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# Young player always marked out for success

RHODRI JONES

FEW at his former school doubted that Rhys Williams was destined for stardom.

The Cardiff full-back, who wins his first cap today against France, has a long list of admirers, the most recent of whom is Graham Henry. But the 20-year-old has been capturing the attention of people for a long time, since he first burst in to the first team at Cowbridge Comprehensive School.

Headteacher Joan Cowell knew that the quiet, polite pupil would be a rugby star one day.

She is under no illusions as to how talented her former pupil is.

"This boy will go far," said Mrs Cowell. "In fact, I was surprised that it has taken Graham Henry so long to pick him.

"But I think the old saying of 'if he's good enough, he's old enough' is very true in Rhys's case."

Williams was the star of Cowbridge Comprehensive School's first team. He was also a hero to many of the younger pupils at the school, excelling at athletics, cricket and, of course, rugby.

The delight in Joan Cowell's voice as his name is mentioned is testament to the impact he had while at the school and to the high regard in which staff at the school hold him.

"It could not have happened to a nicer lad," she said. "We are absolutely delighted with the news at the school.

"If I had a daughter, I could not think of a nicer young man for her to marry."

Williams made his Cardiff debut in February 1999, as an 18-year-old against Bedford. He scored one of Cardiff's nine tries in their 57-14 victory and created several others.

He was the star for Wales in the Junior World Cup later that year and was part of the side which lost in the final to an impressive New Zealand side.

His father, Hugh Williams, is the sports master at Cowbridge Comprehensive but Joan Cowell told him Williams was treated just like any other member of the



**YOUNG STAR:** Rhys Williams received nine caps for Welsh Schools Under-18 Rugby *Picture: FLAIR PHOTOGRAPHIC, PORTH*

school's first XV.

But he had found it hard to disguise his delight at the news that his son had received the call up from Graham Henry.

She said, "He always played down how good Rhys was. It was never a case of 'my son the star'.

"His father has been floating around the school for the past few days. But when I went down to see him taking a lesson with Year 10 the other day, it was as if nothing had happened.

"He just had a little smile on his face. He just cannot stop grinning."

Williams was a model pupil at Cowbridge Comprehensive.

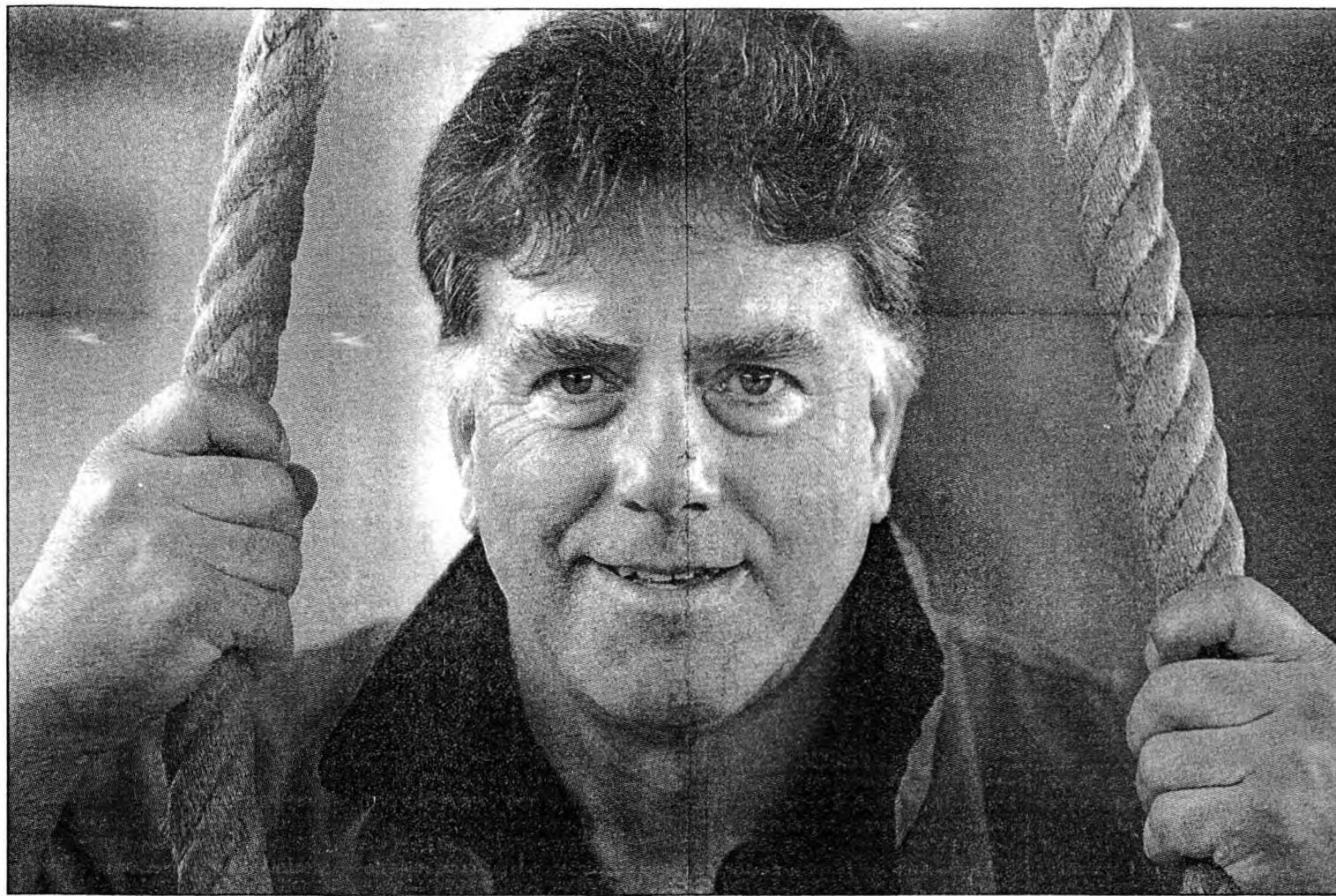
### Sport - Section 2

She said, "All the children, boys and girls, looked up to him. But he was not the kind of boy to let it go to his head.

"He is a wonderful role model for children. He is just a nice boy who is both considerate and courteous.

"We have very high standards at the school and he was a very good student. He sat his A Levels here but he was not blinkered by sport.

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**PROUD:** Hugh Williams, father of new Welsh full-back Rhys *Picture: NICK TREHARNE*

## How the sports-mad family thought the Henry call was just a wind-up

SPORT runs in the Williams family as Rhys' father teaches PE at Cowbridge.

Hugh Williams said Wales coach Graham Henry telephoned to ask if Rhys was doing anything on Saturday afternoon.

"We received a telephone call at home from Graham Henry but when Siwan, his sister, answered, she thought it was a wind up," said Mr Williams.

"He was in West Wales at the time with his girlfriend, so Graham Henry telephoned her house to tell him he was playing but they refused to believe it was him too.

"I am absolutely delighted for him. It came out of the blue and I did not expect him to be chosen.

"When Matt Cardey was injured against Newport, I thought that Swansea's Kevin Morgan would be called up and Rhys would be promoted to the A side."

His father had to postpone his own

big game - the clash between Brynteg School and Cowbridge Comprehensive, two of Wales's strongest school sides. In his capacity as head of sport at Cowbridge, Hugh Williams watched his son play for the first XV and excel at cricket and athletics.

Mr Williams said, "I had no intention of going to Ireland but I have had to get things sorted out pretty quickly.

"I have had to cancel the game between Cowbridge and Brynteg on Saturday morning as their sports master's son will be playing for the Welsh Schools side. We thought it was best to arrange it for a later date."

Williams is the school's first senior international since Aberavon's Haydn Davies in 1959.

Williams could have made the grade in any of these sports, but when he was 16, he chose rugby, even though many people thought he would be opening the batting for Glamorgan.

Mr Williams said "He has been in-

involved in international sport since he was 16 years old. He was a triple jumper and a cricketer, as well as playing rugby.

"He scored three centuries at national under 16 level, which is a record. Glamorgan wanted him to play for them and when he was 16 he had to make a decision between cricket, rugby and athletics. But rugby has always been his favourite.

"But rugby is not the be all and end all for Rhys."

The young full-back, then playing in the centre, was the star of the Cowbridge side that lifted the Welsh Schools cup at the National Stadium in 1997. He crossed for 43 tries that season, including six in one match.

He switched from his schoolboy position in the centre to full back when he toured New Zealand with Welsh Schools.

He is currently taking a year out from Cardiff Medical School where

he is studying to become a physio therapist.

The whole family will be at Lansdowne Road this afternoon and mother Elizabeth and older sister Siwan will be alongside a very nervous Mr Williams.

He said, "There will be a few nerves before kick off but I'm sure that the Irish hospitality will help.

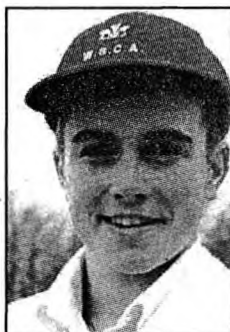
"But once he takes the first high ball or makes his first tackle, it will be better.

"I do get excited when I watch him play. I like to see rugby played with passion and some panache.

"Rhys has pace, vision and confidence. The one area I have some concern about is his tackling, but that is not too much of a concern.

"He is still very slight but that is something that can be worked on.

"He is more than 13 stone but he must not gain too much weight to the detriment of his other assets such as speed"



**MULTI-TALENTED:** Rhys Williams showed great promise at Under-16s level in rugby, cricket and athletics



## WALES COACH HENRY PRAISES SOLID WALES DEBUT FROM CARDIFF FULL-BACK WILLIAMS

**RHYS WILLIAMS** was praised by Wales coach Graham Henry after making a solid debut.

The 20-year-old may have played only 19 games of senior rugby for his club, Cardiff, but he hardly looked a novice against Ireland.

"I was concerned by the weather conditions, but the young fellow came up trumps. He had a big game," said Henry.

"His age does not make any difference. There are not a lot of options to fall back on. He has a very positive future."

The Cardiff youngster was drafted in following the eligibility row surrounding Shane Howarth, and then Matt Cardey's concussion.

And the start of last year's Junior World Cup final team did not let the pressure of the occasion curb his natural flair to run with the ball.

"He gave me kittens," joked Wales captain David Young, in reference to a couple of break-outs.

Williams was delighted with Wales's seventh success in the last nine trips to Dublin.

He said, "We stuck together and came away with a victory. I thoroughly enjoyed it. I cannot believe everything that has happened this last week.

"I loved singing the national anthem. It is where my heritage lies."

● Rhys Williams is pictured relishing the anthem and the action

