

## **Report from Graham Wither, Kent Women & Girls**

For a "non" year this has been an incredibly productive one for the female game in Kent. I have maintained regular email communication with all Girls and Women's club contacts, and we also formed a single "cluster" in the excellent Cluster Zoom initiative that Kevin Cope headed up.

I have also been liaising regularly with my colleagues within the County and also peers in Surrey, Middlesex, Hampshire, Essex, Sussex and Hertfordshire, via the RFU's regional CB clusters and "Player Pathway" zooms. Most recently we had an excellent combined session with the South & South West sharing best practice.

### **Girls Clubs**

Rather than Co-Vid being a complete hindrance, the Girls sections in Kent have been proactive throughout the 2020-21 season running training sessions and eventually modified matches once the regulations permitted them. This has led to a terrific influx of new players. For example, where there were 8 clubs in the 2019-20 under 15 and 18 leagues, this season upcoming we have 13 (including 4 completely new development sides) in the u15s competition and 12 at u18. There will also be many more than the previous 10 u13 sides entering the 2021/22 Waterfall events and distinct u11 girls sections are thriving, attracting young players who would not have come to the game if it was a mixed boys and girls scenario that was being offered. The 2019/20 season finally drew to a close on 31st July (2021!) when I was invited to Aylesford Bulls to present them with the U18 league winners trophy....

Changes to the Under 15 and 18 National Cups have caused some controversy. Just 32 "north" and 32 "south" sides will be able to take part with allocations per county somewhat anachronistically based on their number of RFU Council Members. This would mean just 2 automatic entries at each age group for us and we are being asked to "seed" our teams (5 entered at 15s and 3 at 18s) which is very difficult given the lack of rugby since March 2020.

As well as integrating girls transitioning between age groups after a year away from contact, clubs will also need to start to look ahead to 2022-23 campaign when the new, and resoundingly well received, age-bandings at u12s, 14s, 16s and 18s come into force. Discussions are ongoing re integrating u11 girls.

### **County Girls Programme**

Due to the Pandemic, the 2020/21 County U18 and U15 programme took place virtually. I should very much like to put on record the huge amount of work put into this by Trish Sellors, Mark Finnis & Simon Parsons. We held 4 zoom sessions for each age band to support and educate the girls. Topics covered included Activate, Headcase, Laws, Game Understanding, Principles of Play and Player Reflection. We believe we are the only County to offer any such sort of links and support.

The final session saw a discussion on rugby academies and how these can support the players' progress whilst studying. For girls the sixth form options currently are: Hartpury College and University, Henley College (with links to Ealing Trail Finders), Worthing College, Loughborough College, and North Kent College. As we currently have 1 player attending the Hartpury Sixth form, we asked them to attend our zoom meeting and describe life at Hartpury. From September, 2021 4 girls will be part of the Elite Rugby Programme at Hartpury and will complete their 6<sup>th</sup> form studies there, whilst 2 Kent players will be studying at Henley College.

As a County, it is essential that we maintain contact with the players as they move – identifying that these pathways are successful ways to progress their rugby careers. Trish (Girls Programme Manager) is remaining in contact with players leaving U18s and supporting with links to their University teams or local clubs to enable them to continue to play. Players who have moved from U18s in previous years have had communication re Kent Women's programme.

Four Girls are currently in the Under 18 England Talent Development Group, and were selected in the starting XV for a North v South match at the end of May. The girls are Nicole Whyte, Hannah Smith, Tori Sellors & Tess

White. Nicole, Hannah & Tori will be assessed for England U20s during August/September. Tori & Tess will be having assessments for the U18s in September.

A major change has taken place in that unlike previous seasons when Kent girls were fed into the Harlequins and Richmond Centre's of Excellence (CoE), we are now working with the Wasps CoE (who unlike their male counterparts remain based in West London). I know that Head Coach Mark and his fellow County coaches see this as a hugely positive step. Currently 22 girls are being assessed for England Centre of Excellence at Wasps following a County selection programme, and the results should be known by end of September. The players unsuccessful at this stage in the Kent assessment process have received some development plans and we hope to have a number of these re-assessed by Wasps in November.

### **Womens' Clubs**

Clearly having no rugby for over a year was a worrying issue as we all seek to grow the female game. However, there has actually been significant growth in the number of teams competing in the senior game, which is very encouraging. For the 2021-22 season there are over 360 team entries nationally, which is a near 20% increase from the 2019/20 season and also an increase of around 13% from the entries that there would have been last season, which given the COVID-19 situation is remarkable. Our entered clubs are:-

Level 2 Championship One (South): Blackheath (10 teams)

Level 3 Championship South East Two: Beckenham & Medway (10 teams)

Level 4 NC1 South East (East): Blackheath II, Beccehamians, Canterbury, Cranbrook & Tonbridge Juddians Pink Ladies (8 teams)

Level 5 NC2 South East 2 (East): Aylesford Bulls, Dartford Valley, Gravesend, Lordswood and New Ash Green (9 teams)

The introduction of National Challenge 3 (Level 6) has also been introduced, but entry numbers in our region means that we do not have access to this level and, consequently, two of our brand new teams – Dartford Valley and Gravesend – have chosen to enter at Level 5 rather than the Inner Warrior Development Leagues (effectively Level 7). We do, though, have 4 other new clubs who are starting within the Inner Warrior set up: Brockleians, Dartfordians, Folkestone and Swanley, where they have linked with two Surrey sides and I have been appointed the Competitions Manager for this league.

### **County Women's programme**

Head coach Nathan Morris has kept in touch with the initial cohort of 2020/21 players via a What's App group and spirits seem high. He has also brought new coaches – from Blackheath and New Ash Green - on board.

We will be utilising Dartford Valley's offer to use their facilities free of charge during the season, but Nathan has kicked off the programme with three weekly open sessions in August for prospective County players at Well Hall with over 40 players registered for these "development" sessions. Former England Roses coach Gary Street was in attendance for the last one.

Nathan was part of the Kent representation at a recent sounding-board group held by the RFU to discuss the future of County Representative rugby and came away from that heartened by the message that the future provision of Women's County rugby is seemingly being viewed as a priority.

However, he was concerned that the issue of funding and budgets was still somewhat opaque. I have been able to allay his fears that the county still fully intends to run a representative ladies team in 2021/22 even if there is no formal RFU competition or financial support. Being able to offer the most talented female players an opportunity to

test themselves at a higher level remains a core component of the development of the female game. I am already exploring some sponsorship avenues and will happily take a role in arranging a local regional competition at county level for next season if that's what is necessary. As Nathan so aptly puts it, playing for the county is about more than stash, it's about a desire to test yourself. We would hope to also run a Development/IIIs squad when the time comes.