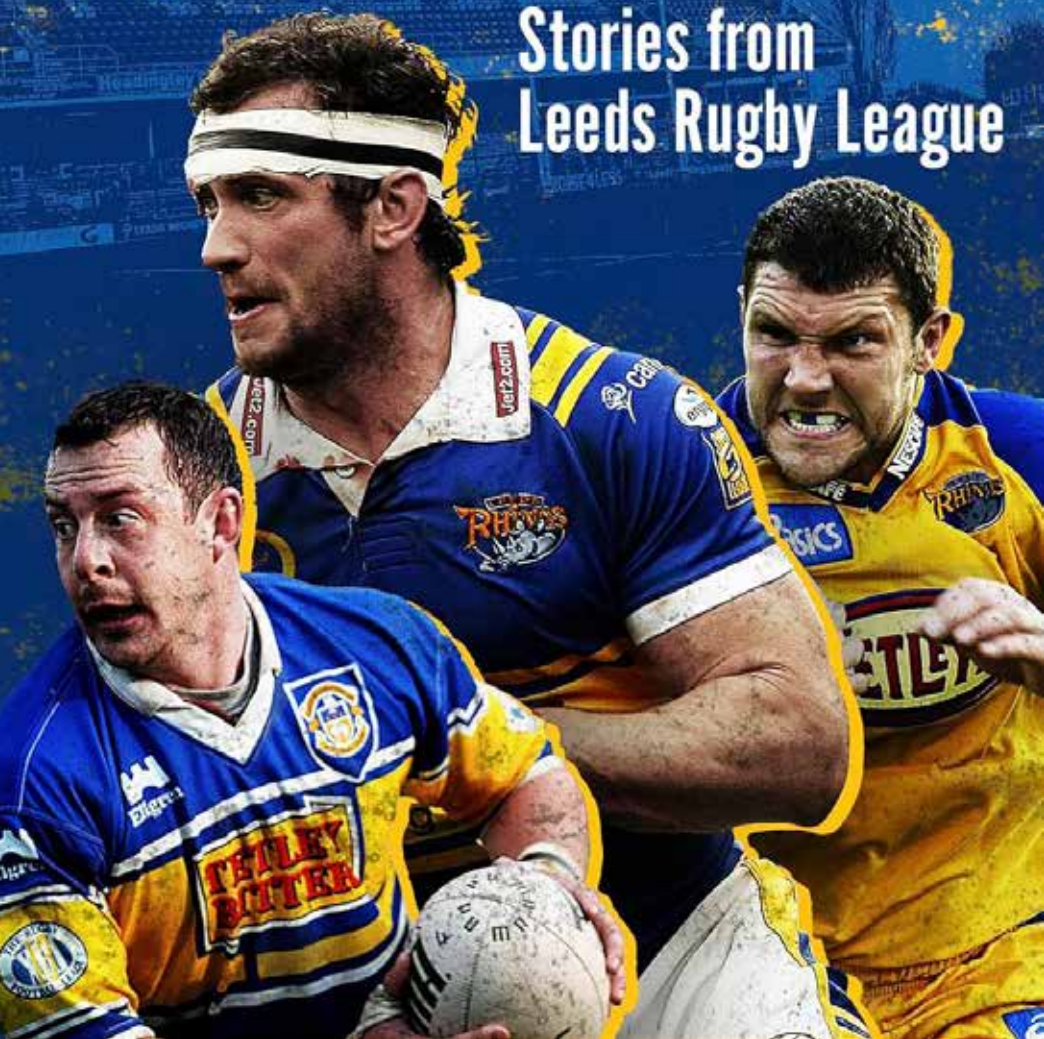


James Oddy

BLUE AND AMBER VOICES

Stories from
Leeds Rugby League



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Alan Smith (1962–83)

Position: Winger

Wakefield-born winger Alan Smith spent over two decades on the wing at Headingley. During that time he scored 283 tries, a destructive and consistent weapon in one of Leeds' greatest-ever teams. Yet while he was a finisher of immense skill and precision, he was also a no-nonsense defender, capable of key ball-and-all tackles on numerous occasions. His first big occasion was the iconic watersplash Challenge Cup Final of 1968 against Wakefield. He also won a championship in 1972, and was part of a Leeds team that finished as table-toppers on five occasions. Six Yorkshire Cups and a Floodlit Trophy rounded off his trophy haul, along with another Challenge Cup in 1977. Smith was also immensely successful as an international. He was capped ten times for Great Britain, including being part of the last British team to win the Ashes against Australia. He also appeared at two World Cups.

UP TO 17 years of age I had never even thought of picking a ball up. I was into rock and roll and motorbikes. I didn't follow rugby. The first match I ever saw was when I was 13 years old and that was at Wembley. Strangely

enough, it was Leeds playing Barrow. I went with a friend of mine whose father was a big rugby league supporter. Then I thought, Fartown are playing, we can get a bus to Fartown, me and this friend. So, we started to watch Fartown a bit. Wakefield then started to become good. I started to support Wakefield in about 1958, and that was it.

We used to have interdepartmental football games at work; they were very competitive. My boss, named Stan, said never mind motorbikes, come down and play rugby. I have seen you play football. And that was the start of it all! The amateur team was called Brookhouse. The open-age side was so successful in the amateur game at that time they wanted an under-19s team. I was 17 so needed to catch up.

I took to the game because I was quicker than most of the lads there. Nobody taught me how to pass or tackle, the fundamental skills of rugby league. But I enjoyed it, and because of my speed I was offered trials at the end of that first season with Wakefield and Halifax. At Wakefield, there is Neil Fox, and many of my other heroes I used to watch. What am I doing on this field with them?

They offered me this £1,000 contract. £1,000 when you are 18, it sounds alright. £250 now, £250 when you have played maybe a dozen games, if you play for Yorkshire you can have another £250; if you go to Great Britain, there is your £1,000. I came away, and my brother-in-law was mentoring me. He said, hang on, don't just jump in straight away. Just see what Halifax have got to say. More importantly, Leeds rang. Do I want to go over there and see them in Headingley? They said, look, if Wakefield are going to offer you a £1,000 contract we will offer you

£1,050 and we will give you £300 now if you sign on, so I did. That was the start of it in June 1962.

Like a one-trick pony I stayed there all my life [at Leeds], with no desire to leave. I couldn't see myself fitting in anywhere else. It wasn't so much about the rugby. It was the friendships that developed. It was good fun. I didn't aspire to first-team football. Leeds had an A-team structure, which was where I expected to start. But I made my first-team debut on 29 August 1962, playing in the first team against Dewsbury, because the left-winger Geoffrey Wriglesworth wasn't fit. I thought, three months I've been at the club, what are you doing picking me? But I got picked, and scored four tries. Can you imagine how I felt? What is happening? But then reality kicks in. Another game and I didn't play as well. Rightly so, I slithered back to the A team where I belonged, to learn my trade. That is where I was comfortable. I was back with the younger lads my age. The Leeds team of the mid-60s was forming in the A team, with the likes of Mick Shoebottom, John Atkinson, Syd Hynes and Barry Seabourne. Leeds had signed the Scottish British Lions winger Ronnie Cowan as well. He was a lovely, classy winger and I eventually took his place.

Roy Francis had arrived as Leeds coach. Roy Francis was the biggest impact in my life and what it is like to be fit. He transformed that team. I think he transformed rugby league. Roy in 1963 inspired everyone. First thing he did was get running spikes for everybody. Now, rugby players didn't train in spikes, but everybody at Leeds had spikes for training, forwards and backs alike. Roy would stand there watching us sprint and say to me, just watch Ronnie Cowan, he's fast and graceful. Me, graceful? I don't think so!

Within a year or two the team came together. Then I got my few chances with the first team. John [Atkinson] signed professional terms. John was always going to be in the first team, that was his space, he wanted to be there. Roy Francis would stand there and say, just watch this fella run, gliding through. And the Leeds front-row then was Mick Harrison, Dave Ward and Stevie Pitchford. Mick was a man for the pack, whereas packs now don't have any effect. Mick was feared in the pack and he was an anchor. Stevie was fit and fast. It was a good pack.

My style as a winger was totally different from John Atkinson's. We got on well and were competitive with each other. Our friendship grew even more after we retired. He wanted to do things that I could do; I wanted to do things he could do. I would never be like him. Roy Francis said that I was his foil. John was the star man. He was the protagonist and I was the foil, and I loved it, that will do for me. But vice versa, I had my own little role to play. My role became a very defensive one. I'd score tries from 100 yards out. Atky, people would stand up when he got the ball, because he could score from anywhere.

John Holmes was unique, always in the right spot at the right time. Where did Holmesy come from? A super player who could play any type of pass. Defenders would try to get John but his peripheral vision and his awareness of where everyone was, was unusual. Great players have that. He played a remarkable number of games, to say he was in a position in the middle of the field, where there were some tough lads about. He was always the target.

The atmosphere at Leeds was wonderful. There was the old bowling club, when you drive in to the main gates. To the right there were four bowling greens that filled in

the crosses, and it levelled it up there. It was a wonderful playing area for touch and pass. There was everything there. The main stand, the South Stand, might get 6,000-7,000 people on a reasonable day, 8,000 occasionally, but I have played at Headingley when there were over 20,000 on Boxing Day. Everybody wanted to be at Leeds. I realised that, whatever I went through, I was surrounded by talent. There was plenty of speed and good footballers. They had respect and inspiration from the top.

I was getting more chances in the first team in 1966/67 as Ronnie Cowan was having continuous hamstring problems. I'd never heard of a hamstring until I met Ronnie! He was the first person to say to me in the 1969/70 season that I'd get picked for the Lions tour. As time goes on and I look back, I am so proud to have been a part of the 1970s Ashes tour for Great Britain. That was some team. Us wingers have to praise the middle of the field, the pack and the half-backs, because the Aussies played it hard. That is the first thing I noticed, they are more physical. You seem to have less time, then they are on to you. They played it hard. But we were a good side.

My first wife, she had written an itinerary of the tour to keep in touch with us. There were no phones, no Facebook. You had to write a letter to keep in touch. She had all the scores of all the matches. It was very rough, it was the worst, cheapest hotels. We were going to get the proceeds from the tour, so the thinking was, I suppose, they would just book whatever place. The first shock was the Railway Hotel in Brisbane. It was two weeks in a dump. When you walked in, the ground floor was white-tiled, it was a bar. Aussies liked a bar. They would sit at the bar and they liked their drinks. There was a wooden staircase

you had to go up to the hotel part of the Railway Hotel. It had a big lounge; all the rooms went off the lounge. But it bonded that team together. We had fun and team-building in that hotel. There was also the Olympic Hotel in Sydney, and flying on a Dakota airplane inland, where they could only take 15 people on the plane. The airstrip was not long enough to even take this Dakota, so they had to clean a peanut field for us to land in. On that tour it was Johnny Whiteley [the trainer] and 14 players. Now teams have got dieticians, fitness trainers, psychologists.. They need it in the modern game. In my opinion, that's why we are not as competitive any more. The lads are superbly fit and strong and they are good, fast players in this modern game. But when push comes to shove, there is a certain toughness brought out of adversity.

You played for Leeds and Great Britain and then worked on the side. In my case rugby wasn't in my family. All of us had to do work. Mine was in accounting. I was good with numbers and could draw. This lad said, I think I will put you in accounts. I got this job in the cost accounting office. I started missing a few night schools because rugby training would be Tuesday and Thursday. My boss was not happy that I was becoming slightly more successful at rugby in 1966–68. Eventually I had to leave. He didn't sack me but said it was my choice. He said, when you are qualified you have that for the rest of your life; when you finish rugby or if you get injured then you have nothing for the rest of your life. You pick. So I picked rugby. I kept working in a place in Wakefield; they set me on in their accounts department. I eventually became the company accountant. In rugby I could earn £7.50 a week, £20 if we won. I made the right choice picking rugby.

If you didn't play you didn't get paid. We played a game at St Helens. We were up for a beating; it was an away midweek game. I had to finish work a bit early, and some of the lads couldn't get off work to play. You sit waiting to be told how much we were on. Basic pay was £14, anything over £20 you're doing alright. The club said, if you win we will give you all £25. We rushed to the door, nearly knocking it off its hinges, and we beat them.

Injuries were another story for me in my career. They don't get as many breaks now as muscles are protecting the joints. We got pulled down at high speeds. In the A team one October night I broke my leg, tibia and fibula. The following week this specialist in Wakefield got to grips with what they had done at LGI in the aftermath of my injury and it was horrendous. So that was in October. By about January I am up again, playing again the following season. My biggest injury still impacts me now; I ruptured cruciate ligaments. So I was finished in 1971 really. They took me down to Arsenal, which had a sporting hospital. They said I had no chance of coming back. I couldn't run. I saw a specialist. There is a complicated operation where they take the kneecap off, saw through the femur, pull the ligament up and calcify. I said no.

I was fortunate to meet arguably the world's strongest man, George McCue, at Leeds Carnegie as the Amateur Athletic Association was up there. He was studying muscle, and he held the British bench press record for years. He had me squatting and running again. As the leg got stronger it was more stable. When things are looking bad you can't give up. They said I could have had my pension if I wanted because of this injury. I said no. I played 12 more years, thanks to my mate George. If you

averaged it out, I missed about ten games a season, as my injuries would flare up a little bit.

Geoff Holmes used to be our accountant where I worked. He was a big rugby fan and he started to put a lot of money into Carlisle. He came to me towards the end of my career at Leeds and said come to Carlisle for £4,000. I said no. I was maybe 38 at the time, still playing for Leeds. I could inspire someone [other players] at Leeds. I still had a part to play if the young players can't catch me in training.

At the end of my career I sneaked out of the back door. I felt the time was coming; April 1983, it was towards the end of the season. Two seasons earlier I only played four to five games. We played Widnes one night, I got a try. I came off the wing and pulled an opposition player down to stop a try. Somehow that was it, my leg went. That was April/May time. Season finished and things were changing. Maurice Bamford came in as coach and I just thought it is time to go. I didn't announce it. I didn't want anything fancy, I would be crying. I couldn't cope with that. That was the finish. Trevor Watson at the *Yorkshire Post* wrote 'he seemed to just stop playing', and I did. You know when you know. It was the ideal time. It wasn't planned that way, but it left me with a contented feeling that you can only go so far. If I look back, I shouldn't have been playing, but the game was in decline. The amateur game was getting weaker. There should have been someone there pushing me out of that team. My experience was getting me by, but the game was changing, it was not as much fun. It was time.