NORTHUMBERLAND RUGBY UNION VALUE THE VOLUNTEER AND END OF SEASON CELEBRATION OF RUGBY

WEDNESDAY 29TH MAY 2024

MORPETH RFC

From the President:

This evening is a real celebration of rugby in Northumberland, bringing together our league and cup winners, alongside our valued volunteers from all clubs across the County.

First of all, congratulations to all those teams who are collecting silverware tonight, and thank you for supporting the county competitions, both senior and age grade.

Well done on a successful season!

As players, we owe a huge gratitude to those volunteers at our clubs that work so tirelessly, mainly behind the scenes, to ensure that our games can go ahead.

Without their selfless time, dedication and commitment to their clubs, many of our community games would not be possible.

It is my pleasure to be able to recognise the efforts of both our volunteers and our players on the same evening.

On behalf of Northumberland Rugby Union, I would like to say a massive thank you to all our volunteers involved in rugby, not just those present tonight, and encourage your continued support for the upcoming season.

Ruth Scott

Northumberland Rugby Union County President 2023-24

Citations for Nominees – Unsung Hero Category

Unsung Hero – A volunteer or a group of volunteers who have gone above and beyond to provide positive experiences.
The nominee has:
Undertaken several key tasks to support the club and can always be relied upon to lend a hand, often behind the scenes.
A positive attitude to developing themselves and their club.
Shown a willingness to go above and beyond for the sake of the club and its members.
And is proactive and willing to lend a hand to support the club.

Alnwick Rugby Club – Simon Wright

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Most people who volunteer in the junior section do so because they have a child in it and Simon is no different, however Simon's boy has been out of the junior section for many years now and Simon has continued to be the Treasurer for the junior section. He has been the Treasurer for more years than anyone can remember and that includes himself! Simon puts many hours of dedication into being the Treasurer and he does this all in the background. The majority of parents won't know him. Simon is meticulous in looking after the mini and junior's money which is held separately from the main club. He looks after the money as if was his own money and not a penny is paid out that is not needed. He is a genuinely nice person that gives up so much of his time when he doesn't need to. Couldn't think of a better person for an award.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Alnwick have a strong junior section and Simon has been integral to that for so many years. He looks after money for the junior section plus money that has been raised for age groups going on tour. When volunteers are hard to come by, he has been a constant. He has put in so many hours of work over so many years to help a countless number of children to play the best team sport in the world.

Final thoughts!

A true unsung hero.

Ashington Rugby Club – Garry Newman

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Garry has been our Treasurer for every year since 1989 apart from 2 years (2008/9) a total of 32 years. During his time as Treasurer the club has always remained in a healthy financial position, whilst managing to ensure we have one of the cheapest (if not the cheapest) rugby club membership and playing fees in the county.

In addition to his duties as Treasurer, Garry runs our bar, including balancing the nightly/weekly bar takings, arranging the 6 weekly stock take, doing the bar and management duty rota, doing the weekly run to the cash and carry, arranging the weekly brewery beer delivery and taking his turn on the bar. Also because of his longevity in his role he is a fount of historical knowledge and is always willing to advise members. Garry also orders our club merchandise and oversees all financial issues. Despite having to say no on occasions to people, Garry is one of the most respected members of our club.

In addition to all these duties Garry also runs the rugby club golf society, supports club functions and is one of the biggest supporters of our bar! If anybody deserves recognition for their ongoing and unseen work it is him.

Submitted on behalf of Ashington Rugby Club Management Committee
Paul Tanney, President.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Garry has ensured that our club remains financially stable and his work has helped ensure that rugby remains affordable to everyone and cost is not a barrier. This is essential for us as we operate in one of the most economically deprived areas of the country.

Our low membership and playing fees have undoubtedly helped us grow our youth and women's sections and ensured cost is not a barrier to playing sport. Whilst at the same time we have continued to invest in our facilities to try and keep pace with the increased demand and usage by creating an additional floodlit training area and improved our clubhouses with additional level access and mobility standard toilets.

Final thoughts!

Garry's longevity is incredible, having been Treasurer for 32 years, initially taking up the Treasurers position whilst still playing first team rugby.

Blyth Rugby Club – Robert Bowman

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

During this offseason it was decided as a club we should revamp the clubhouse. It was a large undertaking but Robert, without hesitation, volunteered and just took it upon himself, with a small team, to help in any way he could. This included volunteering every week night and often weekends for 2 months, after he finished his day job, to help prep, paint and clean the changing rooms, clubhouse and toilets.

As well as this, he and his wife wash all of the senior rugby kits for the club which consist of two teams and includes training t shirts, match jerseys and waterproofs. Rob has also hosted several charity nights for the club to raise funds for variety of causes and helps looks after the younger players transitioning from Colts to Senior rugby.

What impact has this had on rugby?

As a club we are forever thankful for the endless hard work Rob carries out behind the scenes. The senior men's teams take pride in wearing the Blyth badge and kit as they are crisp and clean every match but it's one less thing the team needs to worry about - they can turn up and play.

The club also is in a much better financial situation following Rob's charity nights both for club members and the wider community as he hosted quiz and games nights.

Despite not being a player himself, a large portion of the young colts who have transitioned from colts to senior rugby look up to him as he helps guide them through the step up from age grade - both on and off the pitch - as well as looking after them as the social side.

Final thoughts!

Robert doesn't do anything of the things mentioned for praise, he loves the club and volunteering is his way in which he can help elevate the club and whole environment and leave the club a better place than when he joined.

Gosforth Rugby Club – Tom Kelly and Mark Emmet

How have these volunteers gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Tom is still one of the senior team players but has both started a growing girls junior rugby section over the last three years and has coached the U15 boys team since his son was 8.

Mark is the 1st XV Team Manager and ever present at the club. He also combines his time at Gosforth as a coach for the U15s and volunteers in the kitchen and bar.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Tom has been a leading volunteer and coach in the continued success and growth of both boys and girls age grade rugby. Without his input we would not have established girls rugby. Tom takes the girls from 9:30am each Sunday morning, then the U15 boys from 10:30am and is often the last to leave at the end of the session.

As 1st Team Manager, Marks role is to get the players to the game on time, make sure the kit is always available, is collected after the games and cleaned for the following Saturday. Mark will often make himself available on the subs bench if players become unavailable. He follows this up on Sunday mornings with his son, assisting in coaching, preparing the kids food and working behind the bar when needed.

Final thoughts!

Gosforth are both very fortunate and grateful for two dedicated volunteers who make a real difference both on and off the field. The future of the club depends on the success of age grade rugby and these two gents are part of that success.

Medicals Rugby Club – Angela Harrison, Emma Hall, Andrew Vine, Paul Hodgson and Jeanie Mark

How has this group of volunteers gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Our first two nominations Angela Harrison and Emma Hall are the club physios who put in lots of effort and time to get the players and old boys out on the pitch or sideline watching.

Andy Vine spends many an hour sorting fixtures and liaising between clubs and referees to get the games on.

Paul Hodgson works tirelessly getting the pitches ready and the club house ready for each weekend, he goes above and beyond his job role.
Jeannie Mark spends her Saturday afternoons, pulling pints and sorting food and welcomes all to Medicals Rfc.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Without the 5 mentioned above the club would not be able to function the way it does. They all put many hours into the club and are happy to help in other areas as and when needed. They allow players, families and friends to enjoy the club and are what the foundations the club are built on. They are all invaluable volunteers to Medicals RFC.

Morpeth Rugby Club – Alan Dawson

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Alan has a longstanding volunteer history at Morpeth RFC, initially coaching an Age Grade team for 4 seasons from U13 through to their Colts handover. He provides his legal knowledge, expertly guiding the Club Management Board on a variety of issues as they occur. This is a massive bonus, particularly significant over the last 4 years during which our major £650k Clubhouse Redevelopment project was being planned, progressed, financed, and delivered to successful completion (Oct 2022). In addition, Alan supports our 1st XV each week home & away running the line as Assistant Referee - he always does this enthusiastically with a smile, supporting the main match Referee in their officiating duties, and has done so for multiple seasons.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Key volunteer contribution much valued by the Club, and in 3 very different roles. Thank you Alan, please maintain the great work.

Morpeth Rugby Club – Ben Dale

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Ben played No8 for Morpeth 1st XV many seasons ago, and then instead of finishing he moved down the sides to latterly captain the 4th XV Stags in his last season playing. A keen rugby tourist and supporter of the club,

Ben also coached his son's age groups for many years and became heavily involved in the MRFC Youth section.
As part of his volunteer involvement Ben also took on the role of Age Grade Treasurer, until last year when the accounting process at the Club changed. He carried out his role efficiently and effectively, spending much of his own time producing the necessary accounts, invoice payments, and financial reports.

What impact has this had on rugby?

With approx. 400 Age Grade players from U6 to U16 age groups, plus parents / guardians, this represents a significant commitment to manage the associated financial administration at a consistently high standard. During his period of office we have also transitioned to direct player enrolment / Age Grade subscription payment via GMS systems as per RFU guidelines. This transition required close collaboration with other MRFC volunteers & Age Grade Coaches.
Ben has given much of his personal time to playing, organising and running the club and for that he should be rightly recognised as a true "Unsung Hero".

Morpeth Rugby Club – Yvonne Reed, Kate Pritchard and Craig Shaw

How has this group of volunteers gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Yvonne and Kate run the Under 9 rugby at Morpeth RFC and have done for four seasons.
Yvonne has given up countless hours of her own time to run the team, organising fixtures, registering players and safeguarding the players amongst many other things. Yvonne is the envy of all other clubs and can make even the hardest of situations run smoothly.
Kate works hand in hand with Yvonne and is out in all weathers raising funds by selling tea/coffee and snacks at the side of the pitch. Providing both a valuable service to the parents but also creating opportunities for the team. Kate can always be relied upon to dress up at Christmas parties and take the lead with party games which often lead to dance offs and other fun shenanigans! Both are enthusiastic and dedicated and this rubs off on the atmosphere around the club. Yvonne is also an enthusiastic part of the coaching team.

Craig has been fantastic ensuring the kids understand TREDS and also introducing contact and tackling for the U9.

What impact has this had on rugby?

The U9 team is very strong in numbers due to the commitment from all of the coaches, encouraging kids to play and improve no matter what their ability is. The players and parents have had some wonderful experience such as a tour to Melrose, fun days, Christmas parties and regular supplies of stash. This is all single-handedly organised by Yvonne and paid for by Kate's efforts at fund raising.

Final thoughts!

As a member of the coaching team, I am regularly told by coaches of other age groups and clubs how jealous they are that we have Yvonne and Kate at Morpeth RFC and how lucky we are to have their efforts.

Newcastle School for Boys – Edward Irons

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Edward is currently undertaking a Masters Degree at Newcastle University. He reached out to me last summer to ask if he could get involved with coaching rugby with us. Since then, Edward has given up vast amounts of his spare time, up to 10 hours a week to coach 11-18 year old boys at the school. His enthusiasm, knowledge and ability to make learning fun have had a huge impact on the performance and character of the players.

What impact has this had on rugby?

In a school of around 250 players, Edward has been involved in coaching all of them. At the top end, his subject knowledge has supported players to understand their roles much better and create a passion for improving. Lower down, he has delivered a range of formats of the game that support "non rugby players" to participate, progress and enjoy their involvement in a team game. He has simply been outstanding and I would be proud to recommend him as a coach to anyone at any level.

Final thoughts!

Edward is an excellent character and preaches the core values of rugby, often without knowing he is. A true role model on and off the pitch.

Northern Rugby Club – Ron Borley, Paul Scott and David Willoughby

How has this group of volunteers gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

In different ways these volunteers have contributed behind the scenes to ensure that Northern has continued to provide rugby for all abilities, ages and more recently girls and women for the last 40 years. All three are past players who have stayed with the club or returned to give their support.

Ron Borley has been with Northern for more than 40 years and has taken on most managerial roles from Chair of Mini/Youth to Chair of Ground. He is currently Chair of House and acting Chair of Rugby.

Paul Scott is an ex first team player who returned to Northern as first team manager but has also been active in player recruitment, sponsorship and undertaking Club renovations as necessary. Paul's enthusiasm is infectious and no doubt contributes to team bonding and player recruitment.

David Willoughby is an ex colt who returned to volunteer his services to the Club. This has involved managing the 3rd XV and more recently acting as touch-judge and general support for the 1st XV or any other role when requested.

All three volunteers are perfect examples of the volunteers which are essential for every club to exist and develop.

What impact has this had on rugby?

The Club is not just about rugby (and squash) but acts as a social hub for local residents as well as providing a venue for many local groups to meet. The contribution from Ron Borley ensures that the clubhouse is fit for purpose and welcoming to all.

Contributions from Paul Scott and David Willoughby ensure that the Club attracts, retains and encourages rugby of all levels. In particular Paul Scott has been responsible for essential sponsorship support in addition to his 24/7 team management.

Final thoughts!

All clubs need volunteers to survive. The nominated volunteers put in the significant extra support which makes them stand out as "unsung heroes".

Northern Rugby Club – Nick Weightman

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Nick has taken on a new role as a Lead Coach. He has recruited new players and now leads 30 players. He has also organised a tour to enrich the player's experience. Nick liaises with all parents, other coaches, the club. Everyday Nick spends time trying to support the club, players and parents. I am so grateful for his support.

What impact has this had on rugby?

We have had 6 new players who have never played the game. We have experienced players who have now gone on to the DPP programme. Nick supports parents by picking up players who parents can't attend.

Final thoughts!

Nick gives up his time every day to support a young group of players who not only have got better as players, but also as young people who consistently demonstrate the TREDS values.

Percy Park Rugby Club – Paul Jobson

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

As an ex first team Captain, Paul has stepped into the male First XV managers role with some aplomb. Ensuring strips, kit and training aids arrive at each game, home and away, he has created an environment that has positively impacted on the mental focus and welfare of our players. Further he also acts as assistant referee running the line and has to be said is irrefutably fair. Paul has also taken to cleaning the clubs changing rooms post games and on a Monday night ensuring that all our players change, play and train in surroundings that engenders a feel good factor which, in turn, has had a real positive impact in performance and participation.

What impact has this had on rugby?

With playing numbers in the male game falling, Paul has taken it upon himself to provide an environment where player worth is at the forefront. His efforts to provide a 'feel good' atmosphere where people are valued has seen player numbers increase at training and at games. Consistent playing numbers at second team level has proved to be a problem. Paul's insistence on giving players 'value' we have seen many participants return

and commit. The impact on the first XV is notable. Team focus and preparation has improved performance on the pitch with the men's First XV enjoying great success. Without Paul that positivity would be missing and our team would not be performing as well as they are currently. We cannot inform how highly Paul is thought of as a positive role model to us his contribution is priceless.

Percy Park Rugby Club – Mandy Wood

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Under very difficult circumstances and turmoil within Percy Park's First XV ladies team Mandy Wood stepped in as manager and coach to ensure that our woman's team continued to exist and remained a competitive unit on the field of play. In doing Mandy has shown great resilience and a real tenacity to succeed in the face of adversity that says an awful lot about her character. Her work and enthusiasm has steadied the ship and our girls are once again performing and playing with real enthusiasm in an environment that engenders self-worth and value. Without Mandy's input all the good work Percy Park had placed within their woman and girls section would have unravelled. Mandy has our heartfelt thanks.

What impact has this had on rugby?

In 'steadying the ship' Mandy has had a huge impact on the continued growth of woman and girls rugby at Percy Park.

A growing section of the rugby club that has seen players return to the fold and provide sufficient numbers that provision of second team rugby may be possible in the very near future. Mandy is also involved in assisting and leading upon a burgeoning junior girls section. A group whose enthusiasm for participation is heartwarming. How she interacts and creates belonging with that group of young people is gladdening to witness.

Ponteland Rugby Club – Stu Avis

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Stu has been a regular player at Ponteland for several years, mainly playing in the 2nd team. Last season the club struggled to field a regular 2nd team so Stu decided to step up and help. He volunteered to join the club committee and took on the role of 2nd team captain. All of this was

done despite having two forms of rare epilepsy. He took on the job with gusto and as a result the 2nds have fulfilled 90% of their fixtures to date. In December Stu was admitted to hospital in London for a four week stay, involving fitting electrodes into his skull for possible pioneering treatment. Despite being 'wired' constantly he continued to press and cajole people to play, ensuring the games went ahead without him.
On his return to the club, he returned to the field but, on realising that the junior section was short of players he set up a recruitment process in his local school. Oh, and during all of this he was also assistant coach for the clubs developing ladies team!!

What impact has this had on rugby?

The 2nd team have played regular fixtures and Stu has developed a strong relationship with other local teams so players routinely guest for each other to get local matches on - a godsend in our days of reducing player participation.
This also builds cross community cooperation in the region.
In view of his school participation, second team games and ladies coaching Stu's player number influence will exceed a hundred players - not bad for someone dealing with his own medical issues!

Ponteland Rugby Club – Chris and Emma Freer

How has this group of volunteers gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Reaching the tail end of his long first team career Chris wanted to put something back into the club. He took on the role of 2nd team vice captain and joined the club committee. His son and daughter are involved in the junior section and Chris took his coaching and first aid badges and got involved. He also helped out coaching at County level at Under 16s. He has become a roaming coach, helping out various age groups. His wife Emma also joined in, playing her first game of rugby for the clubs women's team. She also joined the club committee, took her coaching and first aid badges and now helps coach the under 10s.
In the summer, Chris and Emma ran mixed touch sessions at the club and entered a team in the Falcons summer touch competitions.

What impact has this had on rugby?

The Freer family are fully involved and committed in all aspects of the club in the community. Their outgoing, friendly attitude has encouraged

people to take up rugby and has attracted numerous players and families to the club. Their commitment to the summer touch programme has opened up the game to people who wouldn't normally get involved as whole family groups have enjoyed the camaraderie - and cut throat competition!! They have encouraged well over a hundred players to join or continue to play.

Tynedale Rugby Club – Andrew Neal

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Over the last 4 years Andrew has taken on the organisation of Tynedale Youth Section and due to various reasons has ended up organising, running, administrating and trouble-shooting most of it single handedly.

He is driven, committed, selfless and highly organised and as such - the perfect volunteer. His knowledge of rugby makes him perfect for the role. He has created a welcoming, friendly culture at the club for players, coaches, visiting teams and parents alike. This culture is driven by the key elements of Respect, Teamwork, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship. Andrew has produced a fantastic document - essentially a handbook for good practice within the club. It is superbly constructed and very useful. He did all this in his own time without being asked or thanked.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Tynedale youth section is flourishing through Andrews leadership. Every age group has never had more players or coaches involved. The success has spilled onto the pitch with several age groups winning county trophies/plates last season, and most going far in the 2023/4 edition - the u16s already county champions.

Andrew's encouragement and organising RFU CPD and first aid courses has meant all us coaches are more engaged, confident, and I hope better at teaching our squads, both on and off the pitch. Andrew has ensured the bar / food area post match is very welcoming, he changed caterers and we are known for great post match hospitality, particularly noted by the multiple touring sides we host every year. Friday night lights games have been instituted by Andy too.

Final thoughts!

Sadly, Andrew lost his wife Joanne in December 2023. A very popular lady, well known and a big help at the club. She was a dear friend of all at Tynedale. Since this tragic point others at the club have stepped in to try

and take the pressure off Andy at this awful time. It is only now that I, and others have realised how much this one fantastic man does selflessly and so well for the betterment of all us playing and coaching at Tynedale. It is so impressive what he does for the club - kit, food, course, signage, tours...
When I realised just how much Andy does, and how well, I felt compelled to nominate him for a very fitting award.

Wallsend Rugby Club – Doug Pearson

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Doug Pearson has played rugby all his life for Wallsend RFC, retiring at the age of fifty-five then becoming Chair of our club for 4 years, and now Head Groundsman.
From 2010 Doug affectionately known as 'Ground Keeper Willy', has put in at least thirty hours a week of voluntary service, working at our ground, six days a week.
At the age of 74, whatever the weather, he can still be seen dealing with the day-to-day pitch and ground maintenance/machinery issues, line marking the pitches, grass cutting around the site, and laundry of the various teams' kits.
On match days he ensures all the team kit is ready. Similarly, on training nights Doug ensures all the training equipment is up to standard and ready for use by the coaches. He has recently been complimented for the support he provided by a charity and Newcastle Thunder who needed the use of our pitch.
Doug is environmentally friendly, sorting out recyclable material and disposing of materials responsibly. In addition to this, He has planted over 300 tree saplings on site and regularly tops up the bird feeders.
Doug also actively seeks sponsorship for specific ground maintenance issues successfully obtaining £5k for hollow tyning from one of the club's donors. When we held a circus on site for a month in August 2023 Doug attended every day (having marked out parking bays on the grass) ensuring 100 plus cars two or three times a day entered and departed the site safely enhancing the reputation of our club.

What impact has this had on rugby?

In 2018 Doug was invited to Twickenham on a tour of the ground and to learn about grass maintenance, consistently applying this to our pitches.

Having consulted with club members they see Doug taking volunteering to a new level by cleaning changing rooms, collecting strips and laundry, cutting the grass, and the very high standard he maintains across the whole site whatever comes his way including this winter's bad weather. As one member jokingly remarked 'He can cure people's insomnia when he starts talking about grass'.

All of our club members and parents are grateful for him setting up pitches for matches and ensuring the ground is safe for spectators to enjoy our training and matches. The consensus is if anybody deserves an award for being a volunteer they can't think of a better person.

Final thoughts!

Doug is a real character who loves rugby. On his trip to Twickenham in 2018, he is fondly remembered for making a snow angel on the centre circle of the pitch. He willingly passes on his rugby knowledge to anyone seeking advice.

Recognition of Doug's dedication is long overdue.

Wallsend Rugby Club – John Slator

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

John has been in love with rugby since his school days. Today, at 48 years old, he has a full-time high-pressure job, is a committed family man, and diligently performs the Club Secretary's role. John conducts himself with integrity and transparency and acts in the best interest of our club.

He is a fantastic communicator who runs our Wallsend RFC website and social media transforming the club's contact with the wider community. He supervises four volunteers who carry out both the governance and social media for our club.

John communicates effectively with our club sponsors and our suppliers. He is committed to inclusivity and has recently met with an LGBTQ team and has encouraged them to make our club their home.

Further, John has recently qualified as a referee, organised and ensured all coaches and some parents have the requisite first-aid training. Coaching our successful U11 side, he runs regular training sessions and organises matches on Sundays.

If we host a festival John regularly provides barbeques for the players and the parents.

His efforts have the youth engaged and his efforts are fully supported by the parents who are now volunteering to support post-match efforts.
John's biggest achievement this year is to lead from start to finish to establish a charity foundation that has been approved by the Charity Commission. This achievement has ensured the long-term sustainability, success, and growth of the club.

What impact has this had on rugby?

John has been regularly praised for his high governance standards by both Northumberland and English RFU. He has successfully negotiated sponsorship deals and increased demand to advertise and hold events, promoting the financial stability and growth of the club.
Circus de Hilarious held a month-long event with us. This saw John appearing on TV, promoting rugby, and organising the volunteers' roster for a month. This raised a five-figure sum which has been reinvested, brought in new players, and volunteers, and ensured the circus's return in 2024.
This year, he has transformed our communication through the relevance, timeliness, quality, and content of his articles. This has increased hits on our social media from double digits to 1500 hits per day, increased our matchday attendance, and the recruitment of players, and volunteers. This includes the largest-ever recruitment of youth players (99) in one year, a new senior's second team, and potentially increasing the club membership from 120 to 450 by next season.
Recently our chef went sick two days before the club's Burns Night celebrations (John organised the event) he completed his health and safety food hygiene course online working until midnight. It went ahead and was attended by other club presidents etc raising money and protecting the club's reputation.
Finally, thanks to John, our charity foundation allows the club benefactors to now bequeath money, to develop the club's infrastructure, increase participation in rugby union, develop new partnerships, and widen the club's appeal in our community.

Final thoughts!

Wallsend RFC operates in a socially deprived area, where football is king. Rugby was not until recently in the mindset of our local community; it was seen as very middle class. John's efforts such as obtaining funding to get coaches from the Newcastle Falcons Foundation to go into schools and signposting them to us have paid dividends. John makes rugby fun and is

instrumental through his enthusiasm, dedication, and promotion of rugby worthy of this award.

Whitley Bay Rockcliff Rugby Club – Ben Drury

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Ben spends most of his spare time when not working helping girls and women get into a playing regular rugby. Whether it's cleaning the kit, writing a training plan or on the pitch itself, he spends most of his spare time trying to enrich rugby in Northumberland.

He spends hours every week on the rugby pitch coaching and helping out, so that every girl and woman who can, gets game time and practice so that everyone can be the best that they can be.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Ben has done loads to make sure girls and women of all ages can get training and games. He regularly helps set up matches for the county u16 girls, u18 girls and women to make sure they all get as much playing time as possible. He often tries his best through rain or shine to make sure games and training comes through and even when they do get cancelled he tries his best to make sure they get their intended games.

As a girl who has gone through this county set up, I have seen how much impact he and the team around him have had on the girls - they see that someone believes in them, is there for them and tries their best to make sure they can develop in their game. We get the encouragement we need to succeed. With his contributions we now get consistent county seasons with many opportunities to improve.

Whitley Bay Rockcliff Rugby Club – Richard Maslen

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Richard is the 'proprietor' of the Whitley Bay Rockcliff RFC club shop and kit swap. Each Sunday he mans the wooden kiosk which is pitchside at the club and provides players from Rockcliff and visiting sides with access to free or discounted kit to allow them to play rugby. This is especially important as it ensures that all players using the Rugby365 Artificial Grass Pith have the required kit, maintaining the facility in pristine condition for community use.

Richard sources additional kit through e-bay and other online sites and uses his buying and selling expertise to ensure that there is always kit available for players new to the game or who have outgrown their current kit. Richard gives his time freely and brings an approach that is generous and fun.

What impact has this had on rugby?

All of the nearly 400 age grade players at Whitley Bay Rockcliff have benefited from Richard's volunteering efforts, ensuring ready access to kit every Sunday to ensure that they may play their game in the correct attire. This has been especially beneficial to those players who might find it difficult to spend the amounts required to access boots and waterproof clothing, but who due to Richard's uncanny ability to source new and second-hand footwear at ridiculously low prices means money has never been a barrier to participation.

Richard has even taken on supplying teas, coffees and snacks from his kit kiosk ("As I'm here, I might as well!") to ensure spectators are kept fully nourished.

Final thoughts!

Richard took on the kit swap role as a one-off one weekend, from when it's moved from a tabletop available after training to a kit kiosk available through Age Grade Rugby sessions. He also organised a shipment of ex-Rockcliff kit which became available when we changed suppliers to be sent to Fiji for use by players there who would otherwise not have access to kit.

Whitley Bay Rockcliff – Ingrid Whitworth

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Ingrid is the most integral part of the whole clubs girls and women's sides. She manages all different age groups, organising everything. She spends hours every day sorting all the day to day stuff out. She is amazing for the game. Best thing my niece has ever done was to join this club and have Ingrid there for everything.

What impact has this had on rugby?

Lillie my niece had given up on rugby as the girls rugby wasn't going much. It was so hard getting game time and since we contacted Ingrid and she

joined the club I've never seen her more happy playing rugby. Ingrid is an amazing woman and supports all the girls through everything.

Final thoughts!

If there were 100 awards to give out for all categories I will put Ingrid forward for them all she is Rockliff's very own Wonder Woman!

Whitley Bay Rockcliff Rugby Club – Martin Page

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to contribute to the development of the club?

Martin is Rockcliff through and through, would undoubtedly bleed cardinal and gold and is an indispensable member/volunteer. I say indispensable, given his commitment since joining the club in 1979, yet unsung, as the older folk are often forgotten about as the years roll on and more youngsters come through.

Martin is the leader of a group of volunteers fondly referred to as the Old Farts, even if he disputes his leadership status! I would have loved to have acknowledged all of them, not just five, according to the conditions. Martin volunteers countless hours each week, whatever the weather, to ensure the grounds are in pristine condition and lends a hand however he can with whatever else is needed. When Martin is not volunteering, you will find him watching one of the sides at Rockcliff, whatever their gender or age.

Martin also served as a League Secretary and on the men's rugby committee at Rockcliff in 2022/2023. Amongst his many roles spanning decades, he served as President at Rockcliff and with the NRU Referee Society. His enthusiasm for the game remains, and he is always willing to give an ear or share advice with anyone who shares his love for rugby.

Whatever day of the week, you will find Martin at Rockcliff doing something to help!

What impact has this had on rugby?

Players often don't see or take for granted the efforts given to allow them to play the game they love. Martin works hard, out of sight and out of mind. Weather conditions have been challenging, and a concerted effort has been made to get games on. Although Rockcliff has an artificial grass pitch, they only have one grass pitch, and with the poor weather conditions, significant strain has been put on the field as the club has hundreds of players across all ages and genders. Martin's efforts with

the Old Farts have ensured minimal disruption has been caused. Not an easy task!

In his other roles, you will find Martin doing the jobs others don't want to do, such as the administration involved as a League Secretary or attending meetings as a men's rugby committee member on a Monday night. If a changing room is dirty, Martin sweeps up. If the fire needs wood, Martin is on the case. If someone is after advice, Martin makes time. It is challenging to quantify the difference he makes.

Final thoughts!

Martin moved from the South and joined Wallsend RFC in 1966 before joining Rockcliff in 1979. Injury stopped Martin from playing earlier than anticipated, so he decided to pick up the whistle and start refereeing before becoming an assessor. His commitment and volunteered time is unrivalled and to the benefit of our county. Martin deserves recognition as an Unsung Hero not only for 2023 but for the many years he has given the game. He's truly a legend.

Citations for Nominees – Connecting the Community

Connecting the Community - A volunteer or a group of volunteers who have gone out of their way to embed their club/organisation at the heart of their community. Strengthening their offer within the local community and using the power of Rugby to bring their community together.

The nominee has:

Helped the club to have strong presence in the community and actively participate in community events.

Provided opportunities for people within the community to engage with the club on or off field e.g. Fireworks, Beer Festivals, Community Open days.

Brought the community together e.g. supporting local charities and initiatives or fundraising.

Ensured that they provide a welcoming environment to all members of the community e.g providing use of facilities for local organisations to use.

Border Park Rugby Club – David Batey

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to build relationships with the local community and engage with a wider audience?

David ran touch rugby sessions in Bellingham over the summer to try and re engage with people who had fallen out of love with the game. He ran a number of sessions which has lead to 5 people coming back in to playing full contact rugby. It was often a 2 hour round trip to do the hour long sessions.

What impact has this had on the club and/or individuals and what achievements has this contributed to?

As mentioned, it has engaged our club back with the locals and has got 5 people back in to playing rugby. It has also got 2 people to play rugby for the first time ever and getting involved with the great sport.

Final thoughts!

David always went above and beyond to run the sessions at a large cost to him but he is going to run the sessions again next summer and we need more people like him involved in the sport.

North Shields Rugby Club – Simon Forster

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to build relationships with the local community and engage with a wider audience?

I would like to nominate Simon Forster for the volunteer of the year 2024 under the category of "Connecting the Community". Simon approached the club several years ago with the intention of rekindling our youth and juniors section. We had Previously run youth sections at the club however their sustainability had proved awkward with players and coaches moving up through the age groups with no backfill in the lower age ranges. Simon had a clear plan and started with an U14 team bringing along his son with a number of his friends. The team quickly grew into a successful squad of players and Simon set about building other teams at various age groups, to do so he recruited friends and contacts to help out. Through the RFU schools programme Simon went into the three local schools once a week to deliver rugby sessions to the pupils. His drive and enthusiasm shone through and we began picking up players in numbers. Simon also approached local detached youth projects and invited them along to take part, making sure that these youths were not sidelined, Simon made sure to source kit arrange transport and out of his own pocket supplied sponsorship and funding. Over the years Simon has worked tirelessly to build the club's reputation in our community, despite the withdrawal of the RFU schools programme Simon still maintains contact with the schools and delivers coaching to the pupils.

He has set up an annual schools cup tournament at the club where the teams come to compete for a magnificent trophy. In the school holidays Simon has provided a week long rugby programme 'free to local children' seeking financial support from the local council and getting some of our older youth players to help out as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. Many disadvantaged and troubled youths have benefited from Simon's dedicated support, we have among our members young men who have suffered from mental health and drug issues, we have asylum seekers who have fled from the horrors of war and oppression they have all been made welcome at our club, no one is left out and everyone gets a game. Simon has committed an enormous amount of his own time and money to making our club a success in our community, we are forever grateful for his commitment and I nominate him for this award as acknowledgment to his efforts.

What impact has this had on the club and/or individuals and what achievements has this contributed to?

We are very aware of our position in our community. Simon has worked tirelessly to promote our game and our club. By working with a number of other agencies he has reached out and made a huge contribution to our local area: RFU Schools Programme, Northumberland RFU, Newcastle Falcons Community Foundation, Norham High School, John Spence High School, St Thomas More RC School, Northumbria University, Newcastle University, NTEC College, Phoenix Detached Youth Project, YMCA - Supported Living, RISE Project.

North Shields is a hard, working-class area and ranks among the top 10% deprived areas of the country. Unemployment is high, job prospects are poor and as a result, our community suffers from high crime, drugs, mental health and social issues. There have seen massive cuts to local authority funding which has weighed heavily on local charities and groups who usually pick up the slack.

Rugby is a great game but it is also a great and generous family. Simon has worked hard to promote the values of our game by offering a helping hand to those who would benefit most from our support. We provide an inclusive welcoming environment where no one is left out.

Simon has dedicated a lot of work, sacrificing his own time and money to make a difference in our community by inviting people into our clubhouse and welcoming them into our family.

His warm heart and generous personality has made a huge difference to a lot of individuals. Simon has always led from the front, and his approachable and caring attitude means he has counselled some of our members through their darkest times.

This award would go some way to showing our appreciation for his contribution to our game and our wider community.

Final thoughts!

RISE Project Link
https://youtu.be/0t3o5JHEB3U?si=7SYBHPh9aVKl8nec
Club Matters Link
https://youtu.be/gcBU0Wjci44?si=Qc817Apg6zwHuPMD

Northern Rugby Club – Ben Towell

How has this volunteer gone above and beyond to build relationships with the local community and engage with a wider audience?

Ben supports coaching and leads the administration for U12s. He has built strong club connections in Edinburgh and other regions outside of Northumberland which have led to (cross border) fixtures/tours across the entire junior/mini sections. This year Ben supported me in creating access to rugby in a local middle school, delivering after-school rugby club and promoting links with all local clubs.

What impact has this had on the club and/or individuals and what achievements has this contributed to?

Ben's proactive organisation and administration has built excellent club connections not just in Northumberland but further afield. These connections have led to strong bonds between clubs through fixtures, tours and festivals, cementing the values of rugby and promoting the brand/reputation of Northern FC mini and juniors section.

Whitley Bay Rockcliff Rugby Club – Richie Bloomfield, Eric Brooks, Micky Knott, Andy Partis and Nigel Jamieson

How has this group of volunteers gone above and beyond to build relationships with the local community and engage with a wider audience?

The five nominees are the core team of the Rockcliff History Society which in 2023 built and inaugurated a war memorial for the fallen of World War One who were members of the club. For unknown reasons, the club had never had a WW1 memorial as far as even the longest-serving members could recall, despite having had an honours board for WW2. Through painstaking research, involving census, civic, military, newspaper and club archives, over two years the team assembled a list of 14 players and then commissioned a new memorial to be installed on a stone plinth erected by the team. On 4 November the memorial was inaugurated by the local parish priest in a ceremony involving the Deputy Lieutenant of the County, the local MP, several local dignitaries, the Royal British Legion, Army Cadet Corp and a parade of Age Grade Players from the club.

What impact has this had on the club and/or individuals and what achievements has this contributed to?

The research effort has galvanised a group of volunteers who have made visits to war graves as well as conducting thorough and painstaking research. These volunteers include people from outside the club who have chosen to join the effort to commemorate our war dead, and the research, war memorial commemoration and surrounding publicity has tapped into a genuine community effort. Members of the history society have been invited to deliver talks to local schools, and it the commitment to honouring veterans has led to an even stronger and more embedded partnership with the Royal British Legion who now use the club twice a month for a veteran's breakfast and evening social event.

We are awaiting a visit from the Honorary French Consul for the North East and Cumbria and the Mayor of Morlaix in Brittany as one of the fallen was a French national.

Final thoughts!

The inauguration event garnered terrific publicity with social media coverage and acknowledgements from the rugby community across the UK and further afield, including the alma mater of many of those honoured. TV coverage saw the event as the lead item on the 6pm BBC regional news programme, Look North, on the day of the inauguration, one week before Remembrance Day.

Citations for Nominees – Game for All

Game For All - A volunteer or a group of volunteers who have developed an inspiring offer to open the game up to new & underrepresented audiences & make the game more inclusive and accessible for all.

The nominee has:

Used creativity to increase participation in Rugby from all members of the community, with a specific focus on under-represented groups.

Thought outside the box to remove barriers to make Rugby inclusive and accessible.

Provided a welcoming, accessible, and inclusive environment.

Addressed and increased diversity in volunteer workforce through recruitment, retention and support for volunteers from diverse communities.

Whitley Bay Rockcliff Rugby Club – Lesley Marshall

Explain how this volunteer has engaged individuals from under-represented groups in rugby?

Lesley have been instrumental in developing a Touch Rugby offer at Whitley Bay Rockcliff which now encompasses elite touch, social touch, and walking rugby. Through her leadership, the club now hosts an annual touch festival and two In Touch leagues (one summer, one winter) drawing teams both affiliated to clubs and those without.

There are over 50 people regularly engaged in Touch Rugby at the club, many of who are parents of Age Grade players who never having played rugby themselves or lacked confidence to get involved in contact rugby but felt able to participate in Touch.

What impact has this had on the club and/or individuals & what achievements has this contributed to?

The introduction of Touch Rugby has been one of the pillars in bringing a seven-days-per-week rugby offer to Whitley Bay Rockcliff.

- Elite Touch on Monday's sees the 30 or so Blackadders Touch players train and encourages those keen to be involved with rugby but reluctant - or unable - to participate in contact rugby.
- Social Touch on a Thursday brings around 40 players to Rockcliff with a mix of regular touch players, parents of age grade players and others seeking a rugby-related workout.

- Walking Rugby on a Friday is targeted at older players, principally over 50s, but also see's children and grandchildren join the fun and even some current senior players recovering from injury.

Final thoughts!

Our first New Year's Eve touch get-together saw over 50 players along at Rockcliff working off some of the Christmas sluggishness and also raised money for the local Oncology Ward.

We've even found a new member of the men's coaching team, an ex-professional who joined the touch set-up after being advised to stop playing due to concussion!

Northumberland Fixture Secretaries
Represented by Shaun Malarkey

Explain how this group of volunteers, has engaged individuals from under-represented groups in rugby?

Fixtures Secretaries in Northumberland since the end of Covid have worked together to ensure players of all levels get to play this wonderful game.

With reduced numbers of players returning to the game after covid the Secretaries have worked tirelessly together to arrange games when clubs can't get a full side out. They have worked together to bring players together from different clubs and arrange games.

It ensures players get playing time and a chance to engage with players from a variety of different clubs.

What impact has this had on the club and/or individuals & what achievements has this contributed to?

All players who have potentially lost the chance to play due to other clubs being unable to get a full side out.

This is a weekly issue and the Fixtures Secretaries have reacted positively and engaged with each other to ensure over 100s of players get to play.

Final thoughts!

Fixtures Secretaries take calls at all times of the day and night. They ensure referees are acquired and update club stewards and staff so they know when games are organised. This can often be late on Fridays to ensure the facilities and pitches are available.

Citations for Nominees – Game Changer

Game Changer - A volunteer or a group of volunteers who have tried new ways of doing things to improve their club, demonstrating an open mind and willingness to adapt and learn to ensure their club/organisation is fit for the future.

The nominee has:

Put new ideas into practice to improve the club e.g. Friday night lights, adopting Game On framework.

Implemented new processes or systems to help the club operate as efficiently as possible e.g. introducing a new membership system or sustainable approach to operations.

Thinking outside of the box & challenging the norm to enhance experiences.

Continuously learning and looking at how they can add value to the club/organisation.

Ashington Joint Welfare Rugby Club – Iain Douglas

How has the individual used their initiative to improve their organisation?

Iain initiated girls contact rugby for U12 and U14 girls at our rugby club enabling those girls who had played touch rugby at younger age groups to remain at the club and move onto full contact rugby. Iain not only initiated this but is also the main coach. This also builds on our established women's touch rugby team and will help fulfil our ambition of eventually fielding a women's contact team as well as increasing our rugby offer to a new group of young people.

As we didn't have enough girls to fulfil fixtures Iain was instrumental in initiating the Northumberland Valkyries team, contacting other local clubs who also didn't have full girls teams, bringing together girls from Ashington, Alnwick, Blyth and Morpeth to form a team.

What achievements has this contributed to?

Iain has opened up full contact rugby to girls who would not have had the chance to pay rugby at our club and by bringing together other clubs in similar positions, he has pulled together (with support from the other clubs) a team to play matches against other girls teams.

Iain also initiated 2 girls rugby festivals to be held at our club. The first an u12s festival was attended by over 100 girls. The second was an U14s

festival, again to be attended by over 100 girls. Unfortunately, this was cancelled due to waterlogged pitches but it is currently being rearranged.

Final Thoughts!

The work Iain has done has been a real game changer in increasing our rugby offer to not only girls from our locality, but in leading the creation of the Valkyries, it has increased the rugby offer to many girls in Northumberland and this has been recognised by NRU who have asked him to be joint chair of Northumberland Girls Rugby.

Thank You!

When we reflect and look back to how things were at our clubs when we returned to rugby after the enforced break due to covid, it is an unbelievable achievement that for the last two years, from a standing start, we have been able to run a full programme of rugby across all age grades, run a full representative rugby programme across all age groups including adult, and run a full league and cup programme at adult level. It is no secret that the rugby landscape has changed post covid and it is fantastic to see how our clubs are working together to get games on, to get game time for players and to support each other in developing new forms of the sport as we see more and more people begin to access and enjoy the touch, mixed touch and walking rugby programmes now available at our clubs. It is also incredibly encouraging to see how the Girls and Womens game is developing in the County with numbers increasing year on year.

As well as the wonderful people from our clubs that we have already introduced to you, we have a number of other people here today who have helped support rugby within the County. The newly formed Age Grade Working Group are forging ahead with new ideas and projects for next season, the Neuro Diversity and Inclusion Working Group are working hard to help support coaches, players and parents following a call out for help from the clubs. Phase One of their work is being delivered now and Phase Two begins over the summer. A new Competitions Working Group is now up and running and will work on some of the matters discussed at the recent Chair of Rugby meeting. The Chairs of Rugby themselves at that meeting discussed some of the issues around adult rugby and re worked the County Cup Competitions for next season with the aim of more meaningful matches, better competition and less pressure on players at the end of the season. We have a club development weekend planned for the end of July which will offer a "menu" of drop in sessions which all club coaches, as well as safeguarding officers and rugbysafe officers can access. Just in this brief summary of some of the work going on in County, seven different groups of volunteers are mentioned – and there are many more at our clubs - from Club Treasurers and Secretaries to Chairs of Age Grade, Grounds Teams, Referees, 1st Aiders, Pitch Marshalls, Car Park Marshalls, those who design and publish Social Media

posts – the list is endless – and all these volunteers give freely of their time to give our players, no matter what their age, the opportunity to play, develop, enjoy and showcase their rugby skills.

We should not forget the impact the game has within our social circles. They say rugby friendships last a lifetime. It is heartening to see so many people supporting rugby at their clubs catching up with old "foes" from on the pitch as well as friends off the pitch, staying a while post-match chatting and catching up.

Thank you for all you do to support rugby in Northumberland.

Season 2023-24 Northumberland Cups

We now move on to the Presentations for the Season 2023-24 Northumberland Cups.

Congratulations to:

Papa Johns Winners – Wallsend RFC

Senior Cup Winners – Alnwick RFC
Senior Cup Finalists – Northern RFC

Senior Plate Winners – Ponteland RFC

Senior Plate Shield Winners – Morpeth Reivers
Senior Plate Shield Finalists – Ashington Joint Welfare RFC

Senior Shield Winners – Wallsend RFC

No2 Challenge Cup Winners – Novos 2
No2 Challenge Cup Finalists – Medicals 2

No3 Junior Challenge Cup Winners – Novos 3
No3 Junior Challenge Cup Finalists – North Shields Crusaders

No4 Junior Challenge Shield Winners – Morpeth Ranters

No5 Challenge Cup Winners – combined team - shared by North Shields Vets & Ponteland Vets

No4 and No5 Junior Challenge Shield and Cup Finalists
Ashington Colliers
Novos Vets
Percy Park Vets
Whitley Bay Rockcliff Vets

Colts Cup Winners – Novos Colts
Colts Cup Finalists – Northern Colts

Colts Plate Winners – Tynedale Colts
Colts Plate Finalists – Whitley Bay Rockcliff Colts

U16 Girls County Waterfall Cup & Sarah Hunter Cup – Northern Girls
U16s Girls County Waterfall Plate – Morpeth Girls

U16s Boys Waterfall Competition – Northern RFC
U16s Boys Waterfall Competition – Tynedale RFC
U16s Boys Waterfall Competition – Whitley Bay Rockcliff RFC

U15 Boys Waterfall Cup – Alnwick RFC
U15 Boys Waterfall Plate – Gosforth RFC

U14 Girls County Waterfall Cup – Northern Girls
U14 Girls County Waterfall Plate – Tynedale Girls

U14 Boys Waterfall Cup – Northern RFC
U14 Boys Waterfall Plate – Wallsend RFC

U13 Boys Waterfall Cup – Northern RFC
U13 Boys Waterfall Plate – Gosforth RFC
U13 Boys Waterfall Bowl – Alnwick RFC

Moving on to our CANDY, County and Merit League Winners, congratulations to:
CANDY 1 Winners – Tynedale Raiders
CANDY 2 North Winners – Sunderland Shipwrights
CANDY 2 South Winners – Bishop Auckland 2
ALN League Winners – Ashington 2
Merit League Winners – Tynedale Hadrians

And Finally ……

The final awards of today – to the Northumberland Value the Volunteer Finalists 2023…….

In third Place – Doug Pearson from Wallsend RFC

In second place – Martin Page from Whitley Bay Rockcliff RFC

Our winner and attending the Twickenham Event……..

We hope you have enjoyed the event this evening bringing together the volunteers who help make our rugby clubs so welcoming, friendly and safe for the adult and age grade teams here tonight celebrating the end of a successful season.

Enjoy the summer – we look forward to seeing you again in September!

We will now conclude the evening by conducting the County Cup Draws for Season 2024-25.

Good Luck to all participants!

Buy Raffle Tickets