

# **It pays to be passionate and persistent if you are set on a career in coaching**

Published 03/06/19 by [Blake Richardson](#)

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**In this case study we chat to rugby union coach James Clark about his route into the profession, the road bumps that threatened to derail his journey and the many helping hands which enabled him to realise his dream of setting up his own business.**

James Clark is testimony to the fact that if you want something badly enough, you will make it happen.

Nobody ever said coaching was easy. But what can be even more challenging than the role itself is the pathway into the profession.

For those intent on making coaching their full-time career, navigating your way to the entrance and then advancing through the door can be notoriously tricky.

Let's face it, it is a pretty tough market out there, with the demand for full-time jobs far outweighing the supply.

James is one of the many who found it a hard slog as he sought a way to make it pay. But he is not a person to be put off easily and is an example to others who share a passion for coaching of what can be achieved with enthusiasm and tenacity.

## **Take note!**

He admits his incessant curiosity to learn and craving for new creative coaching methods often leaves his girlfriend exasperated.

The main culprit is a notepad which sits permanently on his bedside cabinet, in which he jots down ideas when inspiration comes calling – which can be at any time of the day or night.

‘It drives her absolutely insane,’ he laughs, before adding, ‘but I just love coaching. It’s literally 24/7 with me and it has been for four years now.’

‘Coaching has really helped me grow as a person. It’s been a phenomenal experience for me and I feel so much better for it.’

‘But it’s only now that I am starting to reap the benefits. There was a time when I was in debt and seriously contemplating giving it all up.’

## **Hooked on coaching**

James says he will be forever grateful to UK Coaching, which he credits as helping him during some particularly testing times – from his early learning and development through to the launch of his own business, when he saved hundreds of pounds by becoming a UK Coaching member.

‘UK Coaching has been absolutely fantastic for me,’ he says. ‘And so have some of the people I have met on my coaching journey, who have helped me enormously. I have learned so much from so many people.’

His first foray into coaching came four years ago, at the age of 24, after sustaining a long-term knee injury (a meniscus tear).

During the 10 months he was side-lined he began helping out with the under-16s at his local rugby union club, Abingdon RFC, after responding to an SOS call.

‘They were struggling to maintain the interest of the players – with only three or four turning up for training each week – and I really wanted to still be involved, so I went down and did some specialist front row coaching with them. I got the coaching bug from there.’

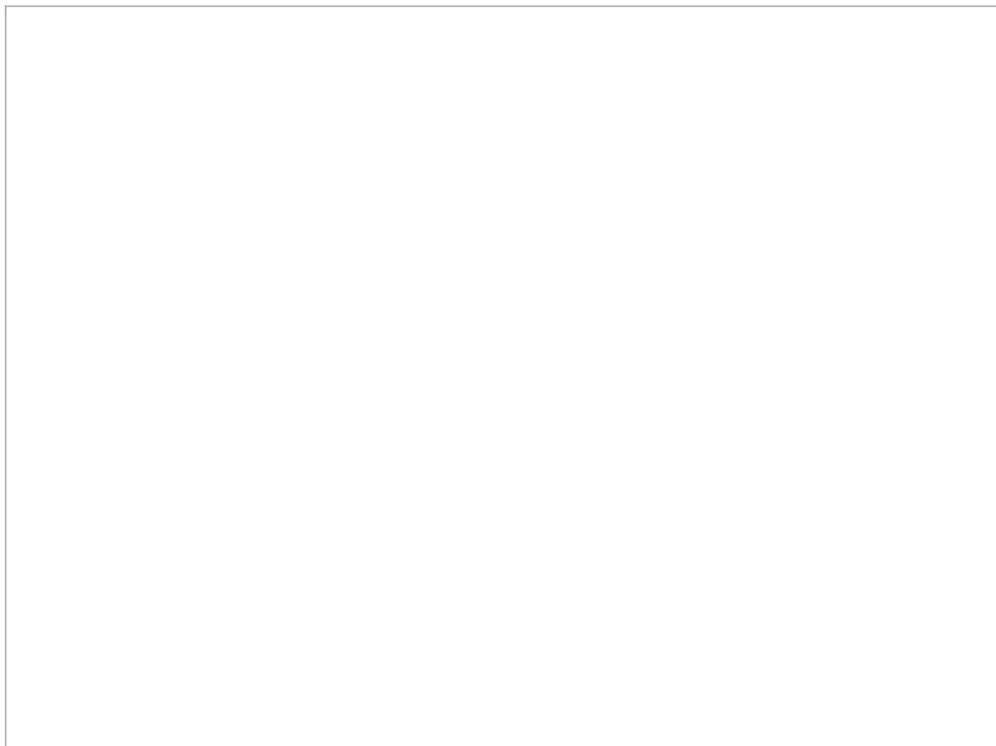
When shortly afterwards he became unemployed, James made the life-changing decision to dedicate himself to coaching full-time.

‘With me personally, if I do anything it’s wholeheartedly and I give it 110 per cent,’ he says, fully buying into the motto that setbacks are only challenges in disguise.

The club organised for James to take the England Rugby Coaching Award (Level 2), which Oxfordshire RFU funded.

‘While I was there the head of the county board spotted I had some talent for coaching and asked if I would be interested doing some work for the All Schools Programme, where the RFU pay for coaches to go into schools and run sessions for young players.’

And so he began working six hours a week for a nominal wage in schools in Faringdon and Wheatley, trying to forge links between the schools and their local clubs.



**You’ve got to**

**connect to advance**

James’ appetite for knowledge meant he was learning at a rapid rate. Unfortunately the money was not rolling in at the same pace.

He was suffering financially due to the minimal hours he was working. He was grateful for the support of his family but, understandably ‘it was getting to the point where I didn’t think it was going to work.’

The turning point came when Rugbytots offered him a job working 24 hours a week as a Lead Coach. He was able to supplement his income with other community work, most notably at Gosford RFC, further

extending his network of connections.

The contacts he was making began to open new doors and shape his journey. Contacts like England Under-18s coaches John Fletcher and Russell ‘Rusty’ Earnshaw, who would become his mentors when he took on the part-time role of head coach with Oxford Brookes University women’s team.

Rusty is a coach developer, coach educator and Level 4 mentor. He refers to his job as an RFU International Performance Coach as ‘the best job ever, supporting players and coaches to have fun, make effective decisions, adapt and rock it.’ John, meanwhile, is the England Under-18 head coach and a former director of rugby at Newcastle Falcons.

The pair encouraged and fed James’ burgeoning interest in multi-sport learning and [games-based learning](#). He was asking a lot of questions around challenge and [constraint-based coaching](#) and Rusty – a leading voice in this field – was more than happy to oblige. Everything that James saw and heard was grist to the mill.

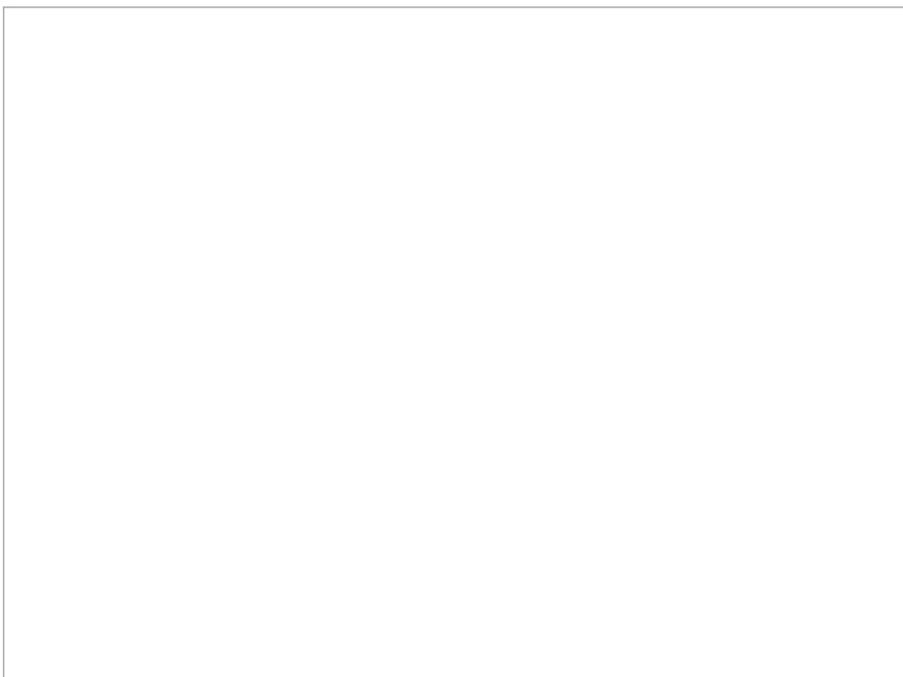
‘I take a lot of ideas and skill transfer methods now from sports like netball, basketball and football that tie in nicely with rugby,’ says James, who says he has profited immensely from the relationships he has forged with his rugby role models, but also from a growing number of coaches in different sports.

His thirst for knowledge was further quenched by joining online communities such as Coach.me, Coach Logic and listening to podcasts on The Talent Equation website, run by Sport England Head of Coaching, and ConnectedCoaches member, Stuart Armstrong.

He has been a member of ConnectedCoaches since May 2016, commenting: ‘I find the content really interesting, reading about different environments and how different people from different sports are operating; I think it’s all so relevant. It’s educational to read about people’s struggles. You may recognise a scenario from your own journey or think, “ah, what a great solution to that problem”’.

‘It’s amazing how different people from different sports are all saying similar things.

‘I think it’s very narrow minded to say rugby union has all the answers.’



**Go compare: Insurance**

James left his role at Oxford Brookes in March last year, with an exciting opportunity to coach in

America beckoning. But when it all fell through, it provided him with the incentive to set up his own coaching business, and the opportunity to put his ideas and ideology into practice.

‘A friend in Seven Oaks said I should have a look at UK Coaching for some help, which he highly recommended. I logged onto the website and my first thought was, “wow, I love the content”. But then when I saw the insurance details and how ridiculously low the price was, bearing in mind I am a start-up business, I was sold.’

With rugby union being a contact sport, companies were quoting him between £500 and £600 for annual insurance.

[UK Coaching’s Membership](#), which includes insurance, is priced at £89.99. He was happy to bite our hand off and, since August 2018, has been a fully paid up member.

‘It helped me out so much when I set up the business. I loved the Code of Practice that got sent out with the membership. And there’s some really helpful stories in Coaching Edge (now replaced with [UK Coaching’s new digital subscription](#)), which I get as part of my membership. Anything that provides different perspectives on coaching interests me.’

## **Building the business**

James’ company – JSC Rugby – has a dual function: coaching and coach development. ‘Coaching kids and young adults to be better rugby players but also to help support coaches to become better coaches,’ is James’ concise overview.

Currently, he works with senior players from a women’s team based in Hampshire.

‘I coach one-on-one with some of the players, covering specific work like scrummaging, line-outs and scrum half training.’

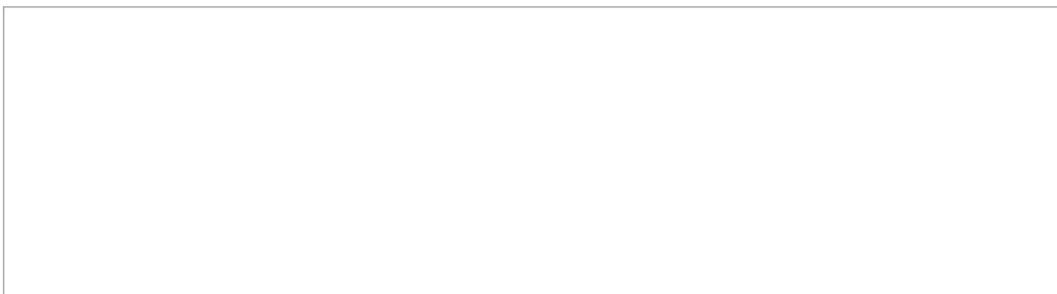
He also works in several Oxfordshire schools – including a contract with Cholsey Primary School, where he carries out teacher training as well as running sessions with the children.

And he is the lead forwards and skills coach for Oxford Harlequins, working with the Colts and Jack Barclay Academy.

At 28, he still has plenty of miles left on the clock as a player too, representing Oxford 1sts in the Bucks & Oxon Premiership.

He has come a long way in the four years since he took his first steps in coaching. While he has had to fight tooth and nail to get the breaks, he has without doubt made his own luck and has enjoyed every second of the journey.

‘I’m now at a point where I am earning a reasonable living out of coaching and can focus on my coaching full time, without having to do shifts at a pub or labouring in order to supplement my income to get by.’



## Final thoughts

At a time when the teaching profession is struggling to [recruit and retain staff](#), how those entry-level coaches harbouring similar ambitions to James must wish they had offers of lucrative [government bursaries](#) tempting them to commit to the profession.

Unlike so many of their likeminded counterparts who enter the parallel profession of teaching, they know exactly what they are letting themselves in for. They have put in the hard yards and are therefore equipped to last the distance. They have enjoyed but they have endured too as they fight to carve out a niche for themselves in the paid ranks.

They have, in effect, done the interval training, becoming conditioned to the nature of the profession after years spent at the coal face. There may be no financial enticement dangled in front of them but they are champing at the bit nonetheless for the opportunity to kick-off a full-time career and prove their worth.

**Share your story with ConnectedCoaches members of your route into the paid ranks.**

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