

**CARDIFF RFC CLUB
CHAIRMAN'S REPORT
END OF SEASON REPORT 2020 / 21**

This will be my final report to the membership after five years as Chairman of Cardiff RFC. As a life-long fan of the 'Blue & Blacks', as well as a former player, it has been a huge honour and privilege to lead your committee. However, I have to say it hasn't always been the most enjoyable experience.

Winning the WRU Challenge Cup for the first time in more than two decades in 2019 stands out as a highlight, as does seeing those players who graduated through our ranks go on to play for both the Blues and Wales. But it seems to me that ever since rugby went regional in Wales in 2003 there has been a mounting lack of harmony at the Arms Park that has become increasingly divisive.

When Cardiff Rugby Ltd was created to allow the Blues to come into being it was never envisaged by any of us that Cardiff RFC would be pushed further and further down the pecking order. Everything was done to enable the Blues to push forward successfully into a new era and over the past 18 years they have won two second tier European trophies and an Anglo-Welsh Cup.

The relationship between the Blues and the RFC has been a difficult one. Since rejoining the club in 2011 I have done my best to ensure the best interests of Cardiff RFC have been placed firmly on the rugby agenda. As we approach our 150th anniversary in 2026 we have to remember all those great players and servants of the club and ensure what they built here in the Welsh capital becomes lost in the mists of time.

Thankfully, every Rugby section committee member I have had the pleasure of working with has remained totally committed to ensuring the world renowned name and reputation of Cardiff RFC, and all it stands for, is maintained. I would like to thank them all for the resolute support they have given me over the past five years.

Maybe, just maybe, the penny has finally dropped at the Arms Park and more people realise that history matters, that whichever team plays at our spiritual home in the heart of the Welsh capital is representing our great club and our great city. The move to drop the 'Blues' title from the regional team is a step in the right direction, but much work lays ahead to ensure there is a fully integrated club that serves the needs of the community, semi-professional and professional elements of the game.

Cardiff RFC cannot afford to be considered an irritant or an afterthought in the minds of people in charge of rugby in our city. That has been the case in the past with none of the pieces of the jigsaw properly fitted together. Hopefully, that is about to change.

Of all the things that have been achieved during my period as Chairman I firmly believe the most important was the appointment of Steve Law as head coach in 2017. He brought with him an in-depth understanding of the Premiership and its players, proven coaching qualities and a set of standards that have been the making of the club in recent seasons. He also understood the traditions and values of Cardiff RFC and helped to mould a strong team that blended youth and experience in equal measure. Steve will once again be in charge of coaching the team next season and his strength in developing not only players, but coaches, has been shown by the fact that Gethin Jenkins is now the Wales defence coach and T Rhys Thomas was forwards coach with Wales U20 this summer.

The progress made under Steve's expert guidance is worth noting. No longer was the title race all about our regional rivals Pontypridd and Merthyr, the 'Blue & Blacks' almost immediately entered the equation. Throughout his time we have worked under the banner of **'Keep striving for improvement, you must keep moving forward'**

Season 2018/19

- The relationship with the Blues began to develop with a better understanding of the needs of both squads
- The playing budget for Cardiff RFC budget was increased by the Blues
- Squad was strengthening saw Martyn Roberts, Morgan Allen, Steff Jones, Zac O'Driscoll, Kieran Martin, Joe Gatt, Mathew Powell and Morgan Griffiths join the squad
- The coaching staff also changed with Gethin Jenkins, T Rhys Thomas, Llyr Lane and James Dixon joining him in what became widely regarded as the best coaching team in the Premiership
- It was Steve's first season with his own choice of player
- Game time was offered to senior and transition squad members at the Blues
- Ben Thomas and Max Llewellyn were prominent and 9 Academy players were blooded, four of who played 10 games or more
- 10 players played 30 games or more and 18 played 20 games or more
- That hard-core of players produced a season in which the WRU Challenge Cup was won and the side were runners-up in the league
- Results exceeded expectations

Season 2019/20

- The Premiership was now even more competitive with only 12 teams in the league, raising the standards and intensity of the competition
- New signings included Brynley Toms, Ollie Drake, Evan Yardley, Nathan Hudd, Alex Everett, James Thomas, Tom Habberfield, Ben Williams, Leon Andrews, Joe Scrivens, Barney Nightingale and Sam Beard
- The coaching staff was changed slightly with James Dixon appointed as attack

coach and Will Cusack as Strength & Conditioning coach

- A brilliant start saw Cardiff win 13 consecutive games before going down by a point after Christmas to Pontypridd
- 3 Premiership teams were beaten on the way to the semi-finals of the WRU Challenge Cup, which unfortunately was then cancelled due to COVID-19
- We were set to play Carmarthen Quins in the semi-final
- In the Premiership, we were 7 points clear at the top of the table with a game in hand before the season was cancelled

Having won the Cup for the first time in 22 years in 2019 we were all dreaming of completing the first league and cup double in the club's history a year on. COVID put paid to that. The debate within some circles was whether or not it matters if Cardiff RFC is truly competitive any more. In many people's eyes the club is seen as a vehicle to provide the next generation of regional players with a step into the senior game. Becoming the servant to professional rugby is not how I have ever envisaged our great club. We have a role to play in bringing players through, as we always have done since the 1950s when we became one of the first clubs in Wales to launch a Youth team. But we have also always been a competitive outfit and must remain so. If playing for Cardiff RFC is to mean anything to current and future players they must be part of a well organised, competitive and ambitious team. It has to be about the collective, not the individual and titles and trophies matter.

As I am writing this we are preparing to get back into some form of rugby post-COVID. It has been a long wait and my condolences go out to anyone from within the Cardiff RFC family that has lost a loved one during this terrible time. Steve is working as head coach and Gruff Rees, academy manager at the Blues, has been installed as the director of rugby. Between them these two will guide both the playing and development fortunes of the club.

There appears to be greater clarity within the club following the decision taken by Alun Jones and the Blues committee to re-brand the regional entity as Cardiff Rugby. The second team will now be known as Cardiff RFC and the players who make-up the team competing in the Premiership and WRU Challenge Cup will be experienced regional players, Academy members and 20 or so semi-professional players identified by Steve. The dream is to have a streamlined rugby pathway that enables:

1. the best young talent to rise to the top, supported by senior pros and semi-pros
2. those who need a bit longer to mature into full-time professionals a chance to get quality game-time under their belt
3. competent and competitive players who want to play for Cardiff RFC to prove their worth by training and playing in a first-class set-up

This is very exciting news. Done well it will have widespread benefit and will safeguard and strengthen the future of rugby at all levels in Cardiff. For almost 150 years the good

citizens of our first city have been trekking to the Arms Park to watch top-quality players and teams playing with pride and panache in the famous blue and black hoops. Now the hope is they will get two teams for the price of one to confidently cheer to further honour and glory in the future.

Talking about the future, we will be starting our Mini & Juniors section this Autumn. Chris Collins, a former player who progressed through the Youth, Rags and senior sides at the club, has been leading this vital project as we seek to sink deeper roots into our community. Two other former players, Bobby Newman and David Morgan, are working with him alongside the experienced development staff at Cardiff Rugby. Our hope is this will extend the player pathway and also engage new fans across the city. Just as we have always championed players who have graduated from our Youth section and risen to the very top of the international game – Lloyd Williams in the Sixties, Terry Holmes and Mark Ring in the Eighties to name but a few – just imagine how exciting it will be to try to spot a first team player of the future cutting his teeth at Mini & Junior levels.

As I prepare to hand over the Chairmanship I would like to thank all those who have served alongside me on the Rugby Committee (Simon Down, Jill Parker, Marc Wakeham, Chris Collins, Clive Davies, David Morgan, Bobby Newman, Ian Tabor and John Huw Williams), and also those I have worked with at Cardiff Athletic Club level. There have been some tough times, strong words spoken and disagreements along the way. But, first and foremost, the best interest of Cardiff RFC has always been at the forefront of our deliberations.

As I prepare to step down as Chairman, I'm looking forward to helping in any way my successor and serving Cardiff Rugby as much as possible into the future.

Regards

Chris Norman