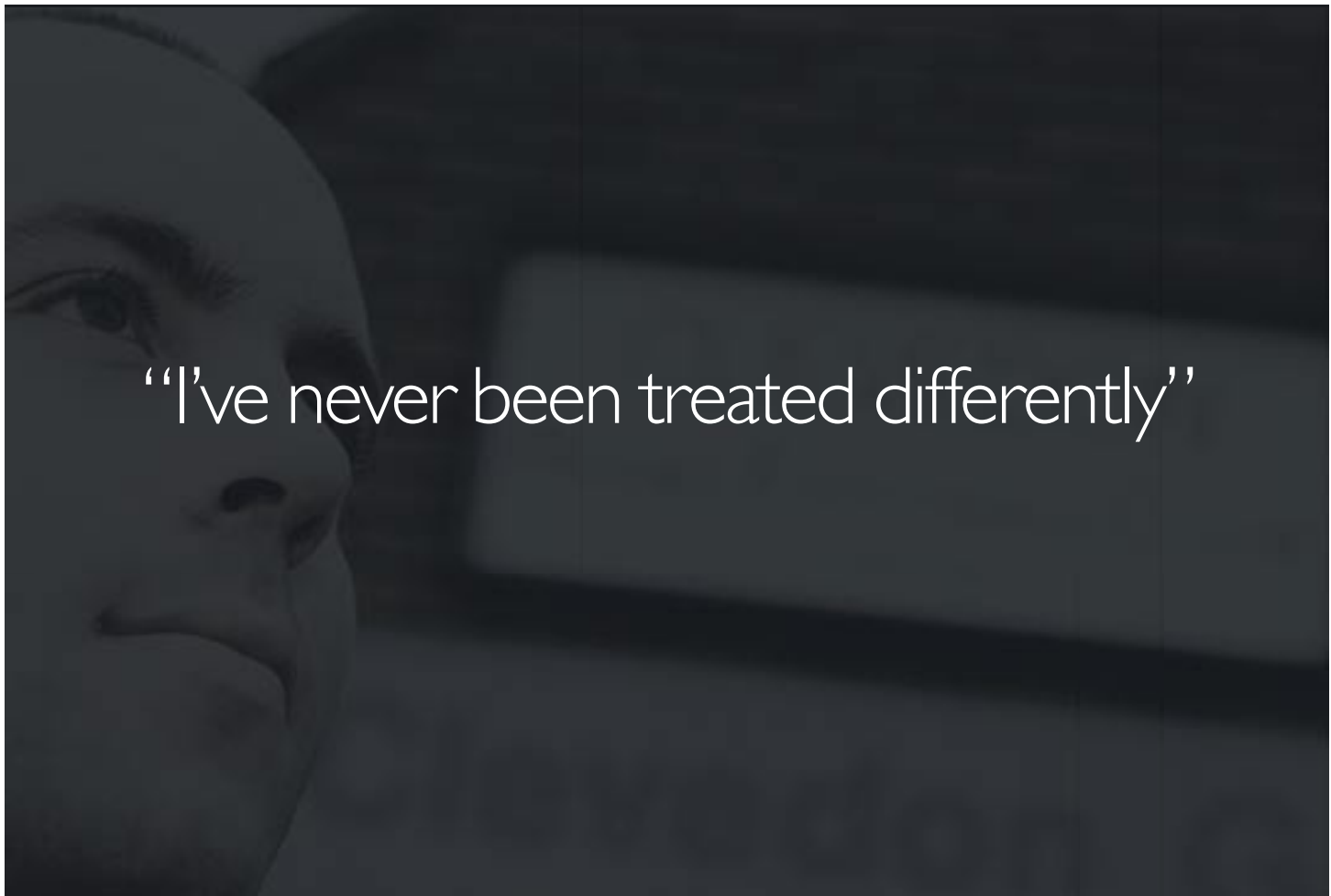


WORDS: Gavin Mortimer PICTURES: Mark Leech/Offside



“I’ve never been treated differently”

An unusual trophy hangs behind the bar at **Clevedon** – the Leg of Death. It’s the one thing everyone at the club wants to beat and also a tribute to one of their players, who has overcome adversity to take to the field

THEY CALL it the ‘Leg of Death’, and it rests behind the bar at Clevedon Rugby Football Club. It’s 21in long and streaked with the colours of the rainbow: sky blue, pale green, vivid purple and soft orange. The Leg of Death. Many have tried to harness its frightening power, but all have met an untimely end. It remains as inviolate, as intimidating, as indomitable as ever.

“Actually it’s one of my old legs,” chuckles James Russell, Clevedon’s 22-year-old flanker. “We use it as the club’s Yard of Ale, but no one’s ever downed it in one.”

By a heart-warming quirk of fate, the Leg of Death holds the same amount of beer as the traditional bulb-bottomed Yard Glass – three pints (that’s 1.7 litres to our friends in Brussels).

“Beer?” retorts Russell. “We don’t put beer in it, it’s cider.”

Of course, Clevedon is in cider country, on the northern coast of Somerset about ten miles west of Bristol. Russell has been playing





Match fit: Russell ensures his leg is securely in place before (right) taking to the pitch



for Clevedon (currently in South-West One) since he was 11, but it was only this season that he appeared in his first league match for the first XV. An unremarkable tale so far but let's start talking legs.

Russell was born without the fibula bone in his right lower leg. The fibula, or calf bone, is the one in the lower leg on the lateral side of the tibia, better known as the shin bone. You don't need any of the cast from *Casualty* to tell you that the absence of the fibula is going to make life a little tricky. But then, by all accounts, it hasn't made much of a difference to Russell.

"My parents have never treated me differently from the day I was born. They sent me to the local school with the other kids and I was treated just like everybody else there, too."

Russell was also born without the index finger on his right hand, like the missing leg bone an inexplicable whim of nature.

"There is no medical explanation as to why I was born without them," explains Russell. "The doctors said it might be hereditary, but as my dad was adopted we can't look back too far to find out."

It would be blithe and inaccurate, not to say dismissive of Russell's fortitude, to say that he leads an entirely normal life despite the missing bones. Without the prosthetic lower leg he wears, he wouldn't be able to walk. But modern prosthetics (artificial legs) are wonderful things, made of lightweight carbon fibre. Whereas 100 years ago Russell would have clumped around on nothing more sophisticated than a wooden peg, nowadays he's just one of the boys. In fact, between you and me, he has been known to pull a fast one from time to time. "It comes in handy at Alton Towers if the queues are long," he grins. "I can go straight to the front!"

So there you have it. Boy born without a bone in his leg, learns to walk like any other kid with the aid of an artificial lower leg. But of course that's only a sliver of the story. Not only has Russell shrugged off his disability to lead an everyday life, he's turned himself into a more-than-handly rugby player.

"I began playing when I went to Clevedon Community School at

“The great advantage is that if I get stamped on I don't feel a thing!”

the age of 11," says Russell. "I started off at fly-half and then moved into the back row, where I've played ever since."

Russell had a leg especially made for his new hobby, a 'sports fit' as he calls it. "It has more spring to it and greater support," he says. "They said it would make me run faster but I don't think that was true! I liked it so much I decided to wear it the whole time."

When one of his legs needs replacing, Russell orders a new one and discards the old one or donates it to the club. "The leg doesn't cause me any problems when I play. In fact, the only problem comes from people tackling me because the leg has a severe edge on it. But I wear a well-cushioned knee pad over it and that stops people hurting themselves when they tackle me. But if you think that everyone has a hard shin then there's not that much difference. The one great advantage for me is that I feel no pain in the leg, so if I get stamped on I don't feel a thing!"

Russell isn't a man given to self-pity. Getting him to admit he has to cope with any grief because of his artificial leg is a struggle. "If I injure my right leg then it's complicated for me," he concedes. "I had a problem with the medial ligaments in my right knee a while back when I was accidentally hit by one of my team-mates in a ruck. When my knee becomes swollen I can't put on my leg and if I can't wear my leg I can't go to work."





"They ripped the pi** out of him all day," our photographer explained, "but that's rugby for you!"

Russell is an aircraft fitter for British Aerospace and next year hopes to start working on the Airbus A380 Navigator. For those of you whose interest in planes stretches only to what the in-flight movie is, the A380 is the world's first double-decker passenger aircraft. In other words, it's big. And big is a word that features large in Russell's life – and we're not just talking about the Leg of Death. He is, as they say in the street vernacular, a 'big man', one who has never sought to make gain out of his missing bone and hates to be given preferential treatment (except in the queue at Alton Towers). As for his ambitions in life, they too are big, be it working on the world's premier passenger aircraft or playing rugby for Clevedon.


"I've played a few times for the first XV since making my debut against Basingstoke in September, always coming on from the bench. I want to play regularly for them but we'll see how things go. We have got a good team at Clevedon now, and if we recruited a couple more players for next season we would stand a good chance of getting promoted to the national leagues [Three South]."

Russell has worked his way steadily up into the senior squad, coming through the ranks of the juniors and the colts. In charge of Clevedon first XV now is Mark Hawkes, who was also Russell's coach at colts level. "James's leg doesn't inhibit him in any way," he says, "though sometimes it frustrates him. He finds it hard to push off on the leg, so if an opposition player fixes him and sidesteps, James can't always move quickly enough. His fitness is very good; in fact, the only thing that stops him playing on and on is that the fibre leg sometimes rubs the [knee] socket and that causes friction."

Hawkes's honest appraisal of Russell is indicative of the club's attitude as a whole. He's a popular and highly respected member of Clevedon – Hawkes describes him as a "unique individual" who has achieved something "fantastic" – but he gets no special favours on the rugby field. "I expect the same from him as I do any other player," says Hawkes. "It makes no difference to me, and I think that's what the rest of the boys think."

Russell would have it no other way. He would be disgusted if he ever suspected he was being picked out of sympathy and not on merit. But no chance of that at Clevedon. Having made a string of first-team appearances, he went on a lads' holiday to Magaluf (Mallorca). On his return, he found himself back in the seconds, having to work hard to sweat out the beer. Following his progress every step of the way has been his dad, himself a keen player in his younger days. "He was still playing into his late forties," says Russell, "but I'm playing a higher standard now for Clevedon than he did in his prime, and that makes him very chuffed."

Whether Russell senior was present in the bar after his son had made his first-team debut against Basingstoke isn't known. Let's hope not. Because there was his son standing on a chair in the middle of the clubhouse, shirt undone, midriff exposed, clutching the Leg of Death. "It was full of cider," he says, "with a couple of gins thrown in. It wasn't pleasant. It took me somewhere between two and three minutes to finish it."

Still, it could have been worse. Russell's 6ft tall. Imagine if he was Martin Johnson's size. Now that would be a Leg of Horrible Death. 



RUSSELL MISSES OUT

A FEW years ago James Russell swam at under-16 level in the Disabled Championship. He was selected in the England Development team in 1999 and hoped to make it to the 2000 Paralympics in Sydney. Sadly, an injury ruled him out. The Paralympics boasts 26 sports, including wheelchair rugby [Britain came fourth in 2004], which is confined to people who've suffered a spinal cord injury or upper-limb disability, not someone like Russell who has a lower-leg disability. 