

## “DANIEL” LAMBERT – An Exceptional Rugby Player



*Daniel Lambert.*

**D**OUGLAS Lambert, usually known as “Daniel” or “Danny”, was born at Cranbrook in 1883 and after a short time at St Edward’s, Oxford, was in Gonville from 1899 to 1902. He was a member of the first ever College Rugby XV in 1900–01 (when he played in the forwards), and also the 1901–02 side, when he was to be found among the threequarters. Arnold’s end-of-season profile of him was, as it often was, ironic: “Thanks to him, our matches never lacked the element of uncertainty. He scored some splendid tries. But though he did much that was brilliant, he left undone more than was necessary, and though he could tackle a man like a demon, he was just as likely to turn his back on him altogether”.

His fame as the College’s first international rugby player rests on seven games that he played for England between 1907 and 1911. In his short international career, when he was never an automatic choice, he established two scoring records that stand to this day. In 1907, against France, Lambert scored five tries in a resounding England victory. This record, equalled by Rory Underwood against Fiji in 1989, has yet to be surpassed. Then, in 1911, again against France (who had already beaten Scotland), in what became known as Lambert’s Match, he scored 22 points, made up of two tries, five conversions and two penalties. Under the old scoring system, when a try was worth three points, this remains a record for an England player.

Arnold, who was coach to those early College XVs, wrote of him in his book on the first ten years of College rugby: “his play was a strange mixture of phenomenal brilliance mingled with occasional fits of what, for want of a better term, became known as ‘the Lambert Stagers’ . . . in attack, his pace, skill and neatness made him irresistible . . . but equally vivid is my recollection of his defence and of the heart-searching ‘Oh Lambert’. Not that he was averse to collaring . . . I have seen him do some desperate tackles. It is never a question of ‘can he?’ but rather of ‘will he?’”.

After leaving school, he went to work in London for the family firm of tobacco manufacturers. I suspect that this was the once well-known firm of Lambert & Butler, since subsumed into W. D. and H. O. Wills (Imperial Tobacco), but I have been unable to find proof of this. He joined Harlequins, for whom he made his first team début in December 1904. Adrian Stoop, already an England cap, recalled Lambert’s promotion from “A” team forward. In a trial game “I thought I was going to score a try but suddenly found myself about ten yards over the touchline. When I recovered, I asked ‘what the hell was that?’ – the answer being ‘Lambert, he plays forward for the ‘A’. Well, he now plays wing three-quarter for the first” was Stoop’s response.

And so he did, turning out for 180 first team games in the years up to 1914, his last game being against United Services, Portsmouth, on 18th April 1914. In nine seasons, he scored 1,462 points for the club, made up of 253 tries (the club’s all-time leading try scorer), one drop goal, one goal from a mark, six penalties and 339 conversions! In a game in 1909, he notched up 33 points against Rosslyn Park (5 tries and 9 conversions), a club record. That same year he played, with three other OEs, Gordon Carey, E. B. Steele and J. T. Rivett-Carnac, in the first ever match at Twickenham. He also played for and captained Middlesex on numerous occasions.

Harlequins, in this period, could frequently field an all-international back division: Birkett, Poulton (later Poulton Palmer), the Stoop brothers, Sibree, Brougham and, of course, Lambert. His left wing partnership with Birkett, another big man, became feared in both club and international rugby. As E. H. D. Sewell, rugby commentator and author, put it: “. . . burly John Birkett, left centre, with as his wing the late Douglas Lambert, whose stride, as I remember, . . . was just about a foot longer than that of any other player in the London area, this accounting largely for his consistent success. While others seemed to be running just as fast as this Old Eastbournian, their strides were twelve inches, more or less, shorter than his. So, naturally, Lambert ‘scored again in the corner’. That Harlequin left wing was the terror of all comers. . . .”

But he was far from being just a “flyer”, as witness a press report on a Harlequins–London Scottish game in 1910: “Poulton flung the ball out to Lambert on the left wing, who took the pass beautifully in his stride. His usual method is to race down the touch-line, trusting to his speed to get through the opposition, but on this occasion he swerved inwards right into the thick of the battle. In and out of the crowd of Scots he threaded his way with a trickiness and dodging ability that have seldom been surpassed. Seemingly endowed with the slipperiness of an eel, he defied all attempts to collar him; four men tried to do so, but failed to come to grips. Feinting and swerving, the lengthy figure in the multi-coloured Harlequin jersey sailed along to within a few yards of the line, where, having drawn the attentions of the full-back on himself, he deftly transferred the ball to Lewis who had simply to hop over and score between the posts to finish off one of the most delightful pieces of football that has ever been seen on a Rugby football ground.”



According to another commentator, “the apparent weakness in his play was that when obviously hemmed in he seemed almost to stop dead and hesitate. This may have been due to two reasons. With his great raking stride, he was apt to outpace all his partners and so be left alone with no one to pass to. Again that great stride of his made it practically impossible to pull suddenly up on his heel and break off in another direction or side-step. When he was in full swing, he was like a huge battleship under way . . . when cornered, he could appear puzzled what to do for the best.”

H. B. T. Wakelam, in *The Harlequin Story*, says that “he was a magnificent place kick and a grand defender as well, being physically very powerful. At Bedford once, he came into contact with that phenomenal young forward, R. C. Stafford. He weighed over fifteen stone but, as an eye-witness states, ‘Danny got him and just threw him into the crowd.’”

Sewell, in his book *Rugger, the Man’s Game*, selected his best-ever English XV for the period 1890 to 1939 and gave Lambert the left wing berth.

Off the field, as one Harlequin had it: “no more popular fellow stepped”. Wakelam must have known him well and says “Lambert was a most amusing character, but he was perhaps a little out of place when elected Treasurer in 1911–12, for it was not his line of country at all. Once, for instance, the writer, having travelled down from Cambridge to play for the club in London, sent in an expense account for 14s. 8d. (73p). Several months went by, a second application was sent in, and a cheque for £14 8s. 0d. (£14.40) was this time received. It was not surprising to see [a new] Treasurer in 1912.”

On the outbreak of war in August 1914, he must, at the age of 31, have volunteered for service. He was commissioned a 2nd Lieutenant in the Buffs and served with the 6th Battalion in Northern France. He was involved in the Battle of Loos, fought between 25th

September and 13th October 1915. According to the Regimental History, on 13th October the 6th Battalion attacked towards Hulluch but, on going over the top, found the wire to be uncut. The enemy opened a withering fire from the front and both flanks as men tried to hack their way through with wire cutters. The attack was renewed again and again by ever-diminishing numbers, but to no avail. Of the three leading companies, very few returned. The battalion suffered four hundred casualties including thirteen officers, of whom ten died. Lambert was one of these. In the confusion which followed, Lambert’s body was not brought in and in consequence he has no known grave. His name can be found on the Loos Memorial to the Missing at Dud Corner Cemetery, along with those of 20,588 others. The cemetery is six kilometres north of Lens on the road to Béthune. Lambert left a wife and a son who was born two months after his death.

If you are ever at Twickenham, the RFU Museum runs continuously one of the earliest pieces of movie footage of a rugby game. For a brief one-and-a-half minutes, one can see the players walking out for the 1911 England–France (Lambert’s) match, plus a short piece of the game. Lambert can be seen talking animatedly to a colleague. Unfortunately the action sequences are none too clear.

Sceptics will no doubt be saying that rugby was a different game in Lambert’s era, that France was new to international competition, and that Lambert’s exploits do not bear comparison with those of other eras. All of which is undoubtedly true. Yet rugby in those early years did not suffer from the gross mismatches that characterise the modern-day international scene and which lead to scores of up to 100 points. The try was worth only three points and penalties were few and far between. Remember that in Lambert’s five-try match, France had held England to 13 points all, at half time; after the break, Lambert ran away with the match, leading to a full-time score of 41–13.

MICHAEL PARTRIDGE (B. ’46)

