

# I'm the man whose name is all over the British and Irish Lions shirt

Exclusive: How David Howden recovered from having his back, and his rugby dream, broken to sponsoring Andy Farrell squad's famous shirt

By Gavin Mairs

Let's get straight to the point, I say to David Howden. What is it like to have your surname emblazoned across the front of the British and Irish Lions jersey?

The 61-year-old chief executive of Howden, the global insurance company he founded "with three people and a dog" in 1994, is sitting in his office with its spectacular City of London views and fizzing with the kind of enthusiasm you might expect from a player named on Thursday in Andy Farrell's squad bound for Australia this summer.

The company signed a four-year deal last July to become principal partner with the Lions, including the inaugural women's tour to New Zealand in 2027, which includes prized sponsorship of the jersey that will be worn by the team and also many of the tens of thousands of fans who are travelling to Australia for the nine-game tour that begins next month.

But what fascinates me is what it feels like for Howden to have his own surname on the shirt, beyond the corporate association, and the story behind his decision to invest in the Lions brand.

"When I saw the shirt as it was unveiled at an event on Oxford Street with Andy, it was a very emotional moment," he says. "I just went: 'Wow! That's the new Lions shirt.'"

"It is an amazing feeling. But in some ways, it is a lot more than the shirt. I am not going to deny that it makes you feel good, and it makes you feel proud and think about the journey we have been on. Would I ever have thought it was possible? No, but there is a lot more behind it.

"Someone once said early on that you need to earn the right to be on the Lions shirt. Speak to any player about what it means to be a Lion and being on the tour. It is a very special team, and I think if you are going to have the audacity to say 'I want my name on the shirt,' you have to have a reason for doing it."

It is a story that began when he was a 15-year-old, playing on the left wing for the Colts rugby team at Radley College in Oxfordshire.

"I received a hospital pass during a match," he recalls. "Someone took my shoulder going that way, someone took my legs going the other way and I hit the ground and I couldn't get up. When you are a 15-year-old that feels quite weird. I had broken my back."



British & Irish Lions head coach Andy Farrell sports the shirt sponsored by Howden  
Credit: Getty Image/David Rogers

Howden had to undergo spinal fusion surgery at an orthopaedic unit in Oxford. The operation was successful, but he never played contact sport again.

"Rugby was my sport, my passion," he adds. "I am half-Scots and half-Welsh so I have had some good years and some bad years [as a supporter] – more bad than good," he adds with an infectious cackle.

"When I couldn't play sport any more, I left school at 16 because that was my passion and went to try to find a job in the City."

## Tragedy his driving force

He arrived in London with little to his name. His father had died when he was just seven and he says his family lost almost all of their estate because of inheritance tax at the time when there were death duties between husbands and wives. They had to sell their family home in Oxford and move up to the village of Thoraby in north Yorkshire.

"When I broke my back playing rugby, I thought to myself, 'let's go and start working.' Life is all about experiences. The tragedy of losing my father may be one thing but the bright side is that perhaps it gave me the energy and drive to get what you thought you had in the past."

His great-great-great grandfather, Alexander Howden, had founded an insurance brokerage and he followed suit into the industry, but at the time the big US companies were buying up the London independents.

In 1994 he decided to set up his own company, with a mission to build a global London broker that would remain independent.

"There were just three of us," he recalls. "My first wife had left me so I brought my dog called Flight to the office and we wanted to build a business around people and over the last 30 years we have built it into a global business, we now employ 22,000 people in 55 countries. We employ 10,000 people in the UK but no-one knows who we are. We don't make effing kitchens!"



David Howden followed in his great-great-great grandfather's footsteps by going into insurance  
Credit: Heathcliff O'Malley

"We needed to build our brand, and the Lions opportunity was perfect. We are a great British and Irish business; we have got offices all over Ireland but are also very international. The Lions is a great British and Irish business and incredibly international. They are the pinnacle of the best and we think that we are too. It seemed absolutely natural to want to associate with them.

"When the opportunity came, the fact that women's rugby is coming on so strongly and we can also sponsor the first ever women's tour was the icing on the cake. Especially for a man with three daughters!"

Howden is proud to point out that one of his employees is the great-great grandson of Bob Burnet, who played,

alongside his brother Willie, on the inaugural Lions tour to New Zealand and Australia in 1888.

Howden says the company's links with rugby are already strong and growing as title partner of the Howden Rosslyn Park National Schools Sevens and the Howden Melrose Sevens and it has been supporting 130 grassroots clubs, from boot donation stations to providing insurance.

And he now intends to bring the energy and drive to the sponsorship of the Lions deal.

"We are going to get artists to paint an incredible mural in Whitechapel when the squad is announced and have the names painted in," he adds. "And we are going to build pubs in Australia called the 'Howden Arms' and have beer mats that are a bit like trump cards, with the details of each player on them.

"They will be traditional English pubs with an Australian twist and the pub's sign is going to be an image of my dog Flight. I want a fun atmosphere. This is definitely going to be about more than my name on the shirt."