

Rugby legend and ex-RAF pilot Rory Underwood's top tips on how to get your civilian career off to a flying start



By Laura Joint for Equipped Magazine

England's record try scorer Rory Underwood MBE is a perfect example of how it's possible to achieve success at the highest level in completely different environments.

The former Leicester, Bedford, England and British & Irish Lions winger was an RAF pilot throughout his rugby years and successfully adapted his skills – such as teamwork and decision-making – so that they were equally effective whether on a rugby field or in an RAF jet. Rory has now transferred his skills to business, as boss of his performance consultancy firm, Wingman, based in Grantham. So he's well placed when it comes to offering guidance on how to use and build your skillset, whatever the arena.

The arena most of us associate Rory with, of course, is Twickenham. His 85 England caps spanned 12 years from 1984-1996. His debut, as a 20-year-old against Ireland, came only a year after his first game for Leicester – a club he was to play for until 1997. His international career also included all six British & Irish Lions Tests in the two tours to Australia and New Zealand in 1989 and 1993.

In his 85 appearances for England he scored 49 tries – an England record that's unlikely to be broken soon, if ever: "I can't see it being broken in the near future," Rory told Equipped. "There's nobody

currently playing who is anywhere near even second place in the list (Will Greenwood and Ben Cohen share second spot with 31 tries).

“From an England point of view, we’re playing the big teams all the time so it’s much harder to score tries. So no, I can’t see it being broken. You’ve also got to be lucky with injuries. I was very lucky and only missed one England game in the whole time. Plus I was playing in a very successful side for two-thirds of my time with England. That helped too.”

Rory’s being modest. The fact is that his rugby achievements ran alongside a successful career as an RAF Flight Lieutenant, which meant training had to fit in with his job: “That’s how it was then. Rugby was an amateur sport and you had a job. For me, I was a pilot in the air force, flying jets, and playing rugby in my spare time. I joined the air force in 1983 and I started playing rugby for England in 1984. I finished playing rugby in 1996 and I left the air force in 2001. The best way to describe it is that I was a pilot in the air force and that was my job. My rugby was a hobby. It’s all changed now because rugby has become a professional sport.”

Joining the RAF was the only career Rory had in his sights when he was growing up in the north-east of England: “I loved flying. I just wanted to fly. Times were very different then. In the first part of my RAF career we were still in the Cold War.”

Rory went through the fast jet system, getting as far as the Tornado. He then spent six years on 360 Squadron – an electronic countermeasures squadron – where he flew the Canberra T17. That was followed by four-and-a-half “fantastic years” flying the Hawk on 100 Squadron at RAF Finningley. Finally, Rory spent three years on the ground before finishing his RAF career with three years at Cranwell, flying the training aircraft, HS125 Dominie. He entered Civvy Street in 2001, after 18 years in the RAF.

“I don’t fly at all now,” said Rory. “I miss it big time. I don’t get the time because my weekends are taken up with rugby. I’ve been on the board at Leicester Tigers as a non-executive director for the last seven or eight years and it’s something I really enjoy. It’s great to still be involved in the rugby set up and it’s a different point of view, being in the boardroom as opposed to on the training pitch or playing.”

Rory, 51, now runs Wingman – working with businesses to help them improve performance, effectiveness and efficiency at every level: individuals, teams and the overall business.

He also does talks for Deloitte at events attended by servicemen and women who are going through the transition process. And he has some tips for Equipped readers: “The one thing I would say is: Recognise that because you have been in the military, you have a fantastic skillset. Do not underestimate this. Know how much it is a benefit to you. So be confident that you have the skillset, but then understand how to use that in a civilian environment. This is the challenge. The worst thing you can do is to pile-drive into the civilian world and try to be a military type of person because it won’t necessarily work.

“I do challenge civilian organisations as well to recognise how to get the best out of military people. For some people, when they first come out of the military it can be a very different environment, the culture is going to be massively different.

“So if you are an employer and you have someone from the military, if you better understand how to get the best out of them, you’ll get a fantastic product – because the military is a fantastic training environment for developing people.

“It provides you with personal development, leadership and management skills. You learn problem solving. These are just a few of the assets that you have.”

Another tip is to be open to guidance and to perhaps consider some coaching: “Any sort of information, mentoring, advice, experiential, pointers – it will all help anyone who’s leaving the military because you’re going from a totally different world into civilian life. If there’s any advice going, then grab it.”

Talking of tips ... it’s the Rugby World Cup this Autumn, so who does Rory think will be lifting the trophy in October? “The favourites have got to be New Zealand. However, I think we’re coming up on the rails. We had a good Six Nations apart from that final few minutes against France. If our players are fit I think we can make the semi-finals, no problem. And if we get through that and make it to the final you never know what might happen.”

We asked Rory if he had a favourite England try, so we could include a link to it on our online edition. His reply? “Yeah, all 49!” He explained: “It’s so hard to pick one. It could be my first one (against France in only his second game, 1984), my fifth try in one game (against Fiji, 1989), it could be a try that won us the Grand Slam, it could be one that I scored that my brother helped to set up (Tony, also a winger, played alongside Rory for England). There are so many elements as to why a try is important to me.

“But I think if I was going to choose one favourite try, it would be the only one I scored for the Lions.” Rory’s try came in the 20-7 win against New Zealand in Wellington in 1993...enjoy!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61Abv0yG8Xw>