



SALISBURY RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB

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DIRECTOR OF RUGBY AGM REPORT JULY 2023

The 2022/23 season saw some fundamental changes in the structure of amateur leagues. Having completed a review of the amateur game in late 2019, the RFU, during the pandemic, reshaped leagues. In the biggest change in 30 years leagues would now be based more on geographical proximity than the rigidity of irregular county lines. As a result there was a significant change in league structure for the 1st XV in their first season back in level 6, and a reduced geographic footprint for the 2nd XV and 3rd XV's leagues. It also led to far more derby style games. Broadly – a massively positive move – that should help put the future of our game on a more stable footing.

The 1st XV competed in Regional 2 South Central, under the stewardship of head coach **Gareth Blackborrow**, and lead coach **Jonah Thorpe**. Salisbury, at the southern end of the league area, would travel as far North as Shipston on Stour and Stow-on-the-Wold, but also were offered games against old foes like Marlborough, Tottonians, Devizes and Swindon. The team, despite significant churn in players, started the season promisingly with a handsome home win against Reading. Unfortunately, it was a false dawn, and the team went on to suffer five losses in a row, including a humbling by eventual league winners Marlborough. Momentum swung positively in late October with a hard-fought win away at Buckingham. Seven wins in eleven games followed over Christmas, with losses against the leagues top sides now only being by marginal amounts, and some crowd rousing wins at Castle Road. Sadly, momentum swung again, with the last four games of the season lost, three of which to top four sides.

Of the 22 games played the 1st XV won 9 and lost 13, claiming 9 try and 5 losing bonus points. This gave us 50 league points in total, placing us 7 of 12 in the league (a hairs breath off the top half). Where this may, in some respects appear disappointing, it is anything but. For the first season back in level 6, and considering how poorly the club performed at that level only a couple of years ago, mid table is very respectable. Furthermore, the volume of narrow losses in the latter stages of the season, suggests there room for growth and a top 4 finish is easily within reach.

The 2nd XV, sadly, did not fare as well in Counties 2 Dorset & Wilts Central. A lack of a designated 2nd XV coach or team manager, paired with variable player availability and a demanding league, meant the 2nd XV struggled for large parts of the season. Huge credit must go to 2nd XV captain **Scotty Nicol** for the work behind the scenes to prepare teams for Saturdays and for the outstanding leadership he showed on the pitch. Despite unfavourable results, Scotty and a collection of other club stalwarts kept a positive atmosphere, and the team fulfilled every fixture. Results are always going to be difficult to get against opposition club 1st XV's or single team clubs that have the benefit of unlimited subs. Corsham dominated the league, but to their credit the 2s gave the other 3 top 4 sides stiff opposition, even registering a draw with second place Warminster.

Results against teams in the lower reaches were far better with cracking wins against Westbury and Bradford-on-Avon. Most pleasingly, having lost to Wheatsheaf Cabin Crew by 2 points in October, the 2nd XV turned it around in January with a 3 point winning margin giving a one point margin in the grudge match double header. At the end of the season, the 2nd XV had played 16, Won 3, drawn 1 and lost 13. With an additional 7 bonus points the resultant 21 points put the 2nd XV in 8th place, thus sustaining them at level 8 for the 23/24 season. A significant result, as if they had been relegated, it would have pushed the 3rd XV out of the counties league structure, into a merit table.

The frictions faced by the 2nd XV were only magnified for the 3rd XV and fulfilling all the fixtures proved unmanageable. By the end of the season, 3 of 12 games couldn't be honoured. As a result, despite one victory and a couple of try bonus points the 3rd XV finished on a negative point score. As disappointing that is, credit must go to **Dave Veal**, **Andrew Barrett** and **Phil Dauwalder** who battled the lack of player availability, routinely roused the troops and dragged players out of retirement, to ensure we could fulfil the fixtures.

TEAMWORK

RESPECT

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After the league season finished, the 1st XV took part in the Papa John's cup competition. Given a bye in the first round of the Regional 2 South Plate, we came up against Wadebridge Camels. The Cornish side played brilliantly on the back of a late season surge in their South West league, and sadly knocked Salisbury out in the second round.

On the county scene Salisbury was represented by four players in the senior Dorset & Wilts training squad. **Bobby Brown** missed out on the final squad by a hairs width and **Jack Colby** was routinely the travelling reserve. More successfully **Ed Crossley** and **Henry Toomer** played in every game as Dorset & Wilts went on to win the Bill Beaumont County Championship. A huge congratulations must also go to **Fraser Doig** who represented the U20 side throughout the county season.

Overall, one could take a pessimistic view of the 2022/23 season, but there are also huge areas for hope. Despite tribulations we still have three active XV's – many clubs our size can no longer say that. We've also got some cracking colts coming through, the Vets section is growing in strength, we have the backbone to three good sides and early efforts on recruitment look really positive.

So, what for the 2023/24 season? Some more reshuffling has been driven by the RFU. The 2nd XV and 3rd XV remain where they are at level 8 and level 9 playing in broadly similar league structures. For the 1st XV they stay at level 6 and stay in Regional 2 South Central, but the league boundaries have been somewhat re-drawn. The centre of the league area is now further toward London and sees us and Wimborne on the western edge. The eastern boundary extends all the way to the M25, but thankfully the northern boundary stops at Reading. The most exciting development is we now find ourselves in the same league as Jersey RFC and in late October the 1st XV will be flown over to face the island's amateur club.

What is the aim in the coming season? As the incoming DoR my priorities are as follows:

- **Increase player numbers and frequency of player availability (TOP PRIORITY).** Achieved through player retention and recruiting, a 'one club ethos', and by ensuring rugby ultimately remains fun and safe.
- **1st XV to maintain current standing at level 6.** Mid table minimum, with a stretch target of top 4. Win rate >50%. (NB: change in league structure means accurate predictions challenging).
- **2nd XV to improve.** Target of mid table. Win rate of >40%. Increase depth for 1st XV.
- **3rd XV to be sustained.** Fulfil all fixtures. Give an opportunity for competitive social rugby.
- **Improve player discipline.** Across all three XV's.
- **Grow the Vets XV.** Target of one game a month September 23 to March 24.
- **Re-establish the Salisbury Spitfires 7s team.** Complete in local competitions. Seek to host our own 7s competition no later than summer 25.
- **Prepare to re-establish the Ladies XV.**
- **Maintain and improve Colts pathway.** Support to the Salisbury Rugby Academy.
- **Be the conduit between the Board and the senior Section.**

As the AGM archives the 2022/23 season and sets the conditions for the 2023/24 season it would be wrong not to highlight the massive contribution of a few key people: **Gareth Blackborrow** has continued to be brilliant as head coach, especially in a season where with no DoR, he was often called upon to wear two hats. **Jonah Thorpe** with great passion continued to lead large amounts of the coaching, especially with Gareth still pulling on his boots. **Dave Veal** was outstanding as availabilitys secretary, his dedication is unmirrored. Our captains **Luke Newton**, **Scotty Nicol**, the 3rd XV pair (**Andrew Barrett** and **Phil Dauwalder**) and **Bobby Saunders** all led from the front on and off the pitch.

I'd also like to take this opportunity to welcome new additions **Tom Hill** and **Alistair Aitkin**, as well as the returning **Nik Mould** and **Henry Carter**, to the coaching and management set up for the coming season. I'm also delighted that **Alex Beck**, having added so much value over the past few years, will continue as the club's physio.

Finally, the senior section would like to thank the Club President, Chairman, board members and the club house team. We collectively know we can't be the easiest to work with, but we do appreciate what is done for us.

Mr J D Watt
Director of Rugby

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