

IN TRYING to write a fitting send off to Sam Tuitupou, who hung up his boots after two seasons with Coventry, a lot of words beginning with F come to mind.

No, the oath you'd expect from those on the receiving end of one of his ferocious tackles isn't among them.

Fan favourite, fearsome, fearless, fastidious, faithful, friendly, family and fate are just some words that resonate with the career of the former All Black, who was a key part of Coventry's promotion winning campaign.

Fate, because there is a tantalising series of 'what ifs' that punctuate Big Sam's rugby journey from Auckland on New Zealand's North Island to the English Midlands.

How different might it have been had he gone to National League One promotion rivals, Amphill, as he originally planned?

He might never have made it to these shores, with the option of staying in New Zealand and extending his international career very much on the table.

He might have been lost to rugby union, with the teenage Tuitupou being offered a contract in league with Canberra Raiders.

And he might never have played first class rugby at all, without the support of his older brothers, who defied family rules to give him his big break in the sport.

'You have to make the most of your opportunities,' says the man affectionately nicknamed Hacksaw Sam by Munster supporters for his tackling when he was a feature of the Irish side. *'When one door closes, another one opens. I have always had to make a mark for myself. I had bigger brothers who would run over me in the back yard.'*

Tackling is something I've always had to work on. It's my strength.'

He talks of *'putting in some big tackles...to impress the boys, to gee them up'* during games.

But he had to tackle a strict Tongan upbringing in Auckland before making the grade in professional rugby.

When Sam talks about his family, love and pride filters through every sentence, every word. His father, mother, brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, and now his own children, in the UK and back in New Zealand.

His parents said 'no' to him making a name for himself in rugby league, refusing to let him join Canberra because they felt he was too young. They also ruled out playing rugby on a Sunday with worship given precedence over sport.

'I grew up watching my brothers play rugby,' he remembers fondly. *'We were brought up in a strong Tongan heritage, and my parents wouldn't allow us to play on Sundays, which was when the New Zealand trials are held.'*

'My brothers used to take me to the trials without my father knowing. He'd stay at church and they'd whisk me off to the trials. I think my older brothers were probably good enough to play at the top levels, better than me, but they never got the chance.'

'I actually started playing rugby league. My older brothers played both. The family across the road who took my brothers to play league, I think they felt sorry for me, always waving them goodbye. So they started taking me along.'

'In New Zealand, you can pretty much play both codes. One is in the morning, the other in the afternoon and I'd be playing two games every Saturday. The school I went to, Calston Boys High, put me onto union more, but they played league on a Wednesday. So I continued to play both league and union.'

'But my childhood, my introduction to rugby, was watching Tonga and Samoa play rugby league. The Tongan rugby league side was always who we would want to go and watch. I always wanted to play for Tonga.'

Fate and opportunity saw him in an All Black shirt instead of the red and white of Tonga.

'It felt kinda weird. It didn't really kick in until I was at the hotel. The first person I rang was my old man. My old man is a staunch Tongan, the type who doesn't show his feelings. He said he was happy for me, but didn't show any emotion...I know he was really happy for me.'

'My dad is known as the hard man of the family. For me it was about making my family proud. It was not all about me. I couldn't have done it without my brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and the family who prayed for me.'

'I was hugely honoured and privileged to play for Auckland, where I was born and bred. Then the All Blacks. Singing the national anthem (of New Zealand) for the ABs, and doing the haka was a very special moment.'

Sam stresses: *'I never dreamed I would make a living from playing rugby.'*

This is the guy who played for his school, then North Island Schools, Auckland Schools and New Zealand Schools. A guy who made his debut for Auckland Blues in Super Rugby as a teenager, and who captained the junior All Blacks to World Championship success at U19 and U21 level.

In fact, his curriculum vitae is pretty special.

As well as the Junior World Championship successes, he's won two Air New Zealand Cup titles with Auckland and then Auckland Blues in the Super 14 league.

He moved to Worcester Warriors, then Munster in the season they won the Celtic League, before joining and captaining Sale Sharks in the Premiership.

Had it not been for injury, he may well have represented Tonga in the Rugby World Cup.

Injury is something he's had to deal with given his powerhouse style of play. He broke a leg during Coventry's National League One winning season.

Moving to centre suited his approach to tackling, although anyone foolish enough to think that he's a one trick pony would not understand that his turn of pace, eye for a gap and silky footwork and hands are match-winning attributes.

'I wasn't the biggest, but I always enjoyed the physical side of the game. I started off at full back, then moved to first five before ending up at 12, where I preferred playing.'

'I played Super Rugby at about 83, 84 kgs, whereas nowadays you get centres who are 95 to 100 kgs. Back then, for that position, because I wasn't tall like other centres, like Tana Umaga, I had make my mark for myself.'

'Putting in some big tackles makes everyone on your side feel good. At the end of the day, it comes down to confidence. I always felt I had the confidence to dominate the opposition. You either dominate the opposition or smother them stopping the offload. You have to identify the person you're up against, whether they're a prop, a lock or a centre with good feet.'

There are several highlights reels of Hacksaw Sam putting in bone crunching tackles on YouTube. They're not for the faint hearted, with Sam giving the impression of a 5ft 9in tall speeding bullet knocking players down.

James Haskill the former Wasps, Saints & England stalwart said *'Sam Tuitupou hit me harder than anyone else I ever played against. It was more like being hit by a swinging girder. And it's not very nice when you're off on a gallop and someone like Sam suddenly flattens you from another direction. It must be like stepping onto a road without looking and being hit by a four door saloon. Suddenly, you're cut in half, flying through the air and wondering if you're going to land safely. And when you do land, you're like a rag doll with the stuffing removed, unable to move a muscle'*.

Sam went on to say, *'I'm a very laid back person. I've loved playing rugby for a living, I've loved the experiences and I'm so grateful for the opportunities I've had. Tackling was simply something I enjoyed.'*

It's clear that as well as tackling, Sam has a deep love of his Pacific Islands heritage.

The reason why he was keen to join Ampthill, before being persuaded to join Cov by Director of Rugby Rowland Winter, was because of the Tongan group of players at the Bedfordshire club.

At Coventry, he enjoyed the opportunity to play alongside fellow Tongans, including Auckland-born Dan Faleafa, with the Scottish qualified Bulumakau brothers, from Fiji, also part of the blue and white Pacific Islands brotherhood.

It is Sam's understanding of how daunting it can be for players to travel around the world to play, their heritage and abilities that has led him to launch his own player agency.

'Player welfare has been a massive issue for me and especially the Pacific Island boys who come, and those with young families. One problem area has been agencies and I had the opportunity to carry on playing, but to be able to start my own agency appealed to me. This is a big opportunity for me and I couldn't turn it down.'

Sam had hoped to play to 40, and play alongside his teenage sons. Even though they are rugby mad and showing promise, the idea of helping a wider 'family' swung the balance in favour of retirement.

'I should have come to the UK years ago,' he admits with hindsight. 'Now I can advise other young players from New Zealand to come over and experience it while they can.'

His own experiences in the dressing room at Auckland have helped shape his attitude to the rugby family. In those days, the younger apprentices weren't expected to talk unless they were spoken to. He credits the great Eroni Clarke in making his introduction to top class club rugby easier.

'For us young Polynesian boys, he just helped make the transition easier,' he recalls. 'He remains a big inspiration.'

While acknowledging that the game, and its old dressing room codes, has changed, it's Clarke's example that is informing Sam's vision as an agent.

He cites his brothers as his other big inspirations in life, and rugby.

Family. Brotherhood. In blood and rugby.

Sam has fond memories of being part of the Cov set up and admits to a few regrets about leaving Butts Park Arena.

Rowland Winter has revealed how Sam took a notebook to his first session with Coventry, showing just how professional he was, setting benchmarks for his team-mates on and off the field.

But Sam praises Winter for persuading him to abandon plans to move to Ampthill, citing the DoR's drive to Stoke-on-Trent, where Sam was staying with his in-laws, to set out Coventry's history and future ambitions.

He is the fourth former All Black to play for Coventry, following Shayne Philpott, Scott Hamilton and Zinzan Brooke, a former Auckland legend who was playing at Coundon Road as Sam was making his debut in the Auckland side. All Blacks 883, 895, 1040 and 1067.

'I honestly didn't know the rich history of Coventry Rugby Club or about the other All Blacks who had played here,' he admits.

'It's a great club. For me, being here and able to embrace that history, what the club is all about, that meant a lot to me. It is an amazing club. To see the former players still coming back to support is something else.'

'Being able, for an Auckland born and bred guy, to come to this famous club and be a little part of creating history is something I will cherish.'

'The loyal support at this club is something special.'

He signed off in front of the Butts Park Arena faithful with a try and Man of the Match performance in the narrow defeat to Nottingham. A fitting final act that words can't match.

