear I may have signed up for one season too many and my body will let me down. This is compounded by the fact that, while I have considered myself

an essential part of the starting line-up for the last two years, the club has had the foresight to bring in a new lock, an Englishman called Alex Codling, to beef up their options in the second row, and he will now have the chance to establish himself as number one while I am out of the running. I am all for healthy competition for starting jerseys within the team as long as I get mine.

There is even another young lock waiting in the wings, which makes six of us for three places (two on the field, one on the bench). This is too many for my liking, particularly as the others all look distressingly competent. Worse still, the young lock doesn't look as though he will be happy to bide his time waiting for his chance. He is Georgian, and although I say young this doesn't mean baby-faced. At 22 he is a great bear of a man, and seems to spend all his spare time in the weights room. His name is Mamuka Gorgodze and he is dubbed, inevitably, 'Gorgodzilla'—although if you value your life you don't say this to his face. During the pre-season mortal-combat sessions he ran around smashing people into the ground, both with ball in hand and with the kind of sledgehammer tackles that cave in ribcages.

One of his victims, our South African centre Rickus Lubbe —no lightweight himself at a respectable 102 kilograms— swore under his breath as he was picking himself up after being stomped by Gorgodzilla, and the beast quickly turned on him: 'What you say? You say I fuck my mother?' (His English isn't great, but he seems to have the basics under control.) It took the intervention of four of us to reassure him it was just an expression, the Gorgodze family honour was in

no way being questioned, and no blood sacrifices would be necessary.

Luckily our other Georgian, Mamuka Magrikividledze, was on hand to help in the calming down. Although Mamuka is a good guy with a sense of humour, he is another 127-kilogram ogre who looks as if he eats babies for breakfast. God only knows what Georgian team runs look like. I imagine a horde of monsters tearing lumps of flesh out of each other, with the unforgiving Tbilisi winter as a backdrop.

My usual plan for dealing with enthusiastic, well-muscled youngsters who are looking hungrily at my jersey and showing off their physical prowess is to adopt a kind of Obi Wan Kenobi (Alec Guinness, not Ewan McGregor) aging-sage-who's-been-around-a-bit style of patter—something like, 'It's all very well standing there looking shiny and strong, there is much you have to learn before you can be ready.' In Gorgodzilla's case this is true: he so revels in his physical strength that he tends to disregard the rules of the game, and looks highly put out when referees have the cheek to penalise him for ripping people's arms off and beating them to death with the bloody limb, or whatever his circus trick of the moment happens to be.

Unfortunately we seem to have a communication problem —I'm talking but he's not listening. One day at scrum training we have too many locks and not enough loose forwards, and I take it upon myself to suggest it would be a good idea if he were to perhaps play in a different position. 'Mamuka, you play number eight.' He doesn't look happy about it, but complies for a few scrums before coming back to me, 'I have

idea. *I* play lock, *you* play number eight.' The old Jedi mind trick, it seems, doesn't work on everyone.

From a layman's point of view, this talk of 127-kilogram behemoths sounds impressive. The terrifying thing for a spindly, six-foot-six, 110-kilogrammer like me is that these men are only just above average size. One of our props, a Samoan New Zealander called Philemon Toleafoa, tips the scales at 140 kilograms. This would be all very well if, as you would imagine, he lumbered around the park from scrum to line-out at the pace of an asthmatic snail, but instead he reaches alarmingly high speeds in a very short time, and takes great pleasure using his shoulder as a wrecking ball on anyone brave enough to be in his way. Our seven props average around 125 kilograms each, although there are a couple of lightweights of my weight. Before professional rugby came along and allowed players to spend more time in the gym, rugby players tended to be larger than average but only a few were genuinely outsize. These days you may get the impression from watching a game on television, or even from seeing one live, that players are still of more or less ordinary size. This is misleading. Standing next to one another they look relatively normal, but alongside them average-sized people—about five-foot-eight and 70 kilograms—look like undernourished leprechauns.