

With the success our Academy players have achieved over the past season, we have been fortunate to obtain an interview with Steve Byrne explaining in detail what the Academy is and how it is run.

Part 1

How did you become involved with Exeter Rugby Club as it was then known?

I went to Hele's School in Exeter where all the teachers were players. For years I never understood why all our matches were at 10.30 on a Saturday morning until I discovered it was because Bob Staddon, Jack Harrison and Alun Rees wanted to clear off to the County Ground at lunch time to go and play rugby! My first introduction to the club was when, having played for the school one Saturday morning, Alun Rees said "We're short in the 3rd team this afternoon, will you come and play?" I ended up playing against Withycombe 2nd team after having played a full game in the morning. It wasn't until the end of the game that I thought "I'm beginning to feel tired"! I had never questioned playing two games and that happened half a dozen times before. I left school at 18 and got a job with Exeter City Council, who sent me off to college in Bristol. As I was coming home at weekends I started playing for the Club regularly. For the first few seasons I played in the 2nds and 3rds, before I played a couple of games for the first team. Over the years I played over 500 games for the club in total, about 120 games being for the first team.

I retired from playing rugby on 12th January 1995 halfway through the season. I had spent over 20 years travelling around the country playing rugby and to be honest I was getting to the point where I felt "I've done this for too long". I thought for ages that an injury would present an opportunity to retire, but luckily that never happened, so I chose my 40th birthday as an appropriate time. It isn't normal to retire in the middle of a season, but we had just played Torrington and won 88-3, it seemed like everyone else in the team had scored except me and I said "That's it, I'm going to retire". Nobody believed me - "You can't retire in the middle of the season, you don't do that" and I said "Well I do!" I stopped playing rugby and started playing squash but I didn't want to finish my association with the club.

Were you an officer in the club before you became a Director?

Whilst still a player I was acting as Hon. Team Secretary and when I stopped playing I joined the Committee and started administering the international tickets. A year or two later I became Vice-Chairman and then Chairman at a time when the professional era was starting. It was a busy and exciting time to be involved with the Club. I was involved with presenting the case to Club Members for the move from the County Ground to Sandy Park, and at the Members' meeting to hear the arguments for and against a move. I remember that almost all of the members who had packed into the Memorial Clubhouse were in favour of making the move to Sandy Park. When I stood down as Chairman I took a step back – we had just had our fifth child so it was time for me to be out of the limelight and spend a bit more time at home, whilst Tony, Keiron and Ian Powell did a fantastic job of organising the move to Sandy Park.

When you became a Director did you have a choice of which role you could fill or was that decided for you?

Every Board member is responsible for a particular aspect of the Club. When I became a director four years ago the Academy was growing in its importance to the Club; it was felt that it warranted representation at Board level and I was happy to take on that role. When the game was amateur there was a relatively simple pathway from the junior section through the colts and into the senior sides. When the game became professional it became very important for young players to receive the right level of coaching and conditioning to enable them to progress from the junior sides. The Academy was seen as something that could accomplish that. The academy managers (Robin Cowling and Rob Gibson) and their team of coaches do a fantastic job and it is very rewarding to see young players join the academy and a few years later see them playing for the Braves and then 1st team.

Can you give us an idea of your role within the Academy?

My brief is to represent the interests of the Academy within the club and act as a link between the Academy managers and the Board. I liaise with the Academy managers and Academy coaches when they need equipment or some new kit and lobby the Board on their behalf. The Supporters Club has been brilliant in its' support of the Academy and last year funded the provision of some weight training benches for the colleges at Ivybridge and Truro. Each year the RFU carries out an audit of the Academy, where every aspect of the Academy is scrutinised. Robin Cowling and Rob Gibson have a huge task in record keeping and writing regular reports on all of the young players, all of which are submitted to the RFU on a monthly basis. The Academy is becoming very important to the future of the Club and it is important that the Board is kept fully informed of how it is functioning.

Can you tell us how the Academies started e.g. were they allotted to different areas of the country geographically or to the clubs in the Premiership? Did you have to apply to run an Academy?

The RFU started the Academy program 10 years ago to help develop international players of the future. In New Zealand there had been a lot of work done with youngsters and the coaches there realized that the best way to develop young players was to spot them at 13yrs to 14yrs, expose them to the best quality coaching and keep them involved during the 16yrs and 18yrs age group when so many young players drop out of the game. There is a big wastage of talented players at that age and the RFU is keen to keep it to a minimum. It was felt that by getting youngsters at the right age, introducing them to the right habits of nutrition, diet, strength and conditioning - all that sort of thing, they wouldn't see so many youngsters dropping out. It also ensured that they received the best possible coaching. The RFU started with the 12 Premiership clubs at that time and they also felt that an academy was needed in the West Country. Exeter Chiefs were awarded the contract to run the Academy for Devon and Cornwall. It was initially called the South West of England Rugby Academy, (SWERA) and that was based in 4 centres – Barnstaple, Exeter, Ivybridge and Truro. It ran for a few years before being re-named Exeter Chiefs England Rugby Academy, for which we were given the franchise 4 years ago. The RFU decided that they wanted the academy in 2 centres only, so that the very best players would be playing together. Players have to have genuine international prospects to be given a place in the academy. Therefore at any one time we only have about 12-13 players in the Exeter Academy. Exeter, Plymouth Albion and Pirates all applied for the original franchise, submitting business plans; at the time all three clubs were pretty much of equal playing standard, all playing in the Championship – it was before we got to Sandy Park. Ian Bremner prepared the bid with Tony Rowe and Robin

Cowling who, between them, impressed the RFU and Exeter won the franchise. The current contract period runs until 2016.

Part 2

Is there any financial benefit to having an Academy – how does the funding work?

The RFU contributes approximately £120,000 per year to the Academy, but the actual running costs are at least double that. So, by no means does the funding from the RFU cover the costs but it helps. We have been working successfully with Truro and Ivybridge Colleges for many years now and I cannot speak too highly of the staff who have produced so many players that have gone on to play rugby professionally. Since moving to Sandy Park it has become the third centre for the Academy. Young players now come here to train each week and have become fully integrated into the professional squad.

At the start of the process there are the schools of rugby which are run (in Cornwall) by the Cornwall RFU and (in Devon) the Devon RFU. These SoRs are for young players aged 13 to 16 years of age. The most talented players of each age group are invited once a month to coaching sessions in Devon or Cornwall; usually at Exeter, Plymouth and Truro. With such a big area to cover it is important to have a base in Cornwall. Post 16yrs the best players are invited to join the Academy proper. Most Academy players choose to attend either Truro College or Ivybridge College because they have the very best facilities but some will choose to remain at their existing school or college to finish their education. Ivybridge and Truro have over the years provided a lot of money for top class sports facilities and the Chiefs provide funding for some of the staff involved with the programme (ex-Chiefs players, Tony Roques, Danny Porte and John Fabian). At the colleges the youngsters make huge strides in their rugby development and I have been very impressed by the way the colleges develop the boys and give them a thoroughly professional outlook. These youngsters have been starting their school day at 7am, 2 or 3 days a week, spending 2 hours using weights before they start the school day. Because of the nature of rugby in the professional era conditioning coaches estimate that it takes 2 years to get a young player strong enough and fit enough to cope with the rigours of top level rugby. It is important that all of a player's muscle groups are equally developed. Failure to ensure this will lead to a weakness and injury.

Has the Academy set-up changed now that Exeter is in the Premiership?

Like everything in the club, the Academy has become more professional and Academy players now train with the professional squad. This gives them access to all of the other professionals that work at Sandy Park. The conditioning coaches and physios now work with the young players on a regular basis. In the past the first team had sole call on those people but now the Academy is included in all aspects of the club at Sandy Park. Academy players offered professional contracts are provided with accommodation near Sandy Park and require a lot of mentoring as for many of them they are away from home for the first time.

How many personnel are involved with our Academy, both students and coaching staff and obviously there must be administration as well - who does that?

That is a difficult question to answer as the Academy is now so closely integrated with the rest of the club. However at the request of the RFU we have started keeping accounts for the Academy which are separate from the rest of the club's activities. These are required for inspection when the Academy undergoes its' annual RFU audit and inspection. Stuart Lancaster oversaw this last year - and every aspect of how the Academy is run is examined.

With separate accounts it is now possible to apportion costs properly to the Academy. A proportion of each of the coach's time is allocated to the Academy as is all the other conditioning, fitness and medical staff. Costs associated with administration and a proportion of the general running costs of Sandy Park are also now allocated to the Academy and this all contributes to a more realistic picture of what the Academy costs to run each year.

Do the students get a grant?

Both Ivybridge and Truro endeavour to help students if they have a financial need. Where a student is attracted from another part of the county help is given with the arranging of accommodation, often with the family of another player who lives locally. The colleges tour abroad extensively, both having represented England at the World School 7s in Japan for example. No players are excluded through lack of funds and the colleges ensure that all players are able to travel.

What proportion of students become professional sportsmen, either as players or coaches, and how does our proportion compare with other Academies? How many of the students here would you expect/hope to see continue their career in rugby?

That's a difficult one to answer! The recognition that our young players are getting and the number who are receiving representative honours is really impressive. Last year we have had 6 lads in the under 18 squad who went to Australia, that was something like 20% of the squad. It was more than any other Premiership club and it was a really good year for us. However, we know there will be a season when we only get one or two players winning representative honours but, if you look at the current under-15s and 16s, there are top quality lads coming through there. A list of all the youngsters that have gone through our Academy and are either playing in the Premiership, the Championship and down to Level 4 is really impressive. There could be a Premiership club now run with players who have gone through our Academy.

Part 3

Does any of our Youth Section go to the Academy?

Yes. One of the things that held us back over the years, since we have been at Sandy Park, has been the lack of playing space. We set up Exeter Athletic (as a separate amateur side), the aim being to stop the drift away from the club after Colts level. We want to give players

leaving the Youth section somewhere to play and stay with the club. Exeter Athletic played one game a couple of seasons ago, it was a day the Chiefs were playing Leicester at home in the Premiership and it didn't work because the ground was too congested. With 4 teams playing there, on two pitches, with 8 or 9 officials, there was not enough space for them. The crowd was coming in as the sides were leaving the pitch, it was all getting a bit chaotic! We realised that to run another club side at Sandy Park on a match day would be very difficult and we would need other facilities and that's why the development at Oil Mill Lane is crucial for the Junior Section, which at the present time is really thriving. The junior sides have in recent seasons played at various schools in Exeter and at Withycombe and Topsham rugby clubs but we want somewhere where we can bring them all together, where the Colts and the Amateur side can play. What we are hoping is that after a first season of friendly fixtures, Exeter Athletic will join the league structure and can do what Exeter University has done this year, join Devon League Div 2. With genuinely amateur players the Athletic side could reach Level 6 or 7, a level like Western Counties, SW2, SW1, somewhere where players graduating from the Junior section or from the Academy could play a good standard of amateur rugby before stepping up to the Braves, it's a natural progression. If you look at college rugby, at UWIC, Hartpury or Loughborough, they've all been in the leagues for some years now and play a very good standard of rugby – that's where Exeter University want to play. I think that Exeter University should have gone into the leagues 5 or 6 years ago. Each year the Chiefs work with Keith Fleming to ensure that talented young players are attracted to Exeter University. Players like Henry Slade, who attended Plymouth College is now on a Sports Science course at Exeter University. Henry is the current England under-20 fly-half, and has a great future. The University will tailor courses to fit in with the professional workload, which is very helpful when we are looking to recruit a young player. The University offers scholarships to attract young players with a good pedigree and this has really helped to improve the standard of rugby at the University in recent years. Ten or fifteen years ago, Exeter University neglected top level sport, but they subsequently realized that sport was an ideal way to promote the University. Hartpury have risen from nothing to national prominence over 20 years purely on their sporting prowess, Loughborough also, and Exeter University wants to be up there with those top clubs. They are now putting a huge effort into elite sport; they're right up there now with their hockey, not far off with their rugby, and cricket is now very successful. Exeter University is now one of the Russell group, one of the top ten universities in the country so academic entry requirements have in recent years become very demanding.

With the University raising their entry requirements it was important to offer an alternative for further education. Bicton College offers us that option and after a great first season the Exeter Chiefs Academy at Bicton will develop over the next few years into a really valuable asset for the club.

Finally, after a very successful 12 months for the South West and our Academy students, do you see the next 2 or 3 season being just as, or even more, successful?

We have been aware that the England (Chiefs) Rugby Academy is very much targeted at players who are the internationals of the future but we felt that we were actually missing players who may be late developers, who could be capable of becoming professional players at Championship or Premiership level, but weren't recognised as teenagers as being international prospects. Matt Hopper for example, was a youngster who came through our junior set-up but wasn't recognised as heading for the top when he was with us; I don't think he was when he was with Plymouth, but someone saw it when he was with Pirates and he has

gone on to great things. We want to retain these players and to do this we need to broaden the Academy base. When Oil Mill Lane is functioning and we have that additional playing space, we want to run a full Academy side that is playing on a weekly basis. This fits exactly with RFU thinking and from next season a Premiership Academy league is being started which will mean the Academy playing regular competitive matches for the first time. The future for the Academy is very exciting and we will see more and more home grown players from Devon and Cornwall playing for the Chiefs over the coming seasons.