

# Exclusive interview

## From rucks and mauls to front line of the Covid war

By Oliver Brown

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Italy's Maxime Mbanda has become a knight and national hero after undertaking 17-hour shifts comforting patients at the height of the pandemic

It was in the grim haze of mid-March, when Italy's Six Nations date with England was postponed indefinitely by a raging epidemic, that Maxime Mbanda typed three words into Google: "Help. Parma. Coronavirus." A few hours later, he was at his local branch of the Yellow Cross, the country's medical transportation service, who asked if he could assist in the ambulances.

For the next 70 days of 17-hour shifts, he would assuage the extremes of human suffering as the virus inflicted its terrible toll on the elderly.

"I wasn't driving the ambulance, I was inside, being the equivalent of a son, nephew, brother, cousin," Mbanda says. "People were scared because they thought they were being taken to die. But we were doing the exact opposite. We were moving them from a full hospital to an empty one, so that the medical staff could try to save their lives with greater energy and less pressure."

For all Mbanda's physical might as a ball-carrier, which has earned him 20 caps for his country, there were moments when he found the experience emotionally shattering. As Europe reeled at the sight of military trucks removing coffins in Bergamo, he was playing his own vital role at the centre of the maelstrom.

"Even though you had to act as the patients' family, you knew they were infected and so immediately you would go behind them to sanitise your hands," he says. "That was one of the worst things. The first days were so hard, because I just didn't realise what was going on. Even the people who had been in the Yellow Cross for 20, 30 years were frightened, because they had never seen anything like it.



"I was more scared than them, because it was all new for me. I wasn't used to seeing so many people suffering together, but the volunteers reassured me that we were saving their lives. When I forced myself to think along those lines, my way of working changed."

Mbanda's contribution would become one of the pandemic's most captivating examples of an athlete supporting his society in its hour of direst need.

Where before he had led a relatively peaceful life as a flanker for Zebre, Parma's hometown club, he learnt in June that he was to be made a Knight of the Republic, one of Italy's highest civilian honours. Only his enforced

spell in the national team's Covid bubble denied him the chance to receive the award in person at the Quirinal Palace in Rome.

"I think about my family with this, and what they can think about their son now," says Mbanda, who this week also won the Pro14 Chairman's Award in recognition of his work for the critically ill. Mbanda resists straying into the past tense here, conscious that Italy's battle with the virus is again at a precarious point as winter approaches, with triple-digit daily death counts.

"I play rugby because I love sharing feelings, victories, even these awards. But I cannot be too happy because of the situation that still exists. We can't forget that."

Mbanda's powerful sense of civic duty owes much to the influence of his father, Luwa, who emigrated to Italy 45 years ago from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Today he works as a general surgeon in Milan, having just completed his fourth degree and performed a leading front-line role as the city's overstretched hospitals shifted almost to a war footing.

"The importance of helping others was one of his lessons in how I was raised," Mbanda says. "He tried once, when I was 14, to make me work for a Milan ambulance service. But when you're a teenager, you just think about having fun. You don't realise how much only one hour a week can help people. Then, it maybe wasn't my time, but now I'm trying to find the right balance. This work with the Yellow Cross didn't stop when the emergency finished. I swore to keep on going."

Perish the thought that Italy should soon be plunged back into the nightmare it confronted in March, but if it was, one senses Mbanda would be first in line to do whatever was required. At 28, he has made it his abiding quest to define himself by his actions off the field. Take the assistance he has provided to Tre Rose Nere, an amateur team in nearby Casale Monferrato consisting almost entirely of refugees. Beyond mentoring the players, he has also furnished them with fresh kit.

"With this, volunteers had thought about how to take the refugees off the streets and to put them on the pitch, to teach them rugby values," he says. "Now they have created a real



'I was inside the ambulance, being the equivalent of a son, nephew, brother, cousin'

team, united and kind. Two of them work for the Red Cross. Their lives have been changed."

Mbanda understands acutely what it means to struggle for a sense of acceptance. Last November, he was cut up by a fellow motorist when driving in Milan. On approaching the other car to remonstrate, he was told, in the vilest terms, "to go back to your country". The indignation boiled inside Mbanda, who

## LTA warns 'catastrophic' closures are looming

Tennis By Jeremy Wilson

At least a third of indoor community tennis centres face the "catastrophic" prospect of closure without government support, the Lawn Tennis Association has warned.

Scott Lloyd, the LTA's chief executive, has also called for a review of lockdown restrictions in Tier 2 and Tier 3 areas of the country, which allow adults to visit gyms but prevent indoor tennis between people from different family bubbles.

The consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic on public leisure facilities has been especially severe and, in tennis, the LTA has forecast potentially dire consequences for its network of 54 community indoor tennis centres, which often provide a vital route into the sport.

A total of £800 million was requested to save public leisure facilities in July, but last week the government announced £100 million of additional funding for local councils to be spent specifically on public leisure, including gyms and swimming pools. "This money will be spread thinly across a huge range of publicly-owned sport and leisure facilities," said Scott.

"As it stands, a large proportion of community indoor leisure centres still face the very real prospect of closure, which would be catastrophic for tennis players up and down the country. We are therefore also calling for government to deliver a comprehensive sports recovery fund, which is needed to protect these facilities and other venues with indoor tennis courts."

The LTA said that the status of many indoor facilities was "perilous" but stressed their pivotal role in supporting the physical and mental health of local communities.

The governing body also said that

current Tier 2 and Tier 3 lockdown rules "severely limit millions of tennis players in terms of who they can play with indoors, despite the socially distanced nature of the sport".

Toby Perkins, the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for tennis, said that it was "completely illogical" for adults to be taking part in indoor fitness classes of as many as 30 people "but can't hit a ball over a net to someone outside of their household or bubble".

Ukactive, which represents gyms and leisure centres, believes that indoor sports facilities have shown that they can operate safely.



Stark warning: LTA chief executive Scott Lloyd says tennis facilities around the country will close without urgent support

The latest data showed that, of five million visits to gyms and leisure centres between Oct 5 and Oct 11, 156 customers that had visited sites reported testing positive within a 14-day period. That worked out at 2.88 cases per 100,000 visits compared to a UK case rate of 150.88 per 100,000 during that same week. "It is very clear from the evidence that gyms and leisure facilities are not responsible for the increasing prevalence of Covid 19," said ukactive chief executive Huw Edwards.

"What this shows is a highly-controlled environment in which staff and customers treat safety guidelines with the utmost levels of respect and diligence in order for people to keep using these services safely.

## Agar fears Super League season has reached virus 'tipping point'

Rugby League

Leeds coach Richard Agar has called for strong leadership from the Rugby Football League as the conclusion of the Super League season threatens to descend into chaos.

Two matches scheduled for tomorrow night have been cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic and Agar says the competition is reaching a "tipping point".

Huddersfield's clash with Castleford was called off after the Tigers reported 12 positive coronavirus tests. The match between Salford and Warrington is also off after the Red Devils informed the authorities they only had 13 players available.

Although Salford did not cite any further positive tests, they have had to play four games in 11 games due to fixture congestion brought about by the crisis. Competition rules deem that Warrington will be awarded a 24-0 win due to a forfeited fixture,

he is a knight and a national hero. "Perhaps I could write a book about my 2020," he smiles. "My life has changed completely in this period. While I was with the Yellow Cross in April, my girlfriend told me that we were expecting a baby. So, soon I will have even more responsibility. I just hope that the future will be better for everybody."

For now, his pride at wearing the Italian jersey will serve as tonic enough, even in the emptiness of Rome's Stadio Olimpico. "When the stadium is full, it will be much better, because it will mean that the virus has passed away. We can't wait." In the meantime, the emergency services will know exactly where to find him.

thought in particular of all the Italian and non-Italian lives that his father had saved.

"It hadn't happened to me for a long time. We know that there is racism, but we can fight against it, not with aggression, but by encouraging the world to talk about it. We can sensitise people. That case in Milan had made me suffer, but a lot of people still made me understand that they loved me. I'm not just Italian, I'm not just Congolese, I'm both. And there's nothing wrong with that."

As Mbanda prepares to face England on Saturday after a 7½-month delay, he shakes his head in astonishment at how fundamentally this year has redrawn his life. One minute he is being racially abused in the street, the next

Call of duty: Maxime Mbanda is preparing to face England on Saturday; (left) working for the Yellow Cross, assisting ambulances, during lockdown

## Ireland game off after French hit by positive tests

Exclusive By Kate Rowan

The Women's Six Nations fixture between Ireland and France has been called off.

*The Daily Telegraph* can reveal that the match, to decide second

place in the championship, has been cancelled due to an outbreak of Covid-19 in the French camp.

It is understood that several members of the French backroom staff, led by head coach Annick Hayraud, have tested positive.

The game had been moved to Dublin after the French agreed to sacrifice home advantage as Irish government rules meant the Ireland players would have had to isolate for 14 days on their return from France.

As amateurs, the Irish Rugby Football Union said many of the Ireland players could not afford to self-

isolate due to responsibilities to their families and employers.

The Six Nations was contacted but made no comment.

It is unclear whether France will forfeit the match or it will be postponed until December. However, Ireland are already due to play in a Rugby World Cup 2021 qualifying tournament then, where they will be vying with Italy, Scotland and Spain for a place in New Zealand.

England will have a keen eye on the developments, as they are due to play France in a two-Test series on Nov 14 and 21.

## Farrell relishing the opportunity to pit wits against old mentor Edwards

By Kate Rowan

A meeting of rugby minds from almost 30 years ago will play a central role when Ireland face France in their Six Nations opener on Saturday night. At just 15 years old, when Andy Farrell was making his first steps into a stellar rugby league career with Wigan, he was men-

tored by Shaun Edwards - now the France defence coach.

When the Ireland head coach, now 45, made his Wigan debut as a 16-year-old against Keighley, Edwards was captain and it is with fondness Farrell describes the bond the pair developed, but it will be put

to one side when the two coaches meet at the Stade de France.

"As a young kid Shaun took me under his wing. He looked after me and showed me what professionalism is because he was ahead of his time as far as that is concerned," he said. "I was privileged to be involved with him as a player. Shaun is a winner and a fighter, and that is why I know the French will be ready."

"He will probably snarl at me and ignore me for the first 10 minutes and we will probably shake hands afterwards."

The admiration extends to how

Edwards has helped transform the French defence since being drafted in by head coach Fabien Galthie. "You can see the difference [Edwards has made] straight away," said Farrell. "He brings so much energy and he would be unbelievably clear in what he wants from the players."

Ireland have their destiny in their own hands, but will have to beat France by a bonus point if they are to claim a fourth title out of the past seven Six Nations Championships.

Robbie Henshaw starts at outside centre in Ireland's sole change from

last weekend's 50-17 rout of Italy, stepping in for Garry Ringrose, who is out with a broken jaw. Cian Healy will become Ireland's sixth centurion joining Brian O'Driscoll, Ronan O'Gara, Rory Best, Paul O'Connell and John Hayes.

Ireland (v France, Stade de France, Saturday 8.05pm, BBC) J Stockdale (Ulster); A Conway (Munster), R Henshaw (Leinster), B Aki (Connacht), H Keenan (Leinster); J Sexton (Leinster, capt), C Murray (Munster), C Healy (Leinster), R Herring (Ulster), A Porter (Leinster), T Beirne (Munster), James Ryan (Leinster), C Doris (Leinster), W Connors (Leinster), CJ Stander (Munster). Replacements D Heffernan (Connacht), E Byrne (Leinster), F Bealham (Connacht), U Dillane (Connacht), P O'Mahony (Munster), J Gibson-Park (Leinster), R Byrne (Leinster), C Farrell (Munster).