

LLANDOVERY RFC ALL STARS XV 1996-2025



*All Stars Captain
Chris Davies*

HUW S THOMAS'S TEAM OF THE LAST 30 YEARS 1996 – 2025

I can unashamedly claim that over the last 30 years I have seen the Drovers in action more than any other journalist – dead or alive!

But, when challenged to select the top 15 players to have put on the Llandovery shirt 1996-2025, I do so with trepidation, knowing that such a task has untold pitfalls.

Many supporters will take issue with my choices and their opinions and views are respected and it is testimony to the continually improving quality of rugby at Church Bank, that there is the crucial difficulty of comparing the worth of players over a long period of 30 years.

That said, I claim no superiority whatsoever over the views and opinions of both Llandovery men and women who have seen the Drovers in action, home and away over the last 30 years.

It is at away games that the true worth of a player's character and class comes through.

It was on a wet, cold Wednesday evening at Ebbw Vale,

Pontypool or Aberavon, in the face of a pumped up home side, hostile crowd and easily swayed officials that a man's value to the team can be gauged.

From Phil Davies, Handel Davies, Carwyn Williams and John Davies to Tony Williams, Derek Jones, Nigel Clarke and Dai Thomas, from Margaret Davies and Helen Thomas to Sandra Clarke, Menna Davies and Helen Williams, through to Justin's travelling storm troopers, and - apologies to anyone forgotten - these were the ever loyal supporters who consistently travelled to brave wind, rain, sleet and snow to shout on the Drovers at venues all over Wales and beyond.

Former committee men, coaches, captains, players and supporters will, too, have their own say on a select XV and their views and votes will make interesting reading.

When I retired from being a College master in 1996, and went into full time rugby journalism, I had already reported, albeit intermittently, on Llandovery games, home and away.

In a report of a 1993 game at Dunvant, I tentatively coined the nickname Drovers in Wales on Sunday and the Western Mail - and now 32 years later, the Drovers is a name used far and wide in reference to Llandovery rugby.

In choosing my team of all stars, I have restricted it to those players who have played at least 30 games for the club - an arbitrary figure, I agree - but one important to distinguish between those who were little more than "guests", rather than "residents"

There are, of course, some great players to have worn the Llandovery shirt - perhaps the greatest a certain Tadhg Beirne, the British Lion - but he does not make my team as two appearances for the Drovers does not - in my mind anyway - make him one of those players who had a huge influence on the fortunes of the club.

Similarly with other Lions in George North (four appearances) and Andy Powell (21 appearances) who were never long enough at Church Bank to make any difference to the cause.

Rhodri Gomer Davies and Macs Page would have been others to be considered but they came below the 30 appearances criterion.

Many Welsh internationals have turned out randomly for the club 1996-2025 - Barry Davies, Dan Evans,



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Garan Evans, Vernon Cooper, Josh Turnbull, Lou Reed, Rhodri Jones, Richie Pugh, Ben Broster, Nathan Thomas, Dom Day to name just a few.

Scottish international lock Scott Macleod and All Black lock Simon Malling played once but their influence pales into total insignificance in comparing them to the contribution of some of the outstanding second rows that have graced the Church Bank pitch.

Jamie Cudmore, John Westgarth, Lyndon Bateman, Bryn Griffiths and Jack Jones are just five whose commitment, power and rugby intelligence played a huge part in the success of the club in their time at the club.

Former Wales fly half Arwel Thomas even played once as did Scotland scrum half Sam Hildago- Clyne but how can I dare leave out of the side Lee Rees - surely the greatest scrum half servant of the club in its entire history?



Lee Rees

I rate him more highly than Rhodri Williams who played 44 times for Llandoverly before gaining his Welsh cap and the talented Rhodri Davies, now at Carmarthen Quins.

Quick, nimble, alert and brave, he was the first name to be penned into the team of greats to have donned the Llandoverly shirt over the last 30 years.

With Rees in the side, supporters expected victory. Without him, they feared defeat – such was the expectation on his broad shoulders.

What an honour it would be for the little man to end his career in a Barbarian shirt to follow in the footsteps of the likes of Aled, Barry and Dorian Williams, Cerith Rees and Andrew Jones.

The words that kept coming back to me as I trawled through the list of players who have played for the club was influence and impact

The players to have achieved the greater honours in the game did not necessarily have the greatest influence or impact on the club's success.

Cudmore, Bateman and Westgarth were brilliant locks but did they have the same impact on the team as Bryn Griffiths and Jack Jones?

Griffiths and then Jones – grandson of the late Wales lock Brian Thomas - brought a consistent ruggedness, combativity and muscular presence into a pack that needed to be more aggressive, one that would not be bullied on a soaking wet night down in muddy Ebbw Vale.

As individuals, they may not have reached the heights of Cudmore, Westgarth and Bateman but as pack leaders, influencers and men to follow in the trenches of war, they were special to the club at key moments.

Would Llandoverly have swept the board in their 2023-024 annus mirabilis without the presence of their inspirational captain Jack Jones?



Jack Jones

This is why Bryn Griffiths and Jack Jones get me vote as locks.

No one will agree with my select team as a whole, but there should be little argument, for example, that the finest props would be Wyn Jones and Andrew "Cantona" Jones.

Here we have a Lions prop and a club legend and Barbarian in "Cantona, both of whom came through the club youth and Junior Drovers pathway.

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Andrew Jones

They serve as a beacon of the wonderful work started off by Dai and Helen Thomas whose inspiration to start off a Junior Drovers section has been of such huge and everlasting benefit to the club.

Wyn stands out as the best example ever of the value of the semi-pro game to the development of talent in Wales.

Years of fighting tight head props, hardened campaigners who were not terribly mobile but who had the strength of Samson, prepared Wyn for a wonderful Wales and Lions career.

Andrew Jones has a place – second to none – in the history of the club.

He played 577 games from 1992 to 2015 as arguably the best scrummaging prop ever to play for Llandoverly in a long one club man career that was rewarded with selection for the Barbarians in 2014.

Wyn Jones added his own tribute when he credited much of his development to the advice, guidance and counsel of the mentoring Cantona.

I had no hesitation in pencilling in Adam Warren at centre. His awareness of time and space, his knack of popping up at the right place at the right time, his balanced running and wonderful ability to put people into gaps that only he could visualise mark him out as special.



Adam Warren

Warren 's influence on back play – offensive and defensive – has been spectacular whilst Rees has been, without parallel, the most exciting scrum half in the history of the semi professional game in Wales.

With Lee Rees at scrum half, it left nine positions still to be filled

After sleepless hours of weighing up who might make the All Stars XV, I offer the following line up.

No one will – I am sure – agree with all my picks but it will ensure many hours of debate, discussion and good natured argument amongst all those who have lovingly and faithfully watched the club over many years.

DROVERS XV

The continued brilliance of Jac Davies's running over the last two years and in particular the Cup semi-final win over Ebbw Vale in 2024 swung the decision as to whom to select as full back, ahead of the long striding Emyr Lewis (son of Allan Lewis) and the dodging, darting Will Thomas.

There were many good wings to consider in Ifan Evans, Tomi Lewis, Harri Doel, Tal Selley and Aaron Warren but the vote went to the exciting Nigerian Joe Ajuwa and Bulth product Mark Jones.

Ajuwa lit up the game – home and away – scoring some scintillating solo tries, and one memorable effort at Ebbw Vale, whilst Mark Jones scored a record 26 tries in a



Rhodri Jones

season 1998-1999 with some of the deadliest try-scoring finishes in Church Bank history.

Jones went on to play 47 times for Wales in an illustrious career and is now Head Coach at the Ospreys.

To partner Adam Warren in the centre the choice was between the long striding, galloping powerhouse that was Tracy Lewis and the indestructible Rhodri Jones.

Former Llandovery coach Geri Davies thought the world of Lewis but the continuous high level of performance of Jones - running , passing, tackling in the midfield over 13 years service to the club - swung my vote his way.

The fly half position gave me the biggest headache of all - how to favour one talent over another?

Aled Williams and Cerith Rees played significant parts in Llandovery success and there is no doubt that, in his prime, the little pocket dynamo that was Williams was the most talented fly half ever to play for the club.

But Williams and Cerith Rees were only at Church Bank in the autumn of their careers after fine showings in the top flight of the game.

Neil Clapham was at times a scintillating loose play runner and so exciting to watch whilst Ioan Hughes, the current first choice, has done nothing but improve since his arrival from Llanelli.

He is a vital cog in the present Llandovery machine – see his vital contribution to the win over Newport on September 12 and then the touchline conversion to win the game against RGC on October 4th.

He narrowly – very narrowly – gets the vote over Jack Maynard. What swung it in Hughes's favour was the quality of his touch finding, a quality that was of high international class.



Ioan Hughes



Taylor Davies

How many tries were a result of some remarkable touch finders deep into the opposition 22, from where the line out rolling maul ended with Taylor Davies or another forward crashing over?

The quality of Maynard's goal-kicking in the tighter games was a major factor in swinging many a result the Drovers way - without it, many a game might have slipped away in disappointing defeat.

A canny play maker, good handler and distributor with the deftness to sell many a dummy to his marker, Maynard's 1.763 points in 209 games - 303 points alone in 2016-2017 - leave an indelible mark on his time at Church Bank.

Emyr Phillips who gained three caps for Wales after leaving Church Bank was the first to come to mind at hooker as a huge part of Llandovery success.

But how could I leave out Taylor Davies who in the annus mirabilis of 2023-2024 scored 21 tries in as many games, including four at the Gnoll to end up the leading try scorer in the Premiership.

The composition of the back row was another head scratcher

I eventually ended up with Dafydd Jones, Jonathan Mills and Chris Davies, leaving out the likes of Nathan Thomas and Andy Powell who did not play enough games to qualify for selection.

Such was the eye catching form of Aberaeron product Jones in his full season at Llandovery - 1999-2000 - that the Scarlets soon had him in their squad.

His rugged, no nonsense power game continued at the highest level as he went on to gain 42 caps for Wales in an outstanding career before a shoulder injury forced him into retirement .

The key forward to Llandovery success in Cup winning season 2006-2007 was No 8 Jonathan Mills – a terrific

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reader of the game, intelligent and fluent in all he did, a leader from the front whose qualities were not appreciated by the Scarlets.

After playing for Llandovery in the Welsh Cup final in 2007, he went on to play for Sale, signed by coach Steve Diamond, who recognised his whole hearted unstinting commitment to the game would rub off on many of the Sale forwards.

He gets my vote ahead of Paul Jones who made a habit of picking up at No 8 and crashing through everyone for try after try – 18 in 1996-1997 and 15 more the next season.

And so to the final selection at open side.

Stuart Worrall has been the best contact area flanker at semi-pro level for 10 years but who can leave out the inspirational local legend that was Chris “Cwmcaiwddu” Davies?

A Llandovery man in every bone of his body, he was indefatigable in open play, swift to the breakdown, uncanny in his positioning and support play, hard as nails but the gentlest of characters off the field.

He captained the club in three season - scoring 63 tries in 245 games - before tasting pro rugby with Dunvant where he became as popular and as appreciated a player as he had been at his home club

He leads my All Stars of 30 years.

A final word - the XV chosen may not have been the “best” in their position but have been - in my opinion - the players who contributed the most to the success of the club at key times and key seasons.

Aled Williams and Jamie Cudmore would be the first on the team sheet if they were to be selected on intrinsic class but my XV relies on the impact that the chosen players made on the team during their stay at the club.

My selections were simply “ influencers” par excellence

ALL STARS XV (club appearances at time of writing are in brackets) (players also considered , not necessarily in order of preference)

Full Back: Jac Davies (37) (Emyr Lewis, Will Thomas)

Wing: Joe Ajuwa (31) (Tomi Lewis, Tal Selley, Harri Doel)

Centre: Rhodri Jones (294) (Tracy Lewis, Matthew Jacobs)

Centre: Adam Warren (131) (Jack Roberts, Rhys Williams)

Wing: Mark Jones (43) (Aaron Warren, Ifan Evans)

Fly Half: Ioan Hughes (79) (Jack Maynard, Neil Clapham, Aled Williams, Cerith Rees)

Scrum Half: Lee Rees (379) (Rhodri Davies, Rhodri Williams)

Loose Head: Wyn Jones (90) (Jamie Hughes, Arwel Evans, Dorian Williams)

Hooker: Taylor Davies (59) (Emyr Phillips, Dafydd Hughes)

Tight Head: Andrew Jones (577) (Berian Watkins, Peter Edwards)

Lock: Bryn Griffiths (160) (Jamie Cudmore, Lyndon Bateman)

Lock: Jack Jones (134) (John Westgarth, Tom Walker)

Flanker: Dafydd Jones (31) (Richard Brooks, Phil Day, Osian Davies)

No 8: Jonathan Mills (41) (Paul Jones, Nigel Clarke, Joe Powell)

Flanker: Chris Davies (245) (Stuart Worrall, Gareth Williams)

PICK YOUR OWN ALL STARS XV 1996-2025 AND HAND YOUR SELECTIONS IN TO THE CLUB OR INTO POSTDATUM, STONE STREET BY DECEMBER 20TH

A XV BY POPULAR OPINION WILL THEN BE REVEALED ON BOXING DAY

Full Back:.....

Wing:.....

Centre:.....

Wing:.....

Fly Half:.....

Scrum Half:.....

Loose Head:

Hooker:

Tight Head:

Lock:

Lock:

Flanker: No 8:.....

Flanker:

Your name:.....

Contact No.: