

Now that we have our own Supporters' web-site, we thought it would be of interest to Members of the Supporters' Club to have an insight into the running of the club. So who better to start with than our Chief Executive and Chairman, Tony Rowe.

To open our discussion we referred to the passionate, loyal and noisy supporters here at Exeter Chiefs, and asked what effect it had on the players and the club as a whole.

“Well, on the players for instance. I think they seem to grow in stature, in fact they have said this to me. Then there is the chanting; people ask me where it came from, but it hasn't been here forever. When we first moved here we were very quiet, but the moment I heard the chant a few years ago, I thought that's good. Our support has grown on match days over the last 3 - 4 seasons, because it is Exeter and the players feel it is their home.. ..there is no mistaking this is their home. The players are very much in touch with what it's all about. It's not just on the field, it's off the field as well.”

When asked about the role of the Supporters within the club he felt that it was very important to the players to have that support no matter where they played.

“It is important to have Exeter people there, whether there is one guy chanting or one guy shouting “Come on Exeter”, they hear that. It's very important to them. I've asked the board that there should be a board member present at every game, anywhere. I've done that because the guys notice and they notice the supporters. Going away last year, as we did to Montpellier, was fantastic. The lads couldn't believe how many supporters had made their way over there. It's only going to get better.”

Did he feel then that having an official Supporters' Club was an asset?

“Yes I do. I think the Supporters Club is great, I am a member myself. All the board are members. There's stuff that you guys do, that we as a professional organisation haven't got the time or resources to do. As a professional rugby club here, everybody is employed and it all costs money. We organise the buses because if somebody gets that wrong there is a big problem. So as a club, from our point of view we want to make the booking of a coach simple and easy so we do that. What we can't do is the bits that you guys do, when the people are on the bus, quizzes, looking after them and giving them a good day out. It is lovely now, in the professional era, that we have the Supporters' club who rally around to put on events, I think it's great. “

Knowing that the Supporters' club is always trying to develop is there anything he felt that we could do? In which direction did he feel we could be going?

“I think that you supporters should be going out there and organising the away game accommodation. I think there is a big hole at the moment.” From the club's point of view, if there is one thing they felt the Supporters' Club should be doing, it is sorting the away travel. “Other clubs have that. Commercially in Exeter, I'm getting really positive feedback; you know, when we play the likes of Gloucester all the hotel bookings go whoosh! Clubs like Leicester, these guys are old hands, they've been doing it for years. They say, “Let's go to sunny Devon for the weekend “.

As the Supporters' Club has raised over £25,000 for all sections of Exeter Chiefs and recently provided testing benches for the Academy, how vital did he think the Academy was to rugby in the South West and possibly nationally?

“Very, very, very.” He went on to give a detailed structure of the Academy which will be the subject of a later article. However, he also explained the social responsibility the club has to the Academy players. “We have very much a social responsibility to these boys. Not only do we try to get them into the England set-up and play for their country, but we have a responsibility to educate them as well. In rugby, you know, their career could be over tomorrow and it's our responsibility and we have to make sure they have another qualification after rugby. The importance of the academy is that at the moment we have only a couple of home grown lads, Richie and Ben. Although Ben is not quite home grown, he's just up the motorway. What will actually happen with these boys coming through is that hopefully in the future we'll have loads of home grown boys. Wouldn't it be good if we had a premiership team with the majority of Westcountry lads? Those 6 under -18 boys of ours in Australia, we're hoping will get picked for the England under -20 squad next season”.

With the Chiefs Community work thriving, did he see this as a positive reflection on the club as a whole?

“Definitely, as a club we have a duty of social responsibility. The club's main sponsor, South West Communications Group, has just provided three vans in the club colours for the community so we have these guys, Tony Walker, Keith Fleming, Marc Dibble, Dom Caton, Drew Meakin and Lewis Webb out in the community every day. Keiron manages the Foundation's match day collections with the 17 – 18 charities which were selected, of which 14 -15 were working with the Exeter Chiefs previously. Basically the more hours they put in the more money the charities get. They have raised over £70,000 so far.

Now the Express and Echo is changing from a daily to a weekly paper, how did he feel this could impact on publicity for the Chiefs, and for the Chiefs Foundation?

It's disappointing as previously we have used the E&E as our notice board but we have been assured that in the new weekly paper Exeter Chiefs will have at least 5 pages every week. We have also employed Pinnacle Photo Agency which will guarantee us plenty of excellent photographs.”

Match days are now a much bigger operation than before. Had that caused the club major headaches re stewarding, health and safety etc?

“The organisation of stewards on match days are the responsibility of Keiron. We are lucky to have carried over a lot of stewards from the County Ground and the new ones are being trained to GNVQ level; our stewards are very good. Last Saturday (Scarlets) we had 70 stewards on duty. Obviously the safety requirement goes back to the Hillsborough days, which is quite right.”

Could he give an insight into the issue of parking and traffic?

“A nightmare. We can't win. Planners wanted to minimise on-site parking. Originally there were three Park& Ride sites designated, Crealy, Westpoint and Matford. We decided Matford was not really any good because it was out of our area and then the Green Lobby said that

it was not really environmentally friendly to have coaches travelling up and back from the car/coach parks to the stadium so we can't win!" When the capacity was 5,500 they had 144 spaces, but now with twice the capacity the Rugby Club have had to designate the top section of the car park for drop off to prevent tail-backs out onto the road. "The TV companies need at least a third of the car park for their vehicles and remember that there are TV cameras at every game now and more match officials mean extra spaces being used up so we have to rent land for the players to park."

Having matches televised undoubtedly causes more congestion with the amount of vehicles here, but also with match times. How difficult has that been for the club?

"TV dictates when the games are played. I have tried to get them on a Saturday at 3pm but TV has the final word. For Europe, the Amlin games could be played any day from Thursday to Sunday and Premiership any day from Friday to Sunday, and at almost any time.... the only requirement is that the TV companies give the clubs a minimum of 6 weeks' notice. "

With the need to increase the size of the stadium to be able to compete fully in Europe and also to generate more income, did he think that Exeter Chiefs would still be able to retain that friendly feel as a club?

"Definitely. You know what it feels like now. When it is a 20,000-seater stadium, enclosed like a bowl it will have an even better atmosphere" and he urged Exeter Rugby Club Members to attend the next Members' Forum on Monday 19th September at 7.30pm at Sandy Park for more information.

Other clubs and teams have frequently remarked on the work ethic of Exeter Chiefs as a rugby team; it is evident that this is carried out by all the staff here so did he think that is why this club is doing so well?

"Undoubtedly. The work that Rob and Paddy have done is exceptional. "

Obviously to have reached this goal has taken a huge amount of work from everybody concerned. How big a change was it from Championship to Premiership in the day-to-day running of the club?

"Very little, you'd be surprised. Contrary to what the media said, we were ready. We already had a 5 year plan in the Championship, we knew what we had to do when we built Sandy Park to the premiership standard and now we have a 7 year rolling plan, so actually we're getting more money to do the same thing. We have more people coming through the gates so we can buy better players, but we have had to increase the office staff by only one. So, not a massive change because we already had the systems in place. In any business you can see what is coming around the corner, good or bad, and you have to be prepared for it".

Now that we are into our 2nd season in the Premiership, did he look back in amazement at what the Club had achieved?

"Ah yes, that's the other side of it. When you get the draw for this season and you see Leicester, Newcastle, Bath, you have to pinch yourself, to remind yourself that you are actually there. It's fantastic. Also from a Supporter's point of view, what I'm really pleased about, is the way that they conduct themselves. Our Supporters are held in high respect by

other premierships clubs already, which is nice. They behave themselves. They're very noisy, they're very rugby knowledgeable but very respectful. I haven't had one premierships club make one derogatory comment about any of our supporters. That is a credit to our supporters."

Personally, what had been the highlight for him over the past twelve months?

"Winning the Championship, no doubt, but that's gone now. That trophy out in the cabinet, I've paid for that, I've given it to the club. It will never come here again, because we won't be going back down there. In the last twelve months? That's tough. I think probably, the highlight for me was the Aviva Premiership dinner in London and seeing the likes of Tommy Hayes getting his award, and Tom Johnson, and also I think Robert should have got something, and I'm not on my own in thinking that. To me, those guys have worked really hard; I can do everything in my power here but I can't go out there and win the game. Unless they win the game, everything I do off the pitch I might as well not bother, had I? What drives me on and all my staff is the team. There are very few premierships clubs where the staff go away and follow the team. My team, this bit of it, will always be driven by Robert's team."

As any supporter of Exeter Chiefs must be aware, an integral part of running a successful rugby club is the maintenance of the stadium and the pitch so in this instalment we are talking to Exeter Chiefs' grounds man, Adrian Witton.

Adrian, dealing with the main pitch, the first thing people say is "Doesn't the pitch look great"? Can you give some details on how you maintain it to such a high standard?

"It's difficult; it was laid in the first place quite well. Yes, we have to maintain it a lot afterwards, but it's like anything, the foundations you put down are like a house, if they're good the house will be good and it's the same with the pitch really. It's sand-based, it drains well but the consequence of having a free-draining pitch is you get rid of the nutrients very quickly. We have to feed it a lot to keep it strong and healthy. We also cut it regularly; people think you should let the grass grow, but grass likes to be cut, as it will thicken up if you do. We spike it and rake it regularly; doing all these jobs is not quick. To scarify the pitch will take me all day so we can soon build up a lot of time doing things. You would be surprised how much rubbish we get out of the pitch, dead grass and stuff like that. We use both liquid and granular fertilisers."

Continuing on from there, how often do you cut the grass?

"During the summer and late summer, probably three times a week; in the winter it's hardly a cut, it doesn't grow very much, so we're down to once or maybe twice a week. In mid-winter it's not at all really; we go over it just for aesthetic purposes, to put a nice stripe on it".

Is the grass you use prescribed by the company that laid the pitch and what mixture or type of grass is sown?

"It's down to me basically. I have regular meetings with suppliers to discuss the best seed to use. There are lots of varieties available; we use a rye mix at the moment. A lot of the premier football clubs use it, Chelsea does and I also believe Twickenham, so it's used by all the top stadiums - if it's good enough for them, it's good enough for us. Two hundred kilos of

grass seed is sown at the end of the season, ten bags at £70 per bag, so you can see how it mounts up. The fertiliser is £400 per application and in the summer we are spreading it every two weeks. In the winter we use something which is more expensive, but lasts a lot longer, so we'll probably only do it twice because the grass is not growing naturally, otherwise you're forcing it".

Adrian, how long do you think this pitch will last?

"I think the club would be looking to renew it during the next three years depending on finances. Renewing would mean replacing just the top soil because all the drainage stays where it is. If you take off just one inch of the surface it's equivalent to 700 tons of soil, so then you have to replace that also. That makes it expensive, because the soil is up to £35 ton, plus transport, taking everything away and the cost of grass seed, you would soon get a bill of £50,000 to £70,000. This year we put 200 tons of sand into the pitch at £35 a ton, and at the end of the season the cost of pitch renovation was about £20,000."

How soon after a game do you begin work on the pitch?

"We get back onto it on the Monday. What we tend to do is brush it, because there'll be lots of dead grass kicked out by the players, so we do this to get the loose stuff off the top, and then use the rotary mower that hoovers up the dead grass. We'll probably spike it, and then hand divot it with a bucket and a fork! Some things remain old-fashioned!"

Can you explain how you put the cup -game logos on the grass? And what about those white lines?

"We have a company who come in and do the logo for us. They've got a big stencil, and they do it with a paintbrush and a pot even in this age of modern technology! They put the stencil down and dot out the outline so they know where it's going and fill in the colour. It takes me and Max, my assistant, two hours to paint the lines, three if I do it on my own because the pitch is 100 metres long, which is the maximum, and width wise it is 69 metres, compared with the maximum 70. It costs about £25 in paint each time we white line, and the paint cannot be put down if it is raining or if the grass is wet so a dry spell is essential to mark the pitch."

How often do you allow the players to train on the pitch?

"Normally that's up for discussion between me and Rob really. It depends on the weather. I like to look after the pitch as much as I can but I realise it's really helpful for Rob to get the players on it as often as he can, so as long as they're not doing too many drills, I don't mind too much. If it's very wet or frosty they won't go on anyway but I do try and let them use it as much as possible."

Knowing how variable weather forecasts can be, do you rely on them for pitch preparation?

"Yes, we have to really. You're right, they're not always accurate. I've been here 4 years myself now and I've learnt that we have a slight micro-climate. Our weather here can be different from Exeter city centre. The wind is the major difference and it doesn't help the grass to grow, in fact it stops it from growing. I watch the weather every night just to fit in the

work, such as spraying the next day, because if I want to do an operation, I need the right weather conditions.”

What is most difficult to deal with frost or heavy rain?

“Well frost really, because if there’s frost on the ground we can’t do anything”.

Is there anything you can do to protect from the frost?

“Yes, we’ve got frost covers for the pitch which we use for snow as well. They have to go down before the frost arrives, because the covers that we have only work down to about - 4. Any lower than that, and it will probably go through them. If you have a televised game the Premiership uses a company that will come and erect a blow-up bubble which will protect the whole pitch for you.”

There is also an artificial pitch here. What is that made of and can you give us some idea of its maintenance. Do you see the artificial pitch as the playing surface of the future?

“I hope not! The artificial pitch is essentially a synthetic carpet; the fibres are about 2- 3 inches long and it’s filled with crumb which is made from rubber– it’s about 2 inches deep of rubber. There is a polystyrene shock pad underneath which makes it quite nice and soft, gives it a good feel. All we do is brush it on a regular basis just to keep the rubber moving around a bit. We try to do it monthly. Also specialist machinery comes in once a year to loosen it up. Saracens are all for having an artificial pitch, but they won’t be doing it this season.”

The stadium as a whole – can you give us an idea of your other duties as grounds man? How is your time divided between the pitches and the rest of the complex?

“We tend to get involved with everything that’s here really. We clean up after the match, clean up the rubbish. Actually this year we have started recycling; that’s a bit better because there’s a hell of a lot of plastic up here; we’ve got recycling bins now which is quite good. Any painting that needs doing, the painting of the steps in the grandstand, that’s about 300 steps to paint. There’s the lodge where the players stay, we go down and keep that tidy, cut the grass, but we don’t get involved on the inside! Nobody wants to go inside there! The pathways, the car park, the Piazza area, we keep them weed free if we can, all the outside areas we keep clean and tidy. A company, Stalite, come in and put up the sponsorship boards, but we’ll fix one if it comes loose. From taking the posts down to unblocking toilets and drains if need be, we’re normally the first port of call if anyone’s got a problem.”

What’s the worst job you do?

“The steps were a laborious job, but I can’t say I didn’t like it - in the summer it’s not too bad. We do a bit of strimming around here; obviously I’m getting on a bit and my back isn’t too good doing that. But nothing really, I don’t mind getting in and doing anything.

Do you think there would ever become a time when a roof would be needed on the Sandy Park pitch?

“I don’t particularly think so to be honest; we’re in the south west, we get wind and we get rain, but it’s only occasionally we get a winter like we did last season. We lost just one game last year which was a very severe winter. The cost would be prohibitive compared with what you would gain from it.”

At the start and end of the game do you look at the pitch and think “Job well done”?

“Well, apart from the Gloucester A game they played last season on a Monday night when I wasn’t very happy because it rained heavily all evening, I usually think it does look nice, although I always think it looks better on a Friday – but sometimes I do think “I wish they would get off now””!

Talking to Adrian, it is obvious that he cares and maintains the pitch to a very high standard. Exeter Chiefs rugby has a pitch and ground staff of which they can be proud.