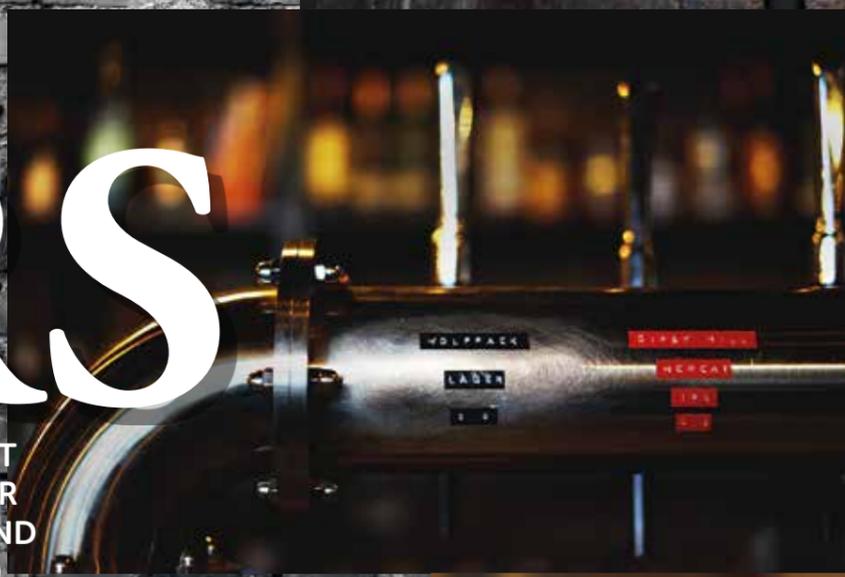


BLOOD, SWEAT AND BEERS

DETERMINED NOT TO JOIN THE LONG LIST OF EX PROS STRUGGLING WITH LIFE AFTER RUGBY, FORMER PLAYERS **CHRIS WYLES** AND **ALISTAIR HARGREAVES** TURNED A SHARED LOVE OF BEER INTO A BOOMING BUSINESS



Chris Wyles (left) and Alistair Hargreaves outside Wolfpack HQ: a converted garage in north-west London



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rofessional sportsmen are the envy of us all. Given the choice, who wouldn't swap meetings for match days; conference calls for cheering crowds? But despite the excitement and adoration, careers in sport rarely last long. For rugby players in particular, 15 years in the game is about as good as it gets. And while most of us look forward to putting our feet up, for athletes with their whole lives ahead of them – who have known nothing but the singular purpose of performance up to that point – the inertia and uncertainty of life after sport can be overwhelming.

So what's anyone approaching the end of their playing days to do? For former Saracens players Chris Wyles and Alistair Hargreaves, the answer was simple: have a beer.

"We actually first met up to discuss the initial idea when Al [Hargreaves] was 28 and I was 26, because we knew that although we were only middle-aged in terms of our rugby careers, it was time to start thinking to the future," explains 35-year-old Wyles, who only retired last year having played 254 times for Saracens (scoring 375 points) and 54 times – including three World Cups – for the United States national team.



"We bounced some ideas around and ultimately we decided we wanted to be entrepreneurial – we wanted to run a business. One day Al turned to me and said, 'What about beer?'"

BOTTLED EMOTION

Rugby players may be among the most well-conditioned athletes on the planet, fitter and stronger with each new season, but the post-match pint (or ten) remains a sacred tradition – bringing players together and creating a culture of inclusivity. For Wyles and Hargreaves, bottling all that became their mission, and Wolfpack Lager was born.

What followed was a period of trial, error and no small amount of beer tasting (all in the name of research). From the outset, though, one thing was

clear: rather than going down the well-trodden craft ale route, they would offer something different – like any good player, they spotted the gap and they went for it.

"There was a space in the market for a full-bodied craft lager, branded in a way that resonates with people," explains Wyles. "Craft beer can be pretentious at the best of times," Hargreaves continues, "so we wanted to create something fun and accessible."

They had the concept and the core values, as well as a customer base – in the form of a stadium full of beer-guzzling rugby fans – more than willing to test out their new product. The issue, at first, was getting pints in hands.

"First we went to the coach [Mark McCall], and we were



Hargreaves takes the path of most resistance

actually really nervous – we had to kind of psyche ourselves up," says Hargreaves – who won four international caps for South Africa and captained Sarries to the Premiership title in the 2014-15 season, before concussion cut his career short in 2016. "Eventually we plucked up the courage and said to him, 'We want to start a brewery.' We were expecting him to shoot down the idea, because we were professional rugby players, but he said as long as it didn't affect our performance, he was all for it. Then we went to the CEO, who said he would back us to the hilt, but the club already had a commercial agreement with another brewery so they couldn't sell our beer at any bar in the stadium."

PARK THE BUS

No bar, no problem. Because what do you do when a commercial deal prevents you from using the stadium's existing facilities? You buy a double-decker bus, fit it with 15 taps and park it next to the pitch, of course. ➡➡



You've been warned





Wyles scored 375 points in his ten-year Saracens career

» “After training one day we literally jumped in the car and drove for two hours up to a bus shelter in Norfolk,” says Hargreaves. “The first day it arrived, we were playing on the Saturday and it arrived on the Friday night, so Wyles was up until midnight waiting for this bus to turn up.”

Explaining the decision – and indeed their business philosophy – Wyles credits a chance encounter with a particular piece of writing. “We stumbled upon an article titled ‘Don’t Flinch,’” he says, “which basically said if there’s a decision to be made about your new business, back yourself, be bullish and believe in the outcome. That’s what was going through our heads when we found ourselves in the bus yard thinking, right, we’ll buy that one then! And it was the same thing when we went to ask the CEO for backing: we were thinking, are we really going to go and ask the CEO of the club if we can buy a bus, put it in the stadium and sell beer from it? The answer was yes, go for it.”

The bus arrived the night before their next home game, and it was up and running just in time for the match. “When we played,” recalls Hargreaves, “we were kind of looking over our shoulders at how well the bus was doing – I think we sold around 2,500 pints on day one, though, so it was a pretty good start.”

BARS AND BEYOND

Four years on from that trip to Norfolk, Wolfpack Lager is now much more than just a bus. Not only is the beer sold in 300 pubs up and down the country; the business has taken up permanent residency in Queen’s Park, north-west London. A direct result of that ‘Don’t Flinch’ mindset, the Wolfpack Bar – now smartly adorned with oak flooring, low-hanging lights and the original, exposed brickwork – was bought when the pair were on tour in America. At the time it was nothing more than a cluttered car garage.

“We did a deal over the phone and only got inside the building when we got back a week later,” says Hargreaves. “It was a mess! There were used car parts everywhere, there were no toilets, there wasn’t even a cellar for storing the beer.”

“We were told it’s a ‘B3’ listed building, and were like, ‘What’s a B3?’” Wyles adds. “But I think

that willingness to learn as you go is part of the entrepreneurial spirit: every day you have to make decisions you’ve probably never had to make before.”

It’s certainly served them well so far. With a £1mil turnover, a team of 12 and plans to open two more bars, Wolfpack Lager has come a long way in a short time. Life after sport, for these two at least, doesn’t seem so bad.

“Former players struggle with purpose,” says Hargreaves, “they finish their rugby and they have a mortgage and a family and they end up doing something just because it pays the bills. We were lucky enough that we had something we were both passionate about. A lot of sports men and women are probably guilty of thinking life as they know it will last forever, but we realised there was no time to feel sorry for ourselves. We had an idea, we had an audience and now we love what we do.”

We’ll drink to that. **TF**

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BURPEE BEER BURNER

WORK OFF LAST NIGHT’S LAGERS WITH CHRIS WYLES’ FAVOURITE HIIT SESSION

“I’m a huge fan of a burpee,” says Wyles. “When you play contact sport for a living, such a big focus is on size and strength, so it’s refreshing to not have to worry about that side of things. We want to stay in shape, obviously, but it’s nice to be able to just keep fit, lose a bit of weight and not have to worry about being big.”

- Set a treadmill to 15kph
- Sprint for 90 secs
- Jump off and go straight into 10 burpees
- Rest for 1 min
- Repeat 12 times
- Have a lie down



Words Isaac Williams Sports photography Getty Images