

Rugby 2009

The 1st XV

High up on the north wall of the tea room in the School Pavilion hangs an age-darkened honours board listing the players of the 1870 XV. These dimly recorded characters were the first ever players to represent the School. It is shown that they were captained over the season by two players, H B Barnes and C Lacy Smith, but beyond that little more is known about them. It is not until 1876, when this magazine came into existence, that we can discover something of the achievements of their successors.

What we learn is noteworthy and perhaps surprising, for in the one hundred and thirty-nine years between 1870 and the year 2009, only three XV's won every match in a season. These esteemed XV's were those of 1941, 1991 and 2000. Against this background the performance of the 2009 XV is all the more commendable. To equal the record of these three exceptional sides is no mean feat, and in so doing this year's XV deserve all the credit that might be showered upon them. It is creditable and pertinent too that the majority of the side had grown and played together since their days in the Preparatory School. Creditable in that it shows the School's rugby set up in a good light and pertinent in that their years together had developed within the side a sense of understanding and camaraderie.

On the back of a successful pre-season camp in Southwold and impressive wins at two 'warm-up' tournaments (St. Albans and Magdalen College), the XV started the domestic season in great spirit and with an overtly dogged determination for the visit of Oundle whom we played under blue skies. In an accomplished performance we ran up some 31 points to just 5 in reply. Tries came from a variety of positions (Andrew Digby-Ince, Oli Clough, Miles Keeley and Adam Hall) and in general terms we retained our pattern and retained our patience. Will Dunkley kicked three conversions to complete the scoring.

A comfortable (eleven try) 69-0 win against West Suffolk College followed and I think we surprised them with a skill level and pace rarely witnessed on their AASE (Premiership Academies) circuit, which tends to be dominated by size and power. Uppingham have always been strong in these age groups and we were aware that it would be a tough match. With a referee who decided that he was not going to deal with the breakdown, we did well to post 19 points to 13 victory. Abingdon looked like being a strong side that would provide stiff competition. However, in a superb all round team display they were dispatched 52-3. Oakham, too, raised their game against us and it took another fantastic display of attacking rugby aligned with resolute defence to record a 45-0 win to complete the half term.

The boys were worried about Dulwich. They had always been competitive at this age group and having played them (and beaten them – just!) in a group game at the St. Josephs festival, contacts close to the source inferred that they were confident of ending our unbeaten run. The match was very close and Dulwich were the best side we had faced to date, well drilled, physical and confident on the ball. 14-12 down with five minutes left, it was looking like their source was right. However, two cross-field kicks by Jamie Elliott over their (very flat) defence were collected by Joe Dorgham and the game was turned around. The belief and skill level were exceptional and the 26-14 victory was justly celebrated at the final whistle.

Wellington had been our nemesis the previous season and the boys had targeted this game as 'the one to win'. The Upper Sixth had also gone out to them in the quarter final of the Daily Mail Cup in their Remove year (after a 10-10 draw) – so there was some history between the teams. On a filthy day, which suited neither side, we eventually came out on top 11-5. In the first half we created quite a few chances but failed to finish and rarely have I seen such ferocious tackling from a School side in the second half as our visitors battered away at our line. The game could have gone either way, but after the pain of 2008 I think we just about deserved to 'nick it'. Warwick had given us some very tough games since the fixture arrived on the scene some three years ago. A stunning first half display blew them away and even I was struggling to find something negative to say at the interval! A final score line of 47-10 was no less than the boys deserved.

Our final match of the season was scheduled as Rugby away. They had not had great results, but we were aware that they were not just there to put a gloss on our unbeaten season. As we tried to 'not lose' the game, they made us work extremely hard for a 16-3 win. Some outstanding defence against a prolonged home attack in the second half probably won the game. The celebrations at the end were lengthy and great to be a part of.

The final tally of Played 9, Won 9, Points for 316, Points against 58 provides a fairly authentic representation of events. The points scored column and 48 tries in 9 games reflects a skill level, pace and intent to play the game with width from all areas of the field. The points conceded statistic reflects an admirable defiance. The boys did defend with great organisation, resilience and determination. When people refer to English inter-school games as 'friendly's they really miss the point. They are only friendly in that no league points are up for grabs. They are still played with commendable fairness and in absolutely the right spirit but it would be hard to imagine games played with more intensity. The other point to bear in mind is that if leagues were in operation sides with an 80% record would be pushing for top spot, in the present system ultimate success can only be achieved by going unbeaten and this is tremendously demanding. However, it is also worth noting that we won The Hampson Trophy (a league played between ourselves Rugby, Oundle, Uppingham, Stamford and Oakham) for the second year running.

The 2009 1st XV season was a privilege to witness and be a part of. The boys could not have been better. Their behaviour on and off the pitch was first class, to coach them was more a pleasure than a responsibility. Sam Farmer led with sensitivity and maturity and all the players followed with good humour and determination. However, it would be remiss of me not to mention the second year colours who dominated proceedings throughout the term. Joe Dorgham added an extra attacking dimension to the team after an injury kept him out of the early games. Chris Smart and Will Dunkley are top class players and were outstanding throughout the term. Finally, fly-half Jamie Elliott - he is a supremely talented athlete, with a rapidly improving understanding of the game – he is also 'tough as old boots'! Jamie was probably the most influential player I have seen in a 1st XV jersey (and that would include Will Skinner and Dave Callam). He has a very bright future in the game!

My sincere thanks go to Ed Swanwick for his time and expertise with the forwards and for his efforts with the 2nd XV. We all wish him well as he returns to his native Australia.

On behalf of the school and the boys, I would also like to thank all the staff who put in so much time and effort and therefore make Bedford Rugby the force that it is.

Paulo Pontine won the Under 14 and Under 16 House Rugby. St. Peter's won the Under 15 competition and Bromham won the Senior event. St. Cuthbert's won the Under 14 and Under 15 House Sevens played at the end of the first half of term.. Sam Naylor (Paulo Pontine) won the Carter Place Kicking Cup.