Rugby Annual Report

The 23/24 season has certainly been filled with many ups and downs, in a year where we are finally emerging from the knockback of the COVID years. Below is a season overview of the rugby portfolio.

Age Grade

This season, we welcomed a number of new faces to help steer and support age grade rugby in Northumberland. Our youth is the lifeforce of future rugby and so we should be embracing our youngsters, helping them to develop their skills and to enjoy the game of rugby as we all did at a similar age. Nicola, John and Andy were welcomed in to look after the boys AG rugby provision, with Adam and Iain joining a few months later to take on the lead for girls AG rugby. The group have provided some excellent support, running superb festivals and finals over the duration of the year, in particular the number and standard of girls rugby has improved drastically over the course of this season – you only had to be at the awards evening at the end of May to see how successful they have been!

Colts Rugby

This season saw one of Northumberland's stalwart volunteers, Rob (Chair of Colts) step down from his role at the end of the season and after over 20 years of commitment to his role in Northumberland. Colts rugby is the pivotal transitional years between youth rugby and taking the important step into adult rugby and Rob did a superb job of supporting these important years of rugby, he will be sorely missed. Moving in to next season Alan Gardiner has agreed to take on the role of Chair of Colts, bringing his own experience of this age group into the rugby portfolio in Northumberland. Alan will be joined by Steve from Tynedale who has coached the Northumberland U17s and U18s for many years now with some superb success, along with Nick at Novos who also brings a great deal of wealth to the group. The Colts season finished with some spectacular finals and we're certainly looking forward to seeing the older Colts group make the start of their journey into adult rugby next season.

CANDY League

This season, the responsibility of looking after the CANDY league moved to within the office and it has been a very successful year for all of the teams involved. So much so, that next season, the CANDY leagues are expanding to welcome teams from the Tees Valley Leagues after word reached them of the CANDY league and how successful and enjoyable it was – we received a request from nearly all of the teams in this league to join the CANDY for the 24/25 season and we look forward to welcoming new opposition into the CANDY – A special thank you to Craig who after many, many years of running the CANDY leagues so well, decided to step back this year.

Vets Rugby

Our vets offer allows many players across Northumberland the opportunity to continue playing the game they love – without getting the runaround by some of today's youth! Simon has done a truly outstanding job once again this season of managing and running the Vet's league across Northumberland, culminating in an excellent final series held at Morpeth on their beer festival

weekend. Vet's rugby formed part of one of our RFU funding streams for this season and so we were able to support Simon and the Vet's league this season, with the intention of supporting further next season. Discussions of representative vets sides to play other CBs is still something in the pipeline for discussion with Simon and the clubs involved.

Representative Rugby

Rep rugby becomes ones of the biggest challenges the rugby portfolio deals with every season – regulation changes over the last two seasons have had a massive impact on our ability to field players of a higher standard – it should be noted that these regulation changes are voted on by the RFU Council and imposed by Governance once they have been agreed – the decisions are not made by the CB.

That said, the rugby portfolio discussed at length the need to demonstrate an ability to compete, particularly at the senior level, where much of the criticism was being directed. I'm pleased to say that this season BOTH the Men's and Women's Senior sides fought hard to achieve their first wins in 7 and 6 years respectively (the men against Staffordshire and the Women against Cheshire), it's been a long time in the making, clearly, but it appears that with new members of the Men's coaching team and additional coaching staff to the Women's senior side, they are definitely heading in the right direction. Thank you to Ben and his team for managing the Women's and Girl's pathway and for newly recruited Adam and his coaching team for injecting some new found excitement and enjoyment into the men's programme. We are already planning to discuss regulation changes with the RFU to try and determine a more level playing field moving in to next season, allowing us to access players who have not been allowed to play in the senior championships this season, but who we felt should have been allowed the opportunity.

The U20s have had a mixed season, starting off the campaign by narrowly beating last year's U20s champions in Durham, before facing two very challenging games in Cheshire and Lancashire (both losses) before finishing their campaign with a close 5 point loss to Yorkshire. This season we had a greater representation from clubs across Northumberland, including several players from Ashington, who in previous years, have not had many players selected to County Rep sides. We had two players this season invited in to the North of England U20s group.

The U18s boys had an excellent season, steered by Steve and his team of coaches, the boys went undefeated against strong opposition in Yorkshire, Cumbria and Durham. The U18s boys programme also paves the way for Divisional selection, where those who perform particularly well are invited to trial and train with the North of England U18s group. This season we had 9 players from Northumberland invited in, with 5 of them making the match day sides against Divisional sides in Midlands and South East.

The U18s girls also had an enjoyable season, playing their fixtures against local rivals in Durham and Cumbria with some tightly contested games. We've also been successful in having a number of players selected to the CoE (18), further demonstrating our ability to produce excellent, young, female players in Northumberland.

The U17s boys being the final group of the rep sides who often play their games at the end of the season. In the last to years, the RFU have supported a new style pathway to help retain the U17s

group in rugby. As such, the group who leave the U16s DPP are provided with a number of development sessions with the county coaches who by the time the games come round in May, form the County U17s side. This season, the boys had a very close win against Cumbria and a mixed series of games against Durham, where the format was changed to mini 30 minute games to allow a wider playing pool from both counties to be available (Durham won 2 of the 3 games overall).

Everything else!

Towards the end of the season (and throughout the summer) clubs have been given insight to a new document called "One County, One Vision" – it's aim is to outline future plans and ideas in order to try and bring the County together as one and heading in the same direction. It's motive is that whether you are a young child, just beginning your rugby journey, an age grade player who is learning and developing their skills in the game, a senior county player at the top of their game, a group of friends who play touch rugby or walking rugby once a week or a group of headstrong vets who are determined to battle father time…. You are Northumberland rugby, and everything which it's core values stand for.

A special thank you to Ken Fraser who after many years serving as Chair of Comps Committee has decided to resign as of the completion of this season – Ken has been instrumental in providing support for the organisation of the various cup competitions which run throughout Northumberland over the course of the season. Moving forwards, a new competitions group has been created heading in to the 24/25 season with new faces (and some old!) forming the basis of the group – the cup draws have been made and with a review over the summer, it is hoped that some of the issues faced with the cup comps this year will be managed more effectively next season.

Lastly, a huge thank you to everyone who has given their time to help develop rugby in all aspects this season. We celebrated many of you at the Honda Value the Volunteer event at Morpeth, but we are well aware that the number of volunteers stretches way beyond that of who we saw at the event – rugby simply doesn't happen without the time, care and effort you give to your clubs and the rugby community.

Thank you also to the Northumberland Referee's Society, much in the same way as our rugby volunteers, without the referees, there are no rugby games. Every week we rely on the society providing all clubs, cup comps and rep rugby games with teams of officials and I'm sure that all of them are looking forward to putting their feet up (at least for a little while!)

A monumental thank you must be given to Claire in the County Office, much of what goes on in the County is down to Claire's knowledge, understanding and pure dedication to her role. I'm sure many will agree that her guidance and hard work is what keeps us all on the straight and narrow every season, so thank you Claire.

And finally a thank you to my Board Colleagues, without their support and guidance over the last two years, the Rugby Portfolio would have struggled to develop and grow in the way that it has this season and as I head into the final year of my tenure as Director of Rugby, I know that the teachings of my colleagues will prove invaluable for the coming season.