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Heart problems forced Lee Mears to quit professional rugby but he's feeling positive

Former Bath and England international rugby player Lee Mears retired from the game due to a life-threatening heart condition. But, as **Sarah Kidner** discovers, life goes on

TACKLING THE FUTURE

42

The number of England caps Lee had in his 16-year professional rugby career

Lee Mears notched up an impressive 177 premiership appearances, 268 games with Bath, ten premiership tries and 42 England caps during his 16-year career in professional rugby. His career ended on 31 January 2013 when Lee, aged 34, announced early retirement; had he carried on playing he risked **sudden cardiac death**^D. But, with the help of family and friends, he's fighting back.

The Bath and England hooker first learnt of his condition during a routine screening. "My first check was in 2007 before the rugby World Cup. It had always been normal until this year, when the test results were a little bit different. They spotted something unusual on the **ECG**^D," says Lee. "I thought 'there can't be anything wrong because I am a rugby player and I run around every day of the week'."

He was referred to Professor Sanjay Sharma, a consultant at St George's, University of London, who diagnosed apical hypertrophic **cardiomyopathy**^D. "Professor Sharma explained that if I kept doing high-intensity exercise, it could be fatal, which came as a total shock. It was surreal to hear someone say it – even though you know your professional career will end one day.

"At first, I thought 'what am I going to do?' All I have ever done is train and hang out with the lads and then there was a line in the sand. I knew I was going to finish at some time but it was a lot sooner than expected," he says.

He felt he had little choice but to give up professional rugby. "When you have a family and there's a chance you could have a **cardiac arrest**^D, I don't really think there's a decision to be made," says Lee, who is married to childhood sweetheart Danielle with whom

he has two sons, Isaac, aged five, and Sonny, who is one.

Leaving the club to which he has devoted his entire career hasn't been easy. "Growing up, Bath was the team to watch," says Lee. "But I've always understood that it's not my shirt; I'm just a custodian of it."

Tough physical conditions

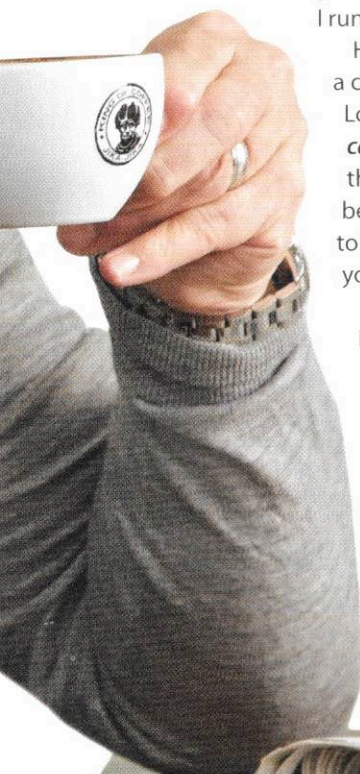
One of the hardest things was the thought that he might not be able to exercise. "My first question was 'can I still do stuff?' because I couldn't imagine life without Brazilian ju-jitsu or yoga," says Lee. "But once I knew it was just the high-intensity sport, it was OK," he says.

Lee had a lot of support from his former club, in particular head coach Gary Gold. "He helped me holistically. Along with the doctor, he helped me find out what I could and couldn't do and he gave me time to think about what to do next. He also directed me to some good contacts; the thing with rugby is it's like a family, there's great networking."

One of the people Gary put Lee in touch with was life coach Simon Wilshire. "He suggested that I draw a life wheel; you draw what's important to you and you soon realise that, for example, being a stockbroker may mean you'll have lots of money but you can't spend time with your family or play golf on a Monday afternoon," says Lee.

The club has also helped Lee with a de-training programme. He has regular check-ups to see what effect it is having on his heart. He's also had to make big changes to his diet. "When you play rugby, you are monitored daily and you're constantly being weighed. As soon as you stop, you have to make some big adjustments.

"I have gone from eating three or four meals a day to two or three. I try to avoid the high-fat stuff, but >>



the main thing is portion size. Occasionally, I'll go out with the boys and, if they've had a heavy training day, they'll have a main for a starter, plus another main followed by a dessert, and I'll be eating a salad."

Lee is still doing yoga and Brazilian ju-jitsu. "Yoga is good for flexibility and the ju-jitsu requires a lot of skill with all the different techniques, so it takes your mind off rugby. Also, I love golf – I've just come back from playing a charity match – and I've discovered I love skiing. I've never been able to go before because rugby's a winter sport but now I know I can go skiing with the family."

Best prop forward

So, does he have any regrets? "Crikey, no. I have been so blessed. Every time you think 'that's the best moment of my career', something else comes along. Playing for Bath the first time – that was huge, because I never thought it would happen – and then being picked for England and wearing the white shirt was unbelievable. I was then selected for the Lions, along with the best internationals in the northern hemisphere; that's about as big as it gets."

Playing international rugby also allowed Lee to indulge a lifelong passion for travel. "Rugby has really opened my eyes and made me realise what a fantastic world it is out there," he says. "I always joke that my little man [son Isaac] has more stamps in his passport now than I did when I was 24. He's been to Australia, New Zealand for the World Cup and he was a three-year-old on safari in South Africa for the Lions' tour."

But there is still plenty left to explore, which is something Lee's looking forward to. Meanwhile, he's busy preparing a new family home in Bath, coaching, giving after-dinner speeches and "trying to give back to the sport of rugby". On top of that, he's just a couple of months away from finishing his pilot's licence and is also throwing himself into the café chain *Jika Jika*, which he co-owns with fellow England international rugby player Matt Stevens.

While Lee's professional rugby career is over, you get the impression this is just a turning point. "I've had an amazing journey and it was lucky that my heart condition was discovered when it was. There's still plenty left that I want to do," he says. ■

Find out more

To order our free guide *Inherited heart conditions: hypertrophic cardiomyopathy* (M111C), go to bhf.org.uk/HMpublications or call 0870 600 6566.

Go online to see more pictures of Lee at home and his memorabilia. Visit bhf.org.uk/HMleemears.



■ **Rugby has really opened my eyes and made me realise what a fantastic world it is out there"**

A cardiologist's view

BHF-funded Sanjay Sharma is Professor of Inherited Diseases and Sports Cardiology, a consultant cardiologist at St George's Hospital and Medical Director of the London Marathon. He was also Lee's consultant.

"People who exercise a lot can develop a 15–20 per cent increase in the thickness of the left ventricle, the main pumping chamber of the heart," says Professor Sharma.

"The problem is trying to differentiate between a heart muscle that has become thick because someone has exercised a lot and someone who has a heart problem, such as the inherited condition hypertrophic cardiomyopathy^p, which also causes thickness, but can increase the risk of sudden death by three- to five-fold.

"You may find a male athlete in the prime of their career has a [heart] wall thickness of 14mm. This could be normal or it could indicate something more serious; it's critical to get the right diagnosis."

If an abnormality is detected in the wall thickness of the heart, Professor Sharma runs a series of additional tests. These include a stress test where he monitors athletes on a treadmill to help determine whether the thickness is the result of intensive exercise, or hypertrophic cardiomyopathy.

Hypertrophic cardiomyopathy increases the risk of **sudden cardiac death^p**, especially when people do high-intensity exercise; hence the advice is to give this up. "For most people, a diagnosis of hypertrophic cardiomyopathy means making a series of lifestyle modifications, such as not doing lots of high-risk sport. You can't take away everything, though – not just because of the psychological implications but because we know that people who take part in moderate-intensity activity are less likely to be overweight, have diabetes or high blood pressure. That sort of benefit can be achieved by walking briskly for 30 minutes every day – you don't have to run very fast on a rugby pitch to achieve that."