

Battersea Ironsides RFC 2019/2020 Report of the Management Committee

The 2019/2020 season has been truly extraordinary. Success on the pitch with four of our Senior teams winning their leagues has been matched by success off the pitch with the Club winning several awards and currently being shortlisted for the prestigious national Gallagher Premiership Rugby Club of the Season Award. This has been balanced by the COVID-19 pandemic, which cut the season short in March and quickly led to the closure of the entire Sports Club. Six months later, we are still unable to play full contact matches with training following a careful path to protect our players as much as possible. It is a far cry from this time last year, when the Club was in the spotlight of the national media during the Rugby World Cup, courtesy of Kyle Sinckler, England and British Lions prop, and a previous Youth player with Ironsides. It has been most gratifying, has been to see how players and members have pulled together to deal with these triumphs and disasters with equanimity, enthusiasm and determination. The amount of work and commitment that occurs behind the scenes as well as during training is extraordinary and we should never forget that we are all volunteers. Thank you to each and every one of our members, it is you who make the Club what it is today.

Seniors

Our Men's teams had a fabulous season with our 1st, 2nd and 4th XVs all winning their leagues. The 1st XV have achieved an impressive three promotions in 5 years and are now playing in the London 1 South League. With the 3rd XV and the Vets coming 2nd and 4th respectively in their leagues it was a successful season all round. This year also saw the launching of our eighth Men's team with the addition of the Super Vets - an over 45s team playing 10 a side, who drew with Farnham in their inaugural game.

Our Ladies team have grown in numbers massively since their inception barely 4 years ago. At the end of the season, the Ladies had around 70 registered players, fielding two regular teams and with ambitions towards a third team. Our Ladies 1st XV finished 1st in the NC1 South East South League whilst the 2nd XV finished 3rd in the Inner Warrior Series South East North - a great result bearing in mind that few other Ladies squads run 2 teams. The Ladies' success reflects the quality of their players with 6 Surrey players, 2 Middlesex players and 3 Great Britain Tag players.

Juniors

The Club's success is very much reflected in the numbers of players which have increased year on year and last season was no exception. At the close of the 2019/2020 season we had 1,256 registered Junior players (split approximately one third/two third between Youth and Minis) with every Mini age group having over 100 registered players and some in excess of 150. We are delighted that our Girls squad in only its second season is proving a huge success with increasing numbers and a committed support group.

Our numbers reflect that we are a very friendly welcoming and inclusive club and our underlying ethos set in stone is that every player of any ability has an equal opportunity to learn and play the game in a safe, supportive and friendly place. The emphasis is always on fun and of course close adherence with the RFU's core values: Teamwork, Respect, Enjoyment, Discipline and Sportsmanship.

This does not mean that we compromise on performance; with 12 Youth teams in the Surrey Waterfall Cup and 3 Youth teams in the Quins Cup all performing well before the season came to an untimely close, and seven U13 players being picked for developing player programmes.

Awards

The year started with our official recognition as the Guinness World Record holders for organising the largest Rugby Tour ever, with the massive Club tour to Minehead in 2019. Then in May, at the Surrey RFU [Virtual] Annual Seniors Awards, awards were won by the Men's 1st & 4th XV and Ladies 1st XV. We were also very proud to see the Men pick up the 'Disciplinary Award' for having the best disciplinary record over the whole season. This is a remarkable achievement when one considers the large number of Ironsides' players in action every week. The vastly experienced and competent fixture secretary Tony Szulc won the Surrey RFU Volunteer of the Year. Finally, we were delighted to be awarded the very prestigious Surrey President's Award for Club of the Season, which followed on from the Club being awarded "Club/Organisation of the Year" against incredibly stiff competition at the Annual Wandsworth Active Awards back in February.

Most recently, we were incredibly pleased to be honoured as one of the 6 finalist rugby clubs in the important and inaugural Gallagher Premiership Rugby Club of the season 2019/2020. It is a huge achievement to get this far and would be a massive accolade to actually win as well as collecting training kit and other goodies.

Ironsides in the Community

We believe that our success reflects our roots as a community club. We have a very visible presence throughout the borough over the weekends but also work with three local charities, several local schools and have a robust inclusivity ethos, with around 30 families being helped through our inclusivity funds as we seek to ensure that no young player will ever be turned away on financial grounds.

We are delighted to support the 3Pillars Project run by Mike Crofts, which runs rugby-based intervention and mentoring programmes, including within Wormwood and Wandsworth prisons, for young people vulnerable to crime. This season we partnered with 3Pillars to deliver coaching sessions at the Oasis Academy on the Southbank London, leading to a number of youth players new to rugby being welcomed into our club.

We have an excellent relationship with the Tag Rugby Trust, which initiates changes to individuals and communities in developing countries through the sport of rugby. Sadly, the planned trip by the U16s/Colts to Zambia, for which the boys had raised £12,000, was cancelled due to COVID-19. However, the inaugural TAG World Cup touch rugby event in September remains a highlight that will hopefully become a more regular fixture.

St George's Hospital remains a key charity for us with a number of employees and students at the hospital having been and continue to be part of our Club. Ironsides Rugby also supported the St George's Coronavirus Appeal raising over £5,000 from our members.

A further highlight of the year has been the massive increase in support of our Men's teams by an army of ex-players, many of whom have returned to the Club and found it still as

welcoming and friendly as ever. The reintroduction of the pre-match Chairman's Lunch has been a huge success, with over 100 attendees, hosted by Colin O'Keeffe, at the Men's 1st XV game against Farnham game in February which also raised £2,000 for our Club charities.

This season, we were invited along with a select number of other clubs identified by Quins to take part in an RFU Diversity and Inclusivity Project in conjunction with Melbourne University, Australia, looking at the impact on the LGBTQ community of masculinity within the sport of Rugby. We are also very committed to mental health related issues and the Club was invited by the Movember Charity and Quins Foundation to take part in the pilot of a Mental Health programme to create both awareness amongst young people, coaches and parents and to offer avenues of support and help.

Battersea Ironsides Sport Club (BISC)

We sometimes forget that we are but one part of BISC and that the ground and Clubhouse at Openview is shared with two other Clubs, Battersea Ironsides Cricket Club (BICC) and Battersea Ironsides Football Club (BIFC), with all of us under BISC and its operating company, Battersea Ironsides Sports Operations Limited (BISOL). We have grown in numbers and the demand on the space at Openview far exceeds its capacity. The Clubhouse suffered a major plumbing failure during the recent lock down and is currently out of action needing remedial work. These are challenges that need to be met and the Club remains committed to working with its sister Clubs within BISC to resolve these issues.

Volunteers

The success of our Club from the awards received to, most importantly, the rugby enjoyed by some 1,500 players across 8 different locations over a weekend, is a consequence of the hard work put in by our volunteers. Our volunteer base is at the heart of this Club and with over 350 volunteers at all levels throughout the Club, it would be a long list to thank each one by name; but there are a few individuals who need to be mentioned. Colin O'Keeffe stepped down as Senior Chair, having been 1st XV Captain and Club Captain. Many of the Seniors' successes are due to his leadership and determination. Many thanks as well to Amy Ritter, plus a host of excellent support, for the huge success of the Ladies and to Roisin Dunstall and Charles Hale for the success of the Girls. Success needs high quality coaching, with Alex Hadley and Shane Cooney for the Men and Mike Crofts and Andy Penniceard for the Ladies (the latter also a Great Britain Touch coach), as well as an impressive support team of other coaches, physios (led by Kathleen Frost), team managers and First Aiders.

Thank you to Rachel Denning and Zoe Goodwin for dealing with the mountain of press enquiries over the World Cup and to Zoe for leading the Gallagher Club of the Season campaign; to Simon Wardley for liaising and communicating with all our old players; to all those who helped develop the Club's COVID-19 protocols and to Richard Cotgrove (Club Secretary), and Ellen Walsh (Youth Coach), who stepped down this year along with Rachel Denning (Committee Member). Last, but by no means least, a big thank you to Richard Smith, who steps down this year after over a decade as the Club's President; his experience and advice during this time has been invaluable.

To all of them and to everyone who helps, the Club has been hugely enriched by your tireless contributions to its success.

Departed Members

It is always a sad task to report of those Ironsiders who have passed away this year. We were immensely saddened at the loss of Elliot Hennell, outstanding clubman, excellent 5th team captain and hugely popular member of our Club. The Club and especially the Seniors have been hugely supportive of Elliot's family and also each other during this difficult time. Elliot's sad passing has triggered an even greater commitment to Mental Health issues.

We also said farewell to former player Andy Smithson and to three founding members of the Club. There was the remarkable Ted Elford; we tried on a number of occasions to arrange for Ted to revisit the club working with his family but it just was not to be; 'Bert' Bigmore, who served as a cadet under Lt. Col. St Maur Toope and was 1st XV captain for 13 seasons; and, most recently, John Whitford, another original member of Lt. Col. St Maur Toope's 42nd Royal Tank Regiment Cadet Battalion, who died peacefully on Sunday 13 September 2020 and whose lifelong love of rugby began with Battersea Ironsides.

May they, and all our deceased members, rest in peace.

The Future

The coming year has a number of challenges both on the pitch, as COVID-19 continues to disrupt our training and playing patterns, and off the pitch, as we work with BISC towards the re-opening of the Clubhouse. We are beginning to move along the RFU's Return to Play Pathway but are conscious that the health and welfare of our members and visitors are paramount. We are grateful for the patience shown by our membership during this extraordinary time.

The time provided by the pause in rugby over the last six months has given the Club an opportunity to clear up a number of issues behind the scenes which will have a beneficial impact going forward. The Sections have worked to produce medium term strategic visions that we hope to publish shortly. The Committee has worked to update the Rules of the Club, not least establishing the Ladies as a section in their own right, which we hope Members will approve at the forthcoming AGM. We are delighted that we now have an approved design for the old scout hut (now the Garratt Green Sports Pavilion), for which we have acquired a long lease. We have building costs, budget approval and had a timeline for construction - at least until COVID-19 disrupted the plans. Meanwhile the Springfield Project continues and construction has begun, with the potential for additional playing space becoming available.

Other initiatives include increasing investment in player Strength and Conditioning both in resources and time and this has now reached down to our Youth section where programmes are designed in a safe and appropriate way. The Colts squads now train with Seniors in pre-season training, giving them an idea of what to expect as they grow.

Training may be limited and social contact reduced due to the pandemic, but the Club continues to provide a community based grassroots approach to rugby being a game for everyone. We cherish our traditions, such as the annual RTR fixture, and our history but we are also always looking to move forward and grow. We are the largest rugby club in the UK. We welcome players from all walks of life across a wide geographical area. We pride ourselves on playing the game well, hard, and with a great spirit. We are Ironsides, 2 3.