Northumberland RFU u20s Season 2025/26

RFU National Jason Leonard u20s Championship

Team Manager's Report

29th May 2026

Introduction & Preparation

The 2025/26 Jason Leonard u20s competition was contested once again in the north by teams from the Constituent Bodies of Northumberland, Durham, Yorkshire, Lancashire and Cheshire. There was again no representation in the tournament from Cumbria.

The season began in the summer of 2025, with Michael van Vuuren and Nyle Godsmark being retained as Head Coach and Assistant Coach respectively. Michael's and Nyle's individual and combined value cannot be overstated, and their excellent brand of coaching will be missed in the season ahead. I would like to thank both for their unrelenting commitment and passion during their time with the CB and I dearly hope to see them return in some capacity in the years ahead. Their forward-thinking approach sets a standard which is much needed in our game, and I have nothing but thanks and praise for their contributions.

In the early autumn, Claire Sharpe began the thankless process of securing player nominations from clubs within the CB, repeatedly chasing down the slow responders and processing registration forms as they arrived. More than 60 nominations were ultimately received, and having received the match schedule from the RFU, we were able to establish dates & venues for trials, training and matches. Thanks also go to Catherine Cotterill who provided physio cover to the squad throughout the campaign and was ever-present at our training sessions and matches.

With our first match scheduled for 8th February, we initially designated 11th and 18th January as trial dates, however the weather intervened and the 11th was frozen off. We decided to treat the remaining three weekends (18th, 25th Jan, and 1st Feb) as trials to allow time to get to know everyone in the pool, and we used dedicated numbered bibs very effectively to identify and assess the many new faces. Some nominees did not materialise at some sessions and some not at any session so we resolved to hold the wider squad of circa 50 players together, knowing that the long season ahead would likely require us to draw on a wider than normal pool. It was agreed that WhatsApp would be the preferred communications method for the u20s this season and this proved to work well.

The match schedule once again worked against us, with matches being spread over an inordinately long period making it difficult to retain and develop a core unit to provide consistency in team selection and performances. The schedule was as follows:

8th Feb v Cheshire (h) at Whitley Bay Rockcliff

22nd Feb v Yorkshire (a) at Bradford Salem

19th Apr v Durham (h) at Whitley Bay Rockcliff

3rd May v Lancashire (a) at Wigan.

Some 85 days elapsed between match 1 and match 4, with an unhelpful 56-day hiatus between matches 2 and 3. It remains my firm view that the competition calendar should be condensed to a shorter timeframe to keep players engaged and add value to the competition.

Matches

Northumberland got the campaign off to a positive start, defeating Cheshire by 46 points to 29, and signs were good. The second match at Yorkshire began equally positively, with Northumberland racing to 21 points from three early well-worked tries, however Yorkshire found their feet in the second half and made their gameplan work to come away with an eight-point winning margin, finishing the match 37-29. Yorkshire's ace card was their venue selection, opting for an extremely short and narrow pitch which strangled the game and nullified Northumberland's backs' threat. Game three saw the ultimate winners of the group, Durham, triumph 15-52 in a captivating contest which was much tighter than the scoreline suggests. This was an end-to-end encounter, with the point of difference being that Northumberland's attack was thwarted time and time again at the five-metre line by an impressive Durham defence. By the time game 4 came around, many players, including some of the leaders in the squad, had lost interest and declared themselves unavailable for the long trip to Wigan. Our ability to fulfil the fixture was in the balance for some time as Michael, Nyle and I exhausted all avenues to find more players, including the vital front row. Newcastle University's Liv Rowe was a huge help to me in securing new players and without her assistance we would have floundered. We got over the line with a reduced playing squad just a couple of days before the fixture was to take place, including debutants at loosehead and hooker who had not trained with us and only met their coaches and teammates for the first time on the bus down to Wigan. The new players acquitted themselves very well on the day and a closely fought encounter saw Lancashire narrowly inch their way home with a 19-12 win, having scored a couple of their tries when Northumberland were reduced to 13 players for two unrelated yellow card offences a minute apart from each other. Northumberland battled to the end of the match and in fact won the second half which was testament to the determination of the playing squad and the never-say-die approach of the coaches. Another five minutes and…?

Summary

Northumberland ended the campaign in fourth place, ahead of Cheshire, with Durham topping the group, Lancashire second and Yorkshire third. Durham progressed to a semi-final 45-29 defeat at the hands of East Midlands, and the final will take place at Twickenham on 6th June between East Midlands and Hertfordshire who defeated Berkshire 24-45 in the other semi-final.

Six players were selected from Northumberland u20s by the North of England selectors and invited to trial on 10th May at Keighley RFC. Two of those declined the invitation and the four who attended were unsuccessful on the day and did not progress further.

All in all, the season was one of mixed fortunes, with a very strong coaching team and promising initial player pool, undermined by a long calendar and fluctuating player availability. The four matches were well-contested, and the conduct of the entire u20s squad was exemplary on and off the pitch throughout the campaign, representing Northumberland Rugby Union admirably.

Ian Hiles, Team Manager Northumberland u20s