



## James Doherty – A HEADCASE encounter

My story is one of misplaced pride, stubbornness, fear and thankfully perspective.

Having played all my junior rugby at Fleetwood and later at Sedbergh School I enrolled at the University of Leeds and subsequently, Wharfedale RUFC, which was to be my home for the next few years. I was fortunate enough to represent Lancashire, and England Counties before moving into a professional environment initially with the Cornish Pirates and later with the then named Leeds Carnegie. After enjoying a childhood dream for a number of years a career change into education allowed my return to Wharfedale.

It was during this second stint at Wharfedale on the 30<sup>th</sup> April 2015, a day I unsurprisingly don't remember, that my experience, outlook and perspective of rugby changed. 15 minutes into the Yorkshire Cup Final I suffered a concussion as a result of foul play. As a 5'7 scrum half built like a Shetland mouse being picked up by a 6'6 second row, off the ball, and driven into the ground with only my 'Lego style' hair to break my fall was never going to end well. I was briefly unconscious, slurring words and very clearly and obviously concussed. The medical team of Wharfedale were outstanding. I was treated with professionalism and they prioritised my health over everything. An independent doctor assessed and sent me to A&E where I was later discharged for 'monitoring'.

What occurred over the next few days was challenging to say the least. I struggled intermittently with light, concentration, headaches, intermittent sleep and blurred vision.

As this was the last game of the season I had nothing to rush back for and externally everyone did their job but I didn't do mine.

I wasn't honest. I hid symptoms from everyone. I suffered in silence. Why? It's only a game? Well for some it may be, but for others, in the moment, it is all that mattered. Players often, especially during a game, don't make rational decisions; they act on emotion, competitiveness and pride.

I was Club Captain of Wharfedale, a long standing National League Club, I had over 100 appearances and there was nothing going to stop me playing in the new season. Pre Season started and I was told to take it easy, 'make sure you're ok' I couldn't have been supported any better. However, I hid all my symptoms from my teammates, coaches, medical team, work colleagues, family and friends.

It wasn't until mid November, 10 games into the season, when enough was enough. I was training on a cold Tuesday night after a tough game on the Saturday and I finally broke. 30 minutes into the session I was suffering an all too

familiar blistering headache, some blurred vision and over riding frustration. I walked off the field, straight into the Physio's room and cried.

My teammates, coaches and club management were supportive, as were my family and friends and a period of rest was agreed. However whilst I rested I was not in the firing line to do any more damage physically I endured two months of frustration through the fear of losing the game I love, a game I had grown up with and one that had given me everything.

However, a break was just what I needed, I did improve, the symptoms had lasted almost 8 months but I was starting to feel normal. I extended my break until after the New Year and eased my way back into light training. I followed all the correct procedure, advice and expertise I could find. I was delighted to be back playing; all was going well until an innocuous bang on the top of my head in a tackle caused my second concussion. With similar symptoms as before; I remained in the stand for the rest of the year.

The lessons I had learned from my first experience gave me some perspective. I started to talk more to family and friends, my teammates understood the situation and I received amazing support because I reached out. Two years followed and I remained involved in the game in a non-playing role.

Those two years allowed my body to recover but more importantly my mind to prioritise what is important. I have had scans and checks on my head and I am now back playing rugby and the journey has come full circle back to Fleetwood. I am enjoying being part of a great group of players and a club that is engrained in my family. However I will never make the same mistakes again and would encourage others to take warning from my story.

We are fortunate to play a wonderful game; it gives us so much socially, physically and mentally. But we must make changes. Drop the macho act, listen to others over your inner pride and take care of you, because no matter what anyone else does, **YOU** can be your own biggest obstacle.

**Please see below link for further support on  
England Rugby's HEADCASE**

<https://www.englandrugby.com/participation/playing/headcase>