

WORLD CUP DREAMS

My greatest achievement in rugby was getting back to play against France in one of the pre-World Cup friendlies in the summer of 2003. I say 'friendly': there's not much friendly about France in Marseille.

I'd been back two days, Clive was about to announce his 40-man squad and a piece appeared in the *Daily Mail*. The name on the piece rang no bells - I think it was Peter Jackson writing under a pseudonym. It harked back to the Lions tour of Australia and revealed that I still hadn't paid my fine. Well, that was true enough.

Clive phoned me from holiday in Portugal and had a massive go at me down the phone. 'I don't need this,' he shouted. 'I'm on holiday. I don't expect to be reading this about you the day before I'm due to name the squad. It's not about you, it's about the squad.'

Well, yes Clive. But don't look at me. I had no idea that this was about to appear in the newspaper - I've spent the last month in America, remember?

He raged on and slammed the phone down, saying, 'If you don't pay this fine, then you're not going to the World Cup.'

The call really deflated me. I'd left my young family and spent four weeks working like a lunatic over my summer break to give myself a chance, a small chance, of being able to run. I just didn't need this rubbish.

I'd been getting solicitors' letters from the Lions saying they were going to take me to court. I'd reply, saying, 'I know your fine wasn't lawful, you know it wasn't lawful, so if you want to take me to court, feel free.'

Apart from anything else, I'd been sent the letter of notification of my disciplinary hearing the day after the tour agreement ended so, strictly speaking, I hadn't even had to turn up for my bollocking, never mind write them a nice fat cheque. I wish I'd stuck to my guns and made them sue me. It would have cleared everything up - especially the fact that I had not actually written the article, or said the words, about which everyone was so upset. I even had a letter from Eddie Butler admitting that.

But the way Clive laid it on the line, I was left with little choice. I wish now I'd told him to shove it, because I think my selection chances probably ended there and then anyway. From that point, I always felt there was uncertainty about my selection and that continued even more when I got to our Rugby World Cup camp.

Anyway, I paid the fine and phoned him back to tell him that I'd done so. I got a terse text back saying, 'I heard. I don't need this sh*t. You will be playing against France in Marseille and that will be your last chance to prove your fitness.'

He wasn't being very endearing at the time, and I wanted to kill him. I needed someone to look after me - I was quite fragile.

When I turned up at the camp in early July, I still wasn't running and everyone else looked in good shape. It was so frustrating watching them and I had plenty of time to ponder what had gone on.

Why was Harry's pass a little bit low in the Munster game? Why had I made that call? If Harry had fizzed it into my hands, or I'd called something different, or just booted it off the pitch, everything would have been different. It's like *Sliding Doors* - your whole life can turn on one seemingly insignificant moment.

I was really getting down - so much so that I went and bought myself a new car, a BMW M3 convertible. I thought it might cheer me up. It didn't.

I was still training incredibly hard, mainly on a bike and a rower. We had a rowing competition at the end of each week - my team was Julian White, Danny Grewcock and me, and the challenge was to see how far we could row in 12 minutes between the three of us. It was a good team, those two guys are great trainers and very strong, and we won it every week, sometimes by quite a long way. That was good, because it helped me to feel more involved in the stuff we were doing. I spent hours every day in the swimming pool, trying to get the movement back in the knee and slowly, day by day, it improved. I would train when the team trained and then I would book in two extra rehab sessions a day on top, training five times a day in all. My strength was going through the roof - I was beating all of the forwards apart from Julian and Grewy on any upper body strength tests. I remember training with Lawrence and striving to beat anything that he could lift. I was bench pressing ridiculous amounts - 65kg dumbbells in each hand - so it wasn't all bad. I was

in serious shape, and I thought that would serve me well. Ultimately, it was between me and Gomers. Daws was in and so was Kyran Bracken, and I wanted to be named as the third scrum-half.

In the early days, Kyran and I had been quite good mates, though our relationship tailed off when I was selected for the Lions in 1997 and 2001 ahead of him. Me being me, I'd given him a bit of banter about it. Now the roles were reversed and he wasted no time in sticking the knife in and twisting it. There was an edge to his jibes, though: I'd always been jokey, he seemed to really enjoy upsetting me. I don't think I'll ever forgive him for that. Everyone else was being really good: Daws was helping me along, Johnno had time for me, lots of people were doing their best to help keep my spirits up, because they could see that it was difficult for me not being fully involved. But, deep down, I feared Bracken was right. Physically, I wasn't up to it. In the previous world cup in 1999, I'd won all our CV, strength, speed and fitness tests... absolutely everything. Now, I couldn't run. They were playing practice games and I wasn't. I spent eight weeks of training camp working by myself, which was like being in a dark room. The knee was swelling up like mad after every session and I had to summon up serious amounts of motivation.

I used to spend quite a lot of down time with Lewis. I've mentioned his weird fixation with testicles before. We spent hours playing his favourite game, Nadger Ball. We'd sit at opposite ends of room with an orange, or a melon, or any large, spherical fruit we could lay our hands on. You open your legs and put your hands on your head while the other lobs the fruit at your balls. That's how boring it was, but it entertained Lewis no end. He thought it was the best game he'd ever played in his life. He caught me on one occasion and but then I got him back with a perfectly floated orange, right into the nuts. For anyone who fancies playing it, there's one other rule: if you move or put your hands down to block the missile, the other guy gets to throw the next one overarm.

The first day I was able to run properly was the Monday before we played Wales, away in Cardiff. Clive put me on the bench and he told me I would get on. I didn't, and I watched Gomers have a fairly good game. He did his basics well, his passing, kicking and decision-making was good, which wasn't great for me. I managed to

drive home afterwards, stupid quick, to spend one day with Lou and Ellie Mae.

I headed down to London on the Monday for the meet-up ahead of the trip to Marseille. I was highly motivated, now, and desperate to play rugby again and I threw myself into team training. We had a non-contact practice game; Daws was putting the ball into the scrum and it was my job to pressure him at the base. Of all the stupid things for someone to do, Backy kicked me on the side of the knee, right where I'd done it.

I was very angry. I couldn't believe that a team-mate of mine would do that to me, knowing exactly what I'd been through and how hard I'd worked to get back. He could have ended it there and then, one bad shot on that knee and I was done for. I almost kicked off at him but just managed to rein myself in. Clive's watchword at the time was TCUP: Thinking Correctly Under Pressure. If I'd punched Backy it would have gone down as a black mark against me. After all, would I snap in the World Cup Final? Retaliate, and you could cost your team the three points that lost you the game. I was mad keen to make a good impression, motivated and controlled in training, constructive in meetings. I wasn't messing around at all and I couldn't throw all that away even for the satisfaction of smashing Backy.

I made it to the Marseille match, and Clive called me in for a pre-game chat.

'Just get through this game,' he said. 'Don't try and do anything extravagant, don't do anything that you don't have to do, just make your decisions, pass well and take control of each situation. All you have to do is be solid and steady and prove your fitness, and I'm 99.99% sure I'm taking you to the World Cup.'

Looking back, it was a strange thing for him to say. He'd never tried to control my play before - quite the reverse. 'I want you to play like Gunter Netzer,' he'd always said to me. I hadn't had the faintest idea who that was, but I looked him up on the internet and it turned out he was a famous soccer playmaker for Germany from about 20 years before I was born, someone who could do anything and pop up anywhere. I'd always felt proud, even elated, whenever Clive said that. Now he was telling me the reverse but I was so happy I didn't stop to analyse his words. I just nodded - when I should have ignored

him and gone on to play my normal game - and left the meeting floating on air. Fantastic. At last... I almost wanted to cry with joy: all that work and sacrifice had paid off. Thank God I'd not taken the insurance.

During the game, I proved my fitness to a good enough degree, and my passing was spot on, probably the best out of the three nines who'd played. I put Tinds through on the pass for the try and supported him well. On the downside, we had problems around the base of the scrum - for some reason, they played Corry at No6, when he's a better No8, and they played Alex Sanderson at No8 for the first time. Alex really struggled with the ball at his feet, which put me under more pressure - I couldn't keep Galthie, one of the world's best pressurising scrum-halves, off him. Still, while Daws was probably the best at handling pressure at No9, I wasn't far behind so I didn't think it was too much of a problem. I knew, too, that I wasn't 100%, though I was getting there. I remember a ball squirted out the side of a ruck, and it was between me and Galthie to dive on it. I hesitated for a second, I had to *think* about it rather than just diving on it, and he beat me to the ball. I also missed a cover tackle on Dominici which I'd normally have made: I missed him by three or four metres, I just didn't have the cruising speed. *Sliding Doors* again: had I been fit I would have got across and put him into touch, we'd have had a line-out and cleared it.

We lost, by a point and I was terribly disappointed; we hadn't been beaten in over a year and I hated being part of a losing team.

I didn't know it then, but that was my last England cap. My 51st.

I'd done a pretty good job and post-match I went up to Clive. 'Thanks for the chance to show I'm fit,' I said. He nodded and looked happy enough.

I had a quick drink with my dad, met some of the Leicester lads who'd moved out to France - Shorty and Perry Freshwater - and just chilled out for a bit. I was confident I'd be on the plane Down Under. I knew I wasn't completely fit, but I also knew I'd worked hard enough so I could run around and make it look like I was OK and that I'd get better in the coming weeks.

We returned to England and played France at home in the return friendly. I wasn't even in the squad for that, and neither was Daws. Kyran played, with Gomers on the bench. I thought they'd picked

me and Daws, and Clive just wanted to see who to take out of the other two - until Phil Larder came up to me during the training session before our midweek day off.

‘Whatever happens,’ he said. ‘Keep your chin up. You’ve had a bad injury, but keep your chin up.’

It’s obvious, in retrospect, that he was giving me the nod and telling me I wasn’t going, but I didn’t see it. Unlike me, that. I sussed it on the drive home for the day at home, like a depressing light bulb appearing over my head. For some reason, I didn’t bother trying to speak to Clive.

I think now of all the things I could have said.

‘Look, Clive... the semis are two months away. I’ll be so much fitter by then and you know for a fact that if we are two points down and you can choose me or Gomers to send on off the bench to change things and try something different you’re more likely to get that from me.’

Maybe I might have changed things. But I didn’t. I went home, watched us batter the French, and waited.

Clive had said in a meeting before everyone left that he would text you if you were in the squad and phone you if you weren’t. There were 40 of us in with a chance, and ten had to be chopped.

I sat there on that Saturday night, hoping for a text, dreading a call. Everything I’d planned for, and worked for, in the two years leading up to this had gone wrong. I kept thinking, *‘Why couldn’t I have had this preparation in 1999, when we didn’t have much of a chance, and had 1999’s preparation for this World Cup?’* In ‘99, I’d been one of our best players, certainly one of the best-prepared. More Sliding Doors and what ifs were going through my mind. I veered from the knowledge that I was out to moments of hope. Clive had usually been a man of his word with me, he’d been relatively straight. But then the old, ‘I’m 99.9% sure I’m taking you’... that 0.1% suddenly looked like a very large doorway, with the World Cup bus heading through it at speed.

The phone didn’t go, the night went really slowly and I struggled to get to sleep. I’d waited four years, since we’d been beaten by Jannie de Beer’s boot, and I really, really wanted this.

I’d had two serious injuries in the year when I didn’t need them. Things had been going pretty well up to that point. There was all the

other stuff off the field with Lou and Ellie Mae, but I was raring and ready to go. I was desperate.

I finally fell asleep and woke up on the Sunday morning, the 7th of September with my phone ringing next to the bed. I leapt for it.

It was Johnno.

‘Has Clive phoned you?’ he said.

Something in his voice told me I hadn’t been picked.

‘No, why?’ I said. ‘What’s the score?’

‘You’re not going.’

I felt myself fall through the floor.

‘Did he say why?’

‘He just said he wants specialists in the 9 position.’

‘Alright mate, thanks for ringing me.’

I put the phone down and told Lou the bad news. On the strength of what Clive had said earlier, Lou’s mum had taken three months’ leave from her job so she could help with Ellie Mae and Daisy, when she was born, while I was away. It was even worse for Graham Rowntree when he was left out; he’d been told he was going, too, and had already booked his family flights to Australia. Poor old Wig lost about £5,000, which he couldn’t get back, and I felt even worse for him. That would have been another knife in the side, the icing on a really nasty cake.

When I’m depressed about something, I end up sleeping and I’d gone back to bed after speaking to Johnno and telling Lou.

Half an hour later, my phone went again. It was Clive. I think he expected me to argue with him, maybe have a Gazza moment, but I didn’t. Apart from anything else, I was clinging to my last hope - that someone would get injured and I’d be called up. You *cannot* go through a tournament like that without injuries. (Unfortunately England did, apart from Grewy’s busted toe, and even I’m not that versatile.) Maybe it sounds selfish, and I’m sorry, but it’s true, I’m human: I’d have *loved* it if someone else had dropped out and given me a chance, and anyone who says they’d feel differently is a liar.

I asked for a reason and Clive didn’t really give me one. He just said he thought it was the best way to go. One day I’ll get the truth out of him, probably when he’s in a head lock and squealing for mercy.

So I just accepted it, and wished him good luck. 'I'm really disappointed,' I said, 'because I know we're going to win it.'

I know I would say this, wouldn't I, but it was a bizarre decision. Yes, I wasn't totally fit, but I could cover wing, scrum-half, fly-half and even full-back if pushed, and Andy Gomersall was just a scrum-half. And, no disrespect, even in that position, even at 80%, I think I was the better player. Daws phoned Clive after the squad was named and asked why I'd not been picked and Clive gave him the same thing about wanting specialists. Well, I had more caps at scrum half than Andy, so that didn't make sense either. I couldn't fathom it out and I still can't.

One thing I do know is there were members of that coaching staff who didn't want me there. Phil and Dave I'm not sure about, Andy Robinson I absolutely am. If I knew who didn't like me, I soon found out who my friends were. They were the people who rang me and Wig and sympathised. People like Shaggy, Lol, Daws and Jase Leonard... the players I'd been through the wars with in the last four or five years.

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Clive's call was the start of my serious drinking. I'd said to myself beforehand that if I didn't get selected I would just get on with it - I knew I'd never be the same again, but I'd try and bounce back and continue to get fitter so that I could make my comeback with Leicester.

Unfortunately, it didn't work out like that. I put the phone down, went to the local pub and had a few. It's one of my traits, going out and getting blotto if I'm feeling low. At least I managed to break myself out of it that day and not go totally mental. Lou was pregnant and, to a large extent, that's what stopped me. I had three or four and then came home because she was due to give birth any day.

I went back to training at the club, and asked Deano to let me play against Irish. Because I'd been with England I'd missed our pre-season, but he agreed to put me on the bench, which I was grateful for.

I trained on the Monday and Tuesday in a bit of a blur and then on the Wednesday - 10th September, I remember it clearly - I kind

of woke up and reality hit me. Some of the papers were saying that it was a massive mistake not to take me, because I'd always performed in the big games. Others said I'd been a liability in Australia with the Lions. The conflicting views started to mess with my head and I began dwelling on it all.

I wanted to believe I'd been left at home because of the knee, and because I'd been slightly below my own standards in the France game. But were some of these stories right? Was the knee just an excuse? Was it that, or was it all the stupid rubbish I'd been saying off the pitch all these years? I'd always walked a tight line, trying to be truthful and honest and sometimes ending up saying unfortunate things because they'd just come into my head. Some of the other players like to suck up to the management, but I couldn't do that. I've always preferred to take the mickey out of someone and then give them a cheeky smile and hope that they take it on the chin as a bit of a laugh. I didn't generally mind copping it back, after all.

Had the coaches finally washed their hands of me? I could imagine them in the selection meeting: 'Look... why should we take the chance with him? You know what he's like.'

'Have I not been picked because of my big mouth?' I'd ask myself. *'Have I been judged on all the off-the-pitch stuff? Has my personality put paid to my international career?'*

If that was the case, I only had myself to blame and I couldn't help but beat myself up over it. These were very dark days, when I tortured myself and reflected over all the things I'd said and done. I wondered whether, if I had my time all over again, I'd have been the same gobby, cocky joker? I wasn't sure. I don't think I'd have been the same person if I hadn't, that's for sure.

At training, my knee was like a balloon. Leon pulled me to one side and said, 'Why are you here?' We did one speed session and I was running as fast as I could but I couldn't get near anyone because the joint was completely surrounded with fluid. But I felt I *had* to train - I had to play and get back on that treadmill.

I came home from training on the Wednesday and Lou and I were watching *The Games* - that celebrity game show on the TV - and she started to get a load of contractions. She'd been having a lot of Braxton Hicks - false contractions - so I was pretty blasé. 'We'll just finish watching this,' I said, 'and if you've still got them then we'll go to hospital.'

The contractions started to get closer together, and stronger, and we realised this was the real thing. We jumped in the car and set off for the hospital, a fair drive away. By now they were getting really close and I started to think she was going to have the baby in the car so I hammered it all the way, not even stopping at red lights and cutting a half-hour journey in half. Lou was in a lot of pain by now, and we went straight into the delivery suite. It was too late for her to have an epidural, so she had to go through the whole thing with just gas and air.

She was amazing: she'd shown such strength and character all through a horrible year, never thinking about herself, just about me, and I realised how much I loved her when I saw her going through labour, without proper pain relief, to give us another child.

It made me step back, realise that rugby is only a game. I'd been exceptionally privileged with my sporting career and the World Cup was a blow, but not being selected was as nothing compared with seeing my second healthy baby daughter born.

It gave me a boost that I really needed.

I was keen to name her Louise after her mum, but Lou insisted on Daisy. I sent a badly punctuated round robin text out, saying 'We've had a baby girl Daisy Lou was amazing', and everyone thought the baby's name was Daisy Lou. We started to get cards to 'Daisy Lou', which I liked, and I managed to get 'Daisy Lou Healey' on her birth certificate. I think Lou was quite keen to get it taken off. Sorry, love.

I sent a text, too, to everyone in the England squad, and to Clive, saying we'd had a baby. It was meant more as a statement of fact, just to let the boys know, and to show things were going well and there were no hard feelings. When anyone in the squad had a baby, he'd be given champagne and everyone would clap and cheer. Clive texted me back and said, 'The champagne is on its way.' He was good at that, Clive; he was good at making you feel special.

We're still waiting for that champagne, though.

Not receiving it made me realise that I wasn't in the squad anymore, and I wasn't an England International any more. I was finished. That was it. More than anything, it was a lonely feeling. England had been part of my life for so long, and I suddenly felt very

distant from it, and from the lads, and that was such a hard thing to take. Playing for England had been a massive goal in my life and a massive brick wall had been erected between me and that goal. All the years of focus, of tunnel vision - like when I'd been on the stepper in the States - and it all just seemed to have slipped through my fingers like a handful of dust.

Later that day, I drove Lou's mum and Ellie Mae over to see them both. I'll remember the moment Ellie Mae saw her sister for the rest of my life. She's a bit of a tomboy, a bit gung-ho and she likes to throw herself into things, but she was unbelievably gentle; she held Daisy and gave her a little kiss on the forehead. That brought tears to a few eyes.

Lou stayed in hospital overnight, but came out with our new daughter the next day and it was great to have them home, and great to be a family of four in the house.

Deano said I didn't have to train until the Saturday, which was good of him. He knew when to tell me off, and he knew when to help me and this was one of those times.

I spent the next few days helping Lou and working on the knee. I was still swelling up a lot, and I was using a machine that sends electrical impulses through your legs and helps pump out the fluid from your joints. I'd also had an ice maker installed in the house so I could have regular ice baths and I bought a compression unit which packed my leg really tightly in ice to further assist the dispersal of the fluid. Without those three things, I wouldn't have been playing. I was self medicating, doing the things that would have been done for me at England.

I was also boozing: despite the lift that Daisy's birth had given me, I'd been getting fairly smashed on a daily basis to deal with it all.

I came off the bench against London Irish - it was something like 19-19, and a close game. I got an incredible reception. I'd never had an ovation like it, even after coming back from Heineken Cups: the sound was unbelievable, a roar of noise that sent the hairs up on the back of my neck and choked me up a bit. I felt like I was home, among friends, and it gave me a massive lift. I'd like to thank everyone who was there that day, actually. You gave me a huge boost.

I owed the club some good performances because Dean, especially, had been good to me during my injury woes and supportive when I wasn't selected for England.

With my first touch, we scored a try, Ollie Smith, right in the corner. I just felt, 'Let's go, I'm back!' Without wanting to sound arrogant, I always felt as though the team got a bit of a lift whenever I came on. I know that does sound arrogant, but others have said it, too. We scored another try not long afterwards, through Henry Tuilagi, one of the most powerful men I've ever seen in my life, and that was that.

The England squad hadn't left yet and I was getting phone calls from people like Cozza and Johnno. A lot of the calls were filling me in on Kyran Bracken's situation. Kyran was in pretty bad shape, they said, with his long-standing back injury having flared up. He was keeping it secret from the management but, obviously, it might get to the point where it became obvious. 'Keep your chin up, you never know,' was the message. As things happened, I wish they'd not told me because it gave me false hope: Kyran was able to play, albeit with a number of injections in his back and mouthfuls of pain killers, and he went on to put in the best scrum-half performance of the tournament for England when he stood in for Daws against South Africa in the group stages.

They flew off Down Under, with KB and without me, and we carried on at Leicester. We embarked on our worst run of games of all time, losing five on the trot to Sale, Gloucester, Leeds, Northants and then Bath away. We weren't playing that well, half our pack was missing and there were a lot of young guys in the team. Morale was low, and it was lowest for me in the match against Gloucester. I'd been having a bit of a problem with my back - if it's not one thing, it's another - and I felt my calf go as I hit a tackle bag in the warm-up. It hurt like hell - I couldn't stand on it and thought I'd torn the muscle, or pulled it badly at best. I withdrew from the game, with a number of people, Wellsy in particular, thinking I was faking it. I couldn't believe they would accuse me of that.

And how bad is this? I was at home that night, feeling sorry for myself, when the phone went. It was Clive, phoning from Oz.

'Austin?' he said. 'Daws is injured and Bracken's back's bad. I need someone to come out as cover. Can you fly out?'

I could have cried. I almost had to force myself to get the words out, to be honest with him. 'I can, Clive,' I said. 'But the truth is I've pulled my calf today.'

'OK, mate,' he said. 'Keep me posted.'

His next called was to Martin Wood, and he flew out instead. Mind you, he was sent home four days later after Kyran miraculously recovered. It's amazing what you can do if you get enough painkillers inside you for a fitness test.

At the time, I thought this had to be the lowest point of all. An injury to someone, and the call to go out as a replacement, had been my fall-back; now that had gone, too.

I went in the next day to see the Leicester physios to get my calf looked at. They said it was a pull, but that now felt wrong to me: I was able to stand on my toes, which you shouldn't be able to do if your calf has gone. It was just tightening up straight away if I ran. Fortunately, I took a second opinion from a guy called Mark Buckingham. He invited me down to see him - I arrived at the same time as Paula Radcliffe, so I knew straight away I was in good hands. He took a look at me, poked me around a bit and said my calf was fine. In fact, I had sciatica, which was related to my recent back twinges. He gave me the most painful bum massage I've ever had in my life and sent me on my way, almost fully fixed. Amazing. So amazing that some at the club now thought I *must* have been faking the injury; they couldn't understand how I'd recovered so quickly.

I'd really upped the drinking at this point, hitting the booze much more heavily since Clive's call. I'd come home from training and open a bottle of wine, neck that, and then open another and neck that, too. My excuse to Lou was that I was trying to keep my back relaxed so that it didn't tighten up again. What a load of tosh that was.

I sat out the Leeds game in the stands but played against Northampton, our fourth defeat on the trot. Deano had us all in at 9am the next day for a clear-the-air meeting.

Essentially, the thrust of it was, *Let's buck our ideas up... now I want you all to go out and get drunk.*

Steve Booth always knew somewhere that was open 24/7 so he made a couple of calls and we found ourselves in a bar watching England vs Samoa, and getting the beers in. At 9.30am on a Sunday. Well, it was my 30th birthday.

Our Samoans were there - Freddie and Henry - and all the boys, and we were all cheering for Samoa. That was amazing to see. I was drunk and had my own selfish reasons why I wanted Samoa to do well - if someone played really badly, or got hurt, maybe Clive would ring again - but I still felt guilty and, deep down, I wanted England to win. Wig was in a similar boat, but there was no reason why the rest of the English boys should have been cheering the islanders: after all, a lot of our mates were out there wearing white. I couldn't fathom it: only Will Johnson was cheering for England.

I got absolutely smashed. We finished at the bar after the game and I suggested that we go to my local, purely so that I could walk home which was fairly selfish, too. We got taxis over there and started drinking again. The worst of it was that my family and some friends had driven all the way down to see me. I nipped home at one o'clock and said hello; my mum and dad and people were all trying to give me my birthday presents, but I was absolutely blotto and could hardly see straight. I mumbled some thanks and then said I was going back out.

'But we're having your birthday lunch,' said my mum.

'I'll be there in a bit,' I said, and left, walking back to the pub and carrying on drowning my sorrows with Freddie Tuilagi, George Chuter and my mate Ade.

In the end, they ate without me. I kept popping back for five minutes here and there but the lure of the pub was too strong. I feel pretty guilty, and embarrassed, about that now, though I think they knew what I was going through so no-one said anything. The Healey family are very up-front and will tell someone to their face if they're really out of order.

I carried on through the evening, going out for a night in Loughborough with Ade and getting back at goodness knows what time in the morning.

The following day, I got up, went out and started drinking again, which had never been like me really. I'd never been a massive drinker - I could put it away when I was with a group, and in the mood, but it never had a hold on me. But now I was in a mess, and I was on the verge of becoming an alcoholic.

Fortunately, I realised in time that it wasn't the right thing to do. I was jeopardising my job, and possibly my family, and I needed to

stop being such a soft arse. It was an easy way out and I've always seemed to take the easy way out and make excuses when times are hard; it was time for me to front up and just take it on the chin.

We played Bath - and lost again - at the beginning of November, and I watched the England game against Wales and did some commentary on it for ITV. I'd seen Balsh get stretchered off and there'd been lots of chat in the studio about how I'd be going out to replace him. I felt sorry for Balsh; he's a good lad, it was his first World Cup and he's never had a lot of luck. Things were going well for him at this point, too. But at the same time I was still desperate for the call. Even if I'd been there for one game, and been involved in it, I would have felt like I was part of it and I wouldn't have felt like an outsider.

I thought there was a fair chance I'd get a call, but it never came and I assumed Balsh was fine, or Clive was happy with the cover he had, or he'd phoned someone else and I'd read about it in the newspapers. Lou's mum was starting work again, and I'd said I'd drive her back home to Leeds with Lou and the girls.

We'd just got past Sheffield when my phone went.

It was Clive. 'I want you out here on stand-by,' he said. 'You've got to be at Heathrow for 6pm to get the 8pm plane.' It was then 4pm.

There started probably the worst journey of my entire life.

I turned the car around at the next M1 exit, drove back to Leicester like a maniac, changed cars, picked up my gumshield and one pair of boots which was all I could find and was back on the motorway south by 5pm. The road was chocker and I must have put the fear of God into a lot of innocent motorists. All the time, my mobile was going with people saying, *I told you so, I told you you'd end up going, good luck, make sure you get involved, it was meant to be*, and all that sort of chat.

I got to Heathrow just in time. A girl from the RFU met me and gave me some kit, which was obviously meant for someone else because it was XXL and the shoes were size 10 - I've still got those in a box, if anyone wants them, those horrible brown designer ones they wore for the tournament.

Because I was the last person to check on to the plane, they'd downgraded me from business to economy.

‘Can you please get me back up to business?’ I said. ‘Only, I’m flying out to the World Cup to try and play for England, and if I have to sit in a little seat for 12,000 miles by the time I get there my knee will be so swollen I’ll have no chance of playing whatsoever, even if I spend the next four days draining it.’

There was lots of shaking of heads, and pursed lips, and sharp intakes of breath, but just as I was about to get on the plane they did get me re-upgraded. In some ways I wished they hadn’t, because they sat me next to some Australian who just talked about Australia all the way there while I pretended to sleep for 24 hours.

I landed in Sydney at 6.30am: really boisterous, feeling on a physical high and hoping against hope that this was it. I’d not drunk on the way over and I was raring to go. Clive came and met me and as we walked out past a load of photographers I felt part of the squad again, fleetingly. It didn’t last all that long.

‘You can’t stay at the team hotel,’ said Clive. ‘It’s Rugby World Cup rules... you have to go to another hotel till we officially call you up.’

Fair enough. I arrived at my hotel and Dave Reddin was there five minutes later. He took me for a fitness test, a load of nice, heavy weights at 7.30am after a day-long flight halfway round the world, which was pretty unnecessary. I passed and Clive asked me to meet him outside the team hotel - I wasn’t even allowed inside.

‘You’re free for the rest of the day,’ he said. ‘We’re holding fitness tests tomorrow on Lewsey and Balshaw; if they fail, you’re on the bench against France.’

In the World Cup semi-final, that was, in case you’ve forgotten.

‘Of course, if they pass, you’re on a flight back to the UK at 5pm.’

Just over 24 hours after I’d arrived.

A few of the lads said they were going to play golf, and asked if I wanted to go. I was jet-lagged, so I needed to stay awake to try and acclimatise as quickly as possible. A few holes sounded like a good idea, and I went out and thrashed about a bit with Mark Regan and one or two others. I fell asleep in the buggy a couple of times but managed to get through. That evening, I went for a pizza with Daws and Shaggy, and then Tinds and Cozza joined us and we had a beer with Zara Phillips and some of her friends at a local bar. If I closed

my eyes, I could half feel I was really there, as of right - I could almost fool myself that I was part of the squad. I could also fall asleep again. By 8.30pm I was snoring into a bottle of Corona.

The following day I got up early. I knew the fitness test was at 9.30am and, like a sad little school kid, I walked around just talking to myself, hoping one of the guys failed. I actually hoped that it was Josh because I felt like he'd replaced me in the squad after my injury all those months before. I mooched around Manly for an hour, just looking at the sea, buying a smoothie and a doughnut, and waiting, killing time.

At the appointed hour, I snuck over to where the tests were being held and watched them, through the fence from miles away, so no-one could see me. I wasn't hopeful. You pretty much have to have a broken leg to fail a test if you can take enough painkillers in the morning to get rid of the niggle and, with a place in the 22 for the World Cup semi at stake, Josh and Balsh would be pretty motivated to pass.

I saw them strip off their tracksuits, stretch a bit and then start running.

And they were running fine. It was clear to me watching that they'd both passed.

I walked away, at rock bottom, knowing my final chance had gone. I'd flown all the way over there and I'd just seen it vanish before my eyes.

It was incredibly cruel.

Then my phone went. It was Clive. 'I need to meet you,' he said. 'What happened?' I asked.

He paused. 'Look,' he said. 'I'll come and see you.'

Five minutes later we met up.

'It's like this,' he said. 'They both passed. I've spoken to Deano and he wants you back in England by Thursday. You've got a Tetley's Cup match against Sale. Personally, I'd like you to stay out here. Someone could get injured in the semi and you could end up playing in the final. But you wouldn't be allowed to be part of the squad.'

I hated hearing those words: *you wouldn't be allowed to be part of the squad.*

'Thanks Clive,' I said. 'It just wasn't meant to be. I need to get home and play for Leicester. That's what Deano wants.'

I remember him saying goodbye but most of the rest of it is lost now. I got in a taxi at about 1pm and was on the flight back that night. The plane was empty, because everyone else was flying the other way, and I got upgraded to seat 1A; that was about the only decent thing that happened to me in those 48 hours.

I felt for a while that things changed in that plane. I thought I'd experienced 'closure'. Deep down, I knew that was the end of it. My last hope was extinguished, and I wasn't going back. In my head, finally, I wished the lads well.

I turned into a fan again. I was on the outside. I sat there at 35,000 feet feeling low as hell; but at least that was the end of the bad part. Now I could move on.

Except I couldn't.

I arrived back home on the Thursday night, and turned up at the club to be told I was playing full-back against Sale, a position I hadn't played in for Leicester before. I hadn't had much sleep, I had jetlag and it wasn't my best game. Or ours. We were rubbish, and I went absolutely mental in the changing room at half time, throwing things and screaming at the guys, trying to start a fight to gee them up.

'Why can't we put in a decent performance?' I shouted. 'Haven't any of you f***ers got any heart? If we lose this now, you shouldn't play for the club ever again.'

It was real anger and I was on the verge of tears. I saw Deano's face as we walked back out; he had a wry, almost wistful, smile on his face. At full time we were drawing, and in the last minute of extra time I stopped somebody on the line, they recycled the ball and scored in the other corner. We'd lost, and there was a terrible feeling of lowness. I felt awful for Deano. There was a lot of talk in the papers about him not producing the goods, but what did they expect? Half our squad was away in Australia. There was only really me, Josh Kronfeld, Leon and Wig of any age and most of the rest were youngsters. Good youngsters, yes, but you can't win hard games without experience, and coaching can't give you that.

I went out, had one beer with the lads and fell asleep in the bar before jacking. I got a taxi home and slept for two days, non-stop - a mixture of depression and straightforward tiredness, I think.

I watched the France semi-final, a great performance by the boys, especially Jonny and Johnno, and I was cheering like a nutter.

I was pleased, and really happy for them, and for England, and it was clear at the end of the game that they were going all the way. The Aussies had gone on a lap of honour around the pitch after their win over the All Blacks but the lads had noticeably avoided that. There was no celebrating, just a few nods and handshakes. They were in the final but they weren't happy with that, they wanted to win. The mental strength showed through, together with all the work they'd done. You could see all the pieces of the jigsaw fitting together, which made it even harder. Once, I'd been one of those pieces.

We had Rotherham away on the day of the final: not the most glamorous of fixtures by comparison. We were due to kick off at 4pm and the club delayed the bus departure time so we could watch the whole final in the morning. It was still going to be tight, so I packed my kit the night before - something I never did - and flicked through the papers in the morning. All were carrying variations on a theme: *This was going to be England's greatest day*. I had to stop reading them, though I had no doubt that they were right. I didn't think Australia had a hope of winning. Not a hope.

I watched the game in bed. A wry grin crossed my face when Lote Tuqiri out-jumped Jason Robinson for the first try. It had always been one of Phil Larder's reservations about me playing on the wing, that I wasn't big enough to cope with the high ball. Jase is a couple of inches smaller than me. I'm not knocking Jason, by the way: he's one of the greatest players the world has ever seen and I'm sure Tuqiri would have beaten me to the ball, too.

That's one of the few memories I have of watching the final. I remember Jonny's kick and the celebrations when we won but most of it is gone, locked somewhere in my memory. I can't actually describe how I felt. I had tears in my eyes, I know that. Some of them were from seeing my mates win the damn thing. People like Johnno, Benny Kaye, Daws... guys I'd been through a lot with over the years. Seeing Will Greenwood so happy and jumping around - Shaggy had had an awful year, with the loss of his baby son Freddie - brought tears of happiness. At the same time there were tears of jealousy, hatred towards the injury I'd suffered and resentment of the people who I didn't think deserved to be there as much as I or Graham Rowntree did. Even my own team-mates, like Dorian West. Nobby was a great player, but he'd come into it late, almost by

default. I don't resent him now, I just did at the time. I just needed someone to hate, I think.

Even worse, Lou and my girls weren't there to be with me. They'd gone to Lou's parents for the weekend to get away so I left a quiet, cold, lonely house behind me as I drove to meet everyone to catch our bus. We had a lot of foreign players in the team at the time, and they were more supportive than a lot of the English guys. People were clapping me on the back and saying, 'I can't believe they won. Hard luck.'

Wig was sat at the back of the bus, just looking out of the window and shaking his head; he was clearly in a bad way as well.

I actually can't remember much of the drive up or the match. I felt like I was concussed, and I wrestled with weird feelings - a bizarre combination of pride and jealousy.

I scored two tries in the game and the ref denied me a third, even though it was a definite try and he was looking straight at me when I was lying on top of the ball over the line. He didn't give it and I swore at him, bitterly, though I don't know what I said. We won but the game was a blur.

I came off the pitch and saw my mum and dad there. They clearly felt as upset for me as I felt for them: they would have loved have been in Sydney instead, celebrating having watched me play for England in a World Cup Final, every bit as much as I'd wanted to be there. I could see that it was difficult for them, and I did pull myself together a bit. '*Stop thinking about yourself so much,*' I thought. '*There are people on your side, helping you, like they always have. Stop being such a soft b*****, and get on with it.*'

For a few moments, a jumble of memories raced through my head, memories of the support I'd had from my family through my whole career, from the day when my dad bump-started the car down Shamrock Road to get me to Rhyl to play for the under-9s when we were late one day, to the time when he ran with me to the ground because it wouldn't start at all.

I went back to Leicester and, instead of going out drinking with the lads, I stayed in.

Then the messages started to come, players texting and phoning me. A few of them taking the mickey: 'Where's your World Cup winner's medal?' is one I vividly recall.

My real friends were different. I took a lot of calls from Australia saying, *This was for you and Wig, Oz, we're thinking of you both.*

Clive said afterwards that there were two players he hadn't taken who were as much a part of the squad as those he did, and they were me and Graham. That meant a lot. But I can't swap that for the reality of having been on that pitch.

I can never swap that for being stood next to Clive and Johnno and the boys on that podium, chucking water over everyone and slapping them on the back.

I'll never have that, because I wasn't there, and for a long time that hurt me more than I thought possible.