

Sport

All change: Former prop forward becomes British tae kwon do champ

Now Hicks kicks

By Gary Baker

IT is always sad when someone has to retire from sport painfully early through injury but Gary Hicks has turned his own heartache into a triumph – and this is just for starters!

The 32-year-old Llisbury father, who retired from rugby aged 29 due to a back injury, took his seven-year-old son Lewis to the Martial Arts and Fitness Centre in Maindee, Newport, and decided to have a go.

Now, 18 months on, Gary, who was a Newport first team prop for nine years and also had spells with Cross Keys and Pontypool, has become a national tae kwon do champion.

And there is more! Hicks snr, who is in the heavyweight division, has been asked about his availability to join the British team for the World Championships next February in Malta.

Hicks' new sporting career saw him win the British United Martial Arts Championships title for his discipline in Worcester last Sunday.

The building contractor, who left Newport during the reign of South African legend Gary Teichmann, said: "There were novice, intermediate and advanced levels at the championships and I was in the intermediate.

"I've been doing it for a year-and-a-half now after I took my son along for the first time. I knew this was a good set-up for children but there was also an adult beginners class, which I joined, and it progressed from there.

"I finished playing rugby two-and-a-half to three years ago because I trapped a nerve in my back when I was playing for Pontypool. I had a few months out and I put on a few pounds in weight. So I decided to try something else, and I tried this.

"I'm getting fitter with it now and also it's a good way of getting self-discipline and a bit of routine. It's eased the injury because we do a lot of stretching to



CHAMP: Former Newport prop Gary Hicks who is now a British champion at tae kwon do. He is seen here training with instructor Gary Gassor. Inset – Gary with his trophy

Picture: MARK LEWIS



warm-up." Hicks proves it is never too late to get involved in sport, and now

aims to move up the kick boxing grades.

He trains two or three times a week and added: "I'd like to progress through the system and get my black belt and wherever the tournament side of things go."

That could be those World Championships as Gary Gasor, the centre's chief instructor, explained. "Gary enjoys the competitive side from his rugby days and it's nice to see it has found another sport that he can get enjoyment from.

"The good thing with him is that, even though he is a big guy and, when you look at him he probably looks a bit intimidating, he's actually a really friendly and easy going guy.

"As far as where he goes now, we will have to sit down and have a chat because he has spoken to Richard Hopkins, who runs the World United Martial Arts Association, and he has already been asked if he wants to be a member of the British team.

He's also been asked if he wants to fight at the World Championships.

"One of the comments that he (Hopkins) came out with was he was very impressed with Gary's flexibility and kicking ability for his size. People tend to think that, because you are big, you can't kick.

"But, if you train properly and hard, like Gary does, there is no reason why you can't obtain that flexibility and kicking ability

through time."

And Gasor struck the nail on the head about the fitness side of things, adding: "Tournaments are incentives to train, you have got something to aim for if you know, in six weeks time, I'm fighting. You know you have to get your road work, your sparring and bag work. It's a big commitment but you are aiming your goals towards that target."

But it is not all training and competition. Hicks said: "There is a good atmosphere and a good social side. You have a bit of fun and it's good to be involved."

And now Hicks can help Lewis with his kick boxing techniques at home as well as down the Maindee centre.

Iversen delight at World Grand Prix call

NIELS-Kristian Iversen, former Newport Wasps star rider, has been granted a permanent wild card for next summer's World Grand Prix series.

Danish ace Iversen, now riding in the Elite League with Oxford, was handed one of the three remaining spots along with Reading's Matej Zagar and Polish rider Piotr Protasiewicz from Ipswich.

The 23-year-old Iversen from Esbjerg said: "It is an exciting challenge for me but I feel I am ready for it. It wasn't a total surprise to be told I was in as there has been a lot of talk in

Speedway

By Ray Parker

Denmark that it was between Hans (Andersen) and me.

"I have a lot of work to do this winter on sponsorship and equipment, my whole set-up really. I have done well as a wild card in the past so I hope I can now do just as well on a regular basis and make a good impression.

"I know it will be hard, but I will be giving it my all."

It is a big step-up for Iversen, a

firm favourite with the Newport fans and still a regular visitor to the Hayley Stadium. In fact he was there for the Mavericks final Conference League meeting of the season against Buxton.

And the announcement that Iversen will be a Grand Prix regular next summer following hot on the heels of his winter appearance in the New Year Classic field is a big boost for promoter Tim Stone as he begins to piece together his field for the major event.

Iversen was placed second in this year's New Year Classic and

the Prince of Wales Trophy which was run as the opening meeting of the season.

But Iversen is still chasing gold for this season with the final leg of the Craven Shield at Oxford tomorrow night followed by an Elite League meeting with Wolverhampton.

The second leg is at Poole tonight. Eastbourne are on 41 points, Oxford a point behind and Poole trailing on 27.

The broken leg suffered by Maverick Sam Hurst at Buxton on Sunday was the final straw in an injury-wrecked season for the Newport club, starting with

skipper Craig Watson way back in May when he suffered a shattered right ankle against Stoke.

Wasps also lost Michael Coles and Mads Korneliussen while Jason King rode two meetings before he too joined the walking wounded as did Lee Dicken but he was able to return before the dismal season ended. The Mavericks also had to ride most of the season without the experienced Scott Pegler who has since decided to call it a day.

Surely the Wasps cannot endure such a tortuous time when the tapes go up next March.