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Firstly, a Happy New Year to all our supporters and welcome back to Spotland for the first game of the year in the form of 'The A.J. Law Infirmary Cup.

I would also like to welcome those who have made the short journey from Oldham to today's game, it was disappointing to see the former Oldham club, the 'Bears' go out of existence in the autumn, but it is great to see the emergence of the new club to take their place.

This match will be a new experience for us all as this Oldham team is completely new and therefore a bit of an unknown quantity, I would like to take this opportunity to wish them all the best in their inaugural season in the second division.

This new year sees us back competing in the first division, I believe that we are in a better position now than when we were last in this division in 1996, a lot of hard work has been put in by the lads in the close season and we are raring to go.

At present talks are ongoing with a number of players with the view of bringing them to Spotland before the season begins, to strengthen the squad for what will be a tough season ahead.

Finally I look forward to seeing you during the course of the season.

Yours in Sport, Shane Jupaea

ROCHDALE 3 HORNETS

Today's Visitors.....OLDHAM

by Gareth Walker

The Oldham side which lines up against Hornets this afternoon is likely to bare very little resemblance to that which was relegated from the Super League last season. On October 27th this year, Oldham Bears went into voluntary liquidation, with debts in excess of £1 million. As a result, all of the Bears players were made free agents, and many moved to pastures new, a number of them with Super League clubs. Out of the ashes rose a new club, headed by a new Board of Directors. The club was told that they must play in Division Two in 1998, and will receive no money from Rupert Murdock's "News Ltd." They are associate members of the Rugby Football League but cannot vote at RFL meetings, although they do hold a vote with FASDA (The First and Second Divisions Association).

With not a single asset to their name when they started up in November, the new club — which will be known as Oldham R.L.F.C., with "The Roughyeds" as their official nickname — have had to start afresh. At the time of going to press, the club had signed just seven players, but were hopeful that they would be able to recruit a strong enough squad to compete in Division Two. They will continue to play their home games at Oldham Athletic's Boundary Park this season although they did have an offer from Hornets to stage their games at Spotland.

The coach of the new club is former Oldham player Paddy Kirwan. Kirwan has enjoyed coaching spells with both Hornets and Oldham Bears' Alliance sides, and the new Oldham club was keen to recruit a local-born man who has knowledge of the town's players. Kirwan fitted the bill perfectly, and was quick to accept the challenging post. The 36 year old is probably most famous for his last gasp try in the 1987 Challenge Cup match against Wigan — it was Wigan's last defeat in the Cup before they won eight successive Wembley finals.

Of the seven players that Oldham had signed prior to Christmas, hooker John Hough, the club's first ever signing is arguably the most renowned. The 23 year old spent four years playing for Super League side Warrington Wolves, making 29 first grade appearances, and his signing was a major boost for the new club. Hornets fans may remember Hough from the 1995 Regal Trophy clash at Wilderspool, when the busy little number nine scored a try in Warrington's 38-20 win Hough is a product of Ian MacCorquodale's Oldham School's team where he played alongside Paul Sculthorpe and Iestyn Harris. Flying winger Chris Eckersley is another Oldham born former Warrington man and his speed will undoubtedly cause problems for Hornets this afternooon. 23 year old Eckersley also played against Hornets in 1995, scoring a well-taken try. The Wolves released him on a free transfer, after he failed to hold down a regular first team place.

Scrum half Darren Robinson was Oldham's third signing. The 19 year old played for the Bears Academy side last season, and although he never turned professional, he is considered to be a very good prospect by many in the Oldham area. Another former Bear to sign up is strong running centre or winger Steve Wilde. Formerly of Saddleworth Rangers, Wilde was a regular member of the Bears Alliance side last season playing under Kirwen.

Criag Barker was the club's fifth signing. Former Waterhead player Barker captained the Bears' Alliance and Academy sides last season, playing mainly at stand-off. Adie Meade, who signed for Oldham in the week before Christmas was also an important member of the Bears' Alliance side, playing in the centres. The 21 year old spent two years with the Bears, and will need to be watched closely by Hornets this afternoon after finishing as the Bears' top try scorer in last season's Alliance. The seventh man to be signed by "The Roughyeds" was Sean Cooper, formerly with Bradford Bulls. Cooper was given a free transfer by the Bulls in mid-December, and Oldham were quick to snap up the signature of the ex-Saddleworth centre.

Despite their obvious lack of numbers at the time of going to press, the Oldham club was very hopeful of signing a number of other players in time for today's game. The half back pairing that led Hornets to promotion glory last season, Steve Gartland and Neil Flanagan, have both been strongly linked with "The Roughyeds" throughout the winter months. Both players have had spells with the Oldham club, and their experience could prove to be vital if they decide to sign. 32 year old vetran forward Paul Round has also expressed an interest in joining Oldham, and has been training with the club over the last couple of months. Oldham born Martin Maders is a target, having spent the last two seasons playing with local amateurs Waterhead. The 23 year old prop is currently on Huddersfield's books. The club has also been keeping an eye on Halifax's Mick Martindale, a ball handling boose forward who would certainly prove a handful if he lined up against Hornets this afternoon.

BACK FROM THE BRINK

During the winter, the town of Oldham came periously close to having no Rugby League team for the first time since 1876. GARETH WALKER talks to one of the men responsible for relaunching the club, new Chariman Christopher Hamilton.

This year, Christopher Hamilton took on one of the biggest jobs in Rugby League.

The 34 year old Accountant led the consortium of businessmen that brought Oldham R.L.F.C. back from the brink of extinction. And without a single asset to their name the new club was left with a huge task to get themselves up and running before the start of the 1998 season.

It is to the Board of Directors immense credit that this has been achieved, and that this New Year's Day friendly is actually taking place.

"It's been a mammoth job," Hamilton admits. "There was absolutely no infrastructure at the club, and the amount of work has increased incredibly because of this."

Hamilton, a life-long Oldham fan, was very keen to help the club as soon as the old club's financial problems became more apparent.

"I first became interested in helping the club around mid-Spetember," he remembers.

"It was then a matter of getting the people together who were interested in rescuing the club. There was various rumours going around the town about who wanted to help the club, and we contacted them one by one, to find out who was genuine.

"In the end, we have a Board of Directors of five people."

The offers of help from Hornets Chairman Ray Taylor have been widely publicised during the new club's first few months, and Hamilton is very grateful for Rochdale's concerns.

"None of the Directors have had any previous experience of running a Rugby League club," he explains, "and so the experience and help that Ray Taylor has offered has been invaluable.

"We actually came very close to accepting their offer to play at Spotland this season." Hamilton continues. "The facilities that were on offer were very very attractive, but in the end, the deciding factor was the Oldham fans, who preferred to stay in the town."

Oldham's first ever game under the new regime is today, and Hamilton is looking forward to what promises to be an interesting encounter.

"It may have come a little too early, as a team, but it was important that our fans had something to look forward to. I rate our chances as 50/50, because at the end of the day, there are only two teams on the field."

Hamilton is certainly enjoying his position as Chairman, and his hard work will soon be put into practice.

"In the first season, we're just looking to be competitive really," he says.

"We need to lay down the foundations for the future. Our number one priority off the field is to get our new office administration up and running, along with the lottery and the club shop.

"The new club needs to be able to run on a viable basis."

All Rugby League fans will have been delighted that the Oldham club that was a founder member of the Northern Union has been able to survive in a time of great change for the game, it is good to see some traditions remaining in place.

COMMERCIAL SCENE

Today's match, The A.J. Law Infirmary Cup marks a historic occasion, the first match for the new Oldham Club, we at Rochdale Hornets are glad that our neighbours chose to celebrate their creation with us.

The fixtures for the new season will be published shortly and these provide excellent opportunities for corporate hospitality, there are a range of sponsorship packages available for the season, these include Match Sponsorship, Matchball Sponsorship and Corporate Boxes etc.

Full details of the various packages on offer can be found on this page.

There will also be space for advertisements on the fixture list, these spaces are available for £50, anyone wishing to advertise through the fixture list or who wishes to undertake any other kind of sponsorship should contact the office on 01706 648004.

Programme advertisers from last season will notice that they have received a free advertisement in today's programme, those companies wishing to continue their advertisements for the coming season should also contact the office.

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ROCHDALE 7 HORNETS

READY TO GO!

Gareth Walker talks to Hornets Coach Shane Tupaea about his hopes and targets for the forthcoming year and catches up on the close season news.

Shane Tupaea simply cannot wait for the 1998 season to start. Following last season's successful promotion campaign and the recruitment of a number of close season signings, Hornets 34 year old is keen to see his off-season work in action on the field.

The arrival of Steve Hall, Andy Eyres, Keith Dixon, Peter Fitzgerald and Leo Casey at Spotland and the promise of more to follow means that Hornets fans can now look forward to the coming season with renewed hope.

The coaching staff have made the best of a limited budget during the winter months and Tupaea is delighted by the way his new signings have shown up in training. "I'm over the moon with the way that the new boys have performed so far" he enthuses, "they've put a whole new dimension into our training", "all of our new signings are very professional and it's rubbing off on the young kids who played in the first team last season."

"Training in general has been very pleasing" he continues "and we've not experienced the problems that we had last year, with regards to facilities, the number of first team and alliance players has been consistently between 20 and 30 and everyone has come through pretty well."

Tupaea is both realistic and ambitious when talking about his targets for 1998, "obviously our main aim is to stay in Division One" he explains, "so ninth or above is our ultimate goal, but realistically with the signings that we've made and continuing to build on last season's success, a mid-table finish is not beyond us.

"People that I've been talking to recently have been speculating about a top four finish and a run in the play'offs but we're not getting carried away just yet." "It's a step up in class and there are a lot more quality players in this division, I'll be delighted to stay in Division One next season and anything else will be a bonus."

Tupaea is especially enthusiastic when talking about his five new aquisitions and also hints that a few more new faces may be on their way to Spotland before the start of the season. "I think we'll see Andy Eyres excelling at scrum half this season and putting together some combinations with Richard Pachniuk at hooker, Andy's got bags of ability and speed and has the pace to go the full length of the field, something that we missed at times last year.

ROCHDALE 8 HORNETS

Peter Fitzgerald will be starting alongside him at half-back and he's another player with plenty of speed, Keith Dixon will start as our full-back and I'll be looking for hims to come into the line as often as possible, Steve Hall has been absolutley brilliant in pre-season training, he's a non stop runner, who'll be very difficult to put down, similarly Leo Casey won't take a backward step, and with Chris Parr also at prop we'll have a very solid base to build on."

"Hopefully I'll also be able to bring Chris McKinney and Richard Smith in as well. I'm hopeful of signing young McKinney before New Years Day, providing that a Super League club doesn't come in with a lot of money, he played with Oldham in the Super League last season and is a good prospect who never stops going forward." "Richard Smith (currently on Halifax's books) is the elusive centre that I've been looking for since the end of last season and hopefully he'll also agree to come."

Today's game against Oldham will provide Tupaea the opportunity to see how the new faces fit in alongside last season's successes. The New Zealander is not underestimating the importance of today's 'friendly' or the quality of the opposition.

"A win against Oldham is very important" he stresses, "it could set up for the rest of the season, we've spent a bit of money during the off-season and it's important for Rochdale Hornets as a whole that we perform today." "We're expected to win the game, but I'm not making any predictions, I'm expecting a tough match because Oldham will be playing with something that you can't buy — bags of pride, the club has signed a lot of Oldham based players and they'll be fired up playing for their home town team. I'm really looking forward to the game, all of our new signings should be on display because the more we play together before the season starts, the stronger we'll be when the League campaign kicks-off on February 8th.

"I'm hoping to speak to Paddy (Kirwan, the Oldham coach) before the game to see how many players each side will be able to field in the game, I'd like to play 20 or 22 players, but Oldham have made a limited number of signings so far we might see a 17 man game."

Tupaea is quick to point to a good start, when he discusses next season's prospects, he knows that a few early victories will set the side on their way to the remainder of the year and pull them away from what promises to be a tough relegation battle.

"It's vital, absolutely vital that we get off to a good start next season", Tupaea stresses.

"I'm looking to take at least three wins from our opening five games" he explains. "Last season, we won our first five games and that set us up for the rest of the campaign."

The highlight of last season was undoubtedly the emergence of several exciting Academy players who held down a regular place throughout the 1997 campaign. Tupaea reports that they have continued to make progress.

"I'm expecting all of the young players to have another big year this time around" he explains, "especially Mick Farrell, Bob Lowe and Chris Scarisbrick. All three have put some weight on since last season and they should be able to capitalise on our pro's hard work by making breaks out wide. Martin Bunce has looked a million dollars in training and he'll be continueing the improvement we saw in his game last season."

Of the players who broke into the side towards the end of the season, Chris Holland has really beefed up and is now around the 15 stone mark, I'm hoping that full-back Gary Bradbury will stake a claim for a regular first team spot, after some decent performances in last season's Premiership, scrum-half Jamie Winrow has sharpended up a lot and has been putting in some good performances for Mayfield during the winter."

If Tupaea's enthusiasm is reflected by his players on the field, then Hornet's fans are in for a treat against Oldham this afternoon, he seems to have recruited wisely and if the likes of Farrell, Bunce, Lowe, Scarisbrick and Cameron can build on last season's potential, then much can be achieved in 1998.

"I'd like to wish all Hornets fans a Happy New Year," Tupaea adds, "We've done the hard work in training and hopefully that will show on the field this afternoon."

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In these days of great change in Rugby League it is good to start the new year, not only full of optimism, but with such a traditional event like the A.J. Law Infirmary Cup. It is also good to be able to welcome our neighbours Oldham to Spotland, for one of Rugby League's traditional Derby matches, which gives the occasion that little bit of extra spice.

Sport has to move on, but Rugby League needs to remember where it came from and what it means to traditional Rugby League supporters, as well as what the game offers to the new converts.



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Jason Green	2	Chris Eckersley
Kevin Mannion	3	Steven Wilde
Mick Farrell	4	Sean Cooper
Martin Bunce	5	Joe McNicholas
Peter Fitzgerald	6	Craig Barker
Andy Eyres	7	Neil Flanagan
Steve Hall	8	Danny Guest
Richard Pachniuk	9	John Hough
Leo Casey	10	Martin Maders
Rob Lowe	11	Brian Quinlan
Chris Scarisbrick	12	Mike Prescott
Chris McInney	13	Emerson Jackman
Subs		
Jamie Winrow	14	Darren Robinson
Steve Cameron	15	Paul Round
Steve Crowther	16	Afi Leuilia
Robert Hall	17	Craig Diggle
	18	Ian Sinfield
Rob Lowe Chris Scarisbrick Chris McInney Subs Jamie Winrow Steve Cameron Steve Crowther	12 13 14 15 16 17	Brian Quinlan Mike Prescott Emerson Jackman Darren Robinson Paul Round Afi Leuilia Craig Diggle