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**Opening Extract from...**

# Jonny

## My Autobiography

Written by Jonny Wilkinson

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# JONNY

## MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY

JONNY WILKINSON

headline

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# PROLOGUE

I never thought it would come to this. I never thought I could possibly ask the question do I want to play for England any more?

Eighty times I have played for England – more than twelve long years of chasing my dreams. I can't believe I can even consider quitting the chase. Three World Cups I have played and if I can hang on for another year, I could be playing my fourth. Yet right now I don't know if I want to go that far. I don't know how to end my England story. What I do know is that I don't want it to carry on like this.

Today, 9 October 2010, at the Stade Mayol, Toulon, the club I love dearly, play Ospreys, from Wales, in the Heineken Cup. Martin Johnson, the England manager, will be there to watch and tomorrow, down on the seafront, where bars and restaurants overlook the Mediterranean, we are due to meet.

The last time I saw Johnno was a few months ago in Sydney, and I told him that England and I had maybe gone as far as we can go. Maybe it's time

for me to stop. But I get the feeling that, tomorrow, he will be wanting to talk about the forthcoming autumn internationals, about England's opposition, about game plans and calls, about my role in the side and how England are going to play. It's my duty to be honest, though. The conversation topic in my head is not what role I should play; it's whether I'm going to play at all.

With England, my confidence has just disappeared. I feel lower than I have ever felt before. I don't want my journey to end here, not like this. The thought of not playing for England again makes me sick, but I simply do not know if I can carry on.

Toulon is a different matter. When I arrive at the Stade Mayol for the game, I could not feel more different. Here, among this group of players from all around the world, I feel high. There is a different handshake for almost every nationality – the Australian George Smith, possibly the greatest openside flanker I've ever seen; Juan Martin Fernandez Lobbe, the ridiculously skilled and driven Argentinian back-rower; Joe Van Niekerk, the Springbok game-winning captain you'd happily die for; Carl Hayman, the rock-like Kiwi prop capable of playing anywhere on the field. These four alone have nearly 250 caps between them.

They seem to gain strength purely from me being here, as I do from them. But our mutual respect is not built on how many caps anybody has won. It's a respect for ability and desire, for what we've been through together, knowing that each player is always prepared to give everything and that each one of us will support the others unconditionally. I belong here. In this changing room, I treasure that sense of belonging. It's not the same right now with England.

We have found our form, too. We've won our last four games and I have been performing well all season. My confidence, which was so shot last summer in Australia with England, is seeping back. I feel like I am worth

something here – the responsibility I am given on the pitch, the respect my teammates give me. Maybe I'm worth what I'm paid.

We are on a roll and we carry on that way. The Stade Mayol is humming today, but the atmosphere is always awesome. Last thing, just before kick-off, the crowd do the traditional PilouPilou. This is a chant with a story, and the story is about the players being primitive warriors who have come down from the mountains to fight by the sea. The crowd love the tradition. They belt out the PilouPilou. But it doesn't seem to intimidate the Ospreys players much – not at all. The Ospreys are here to play.

The game is tight and we exchange penalties until the Ospreys' Shane Williams gets away for a try on the hour. That puts us 14–9 down and we stay that way until, with six minutes to go, we are awarded a penalty. I kick it and we are now two points behind. And then, with four minutes to go, I manage to push a long, floated pass over the top of their rush defence to Paul Sackey, who runs it in to score in the corner. To ensure we're five points ahead and not three, I have the conversion from the touchline. I get that, too. It's been a good day against a very good team.

So that's five wins in a row. We do our ritual lap of the field to thank the supporters. In glorious sunshine, we wave to them and they sing their hearts out back. I like it here.

The Toulon seafront is usually quiet on a Sunday morning, but today it's filled with gaggles of Ospreys supporters who are over here for the long weekend and are out nursing their hangovers in the sun.

We meet at a café on the front, Johnno, Brian Smith, the England backs coach, and me. I try to start the conversation, but some of the Ospreys

supporters come up and ask for a photo with us and we are kind of obliged to say OK.

With regard to my international career, this is the hardest conversation I've ever had, but Ospreys fans are everywhere. We get another request – can you do a photo for us? OK. So we do another photo and then we move on. We find a new bar, but that gets crowded. Again and again we get asked for pictures and so we move on one more time. We finish up in the furthest café at the water's edge, our final option, and at last find some peace and quiet.

I tell them that, from my point of view, I don't feel I'm fitting in to the England set-up any more. I'm not surprised that the team respond a lot better when Toby Flood is in there at number ten rather than me. They seem more relaxed with him. And me? I don't feel like I'm myself around England, I'm not playing as myself, you're not getting the best out of me and I'm just not happy.

I carry on. I tell them how the Six Nations and the summer Australian tour had been such a low for me and that I don't know where I fit in to their plans any more. In the media, I became the scapegoat for our performances in the Six Nations, and it seemed to me that people were happy enough for it to be that way. I was being hammered in the press during that Six Nations and yet, every Wednesday, I was wheeled out regardless to smile politely and answer the questions of the writers who were pulling me apart in their columns.

The point is, I tell them, it's too overwhelming. It's killing me and I don't know if I can stomach it any longer.

Some four hours later, we are finally done. There are no conclusions. Johnno and Brian say to me you should take your time over this. No, we don't want you to stop. So spend a couple of weeks thinking about this hard.

The next fortnight is about as tough professionally as any I've ever been through. How do you end a story like this? I'd like a different final chapter. I'd like at least to end on a high note.

I live here in France with Shelley, my girlfriend, in the peace and tranquillity of the hills, a couple of miles back from the coast. I love the climate here, I love the lifestyle and I feel relaxed in our home, overlooking a valley of vineyards, but this Sunday I return filled with a sense of doom.

My mum and dad are over to stay with us and we debate the topic at length. What is the answer here? The thought of not playing for England again is simply unacceptable to me, and yet when I think of going back into the England environment, I know there's just no way I can face it. I'm doomed if I do and I'm doomed if I don't.

I start to canvas opinion. I ring Tim Buttimore, my agent, and he explains if you retire, the media response could be a big disaster. It could be construed that, because you're not first-choice number ten any more, you just don't want to bother.

That couldn't be further from the truth. I am desperate to be back in there and enjoying it. I am a competitive animal to the core. I have never settled for second best, but at this point, my confidence around England rugby is so low I can't even think about it.

I phone Mike Catt, one of my greatest friends and allies. He understands my pain. And he is positive. He tells me that in the right situation with England, they'd play to your strengths. You'd be straight back in the team and playing as yourself again.

I meet with Richard Hill, with whom I shared so much in the England days and whose career was finished early by a terrible knee injury. He

says consider the long-term side of this. You're a long time retired.

I speak to Felipe Contepomi, my great Toulon teammate, friend and captain of Argentina, and he sees both sides. He says he's gone through a generation change in the Argentina squad and now he sees his role as paving a way for the young guys to take over. But my goal has always been to contribute to the team and I can't stop wanting to be the best. I'm just not sure that I know how to do that right now, and the thought of going back depresses me.

Already, since last summer, I feel I have come so far in rebuilding the confidence that was so completely shattered.

I got back from Sydney and spent four solid weeks in Majorca. Every summer, I holiday in Majorca and every time I'm there I train pretty much every day. This summer I did one boys' week with Matthew Tait, Toby Flood, Pete Murphy, an old mate from Newcastle, and another old mate from way back in mini rugby at Farnham, Andy Holloway. Taity and Floody were a bit more professional about their rest than I was. I pushed myself to the usual limits, working out stupidly hard every day. I worked on skills and fitness. Inside, I worked on weights; outside the villa, on the road, I worked on kicking. I did everything I could to ensure I was well prepared and physically flying for the start of the season.

Our second game was a good away win against Biarritz, but it stood out for me because of Iain Balshaw. It's been thirteen years since Balsh and I started playing together. The first time was at England Under-18 level, and he is still as incredibly talented as he ever was. Now he's playing at Biarritz, uncapped by England for two and a half years.

We met in our team hotel after the game and ended up chatting into the early hours. I asked him what is it like? How does it feel to be playing just club rugby, not to be playing for England? I wanted to know. This is the

debate in my mind. He told me he's still massively keen to get involved. It's something he hasn't got and really, really wants.

A month later, I got a different message. Toulon played the current champions, Clermont, at the big Stade Vélodrome in Marseille. It was a huge game with a ludicrous atmosphere and 55–60,000 supporters going nuts. After we'd won, 28–16, we did our lap around the ground to acknowledge the fans. I was walking round the stadium with all my Toulon teammates, whom I adore. Thousands of people were standing and cheering us in the sun and the voice in my head was telling me maybe this is enough. I've done it for England eighty times; maybe this is OK for me now.



The longer I continue in this state of indecision, the more I feel as though my life is on hold.

Two weeks after the Ospreys game, we are due to play Stade Français at the Stade de France. I go down to the club for a kicking session and I cannot concentrate on my kicking for this big game because all I can think of is my England career. Is it over or is it not?

The minute I make up my mind one way, I immediately switch and go the other. I hit one kick and say to myself just forget about it all, be happy in life, leave England alone.

Then I kick another, straight through the middle of the posts, and I think I can't afford not to push myself to that level and waste all my hard work over the years. This whole career has been about pushing myself to the extreme, trying to achieve everything. I can't stop.

I hit another couple of kicks and my mind starts to slide again. I think about how it felt with England recently. I think about the media fall-out

and watching helplessly as my reputation took a hammering.

But here, at this kicking session, I decide I can't walk away without making up my mind. I can't let this go on any longer.

I think about the 1998 Tour from Hell, when England got beaten 76–0 by Australia. I remember the tour to South Africa in 2007 when an already depleted team suffered from food poisoning, and yet still we had to front up against the Springboks. God did we suffer. Those were mighty hard times, but the point is this: I've never walked away from a challenge.

I can't back down. I can't live with myself unless I feel that at least I stood up and was counted. It's been my way, my greatest value, and I am proud of that. I can't let it change. That is the ultimate non-negotiable. Never give in.

I leave my kicking practice feeling slightly happier. I phone Johnno and tell him I'm in.

I don't know how this story will end, but at least I know that there will be one last chapter. It's not ideal, it's not how I want to feel, but I've got to stand up and be counted one more time.

# CHAPTER 1

I'M not sure if I was born a perfectionist, or if I just decided subconsciously that was the way it was going to have to be.

When my dad pulls up the car at a mini rugby game, I immediately leap out and sprint for the nearest hedge because I need to be sick. Sometimes we have to pull over in a lay-by on the way there; sometimes we have got to the club car park by then. The thought of the game ahead just gives me a kind of panic, a deep fear and a sense of doom about what will happen if it doesn't go well.

I am seven and I play mini rugby for Farnham, where Bilks – which is what we all call Dad – is one of the coaches. I am mad about rugby, particularly during weekdays, when Sparks, my brother, and I mess around with a ball in the garden during daylight hours, and then in the living room when it has got too dark outside.

But Sundays are different. On Sundays, we either have a training session

or we play matches. The training days I love. I can't wait to get to the ground for training. When a game is scheduled, though, I sometimes feel I can't bear it.

As long as there is still a night before the game, then I'm OK. For some reason, it still seems a long way away. But on game-day morning, I wake up early, five or six o'clock, and now it is unavoidable and the fear kicks in. I feel my heart beating like mad as if my body's telling me that something really bad's going to happen.

I can't do it, I tell Mum and Dad. I can't do it. Please, you've got to tell them that I can't play.

If it's an away fixture, we meet the rest of the team at Castle Street in the centre of town and then head off in our cars. Bilks leads the way in our Mitsubishi Jeep, with Sparks in the front and me in the back with my friend and teammate Andy Holloway. And when we get close, that's when I start to want to be sick.

It's the same every game. Pre-match panic, then we play. I normally play well and we normally win the game. Then we go home for family lunch, I watch the rugby league on the TV and, with a big smile on my face, I talk about what a great morning I've had.

I don't know what the problem is, but it must be as frustrating as hell for Mum and Bilks because they know full well that they will be going through the exact same thing next week.

I particularly like it after home games because Bilks catches up with the other coaches in the clubhouse and Sparks and I can muck around with the rugby ball. Everyone likes doing drop kicks. We try to get them over from the 22 metre line. Most boys like to have one or two kicks and then run off and do something else, whether the kick's gone over or not, but I can't just pack it in like that. I enjoy so much the basic feel of kicking a ball. I carry on kicking and I won't stop. I can kick drop goals like this for

half an hour, an hour. I'm seven and I find I kind of slip into a zone where I can do it repetitively over and over again. I won't quit until Bilks comes out of the clubhouse and tells me that I have to because we're going home.

Our garden is built on three levels. The bottom part has the rhubarb patch and the green bin that Dad bought to use as a dog loo. The small middle lawn is our favourite for cricket. Then there is the top bit with a crumbly brick and slate wall – another training ground. I can spend at least an hour kicking a football or a rugby ball against the wall.

I kick the ball with my left foot, and I'll watch my foot all the time, studying the movement of the swing. Then I'll look at my right foot and say OK, I'm going to do exactly the same thing using this leg. I can do this day after day for hours, which completely ruins the wall. I kick with my left, kick with my right, and I keep on like that, completely losing track of time. It's mesmerising.

But I have to go to school the next morning and the panic sets in again. I go to Weybourne Primary and it's like the rugby game. I wake up with my heart thumping in my chest, thinking I can't do this, and I go crying to Mum. I can't go, please don't make me go.

To settle me in, Mum has to come in to the classroom in the morning and stand at the back. As the lesson goes on, she slowly creeps out of the door. School ends at three o'clock, but I insist that Mum's there at half past two, and when I come out she asks me if I had a good day, and I say yes it was great. But Mum knows that tomorrow morning will be a repeat of today.

What I can't stand is the idea of getting the work wrong. I have to get it all right. So I ask Mum can you ask the teacher not to make it too hard?

I'm not scared of hard work, it's just the thought of getting it wrong. Every week we have a spelling test and every week I get twenty out of twenty. One week I spell the word 'gauge' wrongly; I get the 'u' and the 'a'

the wrong way round. I sit there, waiting for my marked paper, expecting to see another '20/20', and when I see '19/20', I don't know what to do with myself and I feel the panicky heartbeat. I feel embarrassed and, as the other kids lean over to look at my sheet and remark on my imperfection in surprise, a desperate need to wind back the clock and do it again.

In the playground afterwards, all my friends are running around laughing. These are people who have probably spelled 'gauge' and other words wrongly, too, and I wonder how can you be laughing? How can you be having such a good time? I just focus, all the time, on trying to get everything right. Mistakes, and the panic, make me so meticulous. If I can be perfect, I can avoid that awful feeling.

The trouble with rugby is you can't be perfect. Yet on the rugby field, more than anywhere else, I need perfection. Especially when it's a Sunday game, when there's a result, something on the line, and it matters to me and my teammates and I feel responsible for it all.

In the Under-8s, I'm played at full-back as a sort of sweeper, a last line of defence. We play in a festival at nearby Alton rugby club and I'm in a team with boys a year older than I am. At half-time during one game, we make a lot of changes. We now have a weaker team and I sense the other boys are looking at me for help, so in the second half I just run around tackling everyone – make a tackle, get up, make another, clatter anyone you can. It feels a bit like I'm spinning plates and I can't stop working for a second. I can't let these plates stop spinning, because if I do, this other team are going to beat us; they'll score and it'll be my fault. And I can't live with that. I make a covering tackle next to the touchline and while getting up off the floor, I say to Bilks I just can't do this any more, it's too much. I want to come off.

I am mad about rugby but I hate the sense of doom that comes with every approaching Sunday fixture. Sometimes I think that if there was an option to

be propelled forward by three hours, providing you could tell me it had gone OK, I would seriously consider it, even though that would mean not playing.

But I do like being full-back. I like the challenge of having to be the tackler; it makes me feel valued. When someone in the opposition breaks the line, people can say oh don't worry, Jonny will sort that out. And I love that. I love to be needed like that. But in order to keep on being seen in that way, I realise that I cannot afford to let people down.

On the pitch, it's easy to see what happens. Every team does the same thing. They give the ball to their fastest man, or their key player, who runs across the field, arcing round everyone, and then sprints up the touchline and scores. So when I see that happening, I do the opposite. I run straight to the corner to cut them off. I get into this habit of sprinting down touchlines, desperately trying to smash people into touch. I don't know why. It's like there's a switch inside me. When I see those guys racing round to the corner, I don't just want to tackle them and get them down, I want to knock them sideways on to the next field, and I want to shock those parents watching from the sidelines, too.

One Sunday, we are playing against Alton and there is a girl in the opposition team. She takes off down the wing with the ball the way everyone does, and I'm thinking to myself do I smash her? What should I do? But I don't get to make a decision, because as I run over to cover, she runs off slightly into touch, round the corner flag, back in and then touches down. And the ref awards the try. That's so unjust. How can that be allowed to happen? And how does that make me look? They have scored and it's the girl who's scored. I look for Bilks on the touchline and I'm crying. It's just not right.

Another Sunday, we are playing an Under-8s game against Basingstoke, and I get a bump on the ear. It's not foul play, but it hurts enough to flick that switch inside me, and my response is to raise the level of aggression.

I charge round putting in the heaviest tackles I can manage. They are not fouls, either, just big hits for a small kid. And I hurt the boys I tackle. From the touchline, Bilks indicates that he is bringing me off. I've done nothing wrong, he explains. It's just best for everyone that I have a rest.

What I really like, though, is midweek when Mum picks me up from Weybourne Primary and we drive on to pick up Sparks from the school I will go to next, Pierrepont. Sometimes we get there early and while Mum sits and waits in the car, I get the ball out of the back of the car and take it into the middle of the school rugby pitch. A proper, full-sized rugby pitch. I kick the ball up in the air and catch it, and do the same again, and again, over and over. I can get completely engrossed and lose myself for twenty minutes while Mum and Sparks look on. Holding, catching and kicking a rugby ball in the middle of a big pitch – this, for me, is a real special treat.



Sparks and I have a video that we have become a little bit obsessed about. We like it because of one thing in particular – a kick by Gavin Hastings, in which he is wearing a quartered shirt. He takes the conversion from about 15 metres in from touch on the 22 metre line. The kick is not the hardest but it's a beauty. I'm not sure exactly what it is about it, something to do with the way the ball flies through the air, but it is my idea of perfection. We love that clip, we play it over and over again.

All I want to do is copy it. I know I need to kick with my right foot as well as my left, and I want to be perfect at that, too. So Sparks and I spend a lot of time imitating Gavin Hastings. When we can't kick outside, we kick inside. We construct our own posts from toilet rolls that we stick together with Sellotape, and we create our own balls from other toilet rolls stuffed with toilet paper.