

## RUGBY

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MOST of us are guilty of playing the fame game when it comes to seeking out inspirational figures in sport.

We put the likes of Rory McIlroy, Paula Radcliffe and Harry Kane on a pedestal and gaze at them admiringly from afar while aspiring to be just like them.

But sporting heroes come in all forms and there is no greater role model than a 36-year-old mum-of-two from Molesey who cheated death and, nine months later, is back playing the game she loves while encouraging others to follow suit.

Hannah Chandler is now a shining beacon of positivity, which is testament to her spirit.

She still bears the physical scars of an horrific car accident in which she and her friend were lucky to escape with their lives.

A frightening head-on smash near Farnham late one wet night is still fresh in her mind, but counselling has seen Chandler overcome the worst of the mental trauma.

"I thought I had died," says Hannah, looking back on what she recalls as a "surreal" experience.

She was a passenger in the front seat when some lights loomed large in front of the car she was travelling in.

The next thing she knew she was in a crumpled wreck of a vehicle, staring up at a police officer on the scene.

Hannah had worked for Surrey Police for nine years and there was obviously some sort of other force at play that night, as that man staring at her in the gloom was a former colleague who had been training to be an officer while she worked there.

"That was fate," she says. "To see that friendly face as the first person on the

# BACK FROM THE BRINK: RUGBY AIDS HANNAH'S RECOVERY AFTER NEAR- FATAL CRASH

scene dealing with the accident - I thought I was dreaming.

"It was a horrible experience. The car was crushed. After we'd been hit we then crashed into a tree.

"If there had been anyone in the back they would have been killed."

Hannah's injuries were extensive. Severe whiplash, shoulder ligaments stretched so as not to hold

the joint in place, right arm damaged leaving her numb down that side, two fingers with nerve damage, as well as knee, hip and back problems associated with a high-impact collision.

Her recovery has been slow and she initially plunged into the depths of despair, turning to alcohol to overcome the physical pain in order to sleep at night. Binge eating the wrong food exacerbated her problems. In her own words she was "depressed, overweight and drinking too much".

But Hannah is a fighter

and knew she had to deal with her problems for the sake of her two boys. Slowly but surely, she has gained confidence and is now part of the Esher RFC family, where her sons play, thanks to a scheme called Warrior Camp.

Frankie is captain of the club's under-12s and Sam is in Esher's U9s despite being a Type 1 diabetic, having been diagnosed when he was four.

"He needs insulin injections just to stay alive so I needed to be there for him," explains Hannah.

"In fact 'who is going to look after Sam?' was

the first thing I thought of at the accident when I thought I was dead."

Rugby has always been her game. She started out at Guildford Gazelles in her 20s as a prop forward.

"It was an up-and-coming sport at the time and was something different I wanted to try," she recalls.

"I had just had the kids and wanted to do something for myself and I loved it. I turned up at the first session with a dress on and trainers with my hair done and make-up on. It wasn't long before I was head-to-toe in mud.

"I hurt the next day but

I really enjoyed playing and there was a good team spirit."

Talking of spirit, it is the entrepreneurial kind which this woman of substance believes has helped too.

She set up a business selling cupcakes after leaving the police and had a tea room in Molesey where she earned the title Elmbridge Retailer off the Year in 2014 - Mary Berry take note.

Unfortunately for Hannah, she had to stop the business because of Sam.

"It was a case of the business or my son's

SPORT

