Age Grade Forum Meeting – 6th November 2024 at Gosforth RFC

In attendance; Andrew Neal (Tynedale and NRU Chair of Age Grade), Mark Reade (CBSM) Lee Weatherley (Chair of NRU), Ian Moralee (Dir of Rugby NRU), Claire Sharpe (County Administrator), Gav Beasley (Falcons Delivery and Operations Manager), Sam Shaw Kew (Mowden Hall School & NRU Youth Committee), Mark Harrison (Ashington), Amy Moody (Morpeth Chair of Minis & CSO), Chris Freer (Ponteland Chair of Age Grade), Emma Freer (Ponteland), Remya Norris (Blyth), Andy Carr (Blyth Chair of Age Grade), Ben Rolls (Blyth / Blyton), Charley Robinson (Gosforth CSO), Craig Thirlwell (Gosforth CSO), David Hobbs (Gosforth), Ben Towell (Northern), Chris Blyth (Northern), Peter McCasnier (Northern), Jamie Walker (Northern), Josephine Hall (Gosforth, John McIntryre (Northern), Jon Nugent (Gosforth Chair and Chair of Age Grade), John Slator (Wallsend CSO and Hon Sec), Andrea Cook (Wallsend Chair of Age Grade), James Walker (Gosforth), James Cartmell (Gosforth), Tom Steele (Novos Chair of Age Grade), Steve Mullins (Tynedale), John Blacklock (Tynedale) and Sam Walton (Northern).

Apologies for absence; None

1. "***The Northumberland Way***" – AN opened by stating that the clubs need players coming through to support adult rugby in the future and Sunday morning rugby is the way to do this. There was broad agreement. AN asked whether to do this we should have our own standards that worked alongside the RFU rule and regulations ie "A Northumberland Way."

The attendees were asked to work in groups to consider what the "Northumberland Way" would mean to them and the following was reported.

Aims and Focus (brainstorm)
Coaches instil a love of rugby to find players that want to play and move into adult rugby.
Coaches need to enjoy what they do on a Sunday - no shouting and screaming at the players.
Social side of what rugby is.
Equip children with life skills linked to TREDS (teamwork, respect, enjoyment, discipline, sportsmanship) all of which are fundamental skills for life.
Sport enhances opportunities in life.
Inclusive for all – players, referees, club members – it needs to be fun, people need to enjoy.
Developing Skills
Fun, train, learn, make it good.
Develop the rugby community.

What does coaching mean? (brainstorm)
Provide a fun and safe learning environment.
Player development as individuals.
Be a positive role model
Be aware that Sundays could be the highlight of the week if home life is difficult.
Player centred – everyone involved – you have a responsibility to make sure everyone in your squad makes it and enjoys what they are doing.
Swap players in and out, adapt games, mix teams. Make things appropriate.

Conduct (brainstorm)
TREDS model.
Football behaviour v Rugby behaviour. Is it leaking into our game?
Respect barriers
Pack mentality of parents – intimidating on a touchline.

Coaches should be able to ask parents to keep the volume down.
Clubs should not put pressure on teams
There should be no pressure from within the age group.
Vocal coaches – coaches hijack the half time talk
Let players be the decision makers – move away from "Tell" coaching.
Learn to be competitive, but at the right time and with the right values.
Competitive elements of the game at an early age (leagues and competitions) drives bad behaviour.
Teams losing by large margins – is this enjoyable for the players. Regulation 15. Bbb

Abuse – "shit ref" – a lot of parents are not from a rugby background and don't understand what is happening on the pitch.
Qualified refs – we need more of them.
Intro to refereeing course

LW explained that there can be reasons why a referee doesn't make a decision – letting the game flow, impact within the game and does it impact on play? Lee advised that the NRURS had a presentation which Lee had put together which explained to Clubs and their supporters the concept of materiality and why, what appears to be an offence, is not penalised. He would be happy to present it to any clubs or at the next Youth meeting.

Peer to Peer Coaching and Player led sessions, Fun, engaging and creative sessions and game/match mentality (Combining brainstorm notes)
Encourage refereeing of peers. U16 Girls can referee U12 Girls.
CB Innovation Funding – referee project (encouraging boys and girls to participate in refereeing courses)
Working idea of a collective "this is what it means" to: Play / Coach / Referee / Spectate (be a parent at) in Northumberland. Document / socials?
We need more qualified referees.
We need to stamp out abuse.
We need to stop parents encroaching onto pitch.
Moving up to adult rugby – we need to encourage our players and integrate them before they leave colts and make the step up.

Steve Mullins said the John Fletcher had implemented a concept at Tynedale RFC that "Sunday should be a fantastic experience". Steve said that for some children the Sunday morning experience could be the highlight of their week and therefore there was duty on the coaches and parents to make sure they delivered a great experience. If this was the starting point of all Sunday session then we would be well on our way to deliver a memorable and enjoyable experience.

AN added that he would like the coaches and players to come up with a set of standards that embraced the topics the attendees came up with, that would be known as the "Northumberland Way."

2. County waterfall Cups
AN has sent out updates to Clubs. AN explained that all age grade competitions need to be approved by the CB and going forward the running of the County Cup competitions will be brought "in house" and run by the Youth Committee.

LW explained that any clubs running competitions or festivals which fall under Competitive activity must have prior CB approval. Regulation 15.9 (c) states that club Competitions,

Tournaments and Festivals must have written approval from the CB before they are allowed to run. Without this the events would be considered unauthorised, and the clubs would be subject to disciplinary action. The clubs involved will not have the benefit of the RFU Insurance cover and may be liable for any claims brought against them. Ian Moralee confirmed that a note to the clubs would be sent out on this basis.

AN confirmed for the 25/26 season the draws for cups will be made at the end of this season. Weekends for fixtures will be allocated and entered into the age Grade calendar to allow clubs to plan appropriately.

AN discussed the low numbers at U16 boys and encouraged teams to be sensible and lend players, bring teams together to do joint training sessions or play together to get boys game time. There needs to be a change of mentality as only 9 teams had applied to enter the U16s County Cup.

A question was posed by one of the attendees about whether the County would be running an Under 12 County Cup similar to last year. AN stated that there would be no U12 County Cup. LW added that Regulation 15 did not allow U12's to compete in a knockout tournament, so it would not be allowed. The same attendee stated that the Board had agreed that the Competition could take place last year and that they were going to get a cup to award to the winner. LW reiterated that a knockout competition would not be authorised and as such not allowed. Clubs who participated would be liable to disciplinary action. The reason the RFU have regulated this is that competition at this age group should be about development and not competition. A Waterfall Tournament was within regulation but would still require CB authorisation.

There followed a discussion about Regulation 15 and the importance of coaches and officials to be aware of it and its implications. A number of the attendees confirmed that they were either unaware of Regulation 15 or had very limited knowledge of it.

The discussion then moved onto Festivals and Round Robins. Under Regulation 15.9 these are classed as regulated activity and require CB sign off. There was some debate about what constitutes each and what requires sign off. IM said that during the previous year a Festival had been classed as an event comprising of players from 3 clubs or more. Liam Nicholls, RFU Club Developer, thought that this had been changed but would confirm this.

3. Discipline

AN stated that issues involving poor coach or parent behaviour needed to be reported to clubs.
The Youth Committee were considering introducing a Whistleblowing policy so that serial offenders could be identified and dealt with.
LW stated that the previous Youth Committee had dealt with an age grade sending off. This is a breach of regulation as all age grade red cards must be reported to the Age Grade Disciplinary Secretary on the correct form – Red Card Report Age Grade. This must be done within 48 hours of the completion of the match. The Age Grade Disciplinary Secretary is Chris Davy.

Match Official Abuse should be dealt with in the same manner and submitted on the Match Official Abuse Form (Community Game) within 48 hours.

4. Age Grade Committee

AN announced that following the advert for new committee members he had appointed Nicola Smith, Dan Simpson and Sam Shaw Kew to the committee. There was still a need for additional

members to provide a representation from schools, Falcons, minis, girls, juniors and colts and applications from interested parties would be encouraged.

5. Safeguarding

Mark Reade (MR) raised the point of clubs posting the score line of fixtures on social media. Scores should not be mentioned but positive comments such as "great day out, loads of mud, fantastic attitude, great skills on show, thanks to host club who lent players, played mixed teams etc" should be included on the game. Remember these are young children and your comments may adversely affect them.

MR added that he was aware of some clubs who were running "Dick of the Day" in age grade rugby. This completely unacceptable in age grade rugby and could result in disciplinary action being taken against clubs who participated in this.

A reminder that Regulation 15.12 Half Game Rule must be followed - everyone should play.

Match day verbal abuse is becoming an issue – if you have respect barriers and technical areas, use them.

All coaches need to have a DBS – should not be coaching without one.

AN asked for a Vote on use of technical areas for U14 Boys and Girls and above. There was a discussion around this and there was a general reluctance for technical areas to be implemented. The No vote confirmed this.

MR advised the attendees that Coaching CPD was available and that at the end of each season Ash Smith (RFU) gets in touch with clubs to ask what courses they want. MR recommended that coaches should be asking their clubs to organise relevant CPD.

6. Falcons – Schools to Clubs

Gav Beasley, Operations and Delivery Manager of Newcastle Rugby Foundation, made a presentation detailing the work that the Foundation was carrying out in schools and in association with NRU.

A steering group lead by Keith Atkinson (Director of Club Development) has been put into place to coordinate and aid the growth of rugby within clubs whilst strengthening the link between schools and clubs. The group has delivery partners in Newcastle Rugby Foundation Coastal partnership, North of Tyne Partnership and RGS/RFU rugby schools' manager.

The NRFC's delivery plan comprises of 10 clubs - Alnwick, Ashington, Blyth, Gosforth, Northern, Tynedale, Ponteland, Novos, Seghill and Wallsend Rugby clubs. Delivery is to boys and girls from Years 7 and 8. The aim is to link participating schools with their local clubs and have children transition into the relevant age grade team at those clubs. There will be transition events at the clubs and fixtures between local schools will be delivered which will help with the process.

Each half term festivals will be held for Year 5 and 6 (U10 and 11s) and Year 7 and 8 at participating clubs. These will compromise of training session and playing opportunities. In October festivals were run at Blyth, Tynedale, Morpeth and Alnwick Rugby Clubs, which attracted over 650 participants. At the festivals young volunteers were invited to assist from the local high schools.

7. T1Rugby

Lian Nicholls, RFU Club Developer, introduced the RFU's new game T1 Rugby which is a non contact rugby. For this season T1 Rugby has been introduced to schools and clubs replacing the Touch Union initiative. The game reflects the characteristics of rugby and has scrums, kicking, lineouts and breakdowns. It is simple to play and has an emphasis on fun, fitness and inclusion, Club role out of T1 will be around April time.

8 AOB

Andrew Neal asked if there was any other business and as there was none he thanked everyone for attending the evening and their contribution. The meeting closed at 9pm.