

Sport
Rugby League

'I was lost away from rugby. I didn't make good decisions then'

INTERVIEW

Sam Burgess has recovered from a tumultuous period in his life to begin a new chapter as Warrington head coach

By Neil Squires

Sam Burgess stands in the entrance of a hospitality room at the Halliwell Jones Stadium. High, wide and of similar dimensions to the doorway, he looks like he should be playing for Warrington Wolves this

week when Super League kicks off, rather than coaching them.

It is from the stands, though, that Burgess will be making his presence felt as a new chapter in his larger-than-life story begins at Catalans Dragons on Saturday.

Never afraid of putting himself out there, one of English rugby's most charismatic and controversial figures has moved on from his assistant job at South Sydney Rabbitohs, the National Rugby League club where he became a superstar, to return home and give head coaching a go. No matter that he is just 35. "Actually, I was 34 when I got the

Fresh start: Sam Burgess will take charge of his first Super League game on Saturday; (below) playing for England in 2015 after switching codes to union

PA/REX SHUTTERSTOCK

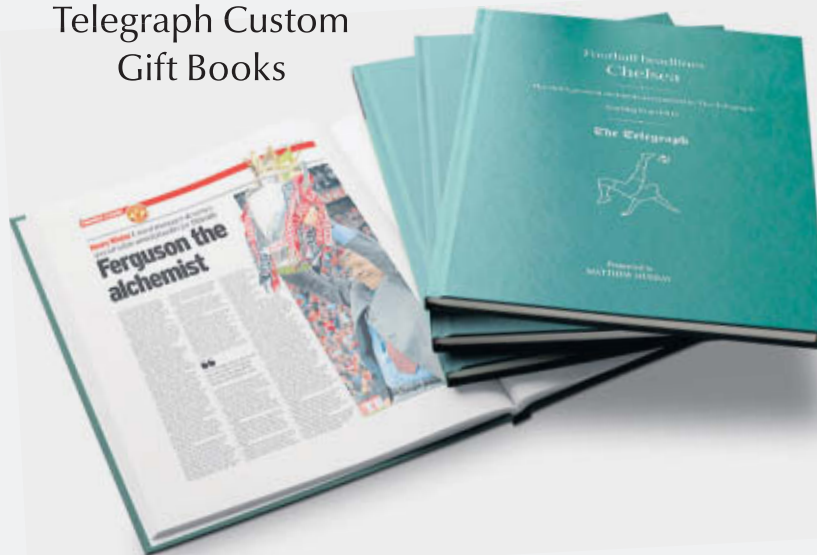


READER SOLUTIONS BY TELEGRAPH MEDIA GROUP

A *bespoke* gift brought to you by The Telegraph

Football Headlines

Telegraph Custom Gift Books



Histories of England's biggest football clubs as reported in The Telegraph

Relive the history of the Premier League's great clubs through The Telegraph's football headline series. Each custom gift book includes reports, articles and iconic images from the newspaper's archives.

The ideal gift for supporters of the teams featured in the series: Manchester City, Manchester United, Liverpool, Arsenal, Chelsea, Spurs and Newcastle United.

Features

- ◆ Recipient's name embossed in silver on the front cover
- ◆ Size: A3 (29.7 x 42 cm)
- ◆ Green leatherette cover

Valentine's Day offer: £63 (RRP £70) with checkout code LOVE10.

◆ books.telegraph.co.uk/custom ◆ 0844 871 1514

Because this is a personalised gift, all sales are final and this product cannot be returned, refunded or exchanged. This product is for personal use only. Publication, reproduction, use in advertising or for purposes of trade is strictly prohibited without written permission. We cannot guarantee the quality of every page of the book due to the nature of the product and its historic content. Our custom books cannot be ordered in conjunction with one another. Discount offer ends February 16, 2024.

job," corrects Burgess, who is younger than Warrington full-back Stefan Ratchford.

"I was finishing up at Souths and this just came up. A lot of people advised me to take a bit more time but Wayne Bennett [the former Rabbitohs coach] told me, 'Go do it. It's the only way you're going to learn'. It was a sliding-doors moment.

"It wasn't a plan but it was a great opportunity outside my comfort zone. I wanted to be a head coach in the long run and I thought this was just a great fit. It is such a great club to be part of."

The morning we meet, he has been training with the team. He still does some running and gym sessions, but contact is a no-no. The "Slammin' Sam" days are long gone.

It is 4½ years since Burgess retired because of a shoulder injury, a period in his life which has been characterised by chaos. His initial venture into coaching with the Rabbitohs stalled when he was stood down after a blizzard of damaging accusations from his former wife, Phoebe, and father-in-law, Mitchell Hooke, while he fought to clear his name.

He describes the situation as "horrific", with a conviction for intimidation of Hooke eventually overturned and no charges laid over Phoebe's domestic-abuse claims. Burgess was, however, found guilty of driving with cocaine in his system, after which he spent four weeks in rehab.

It was a period when he felt rudderless. "When I first retired, I had a rough time. I did not have a purpose or a drive and I struggled with that," he says. "For so many years, I had that sense of belonging to a group and having a responsibility. Almost instantly that had gone.

"In that time I was away from the game, I was just totally lost. I don't find many things hard but I found that period very hard to manage. I didn't make great decisions."

VAR coach quits for rugby league

Phil Bentham is to leave his role as a video assistant referee coach with Professional Game Match Officials Ltd (PGMOL) to become the Rugby Football League's new head of match officials.

The former Super League official has already spent time working with referees at the RFL's Manchester base this week.

Ross Heppenstall

There are complications to his switch of hemispheres. He has a new partner, Lucy, and baby daughter, Robbie, in tow, but his two children from his first marriage, Poppy, seven, and Billy, five, are in Australia. "The only thing that has made me wish I was back there is my family. I miss the children," he says.

It is Burgess's first time living in the UK since his tumultuous year in rugby union in which he was made the scapegoat for England crashing out of the 2015 World Cup at the pool stage.

His reflections on that time are more rose-tinted than expected. "I actually had a great time in rugby union and had some success. People might laugh at that, but I played in a Premiership final for Bath against a heavily paid Saracens team and I got into a World Cup squad. I had to work my backside off to do that," he said.

"I represented my country and I felt like I gave something to the game of rugby union.

"The two warm-up games I played, we won, then in the World Cup I played against Fiji and we won, and then I started against Wales. After 70 minutes, we were winning. Then I came off the field and we lost!

"That game against Wales seems to be the sticking point of my time in union for a lot of people, but I learnt so much. I was surrounded by great coaches who have gone on to have amazing careers post that World Cup.

"Stuart Lancaster, at Racing, is probably now *the* coach in world rugby, Andy Farrell is the current Lions [and Ireland] coach, Mike Catt is with Ireland and Graham Rowntree is with Munster. They are top coaches and I took on board everything they said."

Might he one day contemplate a Farrell-style switch to coaching union? "Never say never," he says. "Andy would be a great role model but he's a hard comparison. He is a great icon and he's a pretty special guy. Besides, I'm only in my first year as a rugby league head coach."

