

RUGBY

LEAGUE

EUROPE

ISSUE 1

NEWCASTLE RUGBY
XV AND XIII
WORKING TOGETHER
AND PROSPERING

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EUROPE'S NEWEST
COMPETITION

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FROM HUMBLE
BEGINNINGS

LILLISRØM LIONS A LOOK AT
SCANDANAVIA'S FIRST
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EDITOR'S COMMENTS

Welcome to the first edition of Rugby League Europe. This magazine is committed to telling all the stories and exciting developments from continental Europe. It's about bringing attention to the great effort and sacrifices of rugby league administrators, clubs and players of the past, the present and the exciting ones to come.

Many fans aren't aware that rugby league is played so widely across Europe. Additionally, it's a reality that rugby league is a sport that often lacks national recognition throughout Europe. This magazine hopes to contribute in some small way to the effort to change that. Each month we will feature content from the Rugby League map in Europe.

The magazine itself is free and will forever remain so. It's a labour of love! There is no paywall or monthly subscription, just content that we hope you will enjoy and that will help grow the game across the northern hemisphere and beyond.

Feel free to get in touch with us if you'd like to be featured in a future edition or simply enjoy reading.

WANT MORE EUROPEAN CONTENT?

If you want more content about European Rugby League then you can check out either of these two podcasts.

Whilst we enjoy listening to both of these podcasts, please note that Rugby League Europe Magazine is not affiliated with either podcast.



Talking European Rugby League

Hosted by Graeme Thompson, RLEF and IRL board member. This podcast is the official podcast of the Rugby League Europe Federation and shares the stories of those involved in Rugby League throughout Europe.



The Rugby League Europe Podcast

Hosted by Lee Addison and Carlo Napolitano both of whom have been involved in federations across Europe. This podcast offers an alternative and sometimes controversial view of the game in Europe.

Alicante 9s

October 2021

Hosted by



Mens - Womens - Juniors

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BREXIT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR FRENCH RUGBY LEAGUE?

By Adrien Frigola



Following the exit of the UK from the European Union, a lot of things are about to change for European rugby league.

Until last season, EU passport holders weren't counted within the five foreign players allowed to be part of the Super League elite squads. Players from the Pacific Islands weren't considered either as foreign players as a result of the Cotonou Agreements signed by the EU in the year 2000 that allowed a special status for passport holders from numerous developing countries, gifting them special treatment to get working visa within the EU. Essentially, only the Aussies and Kiwis were registered as foreign players. But now that's all about to change with the new immigration policy in the UK. Subsequently,

European Union players and Pacific Islands players will count as foreign players just as the Australians and New Zealanders did. The RFL is currently studying the case but any move to make allowances may be blocked by the UK immigration rules that will soon be enforced.

Those changes will probably have a massive impact on the Super League and lower English leagues, considering that the upcoming TV deal seems to be a lot less lucrative than the current one.

The Resurgence of the Elite 1

We could legitimately bet that the UK elite clubs will put their money on some NRL confirmed players and their faith in

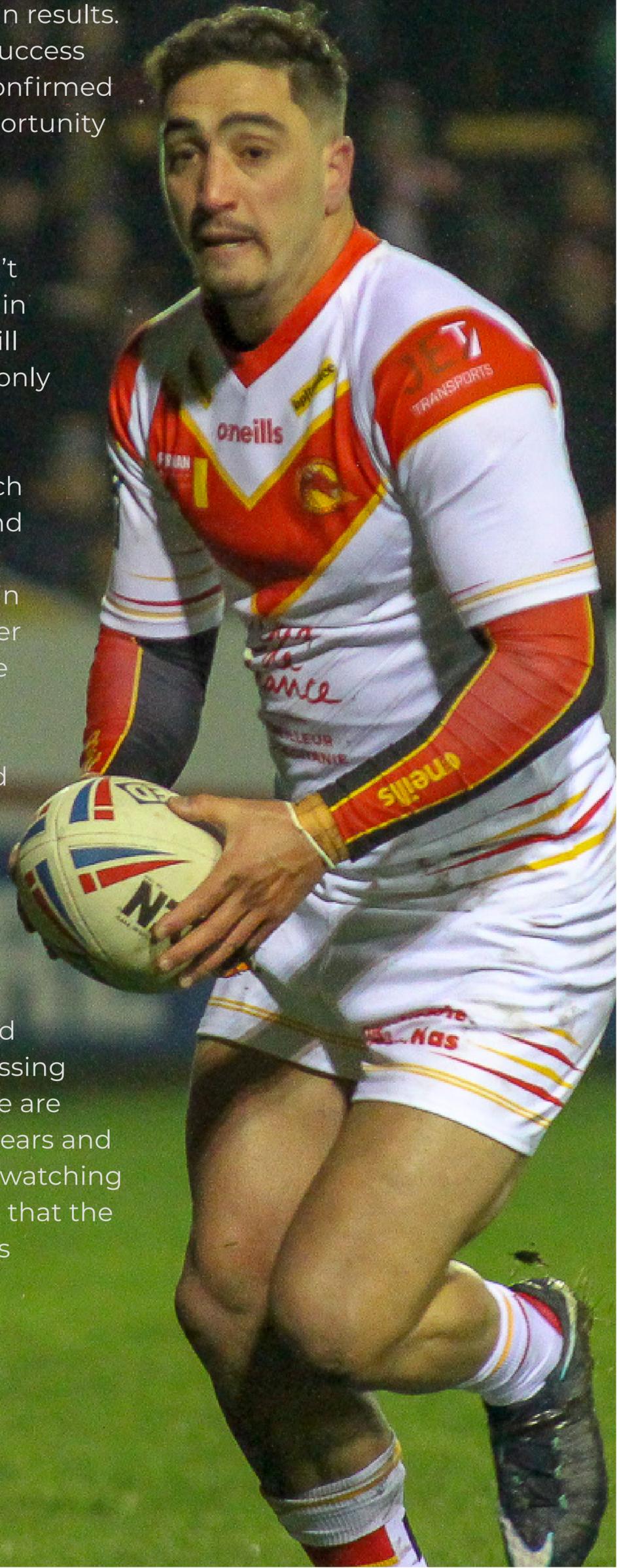


local young talent. Taking this into consideration, the door won't be open as wide as it's been in the last decade for French players for example. However, the "Federation trained" status allows clubs to count foreign players as local players as long as they have played for at least 3 years at academy level in that country, but that means investing in players development with uncertain results. There hasn't been a lot of Theo Fages type of success stories in the last decade and probably only confirmed Catalans or Toulouse players will have the opportunity to play in the UK from now on.

That means the French Elite 1 will need to be reinforced because Catalans and Toulouse won't have the capacity to absorb all the best talents in the country. The two biggest clubs in France will have to make choices to retain and/or develop only a certain amount of players.

The Covid-19 crisis has already turned the French Elite 1 division into an interesting playing ground because of the clubs loss of revenues and the uncertainty around working permit allowance in the UK. As a result, numerous players with Super League experience have arrived to reinforce the Elite 1 squads. Players like Sam Moea (Lezignan), Mickael Simon (Carcassonne) and Antoni Maria (Lezignan) have played more than 300 NRL and Super League games between them and are now plying their trade in the French elite domestic competition. As a consequence, the level of the competition on the field has dramatically increased this season.

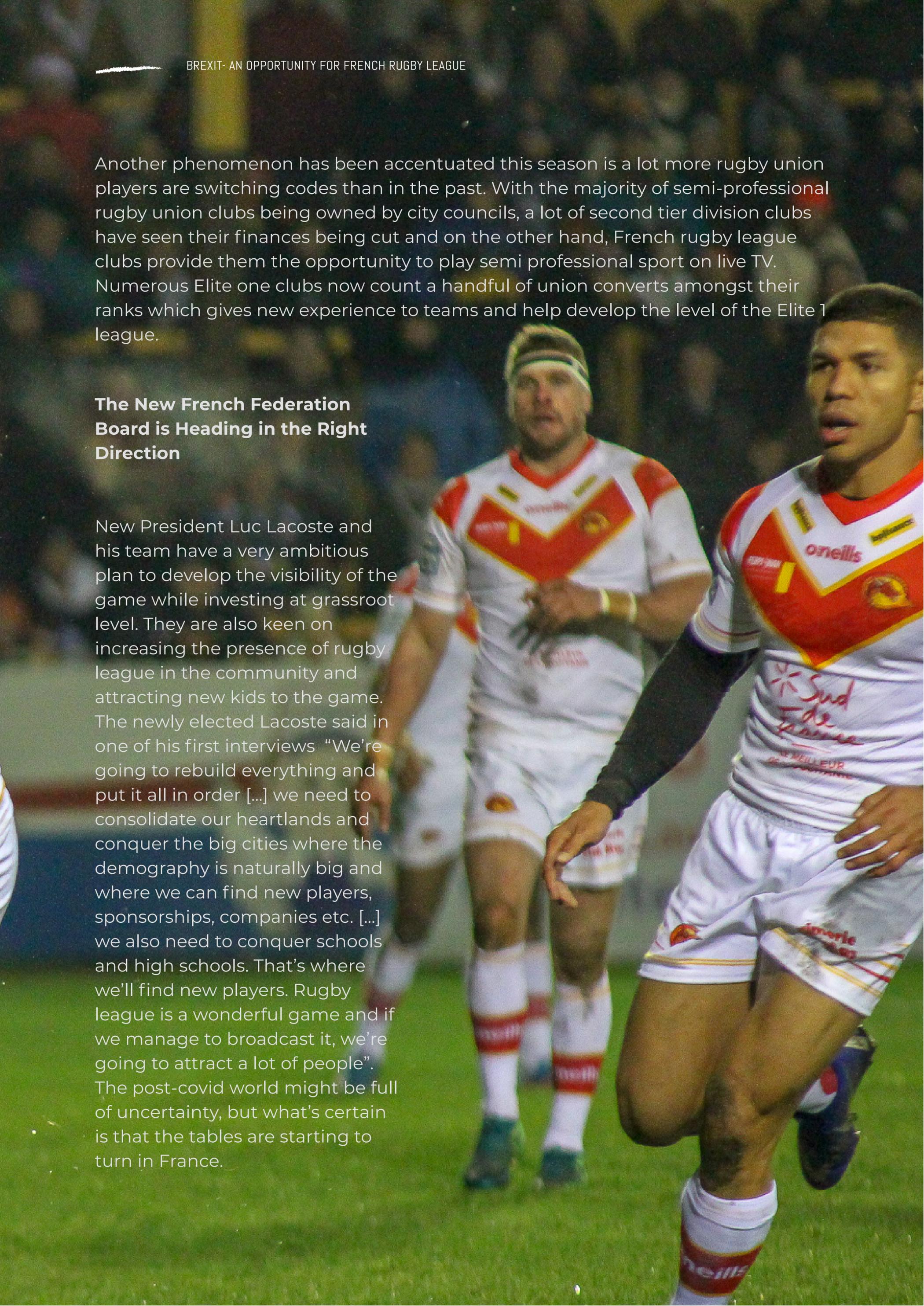
Until last year, the league was mainly composed of young French talent and they're now progressing a lot better under these new circumstances. We are now witnessing the best season of the last 20 years and French rugby league fans have the privilege of watching it live on TV and through the streaming system that the newly elected board of the French Federation is implementing.



Another phenomenon has been accentuated this season is a lot more rugby union players are switching codes than in the past. With the majority of semi-professional rugby union clubs being owned by city councils, a lot of second tier division clubs have seen their finances being cut and on the other hand, French rugby league clubs provide them the opportunity to play semi professional sport on live TV. Numerous Elite one clubs now count a handful of union converts amongst their ranks which gives new experience to teams and help develop the level of the Elite 1 league.

The New French Federation Board is Heading in the Right Direction

New President Luc Lacoste and his team have a very ambitious plan to develop the visibility of the game while investing at grassroots level. They are also keen on increasing the presence of rugby league in the community and attracting new kids to the game. The newly elected Lacoste said in one of his first interviews “We’re going to rebuild everything and put it all in order [...] we need to consolidate our heartlands and conquer the big cities where the demography is naturally big and where we can find new players, sponsorships, companies etc. [...] we also need to conquer schools and high schools. That’s where we’ll find new players. Rugby league is a wonderful game and if we manage to broadcast it, we’re going to attract a lot of people”. The post-covid world might be full of uncertainty, but what’s certain is that the tables are starting to turn in France.



Euro XIII: A Shift in the European Rugby League Landscape



By Álvaro de Benito



Aside from the World Cup it's hard to think that any other competition in rugby league is as eagerly anticipated as the inaugural Euro XIIIs competition that will take place in early 2022. A tournament concept that has been talked about by so many for so long now has a name, format and date.

The competition promises to be the first international competition of professional structure in Europe for domestic teams. Sixteen teams from 16 European associations will compete to be crowned European Champions. But whilst there will be no representative from the 2 dominant leagues of Europe, Super League and Elite 1, the competition does boast a number of national champions such as Rhodes Knights, Edinburgh Eagles and Rhondda Outlaws among its ranks.

The importance of this competition can be understood in a much broader sense than just in a competitive one since it represents a milestone and a solid step in sporting terms for rugby league across Europe. At its core value the competition is designed to focus on player and club development in a professional competitive environment whilst complementing the various domestic leagues throughout Europe. In a rugby league media landscape where Australia and England dominate the headlines, one could be forgiven for not knowing so much about rugby league in Europe.

The reality is that despite the hard work of countless numbers of enthusiasts to grow the sport across the continent, the majority of countries either still don't recognise the sport or don't know that it exists. With this in mind, it's not hard to understand the excitement among fans and participating clubs as Euro XIIIs offers a level of exposure to rugby league across Europe that has never been seen before. When the competition was announced the doubters were quick to call foul, as were certain individuals who felt that the competition threatened their agenda, nevertheless the competition has shown that it is much more than a gimmick as it has continued to announce competing teams and a draw for the 2022 format.

If realised, the sporting value of this competition is incalculable, Euro XIIIs will offer a privileged environment for all those participants who will see in this competition a way, not only to achieve sporting aspirations, but also to participate as ambassadors of the sport of rugby league in Europe. The excitement brought about by the announcement of the draft offers a hope for the weaker teams to map a route to being crowned champions.

Upon its announcement in the summer, the tournament caused a stir with the RLEF who claimed it wasn't sanctioned. Euro XIIIs claimed it didn't need to be and a quick flurry of back

and forth ensued before the dust settled and the various federations gave their blessing for their teams to compete in the competition and the RLEF clarified it was outside its scope of governance.

The Origins of the Competition

Despite the flurry of claims and drama amongst the media when it was first announced, it is interesting to understand how and why Euro XIII came into existence and how the supposed feud with the RLEF isn't quite what some would have it be.

In November 2019, Colin Kleyweg, (then RLEF board member) approached Valencia Huracanes who were engaging with the RFL about league 1 entry, about the possibility of investing in and entering a European Super League. The RLEF proposal was to have 8 clubs in major cities across Europe and would be professional from inception. Redstar Belgrade were to be one of the participants and Valencia were offered to join other cities such as Milan, Manchester, Cardiff and Paris which had been identified by the working group. Conversations carried on for a number of months and broke down over the small issue of the €10,000,000 that was needed to create the competition. Following their match against Featherstone, Valencia

Huracanes began to receive a number of invitations for games from clubs across Europe and as a result invited Colin and the RLEF to explore a much more modest competition prior to creating a huge white elephant that they felt Europe wasn't ready for.

Finally, unable to agree a way forward together, Valencia advised Colin that they weren't interested and instead began to work with other European clubs about creating a development competition that they felt was more in line with the landscape in Europe and that could grow over a number of years. National governing bodies quickly got behind the concept and Euro XIII was born. In truth the drama of the summer seemed to be more as a result of sour grapes and the RLEFs surprise that the head of its working group had been negotiating so freely with Valencia and others.

Objectives of the Competition

The Euro XIII strategy has three objectives focused on the progression of players and sport at European level. The first of these is the development of domestic players. In rugby, regardless of the code, nations tend to put aside the development of local players for the immediate glory of obtaining results by utilising heritage players, Euro XIII seems to



understand that a successful future depends on propping up the base of each team by training and growing the domestic player pool.

The second objective is marked by the reinforcement of the leagues in each country. Clubs want to be in Euro XIII's and federations are able to reserve their places for teams that win their respective leagues which supports the creation and consolidation of national competitions.

The third, which in reality is a sum of the first two, is the ultimate objective of any sporting competition, is to grow the game of rugby league and gain recognition in European countries where it currently isn't.

Representatives

A panel reviewed the candidates to decide which 16 teams would make up the first edition of Euro XIII's, giving special relevance to the future plans and viability of each project in addition to the sports program that each club presented.

The final roster of clubs that will compete in Euro XIII's will leave its mark throughout Europe, including the Home Nations. Rhondda Outlaws (Wales), Leoni Veneti (Italy), Anadolu XIII Pars (Turkey), Chişinău Scorpions (Moldova), North Brussels Gorillas (Belgium), Valencia Huracanes (Spain), Dublin Blues Rugby League (Ireland), Copenhagen RLFC (Denmark), Stavanger RK (Norway), Edinburgh Eagles (Scotland), Vrchlabi Mad Squirrels (Czech Republic), Birmingham Jaguars (England), Rotterdam Pitbulls (Netherlands), Budápest RL (Hungary), Skåne Stags (Sweden) and Rhodes Knights (Greece) will be in charge of making this inaugural Euro XIII season something special.

The teams are divided into four groups of four teams with the first two of each group advancing to the knock out stage. The draw for the group stage was carried out on October 16th of last year, with group A1 made up of the Welsh, Italian, Turkish and Moldovan teams; A2 the Spanish, Belgians, Irish and Danish teams, a B1 group with the presence of Norwegians, Czechs and two of the representatives of the Home Nations: Scotland and England; and B2,

GROUP A1

Rhondda Outlaws
Leoni Veneti
Anadolu XIII
Chisinau Scorpions

GROUP A2

North Brussels Gorillas
Valencia Huracanes
Dublin Blues
Copenhagen RLFC

GROUP B1

Stavanger RK
Edinburgh Eagles
Mad Squirrels
Birmingham Jaguars

GROUP B2

Rotterdam Pitbulls
Budapest Rugby League
Skåne Stags
Rhodes Knights



with the Greeks, Dutch, Hungarians and Swedes.

In the group stage each team will face each other in a single match rather than home and away and the knock out stage will be a single match format too. The 4 semi finalists will then travel to Valencia for a week and over two weekends compete -the first, for the two semifinals, and the second, for the final and the match for third place.

The Draft: a Key Ingredient to Providing a Competitive Tournament

Another novelty that Euro XIII brings to the competition is to provide the possibility for teams to acquire a certain competitive balance through a draft. The objective is very simple: to assist weaker teams with some improved player resources to aid their domestic players development through the incorporation of experienced players. This system will allow choosing, based on a team ranking, a number of determined players. Thus, the four best classified teams may only incorporate two players, while the next four may have three, the next four, with four, and the four with a more limited capacity may choose up to five players.

At this point it is important to highlight that, in order to obtain that development of local

players that is among the objectives of Euro XIII, each team may only align, in addition to the players that correspond to it by draft, a maximum of two non-selectable players for the national team of the country to which the club belongs.

After the relevant rounds, a total of 56 players will be chosen by the sixteen clubs and will be called, through the organization, to compete with the teams for which they have been selected. The final draft will take place in December of this year. With the incorporation of these experienced players, it will contribute not only to a greater spectacle with the possible mitigation of sports differences, but also to a greater development of the players and the game of each team.

To some Euro XIII will appear too grand a project and will continue to doubt its credibility until either the teams take to the field or the competition fails to materialise. Whilst some might feel hesitant, others rather feel anticipation and excitement and nervously hope that the pandemic nor anything else stops the competition from occurring. Whatever the reality in future, there is no doubting that Euro XIII has invigorated administrators, players and fans across Europe and promises to change the landscape forever.



Euro XIIIs Teams - Dublin Blues, Ireland

by Conor Kelly

Rugby League in Ireland has a long yet, spotty history. Games were played as far back as 1934 with Wigan overcoming Warrington in an exhibition match in Dublin. Many events such as this took place sporadically over the next 54 years.

It was not until 1988 that the sport was formalised in Ireland with the establishment of Ireland Rugby League.

From then until 1996 Ireland competed at student and international level with relative success. Then plans to form a domestic competition were hatched. One of the teams involved who had been previously only playing touring teams was the Dublin Blues.

The Blues would become a dominant force in the 90's in the Irish domestic set up. This success would continue in to the 2000's and would also see them producing acclaimed winger Brian Carney who cut his teeth in the game with the Dublin side before a move to Gateshead would catapult him onto the world scene.

Sadly in 2007 the club ceased to field a team and looked to be consigned to the history books until ten years later when a number of then members of the Rugby League Ireland

began plans to bring a semi-professional side to Ireland. Initial enquiries were made to enter a team into the English professional structure. While these plans have never been abandoned, an opportunity would arise which would change the plans of the group.

The introduction of Euro XIIIs was something the Blues could not ignore. Like many European sides the idea of playing teams across the continent was an exciting one.

The game in Ireland has grown stronger over the last number of years and with a higher calibre of player being produced by the domestic game Euro XIIIs presents an opportunity for those players to test themselves against different opponents.

Ireland has seen a number of players relocate to the UK to play professionally in League One and Championship. Players such as Matty Hadden (Rochdale Hornets), Mikey Russell, Peter Ryan (Both Coventry Bears) and James Kelly (Sheffield Eagles) took on the challenge. However, there are more players in Ireland who would be capable of playing at that level if the opportunity was to arise.

This was made apparent when Ronan Michael made his Super League debut for Huddersfield

Giants against Wigan Warriors.

With a talent pool in place, the idea of the Blues is to give players an opportunity of playing a higher level without the necessity of leaving their home country. While it will take a lot of hard work to make it happen it would give a large number of players a chance to develop their skills in a new environment.

Without the strengthening of the domestic competition through the hard work of the clubs in Ireland a project such as the Blues would not be possible.

Irish clubs may quite possibly be stronger than ever before and this has been led by the Longhorns in recent years. Their ascension to the top of the game in Ireland has been one which has been a long time in the making.

For many years the Longhorns were the also rans of the league, however, they have worked hard to create a side which has won 4 All Ireland titles in a row.

It is this dominance which has spurred on other

teams around them to improve their structures on and off the field. In past years we have seen the establishment of a "Big 3" in the form of the Longhorns, Dublin City Exiles and the Galway Tribesmen who have all been pushing to be the champions over the last few seasons.

However, beyond that there are other teams looking to break that mould. The Barrowcudas pushed the aforementioned sides in 2019 and were looking to be a force in 2020 before a little thing called Covid-19 took effect. 2020 also saw the return of the Cork Bulls who did manage to get a game in during the shortened season.

It is all of this positivity and competitiveness that has created the opportunity for a semi-professional side in Ireland and while there is a long road ahead to make that happen, the continued growth of the domestic competition has a key part to play in this becoming a reality.





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Newcastle Rugby: An Example to Both Codes

By Dean Buchan



The battle lines were drawn a long time ago by the two rugby codes and regardless of which city, region or country you find rugby being played in, the 'code war' will inevitably raise its ugly head time and time again. Both codes seem to always start from a basis of protectionism, guarding their territory fiercely due to a sense of fear of the other rival code. It is an approach that has, despite a few glimpses over the decades, continuously failed to explore the great possibilities that could be realised if the two codes worked together. In a centuries old battle it is ultimately

the sport that has suffered with fans, players and clubs robbed of those opportunities and left with 'what could have beens.'

No fiercer is the rivalry between the two codes than in England, rugby league being the dominant force in the north and rugby union having a firm grasp on the south. It's interesting then that England has proven the success story for an unlikely alliance between the two codes. The location of that alliance is in Newcastle, England, home to Newcastle Falcons and Newcastle Thunder. In Newcastle and the north east both

"The success of rugby here in Newcastle is that we don't have politics, the remit is to grow both codes of rugby"

codes have been working together on and off the pitch since the Newcastle Falcons rugby union took over Gateshead Thunder (now Newcastle Thunder) rugby league in 2014.

It was a move that raised some eyebrows at first but over the last 6 years it has brought great benefits to both clubs and offers a reality of what is achievable when the two codes work together.

Reflecting on the move Jordan Robinson, GM of Newcastle Thunder commented "The success of rugby here in Newcastle is that we don't have politics, the

remit is to grow both codes of rugby. Both clubs have the same owner so any disputes are resolved quickly and there is no favouritism shown to one or the other.

An example of this is in our academy which has a dual pathway where we run both codes. At various stages there are parts that focus on rugby league and at

other times it's focused on rugby union. Players are allowed to find their own pathway rather than having it set out to them at 14 or 15 years old. It also provides a great platform to the players regardless of what code they end up playing as they have a greater skill set and can bring things to a game that players who have only played one code cannot."

"It works here because we freed ourselves of all the baggage that comes with the code rivalry"

It's not just in the academy that both clubs are working together. Newcastle Rugby which encompasses the union and league clubs are spreading their message in the community too. Local clubs have been set up that are also free from the politics of code rivalries. Newcastle Rugby head up 15 local clubs with many running teams of both rugby codes.



Jordan points to the 1350 juniors who are playing rugby league in the north east as testament to the success of the project. "It works here because we freed ourselves of all the baggage that comes with the code rivalry and this translates beyond Newcastle Falcon and Newcastle Thunder.

The local clubs work together with the strong ones helping the weak ones. This success has seen a 40% increase across 5 years of junior players when many areas are seeing numbers dwindle.

This is also reflected in our academy. It's 4 years old now and the

effects of the 2 clubs working together are clear for all to see. We have 4 u18 England players in our academy and 3 to 4 players from our academy break into the Thunder squad each year."

Both Newcastle Falcons and Newcastle Thunder are thriving on and off the field due to



their grow rugby approach. Newcastle Thunder have just gained promotion into the Championship and have plans to get to the top of the rugby league pyramid, whilst Newcastle Falcons sit 3rd in the English Premiership of Rugby Union at the time of writing this article.

Summing up why the partnership between the 2 codes has been so successful Jordan adds "The key to our success has been that younger people have taken the helm and we haven't had to deal

with 70+ year old committee members who want to remember what happened decades ago. We are 2 clubs working as 1 in a 21st century approach, not a 19th century one."

It's a wonderful lesson for club owners and administrators of either code and shows what can be achieved by not obsessing about whether it's a Gilbert or a Steeden ball that is placed into the hands of a player but rather an oval shaped one.

Newcastle's success story could be replicated anywhere

globally to grow the sport of rugby and bring benefits to both union and league clubs, leagues and national teams. Although, whether anyone does copy the Newcastle Thunder and the Falcons model to a large degree will rest on both codes ceasing to look at the other in fear and and seeing opportunities instead.



"The story could be replicated anywhere globally to grow the sport of rugby"



THE HUMBLE BEGINNINGS OF DUTCH RUGBY LEAGUE

By Jason Bruygoms

Due to the Covid pandemic, sadly there was only one International Rugby League match held in the Netherlands in 2020, Nederlandse XIII against Duitsland XIII in the annual Griffin Cup challenge, hosted by the Dutch in Zwolle. 'What?' some may ask, 'they play Rugby League in The Netherlands and Germany?' Well, yes, they do, the sport of rugby league has been played as a relatively unknown sport by a bunch of diehards for many years even though the rugby league world might not be very aware of it.

Rugby league was first set up in the Netherlands as far back as 1988, followed by the NNRLB (National Nederlandse Rugby League Bond) in 2003 and then, after a total stop in activity, rising like a phoenix from the ashes, the NRLB (Nederlandse Rugby League Bond) was born in 2009 which still remains



the national governing body 'til this day. Most of the rugby league world either do not know much about the sport here in the lowlands or are not even aware that the sport is actually played here, a country where soccer reigns supreme as the national sport.

What started off as a national squad playing in the Tertiary Student Rugby League World Cup in York, England, is now a rising nation among the lower tiers of rugby league nations. The NRLB now boast a 5-team domestic competition, but unfortunately due to Covid, the 2020 season had to be cancelled, meaning newcomers, the Zwolle Wolves, never got the chance to debut. The National team has had a bit of a winning streak of late, winning their last 6 games over the past few years, under the guidance of national coach Kane Krlic. With wins including home and away successes against Germany and Sweden.

Over the years there have been many volunteers that have sacrificed a lot and put in a lot of energy to get the sport active in the Netherlands. Ian Thompson who established the NNRLB, followed by the NRLB, where people like Timo Meinders, Justin Stook, Dave & Ieneke van Zeijst, and Thijs van der Zouwen all deserve praise and an honorary mention for all the work and time put in during the early stages of getting Rugby League up and running in the Netherlands. Without the work and sacrifice put in by these individuals and

many others, it's doubtful that Dutch rugby league would be where it is today.

Prior to an official domestic competition being set up, it was basically a group of rugby league fanatics that would train together during the summer months and host teams such as the Oxford University Old Boys every year (over a 10 year period) and also Durham University on occasion.

The early stages of the domestic competition was a 9-a-side competition called the Grand Prix Nines, which was made up of 5 teams, the Gouda Bearcats, Den Haag Knights, Nootdorp Musketiers, Te Werve Bustards & Capelle Spartans. Playing a 9-a-side competition every Saturday during the months of May and June, all teams played each other once on a Saturday (1 team having a bye) over 4 weekends, followed by a finals in a tournament style set-up. This became the foundations on which the domestic competition was built on.

In 2015, a 13 a-side competition was born called the BNRL Championship (Belgium Nederland Rugby League Championship), 3 Dutch teams: Den Haag Knights, Amsterdam Cobras & Rotterdam Pitbulls & neighbours North Brussels Gorillas were invited to join the Dutch competition, with North Brussels Gorillas taking the first ever 13 a-side domestic championship.

In 2016 the two neighbouring countries decided to go their own way due to indifferences, which meant the competition reduced to a 3 team competition, Rotterdam Pitbulls taking the spoils of an all-Dutch Championship. 2017 newcomers, the Harderwijk Dolphins joined the ranks, bringing the competition back to a 4 team line-up with Rotterdam taking the silverware again making it two in a row. 2018 was the year of the cobra with Amsterdam Cobras taking the title and then in 2019, the Den Haag Knights took the honours of the National Championship. 2020 as mentioned earlier would have been a 5-team competition but unfortunately the season had to be put off due to the current pandemic.

ROTTERDAM 9S

Another rugby league event that is gaining popularity in the Netherlands is the Rotterdam Nines tournament. This is an annual tournament that dates back to 2004 when it was won by the Scotland Students. The students came back the following year to reclaim their title for a second time in 2005 and in 2006 the winners were Kells ARLFC. The tournament then fell into a 10 year hibernation but was later brought back to life in 2016 when the Rotterdam Pitbulls began organising and hosting the tournament every year. The tournament is now gathering international interest. Teams from Czech Republic, Serbia, France, Wales, Germany just to name a few will travel to Rotterdam in April to take part. 2016 saw the Robertson Spuddies all the way from NSW, Australia win the title, 2017- West Warriors (UK). 2018 - North Brussels Gorillas (Belgium). 2019 - RAF Regiment RL (UK). 2020 – tournament was cancelled due to the pandemic.



While all this has been happening, we have also seen many teams come to the Netherlands to play games against the local clubs, such as the RAF Regiment Rugby League (UK), playing a 3-game series, Les Spartiates XIII (France) playing Amsterdam, Bolton Mets (UK) playing a 3-game series over 3 years against Rotterdam, and with Rotterdam even travelling to Bolton for one of the games. There was also a team made up of players from all the Dutch clubs playing under the name of the “Dutch Unicorns” who travelled to Culcheth (UK) to play the Culcheth Eagles in a one-off game.

As stated in the title, rugby league in the Netherlands started off small and humble and

in some ways is still small and humble but slowly and surely it’s building. Although still relatively unknown, the sport is on the rise and it’s all thanks to those who have put in the work, past and present, people who did what they did purely for the love of the game. Even though it may of felt like an uphill battle and at times felt like it was not making any ground, any achievement, no matter how small, made it all worth it, pathing the way for future generations and laying down the foundations for further growth in the years to come.





SPANISH CLUBS RECRUITING MEN AND WOMEN FOR CHAMPIONSHIP



Originally scheduled to launch in 2020, the new Spanish national league is set to launch in spring 2021 with 6 teams competing in the inaugural championship prior to the format expanding to 8 teams in 2022.

The teams chosen to enter the 2021 league are Alicante Cruzados (Crusaders), Barcelona Dragons, Madrid Osos (Bears), Malaga Bandoleros (Bandits), Mallorca Goblins and Valencia Huracanes.

Rugby League fans in Spain have reason to be excited as over the last couple of years there hasn't been a championship. Whilst each year fans have been able to enjoy various games, fans have missed the spectacle that a championship brings. The new Championship will have 10 rounds of fixtures with each team playing home and away prior to the play-offs and a Grand Final.

Whilst in 2021 the women's league isn't ready to begin, the 6 league teams with women's teams will host double headers on match days where their opposition has a women's team. This will be used to help the women's structure develop prior to the launch of a full women's league in 2022.

Dean Buchan, President of España Rugby League commented "We have worked extremely hard to create a professional environment for our teams to compete. I'm extremely proud of the team, especially given the last 12 months and the challenges that it has brought all of us."

Additionally to the 6 team National Championship, there is a second division scheduled to begin in the autumn where teams wishing to gain 1 of the 2 additional places for the 2022 championship will battle it out for promotion.

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CLUB IN FOCUS: LILLESTRØM RUGBY LEAGUE KLUBB - 10 YEARS ON



By Sarah Smith

Originally hailed as the first ever Scandinavian club back in 2009 we return to Lillestrøm Rugby League Klubb to learn about the club's journey over the last decade and how one certain Kiwi, Dave Hunter is helping to have a big impact on Norwegian Rugby League at both a domestic and national level.

Lillestrøm isn't the biggest place with a population of 85,000 but

despite this they have enjoyed success at a domestic level over the years. Dave first joined Lillestrøm as a player in late 2013 and within a few training sessions found himself coaching the team.

For the next couple of years the team struggled until it eventually was forced to merge with Trondheim Rugby League due to a lack of players. The newly

merged club proved a success on the pitch, finishing as runners up in 2015 before going one better and winning the league in 2016. However, whilst the team was winning on the pitch, both clubs found it difficult to accommodate the other teams players at their own expense.

In 2017 the decision was made to return Lillestrøm back to being an independent club. At the same



time the club began a new direction, having been inspired by Craig West, the Norwegian national team coach who made sure that each club was represented in the national team. Lillestrøm decided to tear up their model. It was becoming increasingly hard to compete against the bigger clubs who boasted several expats in their ranks. The decision was made for the club to focus on growing the game, rather than winning the game and it's a model that Dave has also adopted when he took over the national team from Craig West in 2017.

Dave is quick to credit Craig for the philosophy of the national team that has continued with Norway choosing to put young Norwegians in the national team. Whilst this philosophy has resulted in quite a few defeats over the years, the effects have been huge. An example is that players such as Harald

Mikelsen (Farsund Bobcats) and Kim Andre Seglem (Sandnes Raiders) have gone on to set up their own clubs which expands the footprint of rugby league in Norway.

Back in Lillestrøm, the decision to judge success on the development of the sport beyond the trophy cabinet continued with the club beginning an in-schools development program back in 2017. In 2018 the club set up a partnership with Nannestad college. Dave and Joshua Hornby have now introduced rugby league to an excess of 1000 kids in the area. Reflecting on the success of this programme Dave points out that many of the current team is from that school programme, kids who had never played rugby league previously.

Lillestrøm's development continued beyond college age students in 2018 with the introduction of an under-12s team

iRomerike Rotweilers. Very quickly it became clear that having no teams to play would prove a major issue and so Lillestrøm RLK set up another youth team in Lillestrøm, the Lillestrøm Lions Juniors. At the same time Lillestrøm Lions began to develop their womens and girls teams to ensure a more inclusive environment.

The results on the field have at times reflected the club's vision to grow the game in the region above the pursuit of winning. The results have seen Lillestrøm having the most players registered ever for their mens, womens and youth teams and whilst 2020 obviously wreaked havoc on their season, the future remains bright for the club and over the long term they hope that their development plan will see them able to compete at the top of the Norwegian League once again.



FLINTSHIRE FALCONS RE- EMERGENCE BRING S EXCITEMENT TO NORTH WALES

By Billy Forrester



FLINTSHIRE FALCONS

Flintshire, in terms of rugby league, to the majority of the rugby league community will be unknown. Situated on the North East border of Wales, Flintshire has actually been the hub of community level rugby league for many years.

The history of the sport in Flintshire is a very interesting one as several identities have attempted to conquer the area, in doing so attempting to make a name for themselves in the lower English leagues of the North West. The rugby league world cup 2013 laid the foundations for a Flintshire team incorporated in a five team North Wales conference which was a few seasons later, but why once again, is Flintshire being used to grow the game in North Wales?

Flintshire Falcons aim to once again re-emerge to the forefront of North Wales rugby league. Using the existing committee, Billy Forrester and Paul

Welch are well underway with preparations to reform the open age section of the club. They are currently working closely with a North Wales task group, including influential figures in the sports national governing body. The Falcons are focused on once again competing in the vast landscapes of Snowdonia and beyond.

Having support from the local professional club, the Falcons are aiming to boast a host of teams including men's open age, women's open age and masters sections with ambitions of creating a new competition in the area that will rival their southern counterparts.

With a clear pathway to representative grade rugby league, a new competition would create a fantastic foundation to progress to the potential of international honours or professional contracts. Working with North Wales Crusaders and North



Wales Origin the Falcons are offering players a fantastic opportunity to not only thrive as players in a great environment but also to push their talents to the very top standard the country has to offer.

Wales rugby league has assisted in the process of aiding the team with a platform to train their coaches up to level one standard also providing match officials courses. Four members of the Falcons community took up this opportunity with a total of 13 coaches passing in the North Wales area. Building on from this, Wales rugby league are already in the process of opening up another level one course for more coaches to follow.

Looking forward, the Falcons will be aiming to develop close community ties, and hope to build partnerships with local businesses and other local sporting clubs. The Falcons will be attempting to create a community like no other. A sustainable ethos will be key to achieving

the longevity of high standards on and off field. Another goal is to help the women's game grow to the highest of heights like it deserves, so the team will be looking to replicate the same pathway to give women's rugby league the same opportunities that men have in the area. They aim to create a network of local coaches to achieve a full age grade of juniors rugby league seeing generations of players from the same household and areas progress through to hopefully gain international caps for Wales elite national squad.

The Falcons are in dialogue with other potential teams in North Wales to make plans that could change the face of rugby league in the area. The overall objective is to bring the sport from the depths of neglect to a full league with origin structure, making North Wales a new super power on the rugby league world map.





ITALY PLAN TO USE WORLD CUP AS PLATFORM FOR DOMESTIC SUCCESS

By Tiziano Franchini

After the previous experiences of the rugby league World Cup in 2013 and 2017, the Italian national team will compete at its third consecutive World Cup this year. The Azzurri team will be based in Liverpool and they will compete in group B with Australia, Fiji and Scotland.

All of us at the Federazione Italiana Rugby League (F.I.R.L.) are very proud to be participating at this most important rugby league tournament for the third time. Whilst being at the top level of the sport is an honor, it is also our mission to stay at this level in the future. We are striving to use our World Cup participation to improve the exposure of rugby league in Italy with a development plan to increase participation in Italy and build a strong domestic competition.

We are keen to ensure that we better utilise our presence in the World Cup this year so that rugby league thrives in Italy.

The World Cup is the tool to gain interest in rugby league by the Italian media and our media team are working hard so that we will hopefully see rugby league broadcast by an Italian TV network in Italy. This “Mondiale” will raise awareness that rugby league is a top sport that is played in Italy. The road to the World Cup will start as soon as the Italian government give us the green light to go back on the training field. Our 2021 program will begin with a domestic competition, the Serie ARL, in the spring which will give us the opportunity to work with clubs and players to select the first training squad to start the national selections.



first training squad to start the national selections.

In the summer, we will play international games to further develop our domestic players and increase their performance and standards.

Autumn will see the F.I.R.L hold training camps to prepare and finalise the squad for the World Cup, which will include a minimum of 8 Italian domestic players.

2020 was a year that we all hope to forget and it was frustrating that we weren't able to run our championship, however 2021 promises to be a long and busy year of rugby league activity which will end with the spectacle of the World Cup.

Regarding the World Cup, Italy has a tough group with Australia, Fiji and Scotland, with only 2 advancing to the quarter finals. Given the strength of Australia and Fiji, the most crucial game will be against Scotland in Newcastle on October 24th 2021 before we go against Fiji in Newcastle on October 30th 2021. The hardest game by far will be against Australia, one of the strongest teams in the world in St Helens on Saturday November 6th 2021.

As you can see the F.I.R.L has a concrete plan to deliver on 2021.

Our philosophy for 2021 will be to use the experience gained in the past to act on the present in the best way to build our future.

Additionally, Italy is set to host the upcoming u20 European Championship which will further enhance our program of activity and ensure that the F.I.R.L can capture the next generation of domestic talent.





THE RISE, FALL & RISE AGAIN OF DORĆOL RUGBY LEAGUE

By Stefan Nikolić

Dorćol rugby club was originally founded in 1998 by a group of friends who were passionate lovers of rugby union. Initially, results weren't great, but the passion, the great friendships and the sheer enthusiasm carried the team through its early years.

To understand the club, it is first important to understand the neighbourhood of Dorćol. It is an area that has been the heart and soul of down town Belgrade for many years. There is a vibe to the neighbourhood that can only be explained using the Serbian language, and its this vibe that makes Dorćol club one of a kind. Put simply, you cannot find the same people anywhere else in the world. Their passion for life, for other people, for having fun, for protecting others weaker than themselves is what sets them apart.

In 2001 Dorćol discovered a new form of rugby, and the idea of running a rugby league competition was too tempting. Dragan Pavlović, started to make things happen, a club in the city of Kruševac was formed, and Serbian Rugby League was born. The timing proved perfect because it was the same time as the RLEF was being formed and Serbia was able to become one of the founding nations.

From the very first championship until right up to 2013, Dorćol dominated Serbian rugby league, never losing a game. Their only blip being a draw with Red Star in 2007. During this time there were a few exciting grand finals against Podbara from Novi Sad but overall the level of the game wasn't great. During their dominant years, Dorćol decided to focus exclusively on rugby league and a new generation replaced the founding one with new blood.

This was the same period that the national team qualified for the Euro B competition to play against Wales and Ireland. The majority of the Serbian squad that competed was from

Dorćol who were coached by Ged Stokes who sadly passed away recently. Ged led the team for a two week camp in Cumbria. The results proved a reality check for the players as both Wales and Ireland eased to victory by more than 80 points each.

The experience proved invaluable and upon returning to play in the national competition, Dorćol began beating everyone by 80 or 90 points with the biggest victory coming against Red Star with a scoreline of 112:6.

Everything seemed to be going perfectly until the end of 2012 when a large group of experienced players decided to leave the club. A split in views led to Tašmajdan Tigers being formed and the original Dorćol was left weakened. Some old players laced up their boots once again to lead the club to retain the 2012 and 2013 title before Red Star's young boys took over. Over the next few years the club struggled on and off the field with the only high being Dalibor Vukanovic, Stevan Stevanovic and Stefan Nedeljkovic leading the team to an unexpected premiership in 2016.



Nedeljkovic and Stevanovic spent a month with Warrington Wolves, having the experience of their lifetimes and bringing their game to another level. Dalibor played in England, Russia and France and is the greatest player to have ever run the fields in Serbia. Most of the time he went abroad together with Dorcols' Soni Radovanovic and Red Stars' Zoran Pešić. In doing so they opened the doors and showed the pathway for the generations to come. Soni enjoyed the biggest success, spending half a season at Whitehaven, and a full season in France Elite 1 with Lescure. Another notable player is Danilo Delić, playing now for his 8th season in Carpentras, France Elite 2.

After 8 years, the players that had left Dorčol in 2012 felt that they belonged together and

that the Dorčol vibe must be felt once again. Almost all of the players who left the original Dorčol and transferred to Tasmajdan Tigers, returned so show the full force of Dorčol.

It was a new beginning to return once again to the old ways of Dorčol but this new chapter needed a new name - Dorčol Tigers. The passion and energy was and remains high and everyone can feel it and Dorčol once again is beginning to showcase its unique vibe. The future looks increasingly bright for the club with the U19s winning the championship in 2020 beating Redstar 24-20.





A YEAR ON FROM THE LAUNCH OF VALENCIA HURACANES

by Tony Palacios

Cast your minds back to the 11th January 2020, almost exactly a year since Valencia Huracanes took to the field in their first ever game against Featherstone Rovers in Vilajoyosa in the Comunidad de Valencia.

The game itself was designed as the launchpad of Valencia Huracanes who had become the latest in a long line of non-English clubs who sought to be added to the English rugby league structure in league one.

With not much activity in Spain at the time, it seemed like the only viable option for a club with ambitions to turn professional.

As with all expansion club bids, there were a series of unique questions about Los Huracanes bid, but none more pertinent to teams and fans as, “what will the experience of playing in Valencia actually be like?” Rugby league fans crave new experiences but at the same time, affordability and viability of such rugby league trips is also key. British fans seemed excited about the possibility of trips to Spain to watch rugby league and Valencia seemed a much more plausible and sustainable model than the ambitious bids of Ottawa Aces and New York. This ambitiousness now being echoed by the recent fall from grace for Toronto Wolfpack.

Valencia set their plans out to the RFL (the governing body of rugby league in England) in the summer of 2019 and whilst Ottawa Aces failed to enter league one at the second time of asking, Valencia readied themselves for the visit of Featherstone Rovers.

Many rugby league fans were questioning why Valencia Huracanes would choose such a formidable opponent or how Featherstone Rovers, who had just competed against Toronto Wolfpack in the Million Pound Game and possessed a squad that included talent such as Brett Ferris, Ryan Hall and Dean Parata amongst others would benefit from the game. It was an uneven match-up to say the least but it sparked fan's interest both in Spain and further afield as they waited eagerly with anticipation.

As expected Featherstone Rovers romped home to victory with a 102-18 scoreline but this was a game that was never about the final score. It wasn't designed as a competitive fixture. Featherstone could easily have won by a similar margin against most of the league one clubs in England. The game was about announcing Valencia Huracanes as a real team rather just an expansion bid club that hid behind it's social media and flashy marketing without having a real manager or players.

The Featherstone game was scheduled as the first of 16 games that Valencia would play in an exhibition year that included games against Rochdale Hornets, Keighley Cougars and North Luzon Headhunters of the Philippines. Even after the Featherstone game, Valencia weren't concerned about the result and neither were the fans who watched in the stadium. This was their very first game

and over the course of the year they had a plan to develop and improve the squad to ensure that by 2021 they could be a competitive force. 2020 however, had different plans as we all know too well.

Importantly though, the match proved to



A VIEW FROM THE OPPOSITION - DAVIDE LONGO, CEO FEATHERSTONE ROVERS

"From the initial communication and meetings with Dean and his team in Valencia, prearrangements, to the treatment that we received as a club was exemplary. They organised travel packages for our fans which many took up and I know from the comments that our fans were delighted by the service they received.

We were joined by over 200 Featherstone fans who had travelled over to watch the team. Many were able to do so because of how affordable and accessible a trip to Spain is. There are flights from all UK airports everyday. Together the 2 sets of fans with a large number of expat neutrals who came to cheer on rugby league

be a great success because it answered all the key questions that come with a new destination on the rugby league map. Featherstone Rovers could report to other teams what a trip to play Los Huracanes was really like and fans had also had the chance to sample an away day to Spain.... and they loved every minute of it. So much so that a second game was organised between the two clubs on the

created a great atmosphere both pre and post match.

The result is never important for a team starting out and in truth no one cared about it. This was about exposing more people to rugby league and growing the game of rugby league.

We wanted to support the Valencia project and so we sent some players and coaches out early to do some work in Valencian schools and help fly the flag of rugby league in Spain. I think we are the first English club to do so.

The fact that our fans demanded for us to go back shows how much they enjoyed themselves and is testament to the great match day Valencia Huracanes created.

Personally, I cant wait to return and who knows, next time, we will probably take 500 given how much our fans continue to talk about the game with such fondness."

the back of requests from Featherstone fans.

The game also answered a key question that the RFL should be asking all prospective expansion clubs. Is this a sustainable venture?

Los Huracanes proved the profitability of hosting games by arranging travel packages, creating a match day experience, complete with live music and food. A crowd of over 500 attended, (including more than 200 who had travelled from Featherstone) as Valencia Huracanes equalled a typical match day crowd of many league one clubs.

Whilst others were talking, Valencia were walking and it wasn't just the English clubs and fans that were watching. Fans, players and clubs in Spain were watching too and this is where the real impact of the match happened.

This wasn't the first rugby league match in Spain. There have been domestic matches, state of origin and internationals held throughout the mainland over the past 7 years, yet it is difficult to pinpoint a moment in rugby league in Spain that has transformed the landscape quite like the Valencia v Featherstone game has done.

To understand more fully let's make a comparison between the effect of this game and the game between Catalan Dragons v Wigan in the Nou Camp in 2019.

The stark contrast between the two games is notable. The first was a game between two professional Super League clubs in the iconic Camp Nou watched

by a crowd of in excess of 20,000 spectators, whilst just under 600 watched Featherstone win against Valencia. Yet, whilst proving a great spectacle in Barcelona, the game in the Camp Nou left no lasting impression in Spain. Following the game, no one was clamouring to pick up a Steeden and play rugby league. There was no increase in player participation, no new clubs were formed. In fact 2019 saw less rugby league activity than previous years in Spain. To sum it up, it was just that, a great game of rugby played by two great non-Spanish clubs in Spain, without much thought for how to assist with developing rugby league. Whilst the game impressed people, it inspired no one in Spain to take up the sport.

The game in Vilajoyosa had the exact opposite effect. Played in El Campo del Pantano with a maximum capacity of just 3,500, it definitely lacked the glamour of the Camp Nou. Los Huracanes showcased the possibilities to both existing and new fans alike. Fans were charged entry to the match in a rugby league first for a game involving a Spanish club. Entertainment and travel packages were created for Featherstone fans. Valencia's approach to the game was nothing short of impressive. Of greater note was Los Huracanes ability to loan 3 Salford youngsters for the game, who gave some solid support to the mainly domestic Spanish players in the form of Luis Roberts, Conor Aspey and Sam Bardsley.

In the aftermath of the game, fans, players and club administrators were

A VIEW FROM A FEATHERSTONE FAN - NEIL HESLOP

"It seems like an age ago now but what a great memory it was travelling to Spain with all the other Featherstone Rovers fans to watch them play Valencia Huracanes. Three days of laughter, sun, rugby league and let us not forget the beer! It was a wonderful atmosphere from the moment we arrived.

The Huracanes put on a great match day for us all. I chose to buy the travel package for me and my boys and not only was it brilliant value, everything was spot on. Valencia did a fabulous job at putting the package together and organising everything. I look forward to the next opportunity to go over and see Valencia play. "



left inspired. Player participation increased, new clubs began to spring up in areas where previously there was no or little activity and people wanted to be involved, meaning the torch of rugby league in Spain began to shine brightly.

“Outsiders may say it was a pointless game but to do so would miss the point. Yes we weren’t competitive in our very first game against a club full of talent that has existed for a hundred years, but the game put Valencia Huracanes as a team on it’s journey. We showed the world that we aren’t a pipe dream unlike some other expansion bids.

We showcased rugby league in Spain and we showed a fraction of its untapped potential. A lot has changed over the last year and with it has come new opportunities here in Spain and Europe so we have re-evaluated our ambitions.

Back to the game we specifically chose Featherstone Rovers because we wanted to play a team that would bring a travelling fan base and

Featherstone are famed for the great away following. It’s a real club!

Davide and his team also bought into what we were trying to do and understood that to grow the game in a region it involves work in the community and in schools. It was great to take their team into some local schools and showcase rugby league to a new audience.

Its fair to say that the match day wouldn’t have been the same without the Featherstone Rovers fans who cheered both teams on before and after the match and partied with us afterwards. We were really looking forward to having such a terrific set of fans back this month but I am sure there will be another game in the not too distant future, meanwhile we will focus on the upcoming domestic league."

A VIEW FROM VALENCIA HURACANES



Whilst 2020 was truly a horrible year, despite all the doom and gloom, Spanish rugby league has gone from strength to strength. It is hard to know what the full impact of this momentum would have been if the pandemic hadn't happened,

but as we say good riddance to 2020, 2021 promises to be an exciting year for rugby league in Spain and to a large degree, fans, players and clubs have the game between Valencia Huracanes v Featherstone Rovers to thank for this.

As part of the agreement to play a friendly, Featherstone agreed that their visit would be much more than just a game day spectacle.

Featherstone Rovers sent out their assistant coach Paul March along with stars Brett Ferris and Ryan Hall to accompany Valencia Huracanes on some training sessions in the community and with school children.

Despite the language barrier, Paul and the players got stuck in showcasing the joys of rugby league to a group of youngsters who were being presented with rugby league for the first time. After enjoying a training session and testing their new found rugby skills, the children got to grill Brett and Paul to understand why they thought it was the greatest game of all.



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