

# WHY RUGBY?

It has only been since I stepped away from being heavily involved in rugby union that I have reflected on just how important a part it and the people involved in it have been in shaping me as a person.

Melrose Rugby Club and the people within it was the social hub for me and family for more than 25 years.

It's where lifelong, close friendships were developed and where, almost without realising it, I acquired the social skills to assist me in making decent choices in many different aspects of life.

I believe that it's the characters, within the game, that pass on the ethos and values of the sport;

- Honesty
- Respect
- Fairness
- Humility

These are the qualities that help to maintain strong, local communities and a better society as a whole.

For me, it all began through my next door neighbours, the Blacklock family, in St. Boswells.

From as young as 5 years old, Jock, Norman, Jim and Bert, all rugby players, were happy to pass and kick a ball about with me whenever I was in the back garden of my home.

Although, when it was wet, the titch of a 5 year old, which I was, could hardly pick up the balloon like, leather ball that weighed and felt like a heavy stone rather than a rugby ball.

As an 8 year old, Jim Blacklock took me up to the St. Boswells youth training, for the annual, seven-a-side, Crichton tournament, held at the Greenyards each May.

The Newtown St. Boswells and St. Boswells tournaments, which followed in consecutive weeks, provided three huge weekends of rugby and family "Gettogethers" each spring.

This was my introduction to a team coach and the incredibly enthusiastic, Jocky McDonald. Passion for the sport, oozed out of the ex-St. Boswells, Melrose and Selkirk player. His enthusiasm was really my first encounter with a person that was willing to give so much of their time to provide opportunity to youth in the community.

"Play for your team mates" was his moto.

The number of youngsters, involved in these rugby tournaments, was incredible, with boys coming in from all the farms and hamlets in the Melrose, Newtown St. Boswells and St. Boswells catchment areas.

Because of my diminutive size, which was my physical frame until I grew 6" or 150mm in today's measurements, during my 18<sup>th</sup> year, scrum-half was probably the only position I could have played and I loved playing there. This was because I got my hands on the ball a lot but, unfortunately, forgot to let go of it when I should have.

The mixture in size, speed and ability, of those playing rugby, was the first aspect of the game that I took on board and learned to use for, firstly, personal safety, followed by how each type of player benefitted the team.

I avoided the opposition big fellas, unless there was space to run round them and passed the ball if there was a quick and bigger guy about to flatten me. I knew I should pass the ball if one of my bigger and faster team mates had space to run. These were the simple aspects of the game that Jocky coached.

Jocky would attempt to keep saying, "Play for your team mates Keith" but on occasion his frustration would drive him to yell, "Pass the bloody ball you little bugger"!!!!

Then there was the praise, from Jocky and my team mates, when you gave a scoring pass or tackled and stopped a big fella anywhere on the park. There were, also, the many times that I was disappointed in myself, for making a mistake in attack or missing a tackle, however, as long as you were giving your best, you would hear the encouraging, "Hard luck Keith" or the name of whoever else made a mistake, from a coach who truly knew how to motivate all skill levels of player.

I remember the car journeys for the tournament days themselves. With boys crammed into cars (No seat belts required in those days), it was all part of the family party atmosphere created around the tournaments.

Darnick, Newstead, Gattonside, Melrose Central, Newtown St. Boswells (Newtown) and St. Boswells all had their own, age group teams in the tournaments. There were as many as four or five teams, in each age group, from the likes of Newtown and St. Boswells.

Playing on the Greenyards, in front of literally hundreds of other players and their family supporters, together with being able to plunge into the deep baths, after the tournament had ended, resulted in me being hooked to a game that has been a massive part of my life ever since.

Team sport demands sportsmanship and these three, seven-a-side tournaments epitomise what rugby is all about. During the long days of the tournaments we would play football or cricket, with boys from other towns and villages, on the areas of ground around the main pitch, when we weren't involved in the tournament.

It's where the learning of social skills and the creation of lifelong friendships began.

At 14 years old and looking like a very small 12 year old, I joined Melrose Colts, the under19's team, coached by ex-International half-backs, Eck Hastie and Dave Chisholm. Preparation, preparation, preparation. That was their Moto Eck and Dave were forever being heard saying, "If you're not willing to prepare and be kitted out well you won't perform well".

Black polished boots, boiled white shorts and boiled white boot laces were a prerequisite and you were told about it, in front of your team mates, if you had been seen not to make the required effort.

When the hair got a bit too long, Eck would be heard saying, "Am I hurting you whoever? I should be, I'm standing on your hair".

In the first season at the Colts, I wasn't getting picked to play and there were no subs in those days.

Both Eck and Dave worked hard at keeping every player involved but I was small. They both explained that they were worried about me getting injured and, kindly, left out the bit about me not being ready (Good enough) to play at that time. I knew that there was no chance of me displacing Jim Henderson, one of the best scrum-halves that I ever played alongside.

I, also, couldn't get into the senior school team, at Kelso High School, because Graham Black was a better scrum-half than me.

That was a difficult couple of years but it gave me an understanding of how other players, who are on the periphery of playing squads, feel when not selected and, when I relate to it now, I can see how youths drift away from the game.

The transition into senior rugby saw me playing, in the 1stXV, alongside Jim Telfer, in his last season. He was playing and coaching then and he wasn't slow in advising when my desire to attack from defence wasn't welcome.

While not always seeing eye to eye with all of Jim's coaching style, he instilled the requirement for absolute commitment into all players that were selected for his teams. He didn't need to say anything when he saw a player fall below the standard he required. His look of disdain cut right through you and there was no doubt that you had the choice of whether to meet his standards or not be involved.

Scottish rugby was very lucky to have such talented players around at the same time as Jim coached Scotland. His attention to detail, in set piece and rucking technique, together with his ability to get maximum commitment from individuals and team units, was almost the perfect blend when coupled with the vision and skills of John Rutherford, Jim Renwick, Andy Irvine and others during the 1980's. His coaching partnership, with Ian McGeechan will be very difficult for another pair of Scotsmen to surpass.

Jim, together with Robbie Brown, Alan (Gel) Tait and David (Scrog) Shiel, formed a semi-junior, coaching and management team, for Melrose Wasps, from 2007 to 2016. This team delivered excellent rugby development but, possibly, more importantly, provided very close to the perfect blend of character qualities and values to the players involved, in the Wasps squad, at that time.

During the 1980's, South of Scotland (South) rugby had one of its strongest eras and Johnny Gray (Gala) coached the South to a victory, against the Australian touring squad, who won all four of their International matches in 1984.

Johnny was a good, technical coach but, for me, it was the integrity of his passion, which inspired his teams to be successful as Border men, for Border folk and made him stand out amongst others.

One of the most satisfying qualities about rugby union is the fact that, in order to reach the top level of the sport, those who succeed, almost without exception, must have, within themselves, the values that the sport promotes.

It is the coaches, management, administrators, medics and supporters who have the responsibility to instil these values into our minis and youths playing rugby. All those involved in the amateur, club game provide this backbone of the sport.

More than 75% of the rugby that I played was with my club Melrose. Club trips to England, Ireland and Wales, on International weekends, tours to America and Canada, losing 1<sup>st</sup> Division relegation battles, gaining promotion from 2<sup>nd</sup> Division rugby, playing for the 2<sup>nd</sup> XV and not coping with the alcohol that these guys consumed, singing in opposition clubrooms, pubs and on bus journeys travelling back from away games. These are the memories that have stayed with me and it's the people that I made these memories with, who remain my closest friends and the ones that I can rely on if things get tough.

If a person enjoys physical contact sport, rugby union is probably the best team game for providing playing opportunity to all physical shapes and sizes. The need for physicality is probably why the agricultural heartland of the Scottish Borders was always going to be where the sport found a base and where it has always punched above the region's demographic weight.

Yes, it is the characters, within rugby union, which helps to shape Scottish Borders society and the current custodians, of the sport, must work hard to ensure that they produce positive change in order that the sport remains strong and provides opportunity for our youths to benefit from being involved, with it, in the future.