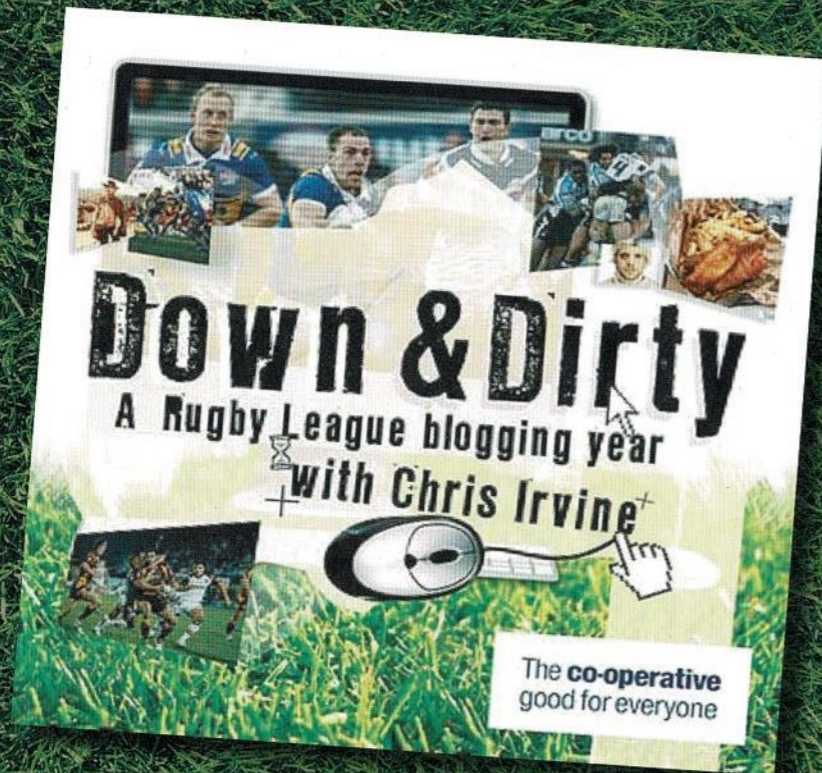


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THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE

FINALS DAY 2008

SUNDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 2008
HALLIWELL JONES STADIUM
WARRINGTON £4

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE GRAND FINAL

CELTIC CRUSADERS
v SALFORD CITY REDS

KICK OFF 4PM

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO PLAY-OFF FINAL

DONCASTER RLFC
v OLDHAM RLFC

KICK OFF 1.30PM

THE CO-OPERATIVE RUGBY LEAGUE CONFERENCE (NATIONAL) GRAND FINAL

BRAMLEY BUFFALOES
v CELTIC CRUSADERS COLTS

KICK OFF 11AM



The co-operative membership

You can help raise money and standards

The Co-operative Membership Share of Profit scheme has been developed to enable Rugby League supporters to raise millions of pounds for their club's community projects.

Members of The Co-operative receive a share of profits based on the points they earn when they trade at any of the Group's businesses, which include: The Co-operative Food, Travel, Pharmacy, Funeralcare and Bank plus Sunwin Motors and any online purchases made through www.cooperative.shop.co.uk. The most recent payout to members was made in July 2008 for £38 million.

If you would like to donate a share of that money to your club's community projects, sign up to the scheme today. All you have to do is pick up a form from your club or download one from the RFL website.



The co-operative
NATIONAL LEAGUE

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WELCOME

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE FINALS DAY 2008
HALLIWELL JONES STADIUM, WARRINGTON **SUNDAY 28 SEPTEMBER 2008**

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On behalf of the RFL, I am delighted to welcome you all to the Halliwell Jones Stadium in Warrington for The 2008 Co-operative National League Finals Day.

This event is a feast of action and we are set for no less than three superb contests involving six exceptionally good teams.

Celtic Crusaders Colts and Bramley Buffaloes get us underway, then Doncaster and Oldham meet and the curtain on the day will be brought down in fine style by the match between Celtic Crusaders and Salford City Reds.

It promises to be a first-class family sporting spectacle and the whole event is well and truly established as a key date in the Rugby League Calendar. Today's event is of course the climax to what has been a great season for The Co-operative National Leagues and the Co-operative Rugby League Conference (National).

We have seen some tremendous action on the field and, off it, all clubs continue to develop and grow at a healthy rate. We have also seen increased broadcast exposure for The Co-operative National Leagues and the 'National League Scorcher' is fast becoming 'must-see-TV' for many viewers.

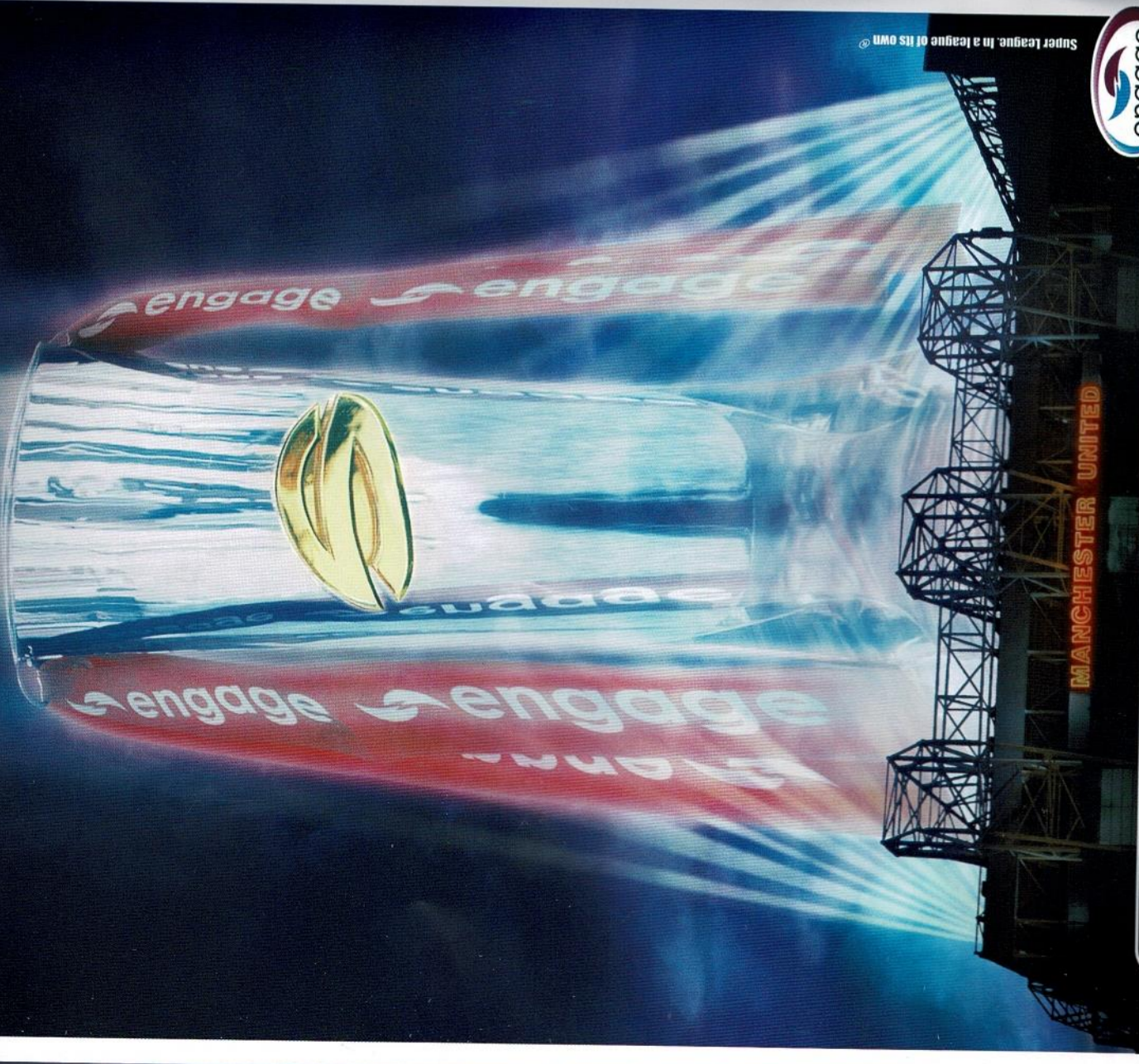
I would like to thank The Co-operative for their tremendous support of the sport at this and all other levels. I would also like to thank our broadcast partners Sky Sports for the support and tremendous live coverage they have provided throughout the season.

To conclude, I would like to wish all six clubs the very best of luck for today's matches and I trust that all spectators enjoy what should be an exciting and action-packed afternoon.

RICHARD LEWIS EXECUTIVE CHAIRMAN **THE RFL**



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OFFICIAL NOTICES

ANTI-RACISM POLICY

The RFL's 'tackle it' policy states it will not tolerate racism of any kind and will take specific action against spectators who engage in racist chanting, abuse or intimidation. Rugby League is a great family sport and, with this in mind, action will also be taken against spectators who use foul and abusive language.

PLEASE KEEP OFF THE PITCH

The RFL requests that spectators do not venture onto the pitch during or after the game. Such action is against ground safety regulations and the RFL reserves the right to take any action against any person infringing these regulations.

MAN OF THE MATCH AWARDS

The Rugby League Writers' Association will select today's Man of the Match award for The Co-operative National League One Grand Final, and the winner will be presented with the Tom Bergin Trophy. The Co-operative National League Two Man of the Match will be awarded a commemorative trophy, while The Co-operative National League Conference Man of the Match will be awarded the David Oxley Trophy

IN THE EVENT OF A DRAW

If the scores are tied after 80 minutes, then extra time of 20 minutes shall be played (10 minutes each way). If the scores remain level after extra time, then further periods of 10 minutes shall be played during which the result will be decided by a 'Golden Score'. Teams will change ends at the conclusion of each 10 minute period. During both extra time and any additional 10 minute periods required, teams shall be allowed a further three interchanges. In addition any unused interchanges from normal time are carried over.



The RFL gratefully acknowledges the support of Sport England for many of the programmes currently being used to develop the sport's potential, both within its existing heartland and in wider areas. Sport England's ambition is to get 2m people doing more sport by 2012. It does this by investing in, advising and developing community sport; and by working with organisations such as the RFL to encourage more people to take part in both formal and informal sport. For more info visit: www.sportengland.org

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FOREWORD

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE FINALS DAY 2008



Our second season as sponsors of The Co-operative League has been another hugely enjoyable experience, and has heralded a number of initiatives which have seen The Co-operative's family of businesses build on their relationships with Rugby League's communities.

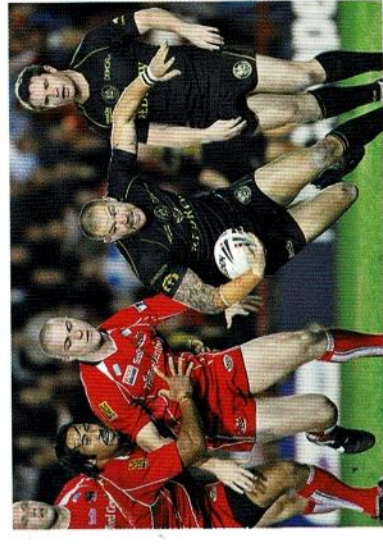
In July, we officially launched The Co-operative Rugby League membership scheme, a hugely innovative initiative that promises to raise thousands of pounds for all professional and semi-professional clubs that have a community trust.

We are proud of our proactive approach to sponsorship and excited that our new Rugby League membership scheme – the only one of its kind in the country – will give so much back to the sport, whilst assisting the development of Rugby League in local communities.

Throughout the year we have also continued to roll out the largest rebranding programme in the UK, which further illustrates our commitment towards investment in the communities in which we operate.

The end of season finals look guaranteed to provide some fantastic Rugby League, as the two clubs who won Super League licences earlier this year will come head to head for one last time in The Co-operative National League One Grand Final. Good luck to Celtic Crusaders and Salford City Reds – as well as the other four sides competing today – and let's look forward to a great day of sport.

PATRICK ALLEN DIRECTOR OF MARKETING,
THE CO-OPERATIVE GROUP



PLAY-OFFS THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE

After a Qualifying Semi-final defeat to Celtic Crusaders, Salford required a second bite at the cherry, and they'll have revenge on their minds today

QUALIFYING SEMI-FINAL

Thursday 11 September
SALFORD CITY REDS 18
 Tries: Bannister, Myler 2
 Goals: Wilshere, Bannister 2
CELTIC CRUSADERS 44
 Tries: Dyer 2, Duggan 2, Quinn, Webster, Blackwood, James
 Goals: Lennon 6
The Willows, Salford. Attendance: 2,607

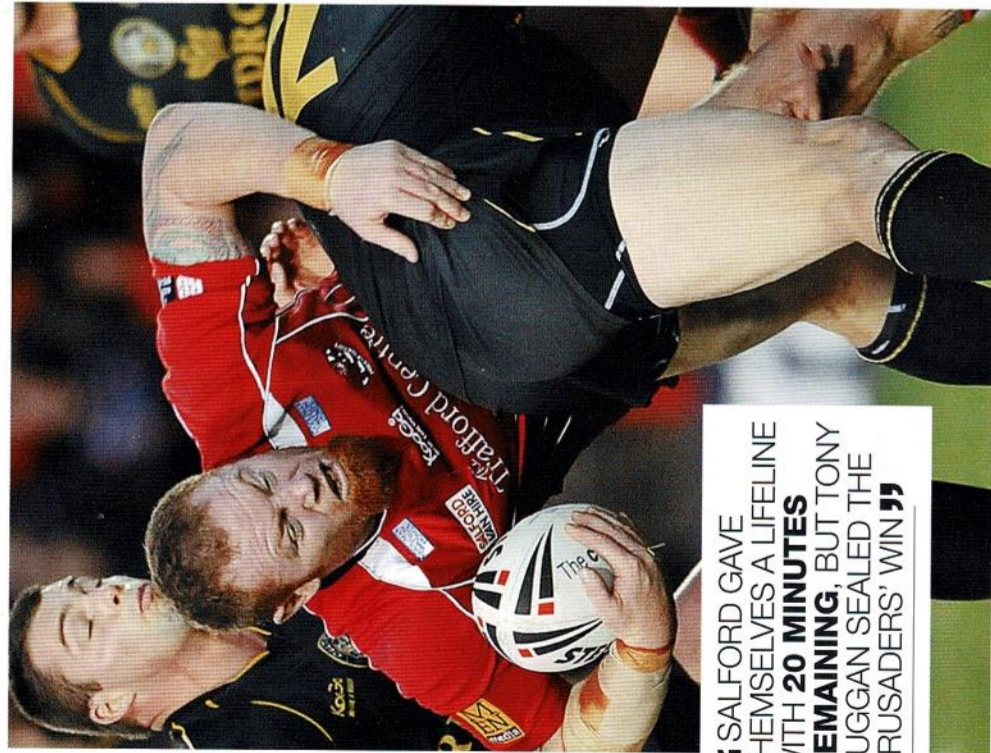
Celtic Crusaders reached today's Grand Final in Warrington with a crushing eight-try win over Salford City Reds, in a performance Crusaders coach John Dixon described as 'wonderful Rugby League'.

The Welsh side made the perfect start when, with just two minutes gone, a surging run from Darren Mapp allowed Jace Van Dijk to set up Luke Dyer, who went over in the corner. They extended their lead when Tony Duggan ran 30 metres to score, and Mark Lennon's kick made the score 10-0 with under five minutes on the clock.

Damien Quinn then scored Crusaders' third try, pouncing on his own grubber kick, before Salford opened their account on 27 minutes, when Robbie Paul laid the ball off to Stephen Bannister, who forced his way through. Crusaders restored their 16-point advantage when Duggan put Ian Webster in for the score and Lennon added the extras.

Salford hit back with a Richard Myler try right on half time, but any lingering hopes the home side had of putting pressure on the Crusaders disappeared after the interval, when Anthony Blackwood and Dyer both added tries and with Lennon's boot proving accurate, the Crusaders had a 20-point lead.

Salford gave themselves a lifeline with 20 minutes remaining, when Myler went over the line, but Duggan sealed the victory with a 45-metre individual try, and Jordan James put the gloss on a convincing win, which left Salford facing the lottery of a Final Eliminator.



“SALFORD GAVE THEMSELVES A LIFELINE WITH 20 MINUTES REMAINING, BUT TONY DUGGAN SEALED THE CRUSADERS' WIN”

FINAL TABLE THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE

	P	W	D	L	PF	PA	Bonus	Pts
Salford	18	12	3	3	614	302	3	45
Celtic Crusaders	18	12	0	6	511	391	4	40
Halifax	18	11	1	6	634	514	3	38
Leigh	18	10	0	8	448	448	4	34
Whitehaven	18	10	0	8	420	399	2	32
Widnes	18	10	2	6	453	410	5	30
Sheffield	18	8	1	9	425	530	3	29
Featherstone	18	6	1	11	452	515	6	26
Batley	18	5	0	13	387	538	8	23
Dewsbury	18	2	0	16	315	612	7	13



ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF 1

Thursday 4 September
HALIFAX 32
 Tries: Black 2, Flanagan 2, Smith
 Goals: Holroyd 6
WIDNES 16
 Tries: Dodd 2, Tyrer
 Goals: Tyrer 2
*The Shay, Halifax
 Attendance: 1,931*

Halifax knocked Widnes out of the competition in a pulsating contest at The Shay. The Yorkshire side made the perfect start, with scrum-half Ben Black going over in the fourth minute, but Widnes then took the lead through Gavin Dodd's converted try.

However, the Vikings fell apart just before half-time, as first Black raced 80 metres for his second try, then Mark Flanagan charged over to make it 16-6. They were hit by another sucker-punch in the second period when Flanagan went over, but that sparked a Widnes revival, with Dodd and Steve Tyrer bringing Widnes to within six points of Halifax.

Halifax extended their lead when Paul Smith bulldozed through the defence, and although Adel Fellous thought he had got the Vikings back in the game, he was penalised for a double movement – and that proved to be their last throw of the dice.



ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF 2

Sunday 7 September
LEIGH CENTURIONS 24
 Tries: Wainwright, Mort, Smith
 Goals: Mort 6
WHITEHAVEN 30
 Tries: Hill, Adebisi 2, McNally
 Goals: Manihera 6, McNally
*The Coliseum, Leigh
 Attendance: 2,306*

Whitehaven ruined Leigh Centurions' farewell party to celebrate 61 years at Hilton Park, as Gregg McNally scored the deciding try to give the Cumbrians a deserved victory just three minutes from time.

Leigh faced an uphill battle from the third minute when Howard Hill powered over to give Whitehaven the lead. Leigh responded immediately with Mike Wainwright's try. Veteran half-back Tane Manihera levelled the scores before Ade Adebisi scored the first of his two tries to give Whitehaven a 14-8 lead.

Leigh levelled before half-time through Ian Mort's converted try, but Adebisi put the visitors back in front. Aaron Smith took advantage of some poor marking to score, and after a flurry of penalties, the scores were level at 24-24. But with three minutes remaining, Andy Gorski sent McNally sliding in for a dramatic end to a thrilling game.



ELIMINATION SEMI-FINAL

Sunday 14 September
HALIFAX 22
 Tries: Greenwood, Flanagan, Wilson, Southern
 Goals: Holroyd 3
WHITEHAVEN 26
 Tries: McNally 3, Adebisi
 Goals: Manihera 3, Drop-goals: Manihera, Jackson
*The Shay, Halifax
 Attendance: 2,302*

Whitehaven set up a Final Eliminator match against Salford City Reds at The Willows after coming from behind to beat Halifax. The West Yorkshire side claimed an early lead through Miles Greenwood, with Graham Holroyd converting, but Whitehaven responded through Gregg McNally's try before Halifax scored again through Mark Flanagan to establish a 10-4 lead.

Whitehaven hit back before half-time, when McNally went over again and Tane Manihera levelled the scores at 10-10 from the resulting conversion kick.

After the break, the two sides traded scores with Dana Wilson and Paul Southern scoring for Halifax and Ade Adebisi and McNally touching down for the Cumbrians. But with the scores locked at 22-22, late drop goals from Manihera and Marc Jackson, plus a penalty, proved enough to see the Cumbrians through.



FINAL ELIMINATOR

Thursday 18 September
SALFORD CITY REDS 62
 Tries: Highton, Turner 2, Adamson, White, Myler, Wilshere, Gardner, Bannister 2, Sibbit. Goals: Wilshere 9
WHITEHAVEN 18
 Tries: Miller, Shackley, Adebisi. Goals: McNally 3
*The Willows, Salford.
 Attendance: 3,000*

Salford City Reds earned the chance to gain revenge over Celtic Crusaders after a crushing 11-try victory over Whitehaven in the Final Eliminator match. Following their 44-18 defeat by the Crusaders in the Qualifying Semi-final, Shaun McRae's men bounced back in style, storming into an 18-0 lead inside the first 11 minutes thanks to converted tries from Paul Highton, Jordan Turner and Luke Adamson.

After Whitehaven scrum-half Tane Manihera left the field with a shoulder injury, Salford's lead never looked in doubt, and further tries from Paul White, Richie Myler, John Wilshere and Matt Gardner before half-time ended the game as a contest. The Cumbrians battled back through Marc Shackley and Ade Adebisi tries. But Turner added a second try and Ian Sibbit and Stephen Bannister (twice) also went over, to complete a one-sided rout.



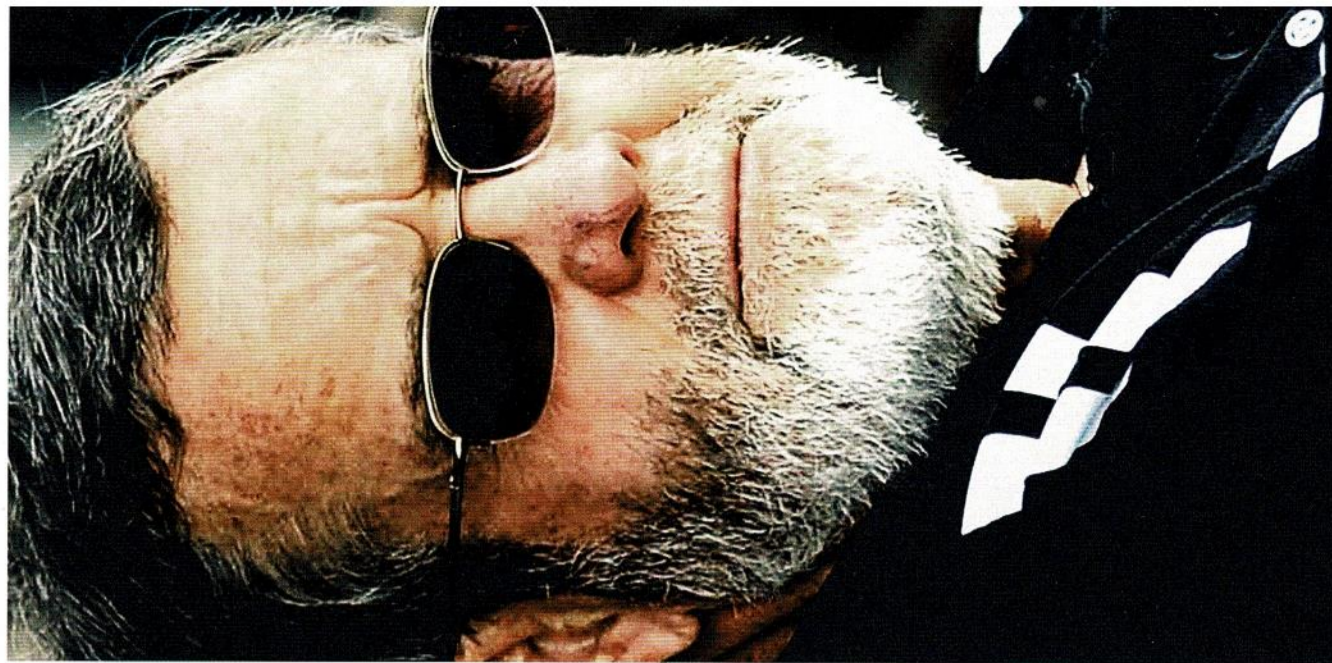
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THE ONLY WAY IS UP

Win or lose today, John Dixon's side is heading in the right direction

WORDS: JOHNNY SHARP

➤ **What would it mean to you to win today's final?**
It will be a great achievement for the core of players that have come through all the way with us and made huge strides. To win back-to-back titles would be a huge statement for the progress this club is making.

➤ **How has interest in Rugby League in Wales increased since you've been at Crusaders?**
The interest that's been generated through the progress of the Crusaders in the last three years has been massive. The crowds have shot up and I'm sure they'll continue to do so in Super League next season. Our performances are on the way up, our crowds are on the way up and we're moving in the right direction.

➤ **There's also some exciting young Welsh talent coming through the youth ranks. Do you keep a close eye on the Colts side?**
Certainly, that's where young Ben Flower came from, and he's a really good indicator of what we're doing. The Colts are full of young Welshmen, so we have four or five of them training with us every week. The Colts have done incredibly well this season, and a few weeks ago, we also put our first U18s side on the park, so we're hoping that some of those players will make the grade in a few years time. It's all really encouraging.

➤ **What was the key to your convincing victory at Salford City Reds in the qualifier?**
We got off to a good start, and then when we established the superiority, we didn't let them back into it this time. We increased our dominance and maintained the pressure defensively, while continuing to carry the ball well.

➤ **Was there a danger of switching off in the two week gap you had before the final?**
Yeah, I was arguing with my friends about the value of winning or losing the qualifier. You could argue that if you play the Final Eliminator, you get another week of footy. But my approach is to play as best as we possibly can every time we go out. I'd rather be in our position than having had to scrap for the second final spot.

➤ **It will be the fifth time you've played Salford this season. Will you change your approach at all?**
No, we've been working on those attacking and defensive systems all year and they've worked for us, so we'll be playing to our strengths and not worrying about the opposition too much. ■

“ AT CRUSADERS, OUR PERFORMANCES ARE UP, OUR CROWDS ARE UP, AND WE'RE MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION ”

“WE WANT TO SHOW WE DESERVE THE” LICENCE

A recent convert from the 15-man code, Ben Flower feels there is something special stirring in Rugby League in the Principality

WORDS: BEN COLLINS

► **You've made a big impact in your first year playing Rugby League. What does it mean to finish the season off with a Grand Final?**

It's unbelievable. Going from the Colts side at the start of the year to a first-team regular has been brilliant. To get to a final too, I couldn't ask for more. I'm pleased with myself because there's not many that have come from Union, got in the starting line-up so quickly and had a real good crack at it.

► **What convinced you to switch codes?**

I played League when I was 16 and really enjoyed it. I was then signed up by the Newport Gwent Dragons so I stuck with Union. They began moving me into positions that took me away from what I'm good at. Like running and tackling hard, and I wasn't enjoying it. A League agent watched me playing for my club side Bedwas last year and my Dragons contract was almost up. I'd always wanted to play League again – the collision element of League is more my type of game – so I thought ‘if I don't do it now, when will I?’ It's the best thing I've ever done and I've no regrets about it whatsoever.

► **Has your experience of playing League before helped you to settle so quickly?**

I only played a few games. I was watching them the other day and I looked like a Union player playing League. My running lines were nothing like now and in defence it was ‘who can I get to first?’ There wasn't much I brought from that.

► **So, was coming through the ranks with the Colts side a bigger factor then?**

I needed those games. I couldn't have gone straight into the first team and done well. I needed to sort my running and defensive lines out, and be able to read the game. I'm still learning and it'll take a couple of

years to know the game inside out. Super League will be another big challenge for me and I'm going to take it with both hands.

► **Do you think other young Welsh players will follow you from Union?**

I've done it and there's no reason why anybody else can't too. There are loads of boys that should be playing in a regional side and I was one of them, but they tend to pick people on their name rather than their form. If you've got a New Zealand accent you'll have £100,000 on top of your contract! Union's a bit political at the moment and I'm sure you'll see more coming from the regional sides to the Crusaders.

League's really kicking off down here and Union are thinking ‘we better get another regional side to knock the focus off League’. There's more League going on in Wales than I've ever known, and over 100 boys turned up for the Crusaders' under-18 trials.

► **Do you feel Crusaders have shown from their on-pitch performances that they deserve a Super League licence?**

There's lots to work on but I think we'll surprise a few sides. We were the only team to win at Saiford this year and their fans clapped us off after beating them comfortably. We're winning people over and if we win the Grand Final we'll get a lot more respect. We've got the licence, but we want to show we deserved it.

► **Your club coach John Dixon is also Wales coach. Will a good performance in a big final like this cement a call-up for the Test match against England?**

It will push me a step forward. I'm trying not to build my hopes up, but to play against some of the world's best players would certainly be the biggest achievement of my life so far. ■

“THERE'S MORE LEAGUE GOING ON IN WALES THAN I'VE EVER KNOWN – OVER 100 BOYS TURNED UP FOR THE CRUSADERS' UNDER-18 TRIALS”



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GRAND DESIGNS

Shaun McRae is hoping this final will help Salford's long-term growth

WORDS: NEIL BARRACLOUGH

➔ **How satisfying was your side's performance against Whitehaven?**

We needed to respond to our performance from the week before. It was a do or die game we really needed to win and the response was good, the performance was terrific and we're very pleased. The game was over by half-time but we tried hard to continue the job.

➔ **You've already won the Northern Rail Cup and the League Leaders Trophy. What would it mean to win the Grand Final as well?**

We're in the game for a lot of different reasons and one of those is to win everything we go in for. There are other reasons to be involved, but certainly success is important to a lot of people. We're in the Grand Final but we want to win the game. Athletes don't like coming second.

➔ **What has pleased you most about this season?**

Number one is that we haven't gone out and got loan players in. We kept faith with the people we believed in at the start of the year. I give a lot of credit to our medical staff and strength conditioning staff, they've done a tremendous job and the guys have responded to that. There's only one player in the squad who hasn't played first team all year. It hasn't been an easy ride and I've been impressed with our attitude and desire. They're a close-knit group and they know what's at stake this weekend.

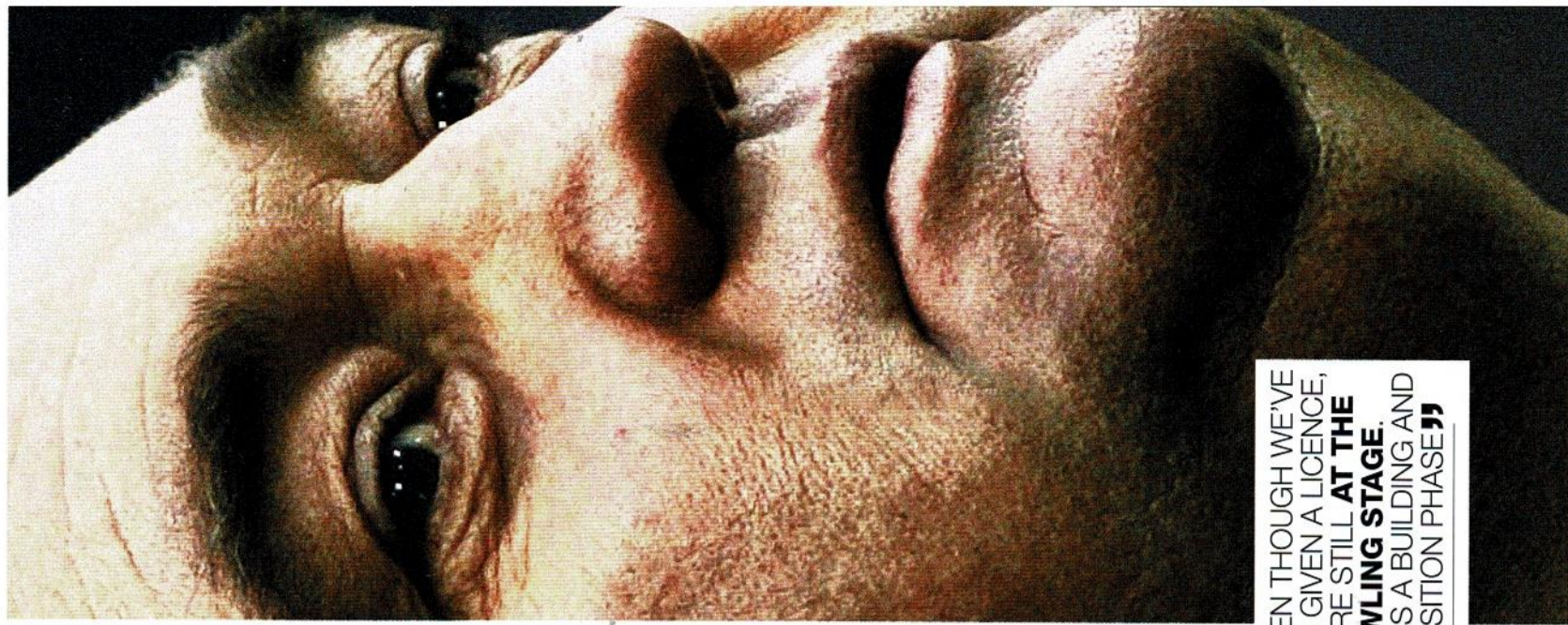
➔ **As a coach from a top-flight background, have you been impressed with the overall standard of The Co-operative National League One?**

I've been surprised from day one about the standard. I didn't realise how many good players there are in National League One. It's been a lot tighter competition than people thought and there have been some terrific performances.

➔ **Are you confident that the Reds can make a real impression during your next three years in the engage Super League?**

I'm very confident that we'll be successful over a period of time. It's a bit like learning to crawl before you walk before you run. Even though we've been given a licence we're still at the crawling stage. We're looking forward to it but we also realise it is a transition and building phase. We want to perform every week and be competitive, but the non-relegation situation eases the pressure to a certain extent although the challenges still remain. The licensing agreement is one of the most significant decisions that the RFL has taken in the history of the game. ■

“EVEN THOUGH WE’VE BEEN GIVEN A LICENCE, WE ARE STILL AT THE CRAWLING STAGE. THIS IS A BUILDING AND TRANSITION PHASE”



“WE FEEL GOOD AND WE’RE BACK TO OUR BEST”

Salford’s long-serving centre and Ireland captain Stuart Littler has a competitive streak a mile wide – as he hopes to show again today

WORDS: JOHNNY SHARP

➔ **That was quite a performance against Whitehaven. Was it something of a reaction to the way you’d lost to Celtic Crusaders in the qualifying semi-final?**

Yeah, we knew it was do or die. We’d worked on a few things in training and knew we couldn’t play like we did against Celtic and hope to win the Grand Final or probably even reach it. So we were determined to raise our game.

➔ **Would you rather have had a week off?**

Of course. Playing wise, they should be on the ball next week, having had the extra week’s break. But after the Whitehaven game we feel really good and we’re back to our best, so maybe we needed that extra game.

➔ **Does the fact that promotion isn’t on the line this year take the pressure off this game to an extent?**

Not for us. We’re really made up about getting the licence, but we’re all so competitive. If I played you at a game of pool I’d want to thrash you at it! If we enter a competition we strive for success. I can’t see anyone on our side telling you any different. No one wants to be remembered as the losers.

➔ **You’re well acquainted with the engage Super League – are Salford ready for it?**

We’re still full-time, which is a lot better than having gone part-time and then having to raise our level of fitness and being behind the pace, having to work back up to full-time level. We’ve kept a lot of players on from last season, made a few really good additions to the squad, we’ve got some great young players coming through, and hopefully there should be a couple more additions to the squad before the start of next season.

➔ **You turn 30 next year – how are you feeling? A few miles still left on the clock?**

Well I was a bit of a late developer so I maybe haven’t taken as much of a battering as some of other players my age. They say you end up retiring when your body tells you to, but right now I feel fresh, I’m training well and, touch wood, there’s really no worries on that score.

➔ **You talked about your goals for Salford, what about Ireland in the World Cup? Do you fancy your chances of surprising people?**

Definitely. We’ve got a tough draw with Samoa and Tonga in our group – Samoa in particular look strong, with lots of engage Super League and NRL players in their squad – but we’ve got a few players from those comps ourselves, so on the quiet we fancy ourselves. But anything can happen when you get out there.

You only have to win two group games and you’re one game away from the semi-final of the World Cup.

➔ **There’s talk of an Irish team entering The Co-operative National Leagues in the future. Do you think that’s a realistic prospect?**

Yeah, when you look at the Irish set-up and see the lads playing in local leagues over there they get better and better. So that must be the next step, and it can only help the standard over there. I think a good World Cup could also really help the Irish game take off.

➔ **It’s your testimonial season next year. Did you ever think 10 years ago that you’d still be at Salford?**

It’s a dream come true really. When I went full time I thought I could go back and do something else if it didn’t work, but 10 years down the line I’m still playing. I’m proud to have been at Salford all that time too – they’ve been good to me. ■

“WE’LL BE READY FOR SUPER LEAGUE NEXT SEASON. WE’VE GOT SOME GREAT YOUNG PLAYERS COMING THROUGH AND HOPEFULLY THERE SHOULD BE A COUPLE OF NEW ADDITIONS TO THE SQUAD”

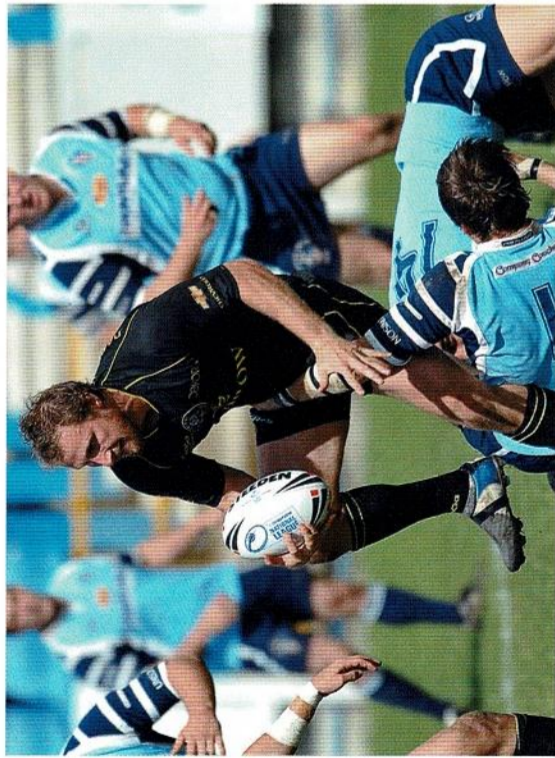


ONES TO WATCH CELTIC CRUSADERS

Crusaders captain **Jace Van Dijk** names five of his players to look out for in today's Co-operative National League One Grand Final



"I've missed a fair few games this season, but I'm happy with how I've hit a bit of form over the recent games. It's a great achievement to reach the Grand Final considering where we've come from. I don't know any other team that has come from League Two and straight into the Grand Final. We really feel good about our chances for Super League."



DAMIEN QUINN STAND-OFF

"He's been great for us all season. Probably the only fit half-back in the club for much of the year so he had to take on a lot of the ball-playing roles. He dealt with a lot of pressure heaped on him during the 11-week period

when I was out - he kept us on track and we played some good stuff during that time. We played a lot of footie together growing up as juniors back in Queensland, so we have a pretty good understanding and know what each other is thinking. We have a pretty good combination there."



GERAINT DAVIES PROP

"Geraint has come in from the Colts and come on a lot in the last few years and hopefully he'll continue developing. I've been very impressed with his skills and the way he handles training. He's been one of our better players all season in the front row."



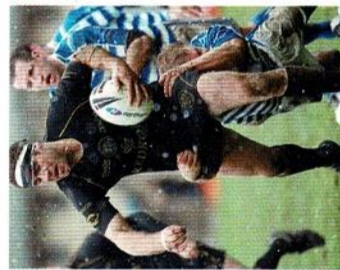
BEN FLOWER PROP

"I think he's got a great future ahead of him. This was his first full year of Rugby League, and he could do anything in the game if he wants. He's got a real build for the game and I'm really looking forward to seeing what he can do in Super League next year."



NEIL BUDWORTH HOOKER

"He's been a good player again for us this season and was nominated in the team of the year. He's a great professional who played in Super League for Harlequins and more often than not he'll take on the dummy half role, creating stuff and make openings for us."

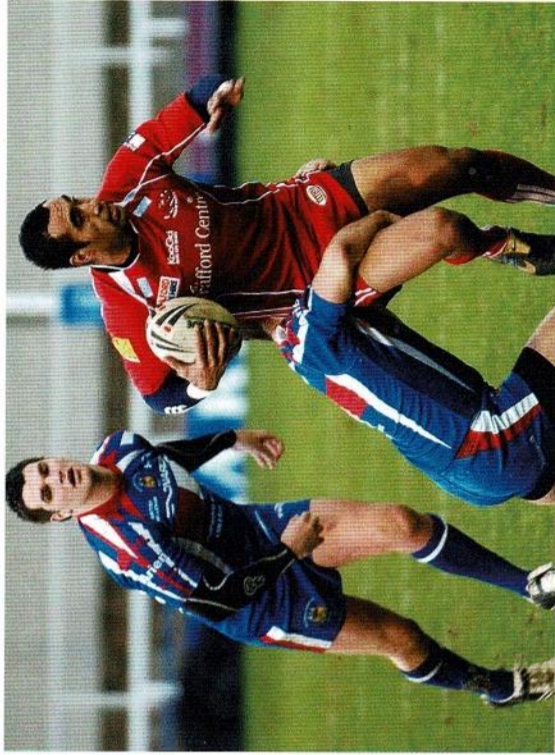


DARREN MAPP SECOND ROW

"Darren's been one of our best players all year, he's been a real forward leader, and for me, he's been the stand-out player of the year. He does all the little things that no one really sees. He puts in a lot of hard graft and that has helped achieve so much for us this year."

ONES TO WATCH SALFORD CITY REDS

Salford captain **Malcolm Aiker** names five players to look out for in today's Co-operative National League One Grand Final



JOHN WILSHERE CENTRE

"Johnny's been probably our most consistent performer this year, as well as last. When he gets the ball in his hands he's so dangerous. He can offload, he gets through gaps and scores tries. When he gets the ball he

can always create something and he's one of our major attacking weapons on the right hand side. His kicking has been fantastic too. It was one of our weak spots previously - to be honest, it was part of why we got relegated - but he's rarely put a foot wrong for us this year."



"We've got a score to settle with Crusaders. We're not happy with the way we've played against them this year. There aren't many people who can say they've had good games against them - everyone has played a bit within themselves. As individuals and a team we want to get that right, and I think that will make it a really good contest."



ROBBIE PAUL STAND-OFF/HOOKER

"It's been great playing alongside Robbie, he's an old stager with a lot of experience and he can create something out of nothing. He's still got it, and I'm glad he's on our side rather than playing against us, because on his day he can be lethal."



CRAIG STAPLETON PROP

"Craig won all our club awards recently and rightly so. He's an unselfish player who knows what his job is, he goes out there and consistently does it. He's not just a workhorse either - he'll get a quick play-the-ball for you and other people reap the rewards."



LUKE ADAMSON SECOND ROW

"He's a young lad who has cemented his place this year. He's worked so hard and matured as a player and a person. It's a hard league this - not as fast as Super League, but it's more physical - and that toughens up kids like Luke. That will stand him in good stead."



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THE RESULTS HOW THEY GOT HERE

ROAD TO THE FINAL

Today's two finalists occupied the top two positions in The Co-operative National League One. Here's how they sealed their passage to Warrington



CELTIC CRUSADERS



DATE	OPPOSITION	SCORE
21 MARCH	DEWSBURY RAMS (H)	14-12
24 MARCH	SHEFFIELD EAGLES (A)	6-25
29 MARCH	HALIFAX RLFC (H)	26-18
11 APRIL	WHITEHAVEN (A)	16-44
27 APRIL	WIDNES VIKINGS (A)	16-14
2 MAY	FEATHERSTONE ROVERS (H)	28-18
15 MAY	SALFORD CITY REDS (A)	22-24
31 MAY	BATLEY BULLDOGS (H)	56-28
8 JUNE	LEIGH CENTURIONS (A)	45-22
22 JUNE	DEWSBURY RAMS (A)	32-10
26 JUNE	WIDNES VIKINGS (H)	38-6
13 JULY	FEATHERSTONE ROVERS (A)	30-42
19 JULY	WHITEHAVEN (H)	22-26
27 JULY	BATLEY BULLDOGS (A)	22-30
2 AUGUST	SHEFFIELD EAGLES (H)	42-6
10 AUGUST	LEIGH CENTURIONS (H)	38-28
17 AUGUST	HALIFAX RLFC (A)	38-28
23 AUGUST	SALFORD CITY REDS (H)	20-10

QUALIFYING SEMI-FINAL

11 SEPTEMBER	SALFORD CITY REDS (A)	44-18
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SALFORD CITY REDS



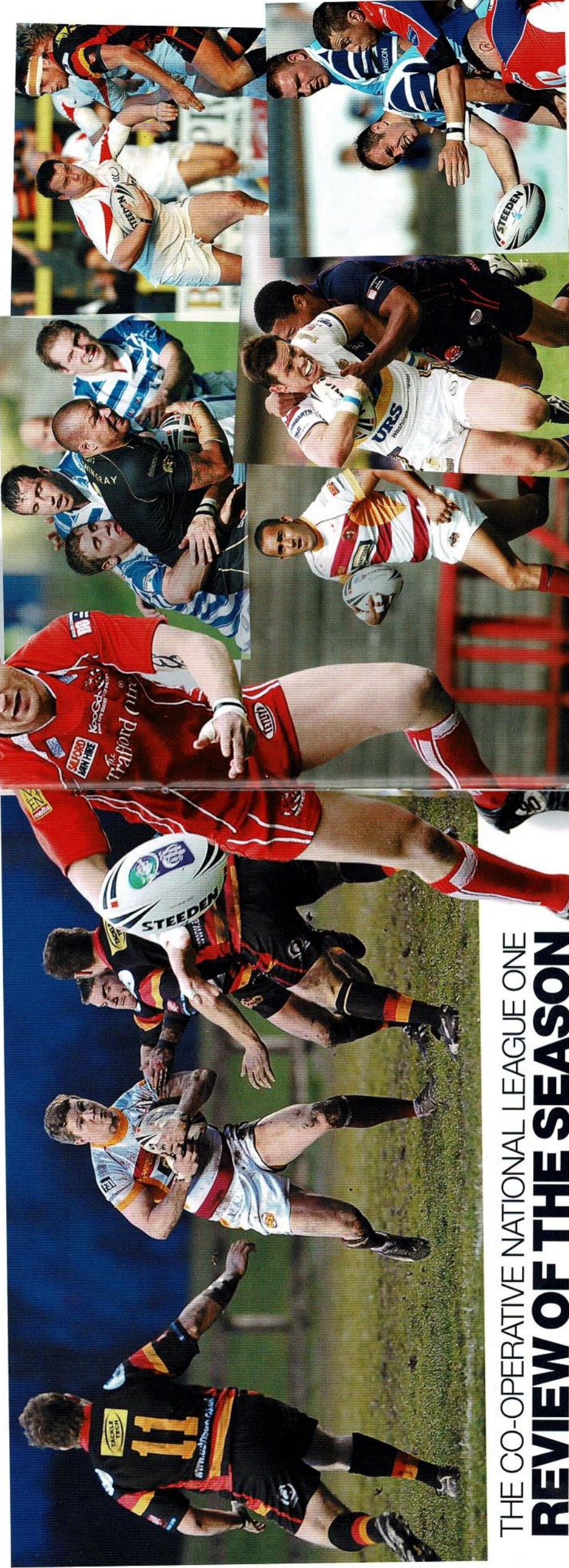
DATE	OPPOSITION	SCORE
20 MARCH	LEIGH CENTURIONS (A)	24-8
24 MARCH	FEATHERSTONE ROVERS (H)	42-12
30 MARCH	BATLEY BULLDOGS (A)	48-22
11 APRIL	WIDNES VIKINGS (H)	16-16
24 APRIL	WHITEHAVEN RLFC (H)	36-10
2 MAY	SHEFFIELD EAGLES (A)	24-24
15 MAY	CELTIC CRUSADERS (H)	24-22
29 MAY	WHITEHAVEN RLFC (A)	22-26
6 JUNE	SHEFFIELD EAGLES (H)	34-10
19 JUNE	WIDNES VIKINGS (A)	18-20
27 JUNE	HALIFAX RLFC (H)	30-24
13 JULY	DEWSBURY RAMS (A)	70-22
20 JULY	FEATHERSTONE ROVERS (A)	30-30
25 JULY	LEIGH CENTURIONS (H)	46-12
31 JULY	HALIFAX RLFC (A)	36-18
8 AUGUST	DEWSBURY RAMS (H)	58-6
17 AUGUST	BATLEY BULLDOGS (H)	46-0
23 AUGUST	CELTIC CRUSADERS (A)	10-20

QUALIFYING SEMI-FINAL

11 SEPTEMBER	CELTIC CRUSADERS (H)	18-44
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FINAL ELIMINATOR

18 SEPTEMBER	WHITEHAVEN (H)	68-22
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THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE REVIEW OF THE SEASON

Salford may have eventually won top spot comfortably, but it wasn't easy all the way in one of the most competitive seasons to date

MARCH/APRIL

In contrast to the opening weeks of the 2007 season, when eventual Grand Finalists Castleford and Widnes swept all before them almost from the start, the first five rounds of fixtures in The Co-operative National League One suggested that a much tighter competition was in prospect for 2008.

As the relegated side from the engage Super League, Salford City Reds were strong pre-season favourites, but they hardly had it easy, struggling to overcome Leigh on the opening weekend and having to turn around half-time deficits to beat Batley and draw with Widnes. That last result was a creditable one for the Vikings, given their pre-season problems when the club was docked nine points for going into

AS THE SEASON'S THIRD MONTH REACHED AN END, HALIFAX WERE SOMEWHAT UNLIKELY LEAGUE LEADERS

administration and lost several key players. Back on an even financial keel under new owners, the Cheshire side nevertheless found the going tougher this season, and after three narrow wins and that draw with Salford, they lost at home to Celtic Crusaders in late April. That result firmed up the promoted Bridgend side's credentials as genuine contenders, in spite of their early inconsistency when they lost to Sheffield and Whitehaven in between wins over Halifax and the 2007 Grand

Finalists. Halifax, meanwhile, were showing formidable intent, with four wins out of five and the league's top points scoring record. At the bottom, however, Dewsbury had only two bonus points to show for five defeats, and already looked set for a season of struggle.

MAY/JUNE

As the season's third month reached an end, Halifax were somewhat unlikely league leaders, after continuing their free-scoring form with 116 points notched up against Dewsbury and Batley. Meanwhile, Salford were showing signs of faltering, after a second draw in three games at Sheffield, and defeats at Whitehaven then Widnes. Yet they had shown their class in beating Celtic Crusaders in between those fixtures, and although Halifax also had a blip in losing to Sheffield, they then overcame Widnes to retain top spot. The meeting of the top two at The Willows proved to

be one of the games of the season. Salford looked to be cruising at 24-0 up after only 26 minutes, but the Yorkshiremen clawed their way back to parity on the hour mark, and briefly threatened a famous victory before Stefan Ratchford went over for Salford and Sean Pencywicz's sending off ended Fax's hopes.

The league was clearly going to be far from a two horse race, however, as Celtic Crusaders were proving, and their 38-6 win over Widnes at Brewery Field moved them level with Halifax. In the battle for play-off places, meanwhile, Whitehaven were starting to show form after a poor start to the season, with four wins in six during May and June, including a battling victory over Salford. Leigh were also going well alongside them.

There seemed to be no miracle recovery in prospect for basement club Dewsbury, however, as they had to wait until 5 June to record their first league win, and were already staring relegation in the face. The fact they

had collected five bonus points from 11 games showed they were far from being no-hopers, but their one win over Batley, however, who had only won three from 11, and were suddenly looking anxiously over their shoulder.

JULY/AUGUST/SEPTEMBER

The established order of things was reinforced in style in the first week of July when Salford inflicted a ruthless 70-22 battering on Dewsbury on their own ground. Buoyed by a Northern Rail Cup final win over Doncaster, the Reds remained undefeated until a final weekend reverse at Brewery Field, by which time they were seven points clear at the top.

The Bridgend outfit's challenge looked to be fading when they followed up that win over Widnes with three consecutive defeats in July, but their nearest challengers Halifax were also suffering indifferent form, with losses

against Whitehaven and Salford. It meant that their clash with Celtic at The Shay in the penultimate week of the season proper would be crucial in deciding who would clinch second spot and with it, two chances of reaching the Grand Final. The Welsh side prevailed 38-28 with a strong second half display, and then a final day win over Salford meant that their opening play-off fixture would be against the same opponents.

At the opposite end of the table, Batley sealed their survival, and Dewsbury's fate, in style with a win over Celtic Crusaders, while the scrap for play-off places was not resolved until the penultimate round of fixtures, when Widnes ensured a play-off berth by beating Sheffield at the Don Valley Stadium. That left the South Yorkshire side with only a mathematical chance of catching Leigh or Whitehaven, but in the event, neither needed to rely on points difference once they'd won their final fixtures. ■

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE AWARDS

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE



PLAYER OF THE YEAR
WINNER: **DAMIEN QUINN**
Celtic Crusaders (left)

Nominees: **Craig Stapleton** Salford City Reds; **John Wilshire** Salford City Reds

YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
WINNER: **RICHIE MYLER**
Salford City Reds

Nominees: **Paul Mennell** Batley Bulldogs; **Stefan Ratchford** Salford City Reds

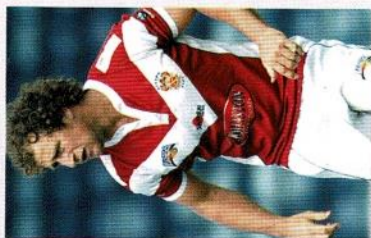


COACH OF THE YEAR
WINNER: **SHAUN MCARA**
Salford City Reds (above)
Nominees: **Matt Calland** Halifax RLFC; **John Dixon** Celtic Crusaders

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE LEAGUE WEEKLY ALL-STARS

- 1 **Tony Duggan** Celtic Crusaders
- 2 **Dean Gaskell** Widnes Vikings
- 3 **Mark Daile Cort** Celtic Crusaders
- 4 **John Wilshire** Salford City Reds
- 5 **Paul White** Salford City Reds
- 6 **Damien Quinn** Celtic Crusaders
- 7 **Richard Myler** Salford City Reds
- 8 **Craig Stapleton** Salford City Reds
- 9 **Sean Penkwyicz** Halifax
- 10 **Phillip Leuluai** Salford City Reds
- 11 **Lee Doran** Leigh Centurions
- 12 **Darren Mapp** Celtic Crusaders
- 13 **Neale Wyatt** Celtic Crusaders

PLAYERS OF THE MONTH 2008
AUGUST **Darren Mapp** Celtic Crusaders
JULY **Leroy Joe** Whitehaven (below)
JUNE **Damien Quinn** Celtic Crusaders
MAY **Neale Wyatt** Celtic Crusaders
APRIL **Jace Van Dijk** Celtic Crusaders
MARCH **Richie Myler** Salford City Reds



PLAYER OF THE YEAR
WINNER: **DAVE ARMITSTEAD** Barrow (left)
Nominees: **Corey Lawrie** Doncaster RLFC; **Dan Russell** Gateshead Thunder

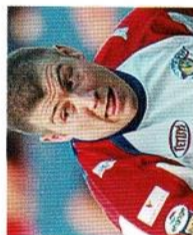
YOUNG PLAYER OF THE YEAR
WINNER: **LUKE GALE** Doncaster
Nominees: **Kyle Briggs** Doncaster; **Michael Knowles** Gateshead Thun.

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO LEAGUE WEEKLY ALL-STARS

- 1 **Paul O'Connor** Oldham
- 2 **Stewart Sanderson** Gateshead Thunder
- 3 **Marcus St Hilaire** Oldham
- 4 **Ben McAlpine** Gateshead Thunder
- 5 **James Nixon** Barrow Raiders
- 6 **Kyle Briggs** Doncaster
- 7 **Dan Russell** Gateshead Thunder
- 8 **Andy Shickell** Keighley Cougars
- 9 **Corey Lawrie** Doncaster
- 10 **Richard Mervill** Oldham
- 11 **Michael Knowles** Gateshead Thun.
- 12 **Danny Halliwell** Oldham
- 13 **Dave Armitstead** Barrow Raiders



COACH OF THE YEAR
WINNER: **DAVE WOODS**
Gateshead Thunder (above)
Nominees: **Martin Crompton** Blackpool Panthers; **Barry Eaton** Keighley Cougars



PLAYERS OF THE MONTH 2008
AUGUST **Dan Russell** Gateshead Thunder
JULY **Paul March** York City Knights (below)
JUNE **Dave Armitstead** Barrow Raiders
MAY **Jamaine Wray** Keighley Cougars
APRIL **Corey Lawrie** Doncaster
MARCH **Kyle Briggs** Doncaster



We started with nothing, had nine points deducted and then didn't get the news we wanted midway through the season. When you look at those things, I think we've done remarkably well.

"We were disappointed not to progress in the play-offs but the standard of National League One has gone up and up.

"We like to think we've developed a new culture at Widnes. An awful lot has happened in a short space of time - this time last year the club was dead - but we can now look to the future very positively."



Steve McCormack, Widnes Vikings coach

"We're really happy with what we got out of the season. We certainly over-achieved but that's down to the **hard work** of the players, staff and Steve Garside. We won some games quite easily, but the standard of **competition** was a lot better than other years. I'd be disappointed if we weren't competitive again next year. With a lot of **hard work** I'm confident we can be competitive in NL1."

Dave Woods, Gateshead Thunder coach

"Promotion was the goal for us and it was great to achieve that by the end of the year. The players and everyone associated with the club deserve every bit of recognition after their efforts this season.

"We had a thin squad and that was challenged towards the end of the season but I was confident we could get promotion as the injured boys came back and boosted the team.

"It's important for us to get some quality players in now and if we can add some depth then I've no doubt we can compete in National League One."

Dave Clark, Barrow Raiders coach

"It was a frustrating campaign for us. We set off with high hopes of achieving the play-offs and we could have achieved that, but we had a really **bad spell** in the middle of the season - in the end I was pleased to avoid relegation. We racked up eight bonus points so we've been **competitive**, and with a bit more luck we could have been in the top six. We **lost** a few games at the death and that cost us."

Gary Thornton, Batley Bulldogs coach

"We definitely had some highs and lows this season - we showed we were capable of beating anybody on our day but we didn't maintain any consistency throughout the season. It was a **disappointing way** to go out of the finals, but it was the most competitive season ever in League One. We have a **knack** of bringing through good young players and they'll make a **real impact** next year."



Paul Rowley, Leigh Centurions assistant coach

"In the end it was a disappointing year. Throughout the season we've been in the **top six** so it was frustrating to eventually finish seventh. **The challenge** was to reproduce last year - having said that, we actually won more games than last season but the **competition standard** has improved. There were plenty of positives - we showed we can compete against the top teams, so that's something for us to build on next season."

Mark Aston, Sheffield Eagles coach

ANALYSIS

Sky Sports' Barrie McDermott assesses today's key action areas



THE PLAYMAKERS

Salford have a young side, and **Richie Myler** at scrum-half reminds me of a young Danny McGuire. He knows where that try line is, knows where and when to make the breaks and where he needs to be to capitalise on breaks. He's got a cute rugby brain.

There is experience in the side, though, not least in the form of talismanic captain and one of the nicest guys in Rugby League -

Malcolm Alker. **Robbie Paul** has also done it all, and he's versatile, like a lot of their players. They've got loose forwards who can play in the halves, halves who can play as hookers and second rowers who can play in the centres.

For Crusaders, **Jace Van Dijk** is a creative player with a great kicking game. He's lost weight due to injury but I think it suits his game. His combination with **Damien Quinn** is dangerous and they will test you continually. You can't afford to switch off because they'll catch you out.

THE POWER

I've watched both these teams several times this season and seen how big and physical they are up front. For Salford, **Craig Stapleton** was a guy I played against when he was playing for Leigh, and I came to respect him then as a player who took no nonsense. He hurts teams when he's got the ball, not just physically, but he's a constructive player who has ball playing skill. When the opponents are in possession, he's a formidable opponent.

For Celtic, **Jordan James**

is a player just coming into the best years of his career. I believe a front row forward peaks between the ages of 28 and 32, and he has the ability to be an enforcer and dominate games. I think he's ready to step up and take that role

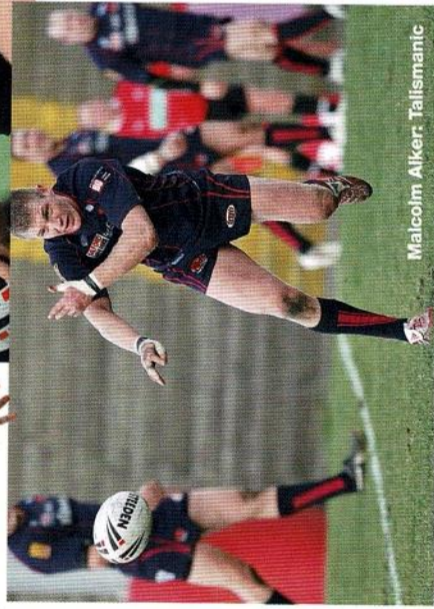


Robbie Paul: Versatile

“YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO SWITCH OFF AGAINST CRUSADERS BECAUSE THEY'LL CATCH YOU OUT”



Jace Van Dijk: Creative



Malcolm Alker: Talismanic

for the Crusaders and this would be a great place to do that.

Ben Flower also has a fantastic future, and gets better and better. It'll be interesting to see how he performs on the big occasion.

THE PACE

Both teams have great pace and agility out wide and a lot of guile with the ball. They're always going to score tries when they get near the line. For Salford, **John Wislere** is a great strike player to have in your team but not just for his try-scoring ability. In defence he makes sound decisions, but what takes him above anybody else is that if you concede a penalty in your own half you know John Wislere will stick it between the 'H'.

On the Celtic side, I think **Mark**

Dalle Cort at centre could be in direct competition with Wislere, if so, that will be a key battle. Dalle Cort is a big presence and he's very strong. He has the power and pace to bother any organised defence and if he can also help stop Wislere his side have a great chance.

Also for the Crusaders, **Tony Duggan** is probably the best full-back outside the engage Super League. He's a potent weapon for them, tracking up that middle corridor and feeding off scraps the forwards leave. He's an instinctive player who always seems to be in the right place at the right time, so don't be surprised to see him score.

SUMMARY

I know Crusaders had a big win in the Qualifying Semi-final, but I don't think form will have any bearing on the game today. It's about the emotions of the day, making sure the team plays the game in front of them. Both teams have the ability to score tries, and the mental and physical toughness to prevent them. But it's a game of inches in finals, and whichever one handles the conditions the best will be the victors. ■



Jordan James: Enforcer



Craig Stapleton: Constructive

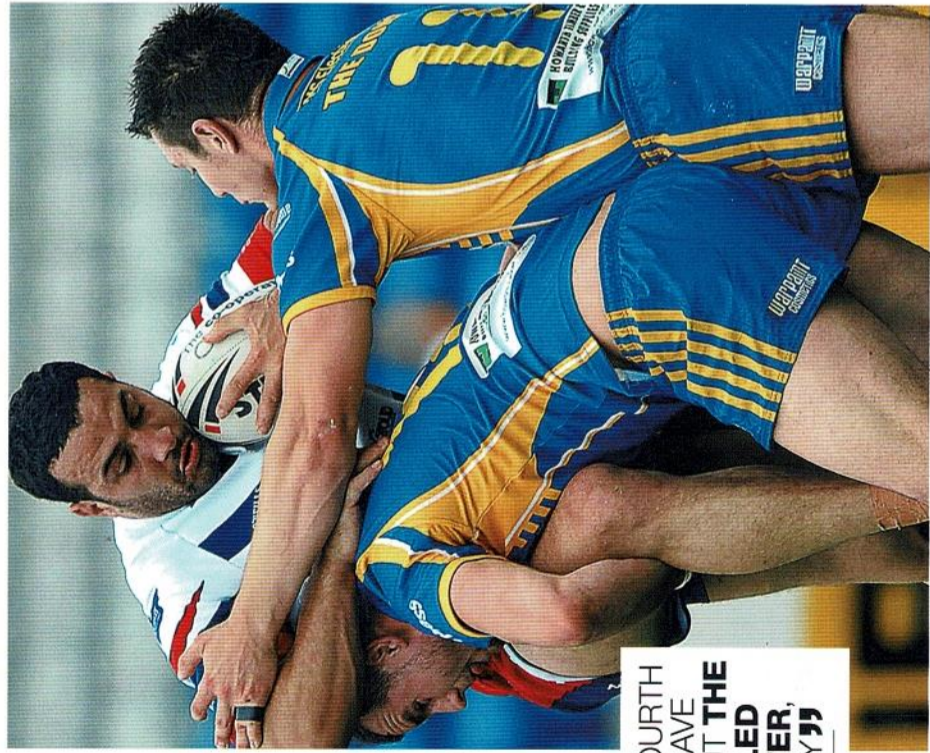
“I KNOW CRUSADERS HAD A BIG WIN IN THE SEMI-FINAL, BUT I DON'T THINK FORM WILL HAVE ANY BEARING ON THE GAME TODAY”



John Wislere: Strike player

PLAY-OFFS THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO

After losing their unbeaten home record to Doncaster in the Qualifying Semi-final, Oldham will be out to get their revenge on Ellery Hanley's men today



QUALIFYING SEMI-FINAL
Sunday 14 September
OLDHAM 20
Tries: St Hilaire, O'Connor, Joseph, Onyango
Goals: Halliwell 2
DONCASTER 32
Tries: Luisi, Gale 2, Bauer, Reittie
Goals: Gale 6
Boundary Park, Oldham.
Attendance: 1,305

Fourth-placed Doncaster reached today's Play-off final with a terrific display which ended Oldham's unbeaten home record. Zeb Luisi broke the deadlock for the Dons after eight minutes before Luke Gale touched down twice to extend Doncaster's lead to 18-0. However, Oldham clawed their way back into the game with three tries of their own through Marcus St Hilaire, Paul O'Connor and Phil Joseph. Danny Halliwell converted two of the tries to bring Oldham within two points of the Yorkshiremen, but with the Roughyeds now on top, half-time arguably came at the worst possible time for them.

In the second half, Oldham's indiscipline handed the initiative back to the visiting side, and two Gale penalties added to an Andreas Bauer try gave Doncaster some breathing space. Although Lucas Onyango scored Oldham's fourth touchdown to give them fresh hope of snatching the spoils, Doncaster's victory was sealed by Wayne Reittie's try with just three minutes remaining on the clock.

The result meant Oldham would have to face a Final Eliminator match, while Doncaster, who had also struck a crucial psychological blow over their rivals, enjoyed a week of rest.

“OLDHAM'S FOURTH TOUCHDOWN GAVE THEM HOPE, BUT THE WIN WAS SEALED FOR DONCASTER, WITH A LATE TRY”

FINAL TABLE THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO

	P	W	D	L	PF	PA	Bonus	Pts
Gateshead	22	19	0	3	767	415	2	59
Barrow	22	16	0	6	703	375	4	52
Oldham	22	17	0	5	716	456	1	52
Doncaster	22	15	0	7	672	426	3	48
Keighley	22	15	0	7	611	519	3	48
York	22	11	1	10	740	540	7	42
Rochdale	22	10	1	11	715	610	4	36
Workington	22	6	0	16	512	628	10	28
Blackpool	22	7	1	14	472	828	2	25
Swinton	22	6	0	16	482	777	4	22
London Skolars	22	4	1	17	449	823	6	20
Hunslet	22	4	0	18	336	778	5	17

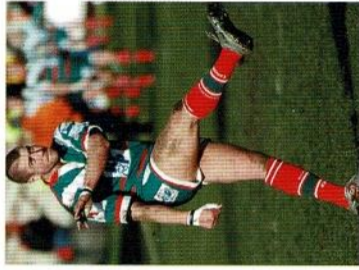


ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF 1
Friday 5 September
YORK CITY KNIGHTS 12
Tries: Ratcliffe, Oakes
Goals: Mitchell 2
ROCHDALE HORNETS 28
Tries: Rolls, Butterworth, Rivett 2, Muir
Goals: Sneyd 4
Huntingdon Stadium, York.
Attendance: 682

Rochdale Hornets booked their place in the Elimination Final by beating York City Knights in a tight match. The Hornets line was under siege for much of the game, but an outstanding defensive display meant that it was rarely breached.

Rochdale took the lead on 17 minutes, when Paul Rolls' try was converted by Carl Sneyd. York hit back with two Adam Mitchell penalties, but just before half-time, Leroy Rivett raced from his own line to set up Sam Butterworth who gave Rochdale a 10-4 lead.

York scrum-half Danny Ratcliffe reduced the deficit to two points early in the second half, before Rivett extended Rochdale's lead in the 54th minute. York centre John Oakes gave his side a lifeline eight minutes from time, but with the Hornets defence under pressure, Rivett ran the length of the field to touch down and Jonathan Muir's try sealed the win on the final hooter.



ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF 2
Sunday 7 September
KEIGHLEY COUGARS 32
Tries: Shickell 3, Presley, Bissell
Goals: Jones 6
WORKINGTON 14
Tries: Benjafield, Lunt, Miller
Goals: Forber
Cougar Park, Keighley.
Attendance: 933

Keighley Cougars advanced to the Elimination Semi-final after a bruising encounter. Cougars opened the scoring on 12 minutes when Andy Shickell went over from close range. Workington hit back four minutes later when Ryan Benjafield drove through a static defence, but Shickell and Jon Presley stretched the hosts lead.

Workington gained a lifeline before the break when Shaun Lunt scored, with Forber's conversion making the half-time score 18-10.

A second-half injury to Lunt allowed Keighley to regain the initiative and though Workington pressed hard to cut the deficit, Iain Marsh became Workington's third player to leave the field injured. When Shickell crashed over for his hat-trick of tries on 75 minutes, the game was over as a contest. Neil Lowe grabbed a consolation try three minutes from time, but Cougars substitute Simon Bissell ended the scoring.



ELIMINATION SEMI-FINAL
Sunday 14 September
KEIGHLEY COUGARS 26
Tries: Rayner, Presley 2, Rawlins
Goals: Jones 5
ROCHDALE HORNETS 32
Tries: Ainscough, Sneyd, Sinfield 2, Cuncliffe, Giles
Goals: Sneyd 4
Cougar Park, Keighley.
Attendance: 1,033

Rochdale Hornets produced a magnificent comeback to seal their place in the Final Eliminator. Trailing 24-6 with half-time approaching, they scored four tries either side of the interval to set up a derby clash against Oldham.

Rochdale took an early lead when Martin Ainscough went over, but tries from George Raynor, Jon Presley (two) and Brendon Rawlins gave the hosts a 24-6 lead. But Carl Sneyd's try right on the half-time hooter gave Rochdale a glimmer of hope, before a remarkable comeback was completed with three tries in six minutes early in the second half.

In the 45th minute, a quick play-the-ball saw Iain Sinfield crash over, followed by David Cunliffe and Chris Giles. Sneyd converted two of those three tries to give the Roughyeds a commanding 28-14 lead midway through the half, before two late tries from Daryl Cardiss and Goulden sealed the victory.



FINAL ELIMINATOR
Sunday 21 September
OLDHAM 38
Tries: Mervill, Langley 2, Goulden 2, Coyle, Cardiss
Goals: Nany 5
ROCHDALE HORNETS 14
Tries: Alcock, Billings
Goals: Sneyd 3
Boundary Park, Oldham.
Attendance: 1,365

Oldham Roughyeds reached the Grand Final at the second time of asking by overcoming local rivals Rochdale Hornets in a seven-try win at Boundary Park. The Roughyeds struck first, taking the lead through Mick Nany's penalty before Richard Mervill crossed for the first of their tries, and they looked to be well in charge when Gareth Langley's try gave them a 12-2 advantage. However, Rochdale hit back with two tries in four minutes through Paul Alcock and Janan Billings to establish a 14-12 half-time lead.

But three tries in the first 15 minutes after the break put Oldham in control. First Langley touched down, followed by Tommy Goulden and James Coyle, Nany converted two of those three tries to give the Roughyeds a commanding 28-14 lead midway through the half, before two late tries from Daryl Cardiss and Goulden sealed the victory.

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO REVIEW OF THE SEASON

Two sides from the far north of England set the pace and held on for automatic promotion, but not without a few scares

MARCH/APRIL

It was a case of the north rising again from the earliest weeks of The Co-operative National League Two season. Gateshead and Barrow, both hailing from regions a fair few miles to the north of Rugby League's traditional heartland, went unbeaten through March and April, and by the time the Cumbrians travelled to Tyneside on 27 April, it already had the look of a title-deciding clash.

Barrow came from behind to take the spoils, but there was still a lot of rugby to be played. Also unbeaten in the first two months were Doncaster, who had been relegated last year as well as suffering financial problems, but were seemingly resurgent under new ownership and the coaching of Rugby League legend Ellery Hanley (below). Keeping pace with those three at the top were Oldham, with only one defeat, which came against

the similarly formidable looking Keighley, who were themselves unbeaten until they lost to Doncaster on the same day as the Barrow-Gateshead clash.

Also on that last weekend in April, the bottom two clubs, Hunslet and London Skolars, played each other, the prize being a first win of the season

for either of them. In the event the Skolars took the spoils 31-24, a result which lifted them to the heady heights of third from bottom, since York City Knights were also without a win in the opening two months of the season. That was a disappointing showing considering they finished in sixth place in 2007.

Workington weren't doing much better, with just one win from six.

MAY/JUNE

Barrow and Gateshead continued to set a blistering pace at the top during the middle months of the season, as both went on two month winning streaks. Gateshead's winning run was only ended when Dave Woods' boys slumped to only their second loss of the season at Oldham on the last weekend of June.

By that time, Doncaster's exploits in reaching the Northern Rail Cup final meant they had played several games fewer than their rivals, but losses to Barrow and Gateshead in successive weeks suggested they might be taking their eye off the ball in the league.

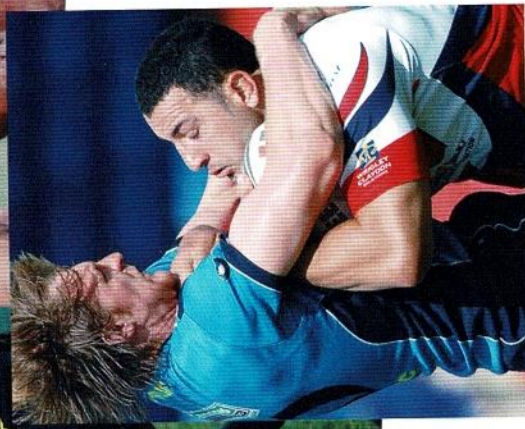
Oldham couldn't prevent Barrow extending their 100 per cent record, but that win over Gateshead kept them neck and neck with the Tynesiders.

JULY/AUGUST

A season is a marathon, not a sprint, and if Barrow fans didn't know that by the start of the summer, they did by the end. A 70-14 win over Swinton in late June made it 13 wins from 13 games, and they probably thought a visit to struggling Hunslet would be something of a formality. Not so, as they lost 15-10, a reversal which began a sequence of five defeats in six games which cost them the top spot. Wins over Keighley and Swinton helped seal second spot, however, and they were able to celebrate automatic promotion.

In contrast, Gateshead won six on the spin after a defeat to Keighley to open up a seven point gap at the top, while Oldham's three wins in their final games narrowly failed to secure them automatic promotion.

Instead they booked a home tie with Doncaster, who recovered from their heavy



“A SEASON IS A MARATHON, NOT A SPRINT, AS BARROW FANS FOUND OUT DURING THE SUMMER”

defeat against Salford City Reds in the Northern Rail Cup final to record five wins from their last six games and secure fourth place.

Keighley were in even better form, winning eight of their last 10 to end up level on points with the Dons, while York also found their feet, with five wins on the bounce – averaging over 50 points per game – to make the play-offs. Their opponents would

be Rochdale, who were showing equally strong form with convincing wins over Barrow, Doncaster and Oldham. Workington made the last play-off berth rather unconvincingly, but they won't have been complaining, and nor will Blackpool, who improved considerably on last year's winless season with seven victories and ninth place, looking down on Swinton, London Skolars and last of all, Hunslet, who followed their third win on the trot over unbeaten Barrow with seven consecutive defeats. ■

ONES TO WATCH DONCASTER

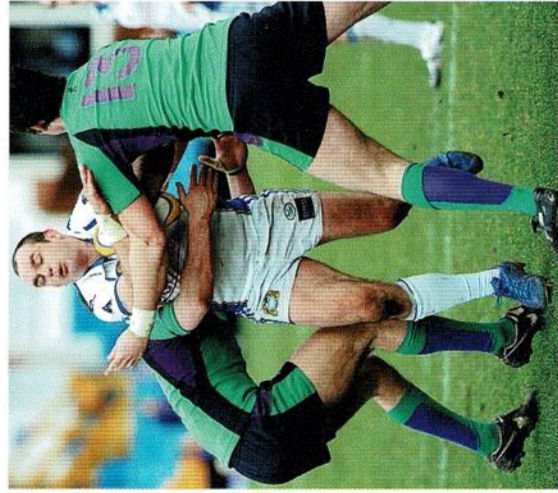
Win or lose today, Doncaster coach **Ellery Hanley** is full of praise for his side's achievements this season, as he tells us below. Elsewhere on this page, we profile five Doncaster players to look out for today.



“My players have done extremely well under very difficult circumstances this season. We've had one of the smallest squads in the league, so I can't speak highly enough of them. What has been most pleasing to me has been the fact that we've played with a very young side, with an average age of only 21, so that bodes well for the future.”

We had a fixture backlog earlier in the season so it was inevitable we would have a dip in form at some point, but the key is to learn from defeats. Whatever happens today, if we learn from it, we can move forward.

Ourselves and Oldham know each other very well, and there's been little to choose between us in our previous encounters. It will come down to getting the fundamentals right on the day.”



COREY LAWRIE HOOKER

Boasting huge experience from his time with New Zealand Warriors in the NRL, this versatile Kiwi also plays at loose forward,

but at number nine he is surely one of the best in his position outside the engage Super League. He retires after this game, so he will be desperate to go out on a high note.



KYLE BRIGGS STAND-OFF

One of the real young finds for Doncaster this season, this former Leeds academy half-back has all the creativity you'd expect from his position, allied to a strong kicking game. He has also forged a great partnership with fellow Leeds graduate Luke Gale.



ZEBASTIAN LUISI CENTRE

Nicknamed 'Lucky Luisi', Zeb is another highly experienced Kiwi who made his name in this country as a full-back at Harlequins but has since been a very powerful performer for the Dons. As well as his defensive qualities, he's also a regular try-scorer.



LUKE GALE SCRUM-HALF

Recently voted Young Player of the Year for The Co-operative National League Two, this 20-year-old Leeds academy product broke the club record for tries scored in a season. That's a result of his pace, eye for a gap and elusive running, but he also expertly directs play.



PETER GREEN SECOND ROW

The club captain who can always be relied upon to run that extra mile for the cause, and whose passion inspires those around him. If the chips are down for the Dons today, this teak-tough forward will be the man stopping heads from dropping.

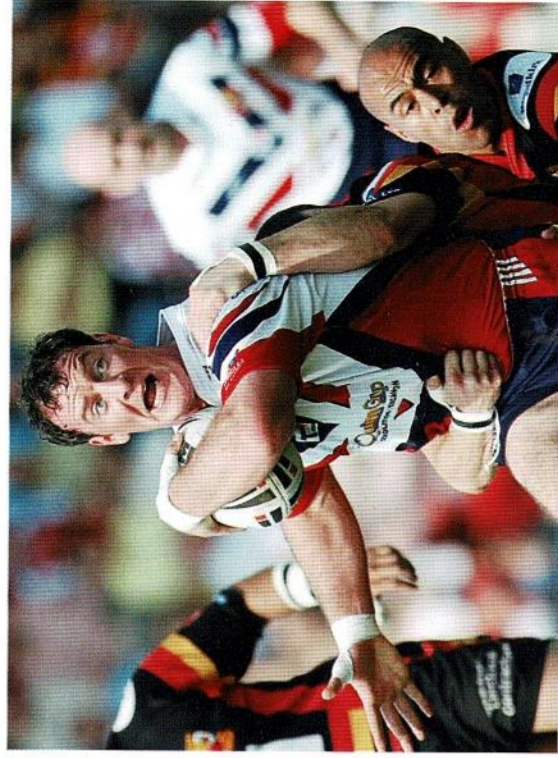
ONES TO WATCH OLDHAM

Oldham coach **Steve Deakin** names five of his players to look out for in today's Co-operative National League Two Play-off final



“We've had some really close games against Doncaster

this season – we've played them three times and they've beaten us twice. There's not much to choose between the two teams but if we get our execution right and handle the occasion I think we'll come out on top. Either way it should be an outstanding game”



ROB ROBERTS SECOND ROW

“Rob, known to everyone as 'Two Bobs', is not only a Welsh international and our captain but he's also a massive leader for the club, both on and off the field. Since he signed from Leigh last season he has directed

operations and all the other players look up to him. Put it this way, in the five games we lost during the regular season, Rob didn't play in two of them, and came off in the first 20 minutes in three of them. So that tells you how important an individual he is to everyone in this team.”



MARCUS ST HILAIRE FULL-BACK/CENTRE

“He will be familiar from his time in Super League, and Marcus has the ability to play winger, centre or full-back. He's been a steady influence on our defence – his professionalism played a large part in educating Paul O'Connor to take on the full-back position.”



JAMES COYLE SCRUM-HALF

“A youngster who came out of Wigan's youth set-up. Since arriving midway through last season he's made the scrum-half spot his own. He's a player around whom the club is hoping to build for the future – he's responsible for directing us round the park.”



DANNY HALLIWELL UTILITY

“An experienced player who has been invaluable as a utility for us this year. He signed from Salford after time in Super League and can play wing, centre or second row. His physical presence means he can take the ball out as well as defend very strongly.”



MICK NANNY CENTRE

“This will be Mick's last game for us, as he's going to Harlequins next season. It's about time he tried his hand at Super League, he's broken scoring records everywhere else. He's a great goal kicker who scored 20 tries this season – a true all-rounder.”

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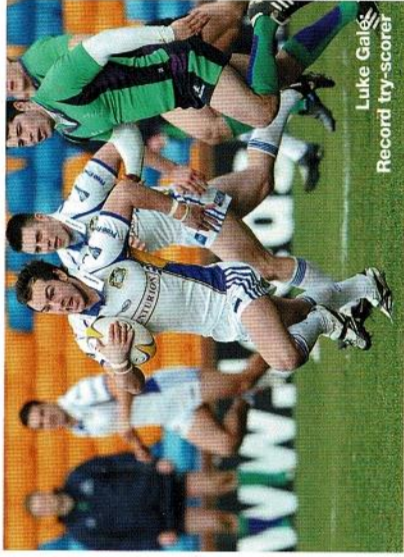
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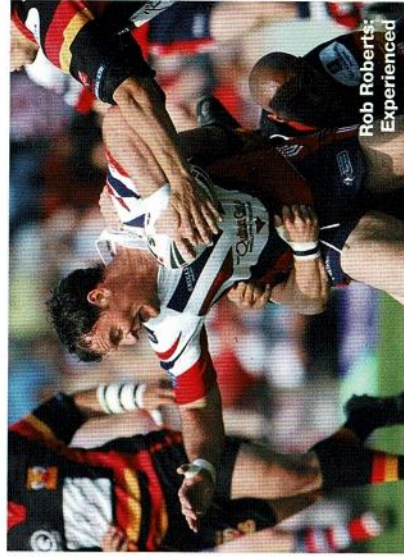
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Rob Roberts:
Experienced

PREVIEW CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO PLAY-OFF FINAL

Today's match will bring together two ambitious clubs, writes **Gareth Walker**

THERE WERE TWO NOTABLE omissions among the nominees for The Co-operative National League Two Coach of the Year last Tuesday, but it's unlikely that either Ellery Hanley or Steve Deakin will pay much attention to that should their side grab today's second chance to earn promotion.

Both men perhaps paid the price for the pre-season expectations at their clubs when the votes were cast for the award. Doncaster and Oldham were among the favourites for the title after eye-catching recruitment campaigns, only to see those dreams drift away during a fascinating season.

In Hanley's case, he found himself without the club's two most high profile signings, with loan capture **Graeme Horne** never playing for the club and former Australian international **Chris McKenna** limited to just a handful of appearances due to injuries that would eventually end his career. Instead the Dons have relied heavily on youth, a fact illustrated by **Luke Gale** and **Kyle Briggs'** nominations for the Young Player of the Year award, which scrum-half and club record try scorer Gale won. A third young half-back, **Kyle Wood**, has also played a significant role.

But there has been valuable experience in the Doncaster ranks as well, particularly in the shape of club stalwarts **Peter Green** and **Craig Lawton**, who have flourished under Hanley's guidance. Then there is the New Zealand hooker or loose forward **Corey Lawrie**, an inspiration for the Dons who will be missed when he returns home at the end of this season.

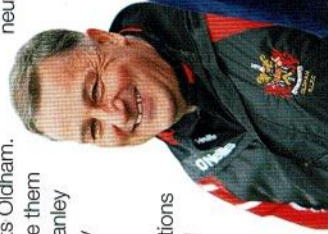
Another factor in Doncaster's inability to secure automatic promotion was undoubtedly the fixture backlog created by their success in the cup competitions, not least reaching the final of the Northern Rail Cup at Blackpool. There they were heavily defeated by full-time Co-operative National League One side Salford, but there was still much pride in the club reaching the first final in their history.

Today sees another final, one secured through an impressive 32-20 win at today's opponents Oldham. It was a victory that gave them another week off that Hanley and his squad will surely treasure. Defeat then for the Roughyeds raised questions over whether they could secure the promotion

that looked a solid bet when they signed several high profile players during the close season. But Deakin and his squad recovered well, showing admirable character to overturn a 14-12 half-time deficit against in-form Rochdale to win the Final Eliminator 38-14 last Sunday.

In that victory, scrum-half **James Coyle** and hooker **Matty Brooks** were key figures, and are expected to feature prominently again today, though the possible loss of stand-off **Neil Roden** with a hamstring injury could be a blow. Still, Oldham have plenty of firepower in the forwards, where the experienced **Rob Roberts** and the ultra-consistent **Richard Mervill** will lead from the front.

Both coaches are big on discipline, so today should provide a free-flowing battle that is easy on the eye. But with so much at stake, it may be difficult for them to sit back and enjoy what should be a great contest for neutrals. ■



PLAY-OFFS CONFERENCE (NATIONAL)

Bramley Buffaloes qualified early for The Co-operative Rugby League Conference (National) Grand Final, but Crusaders Colts had to work harder

ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF 1

Saturday 6 September
FEATHERSTONE LIONS 22
Huddersfield Underbank 18
 A try three minutes from the end of extra-time gave Featherstone Lions a dramatic late win. After a scoreless first half, Lions broke the deadlock with a Steve Froggatt try. Huddersfield's David Holmes levelled, but Stu Davies crashed over to regain the Lions' lead. Holmes' late try sent the match into extra-time. Froggatt edged Lions back in front, but Holmes' third try seemed to have won the game. But Nicholson went over to seal a dramatic win.



ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF 2

Sunday 7 September
WARRINGTON WIZARDS 38
Liverpool Buccaneers 16
 Warrington Wizards reached the Elimination Semi-final, with Alan Reddecliff scoring a hat-trick of tries. His first came after six minutes, but Buccaneers' Matt Garner levelled soon after. Reddecliff and Chris Mellor gave the Wizards a commanding lead, and though Mike Forber reduced the deficit, Reddecliff's hat-trick try gave Wizards a 20-10 interval lead. Stuart Pirrie increased the lead in the second half and though Joel Parker replied for Liverpool, tries from Pirrie and Ian Stephenson sealed an impressive win.

ELIMINATION SEMI-FINAL

Saturday 13 September
WARRINGTON WIZARDS 24
FEATHERSTONE LIONS 32
 Champions Featherstone Lions reached the Final Eliminator, after a thrilling match. Lions' Steve Lawrie opened the scoring, but Billy Sheen levelled midway through the half. Jono Smith gave the Wizards the lead, but Lions hit back with tries from Danny Huby and Brian Sutton. Warrington levelled through Alan Reddecliff, but the visitors regained the lead when Richard Frankland scored. Chris Mellor's try out the deficit to two points, but Frankland's try secured the victory.

ELIMINATION PLAY-OFF

Sunday 21 September
CELTIC CRUSADERS COLTS 44
FEATHERSTONE LIONS 18
 Featherstone Lions' reign as Conference (National) champions was ended emphatically by the Crusaders Colts, who ran in eight tries to emulate the achievements of their club's first team in reaching the Grand Finals Day.

Two tries in three minutes just after the break were the key to the Celts' victory, but Lions' indiscipline cost them dearly with two sinbinnings in the first 20 minutes. Simon Child was sent off for dissent just five minutes in to the game, and the Colts took advantage. Lloyd White setting up Greg Callow who went over in the corner.

Featherstone equalised five minutes later through Stuart Davies, but after Child had returned, they were a player down again straight away when loose forward Jamie Nicholson was also sinbinned for backchat. Colts again took advantage, scoring through Tom Bunnell and then Gil Dudson.

Straight after the interval, White opened up a gap for Chris Vitalini to score and then set up another try for Elliot Kear. Lions hit back on 56 minutes when Ben Smith found a gap, but with 11 minutes remaining, Mills touched down and two tries from Mark Wool and Lee Williams in the final few minutes sealed the win, and a double celebration for the town of Bridgend.

QUALIFYING SEMI-FINAL

Sunday 14 September
BRAMLEY BUFFALOES 43
CELTIC CRUSADERS COLTS 24
 Bramley reached the Grand Final for a third season in a row after a convincing win. Colts took an early lead through Lloyd White's penalty, but when Shaun Flynn dived over on eight minutes, Bramley never relinquished the lead. Tries from Paul Drake and Matt Mulholland extended the lead and when Geraint Davies was sinbinned and Philippe Gardent was taken to hospital with a head injury, the Welsh side were beaten. Jon Nicholls and Shaun Gilmour went over before Davies replied for Colts, but any hopes of a fightback were ended when John Richardson went over.

PHOTO: IAN LOVELL

FINAL TABLE CONFERENCE (NATIONAL)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Bramley Buffaloes	18	15	1	2	670	268	49
Celtic Crusaders Colts	18	15	1	2	723	316	48
Warrington Wizards	18	15	1	2	747	398	48
Featherstone Lions	18	9	1	8	440	470	32
Huddersfield Underbank	18	6	3	9	586	400	30
Liverpool Buccaneers	18	6	1	11	432	583	24
Gateshead Storm	18	6	2	10	436	677	24
Hemel Hempstead Stags	18	6	0	12	532	630	22
Dewsbury Celtic	18	5	0	13	439	622	18
East Lancashire Lions	18	2	0	16	325	966	8

THE CO-OPERATIVE RUGBY LEAGUE CONFERENCE (NATIONAL) REVIEW OF THE SEASON

With three teams matching each other blow for blow in the Conference (National), it made for a thrilling race for the top spot



“ THE TOP THREE WERE TAKING POINTS OFF EACH OTHER, BUT THEY WEREN'T LETTING ANYONE ELSE HAVE ANY ”

MARCH/APRIL

When last year's finalists Bramley Buffaloes and Featherstone Lions battled out a 22-22 draw on the opening day of the season, it seemed as though both sides would be front runners again this season.

However, when Fev failed to win their next three games against Celtic Crusaders Colts, Dewsbury Celtic and Warrington Wizards, it became clear things wouldn't be that simple. The Wizards opened with three straight wins, but they weren't as impressive, as Conference new boys Crusaders Colts, whose four straight wins included a 74-point drubbing of Hemel Stags. Last year's third placed side, Warrington Wizards, were also looking strong, with another 100 per cent record in the opening fixtures.

MAY/JUNE

The first table-top clash of the season came on 24 May, when Warrington Wizards hosted Bramley at Widlerspool, recording a 22-14 win. It was soon followed by two more big games – Bramley came from behind to

JULY/AUGUST

As the season reached its climax, there was little to choose between the top three, but Warrington struck a blow when they went to Bramley and won 32-30 courtesy of a late converted try.

However, the Yorkshire side then beat Crusaders Colts 19-0 to leapfrog them into the top two. That meant the final week's showdown at Brewery Field would decide top spot. If Warrington could win in Bridgend, they would stay on top. If they lost and Bramley won at Dewsbury, they would drop to third.

In the event, Bramley did win at Dewsbury but Warrington were one kick away from a draw, which would have put them into second place. After Danny Shaw's late try, Chris Mellor missed a difficult conversion, meaning the Colts held on to a 24-22 lead, and a qualifying semi-final spot. ■

ONES TO WATCH CONFERENCE (NATIONAL)

BRAMBLEY BUFFALOES

Chosen by coach Paul Cook



“It’s a young squad on the whole, with a bit of experience thrown in, and I’m confident we can go one better than last year and win in the final. We beat Crusaders Colts three times this season and they’re in good form but I think we’ll be too strong. We were confident last year as well, but we’ve fine tuned a few things and prepared slightly differently.”

JOHN NICHOL

LOOSE FORWARD

“A great leader who I picked as captain after he’d been captain for the Leeds Met university side and the GB students. He doesn’t always talk that much on the pitch but he leads from the front and talks when he has to, puts himself about and people look up to him.”

PAUL DRAKE

STAND-OFF

“He was captain last year and he’s played in the halves this season, and with a new half back partner Tony Williams, he’s done really well. The combination has really stood up this year and they’ve directed us around the park. He also kicks our goals.”

TONY WILLIAMS

SCRUM-HALF

“Our scrum-half who has scored so many tries for us this season, I think he and Paul Drake are one of the key reasons why we’ve managed to

get top spot in the league. We lost Bradley Asquith, who was hooker at the start of the season, so we have relied even more heavily on Paul and Tony to create things for us.”

JOHN RICHARDSON

WING (below)

“John has been really outstanding for us on the wing this season. I’ve known John for several years and he’s got better and better, he’s really done magnificently for us this season and he’s scored a lot of tries too.”

ANDY McCANN

WING

“Another young winger who has come through for us – a local Leeds lad who we found playing in the local leagues. We snapped him up and he’s a fantastic prospect. With a couple more years of coaching in him he’ll be a really good player, I’m very confident about that. He’s quick and scores tries as well.”

CELTIC CRUSADERS COLTS

Chosen by coach Dan Clements

“We’ve had a great debut season in this league – to get to the Grand Final is a fantastic achievement from the lads. We’ve had some great games against Bramley too. They are a great club with a lot of history, and we’re really looking forward to the challenge of testing ourselves against them again.”



LEE WILLIAMS

CENTRE (right)

“He’s been outstanding for us at centre – a really sharp young player who is quick with his feet, strong in defence, powerful with it, and not easy to stop when he’s attacking at the other end either.”

ALED JAMES

SCRUM-HALF

“Another Colts player who has been in and out of the first team, he’s a great half-back, with a good footballing brain, really strong distribution and leads the team round the field really well.”

TOM BURNELL

HOOKER

“He’s played really well for us from the dummy half position and I’m definitely hoping he’ll break into the first team. He is an eye-for-a-gap hooker, he takes his opportunities when they come and directs things round the ruck well.”

GIL DUDSON

PROP

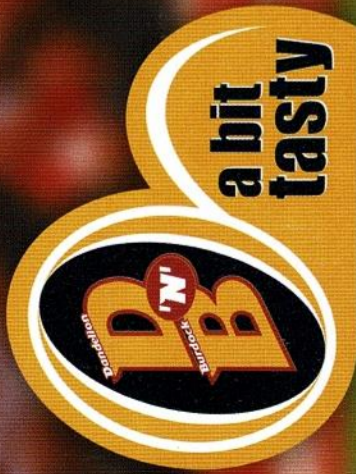
“He’s one of our Under 18s, and he’s just come

back from a European tour with Wales. He’s had a great debut season in Rugby League as a strong and aggressive prop. He has really enjoyed playing a game with more hands on the ball.”

GARY WILLIAMS

UTILITY

“He’s another really good prospect from the Under 18s, who has played in the forwards but also as a centre and on the wing. He can put in a real good hit sometimes and he’s also proved himself to be a great prospect out wide. He’s very fast and he’s got a good eye for the try line.”



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Event 17
Exclusive Meet the England Squad



PREVIEW CO-OPERATIVE RUGBY LEAGUE CONFERENCE (NATIONAL) GRAND FINAL

The Grand Final sees experience pitted against youth, writes **Phil Caplan**

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE sides contesting the top prize could not be more defined at the end of the most successful Co-operative Rugby League Conference (National) season since this tier's inception in 2003.

Bramley Buffaloes are in their fourth successive decider, having been champions in 2006 when they defeated Hemel Stags on this ground. Last season, Paul Cook's men were hot favourites to beat Featherstone Lions but they failed to recover from a poor start and have since waited impatiently to once more prove their pedigree on the big stage.

Celtic Colts are the eighth different side in six seasons to contest a Grand Final at this level and are in the final in their first season, a further testament to the work going on at Brewery Field in Bridgend that underpins their engage Super League licence.

Formed to encompass the cream of the Conference crop in the Principality and to keep aspiring first team squad members fit, that potentially difficult task has been superbly handled by the competition's Coach of the Year Dan Clements and his staff. He was a player with Newport Titans and Cardiff Demons so knows the strength of the local product that is exemplified by the elevation of Ben Flower to the elite level. Several others are set to follow, many of whom successfully represented Wales as they lifted the Under 18's European Nations Cup recently.

Among the most prominent, stand-off and points machine **Lloyd White** has taken the eye, his six goals in the Final Eliminator to knock out defending champions Featherstone Lions taking him to 192 points for the campaign.

PHOTOS: IAN LOVELL



“AS WAS THE CASE IN LAST YEAR'S DECIDER, BRAMLEY HAVE THE EDGE ON FORM, WINNING ALL THREE AGAINST THE COLTS”

Greg Callow is an excellent finisher, scoring 15 tries in 17 appearances, while centre **Lee Williams** has crossed 22 times in 18 matches. Full back **Elliot Kear** has a similarly prolific ratio, going over on 17 occasions in 15 starts while up front, hooker **Tom Burnell** has been a revelation along with **Mark Wool**, another to have a great tournament in the Czech Republic for the national side.

To add flavour, French former Gridiron player **Philippe Gardent** has beefed up the pack while experience has come from former Sheffield and Widnes pivot **Aled James** and ex-Swinton stalwart **Phil Cushion**.

Bramley have kept the bulk of their hugely successful squad from recent seasons together. Winger **John Richardson**

has capped a tremendous year by becoming the competition's Player of the Season, scoring some spectacular and crucial tries along the way. **Paul Drake's** kicking remains one of the side's most potent weapons and he has formed a lethal partnership with **Tony Williams**, who had a spell at Hunslet, and won the David Oxley Medal for Bradford Dudley Hill against the Buffaloes in the 2005 Grand Final. **Andy McGann** has formed an exciting partnership with **Daniel Caston** on the right while skipper **Jon Nicholls** directs play from loose forward.

Veteran **Danny O'Connor** is also a crowd favourite along with prop and assistant coach **Mark Butterill** while full back **Shaun Flynn** links to devastating effect.

As was the case going into last season's decider, the Buffaloes have the edge on form after winning all three encounters against today's opponents. The sides have met three times so far in 2008, with Bramley – who finished a point ahead of Celtic to retain their League Leader's Shield – winning 34-24 in Wales, 19-0 at home and 43-24 in the Qualifying Semi-final at the Arthur Miller Stadium a fortnight ago. ■



Event 19 - Sydney harbour's newest craft, The Bella Vista

EVENT 19 - FRIDAY 7TH NOVEMBER

Private four-hour cruise of Sydney Harbour aboard the new showpiece craft The Bella Vista, which boasts outdoor decks and all-round panoramic windows. Plus a free bar throughout the afternoon including champagne, spirits, wines, beer and soft drinks.

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EVENT 3 - THURSDAY 23RD OCTOBER

Morning coach tour of Townsville including the Strand waterfront and Castle Hill viewpoint. Plus a tour of the Dairy Farmers Stadium, home of the North Queensland Cowboys.

Early afternoon ferry trip from Townsville to nearby Magnetic Island.

Private coach tour of Magnetic Island, including afternoon tea, before ferry back to Townsville and coach transfer back to hotel.

DEPART 10.00AM AND RETURN 6.00PM

EVENT 8 - WEDNESDAY 29TH OCTOBER

Half-day coach tour of the world's famous Melbourne sports venues, featuring:

- Guided tour of Melbourne Cricket Ground
- Visit to the new National Sports Museum
- Drive round the Formula One circuit
- Visit to Princes Park, training centre for Melbourne Storm, home of Carlton Aussie Rules club and venue for the 1992 Australia v GB Test
- Visit to Olympic Park, home ground of Melbourne Storm, plus adjoining new site for partially built new home stadium
- Hosted by Frank Ponissi, Melbourne Storm Football Operations Manager and ex-Kangaroo Assistant Coach

Followed by Happy Hour with Melbourne Storm supporters at the Belgian Beer Café (own cost for drinks and bar food).

DEPART 12.30PM AND RETURN 8.30PM

EVENT 30 - THURSDAY 20TH NOVEMBER

Full-day coach tour of The Gold Coast featuring:

- Tour of Robina Stadium, home of the Gold Coast Titans
- Lunch stop at Coolangata (own cost)
- Afternoon on Surfers Paradise
- Optional river cruise (own cost)
- Dinner and entertainment at The Titanium Bar, official social club of the Gold Coast Titans

DEPART 9.30AM AND RETURN 9.30PM

THE FRONTLINE FAIR PLAY INDEX

Widnes survived a late scare to win the Frontline Fairplay Award for The Co-operative National League One

A 10-MILE ZONE STRADDLING THE western end of the M62 is officially the best disciplined area in professional Rugby League. For close neighbours St Helens and Widnes Vikings are the 2008 winners of the Frontline Fair Play Index for the engage Super League and The Co-operative National League One respectively.

Each club receives a Frontline Trophy and £5,000 worth of Frontline Bathrooms products as reward for being table-toppers in the Frontline Fair Play Index, the RFL's official disciplinary barometer, which is calculated as follows:

- 1 point** Technical penalty
- 2 points** Foul play penalty
- 3 points** Sin bin
- 4 points** Sending off sufficient
- 5 points** For each match suspension (eg three-match ban, 15 points)

The only difference is that in The Co-operative National League One, all penalties count one point.

In the engage Super League, Saints were leaders of the Frontline Fair Play Index for most of the campaign, finishing well ahead of Humberstone duo Hull FC and Hull KR.

For the first time since the index was introduced at the start of last season, Saints recorded the feat of not conceding a penalty, for either technical or foul play, during their 54-0 success at Harlequins in July.

Widnes Vikings relinquished their long-time leadership of their league's Frontline Fair Play Index to Salford City Reds on the last day of the league season. However, Prop Jim Gannon successfully appealed against his one-match ban for dismissal against Whitehaven and restored the Vikings'



Celebrating the Vikings' Frontline Fair Play Index success, the up-and-coming trio from Widnes (from left to right) Matt Strong, Scott Yates and Anthony Mullally

one-point lead to clinch the trophy and £5,000 worth of Frontline products.

Last year's inaugural winners were Harlequins RL in the engage Super League and Castleford Tigers in The Co-operative National League One.

Frontline Bathrooms are one of the UK's leading suppliers to the bathroom industry and an official partner of the RFL in a two-year deal with an annual six-figure investment. Based in Featherstone, they are the main sponsors of Featherstone Rovers,

including front-of-jersey branding. From 2009, the Frontline Bathrooms name will also feature on the St Helens shirt in a new sponsorship venture.

Michael Sammon, marketing manager of Frontline Bathrooms, said: "We are delighted to play an active part in spotlighting fair play in one of the most physical collision sports. Our official partnership with the RFL provides the ideal national platform for promoting our famous Frontline Bathrooms catalogue."



Stats are correct after round 18 of Co-operative National League One on 24/08/2008

Team	Pens Conceded (x1pt)	Sin Bins (x3pts)	Sending off sufficient (x5pts)	Match Bans (x5pts)	Fair Play Total
1 Widnes	129	2	1	0	139
2 Salford	137	1	0	0	140
3 Celtic Crusaders	130	3	0	1	144
4 Dewsbury	143	4	0	0	155
5 Halifax	152	2	1	0	162
6 Batley	148	3	1	6	191
7 Sheffield	181	4	0	0	193
8 Leigh	170	4	1	4	206
9= Whitehaven	173	6	1	7	230
9= Featherstone	155	4	2	11	230

The Frontline Fair Play Index is calculated using a weighted formula powered by statistical data collected by PA Sport



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DESTINATION DOWN UNDER

Some of the players on the pitch today could be forgiven for having their minds on sunnier climes

THE PLAYERS ON THE PARK TODAY ONLY HAVE THEIR eyes set on winning their respective finals, but in four weeks time, a select few will be competing for the sport's ultimate prize – the Rugby League World Cup.

RLWC 08 kicks off in Australia on 25 October, and several participants from today's games will be harbouring ambitions of being involved. Although the England squad consists entirely of engage Super League players, there are plenty of Co-operative National League stars from the other competing nations who'll be boarding the plane very shortly.

Among them is Salford City Reds' free-scoring back **John WilsHERE**, who looks set to line up for Papua New Guinea in the opening match of the tournament against England in Townsville. Having already notched up 32 caps for his country, WilsHERE has a good chance of being named in the starting XIII for that game. Other players who may face him at the tournament include his current Salford

City Reds team-mates **Karl Fitzpatrick** and **Stuart Littler**, who are in Ireland's preliminary squad, and Samoa's **Phillip Leulua'i**.

Sadly for many of the players on the Celtic Crusaders side, Wales failed to reach Australia. However, their aggregate defeat to Scotland means that a few other Co-operative National League One stars will have an opportunity to make a name for themselves at the tournament.

Scotland's preliminary squad includes many familiar faces from The Co-operative National Leagues, including **Lee Paterson** and **John Duffy** of Widnes, **Iain Marsh** and **Matthew Tunstall** of Workington, **Jack Howieson** and **Alex Sztock** of Sheffield, **Mick Nanyan** and **Ian Sinfield** of Oldham, **Neil Lowe** of Keighley, **Spencer Miller** of Whitehaven and **Tom Wild** of Rochdale. Widnes Vikings coach **Steve McCormack** is also in charge of the Bravehearts side.

Ireland's squad also draws upon National League talent. Littler and Fitzpatrick could be joined by the Widnes trio of **Bob Beswick**, **Gavin Dodd** and **Dean Gaskell** and the Leigh Centurions duo of **Lee Doran** and **Tony Stewart**. Other stars featuring for the Wolfhounds may include **Mick Cassidy** of Barrow Raiders, **Ged Corcoran** of Sheffield Eagles and **Graham Hoiroyd** of Halifax.

Doncaster fans will also be looking out for their erstwhile loan signing **Jean-Christophe Borlin**, who has now gone back to France due to work permit issues, but is featured in his national team's preliminary squad.

Whoever plays, though, the 2008 Rugby League World Cup looks like being the best yet. Who knows, a few players from this neck of the woods might just make an international name for themselves out there.

For news and information on the Rugby League World Cup, visit www.rlwc08.com



Mick Nanyan
Scotland



Karl Fitzpatrick
Ireland



John Duffy
Scotland



Stuart Littler
Ireland

John WilsHERE
Papua New
Guinea

BIGGER BETTER FASTER STRONGER

The Co-operative National Leagues are set to get even better from 2009

TODAY MIGHT JUST SPELL THE end of an era for The Co-operative National Leagues, and usher in the beginning of a bright new one. If you thought this season had been one of the most exciting and competitive for many a year, it could be even better in 2009, when a new and improved competition will be coming your way.

"The RFL is investing £2m into The Co-operative National Leagues One and Two," says the RFL's community marketing manager Adam Jude. "The aim is to create an even more vibrant competition, and drive up standards on and off the field."

The first objective is being met with the introduction of Toulouse into The Co-operative National League One, and it is hoped the expansion won't end there.

"We're working with the Celtic nations to incorporate teams from Ireland and Scotland in the National Leagues in the future, along with teams from less well-represented areas of England," says Adam.

“THE AIM IS TO CREATE AN EVEN MORE VIBRANT COMPETITION, AND DRIVE UP STANDARDS ON AND OFF THE FIELD”

But while geographical expansion is one aim, there will also be an emphasis on bringing the Rugby League family even closer together in The Co-operative National Leagues.

"The RFL will be making the Northern Rail Cup final in Blackpool the centrepiece of a celebration weekend," explains Adam. "So we're launching the Rugby League Nines, bringing all 21 National League clubs together in a two-day tournament. It will feature a bowl competition and a cup tournament, and will take place as a curtain-raiser for the cup final. It should make for a fantastic weekend in Blackpool for the whole Rugby League community."

Prize money for both leagues will rise considerably, with £100,000 for the winners of The Co-operative National League One, while other initiatives being considered include the introduction of names and squad numbers onto team shirts.

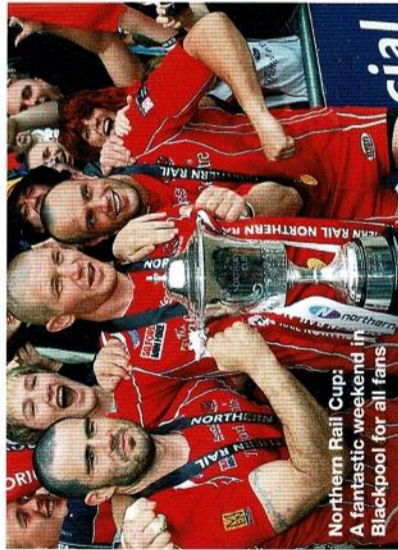
In return for this investment from the sport's governing body, clubs will

also be expected to raise their game with regards to off-field operation.

"We're looking to clubs to develop their businesses – especially by expanding their operations in the areas of community development, player development, coaching, and volunteering," says Adam. "We'll also expect them to explore new avenues of revenue generation and secure commercial partnerships. By way of an example, you only have to look at the partnership with the UK's biggest retailer, The Co-operative, and the television exposure achieved through our partnership with Sky Sports."

There's also the important task of running their clubs day to day. "We want clubs to do better in terms of administration, data management, putting in place business and management plans, and raising their marketing and PR profile," he says.

All told, it's a case of pushing all 21 teams into a different league. And that's something that everyone in the game will want to be part of.



Northern Rail Cup: A fantastic weekend in Blackpool for all fans



SPREAD THE WEALTH

Under The Co-operative's scheme, your club gains every time you spend

AS MAJOR SPORTS GO, FEW ARE MORE HUMBLE and unpretentious than Rugby League. Even at its highest level, it has always been a community game that survives on the passion and pride of supporters and the contributions of sponsors. At Co-operative National League level in particular, every penny raised can be valuable in helping local clubs develop new talent and remaining at the centre of their community.

Now you can help raise money through a new and innovative scheme which donates money to your club every time you spend money on your weekly shopping, a holiday or even your mortgage.

Each year, The Co-operative pays out millions of pounds to its members as part of its Share of Profit scheme and in July it paid out this year's sum of £38m. The Co-operative has developed the scheme so that Rugby League supporters can raise millions for their club's community projects.

All you have to do is fill in a membership form and state which club's community project you would like to benefit from your share of profits. All engage Super League (except Catalans Dragons) and all 22 Co-operative National League clubs are now eligible to be included in the initiative, as long as they have a community division.

"We are confident that The Co-operative Rugby League membership scheme will raise millions of pounds over the coming years," says Liz Matkin, The Co-operative Group's sponsorship manager. "This will be invested by community trusts to support the ongoing development of the game."

The Co-operative's 'Good For Everyone' ambassador Salford Reds' Robbie Paul praised the scheme as he visited Orrell Holgate Primary School (right) to help explain the scheme.

"It is tremendous news for Rugby League. It will provide support to the game for many years to come and help across all aspects of the game, especially the development of players," he said. "It's so easy for fans to sign up for the scheme, whilst knowing they're playing their part in the growth of Rugby League."

For more information or to join the Rugby League Membership Scheme, visit www.therfl.co.uk



“THE CO-OPERATIVE RUGBY LEAGUE MEMBERSHIP SCHEME WILL RAISE MILLIONS OF POUNDS OVER THE COMING YEARS”

SIGNING UP FOR THE SCHEME COULD HARDLY BE SIMPLER...

- 1 Click on the Co-operative Member pages on the Super League and National League pages of www.therfl.co.uk
- 2 Download the application form and fill it in with all relevant details.
- 3 Choose which club you would like to donate your Share of Profit to and enter the relevant code onto the form.
- 4 Send the form back to the Co-operative via the supplied

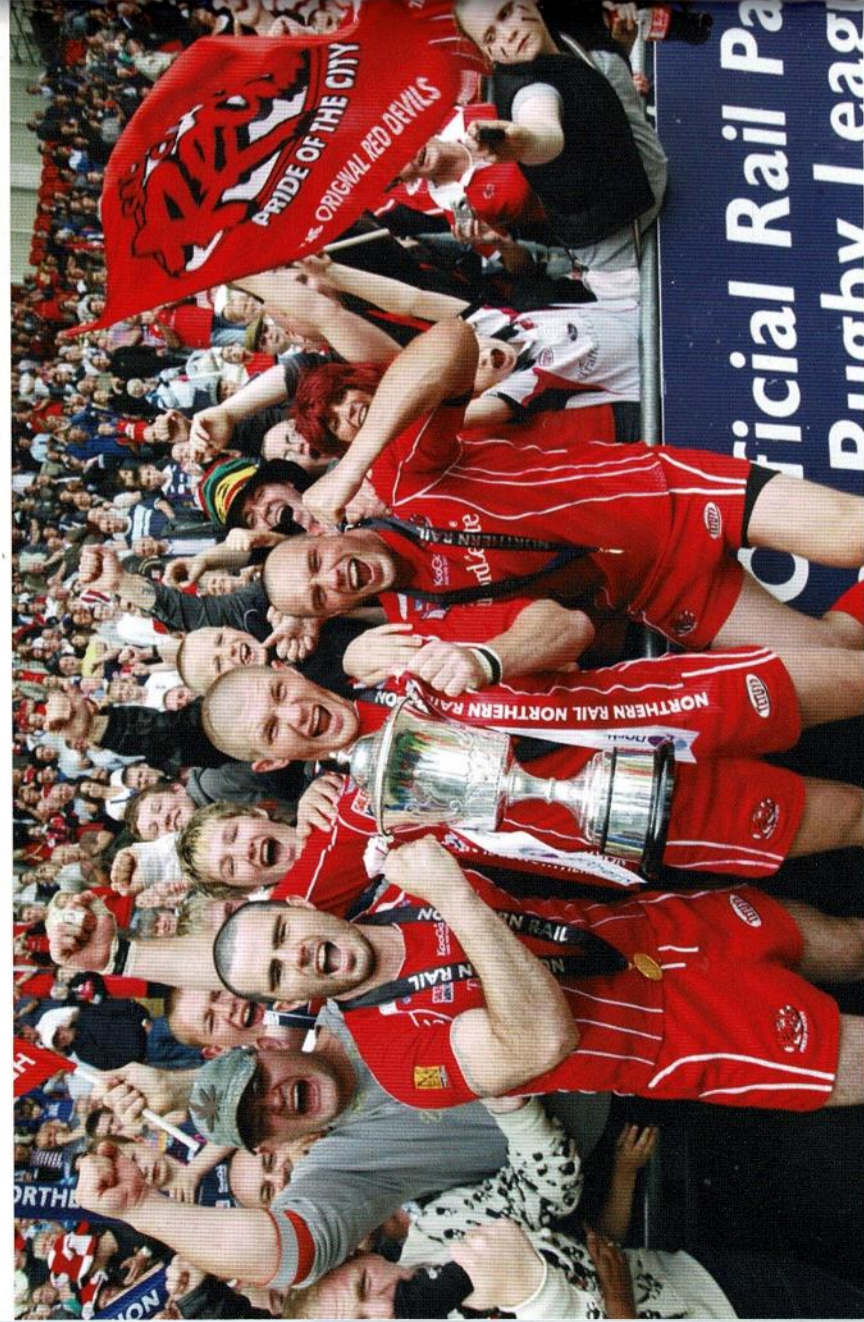
FREEPOST address.

5 Build up your points by using your Membership card in the following of the Group's businesses – The Co-operative Food, Bank, Travel, Pharmacy, Funeralcare and Bank, plus Sunwin Motors and any online purchases made through www.coopeshop.co.uk



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THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE GRAND FINAL



CELTIC CRUSADERS

Paul Ballard	Wing
Chris Beasley	Second row
Anthony Blackwood	Centre
Neil Budworth	Hooker
Tom Burnell	Hooker
Mark Dalle Cort	Centre
Geraint Rhys Davies	Prop
Gareth Dean	Prop
Tony Duggan	Full-back
Luke Dyer	Utility
Ben Flower	Forward
Philippe Gardent	Prop
Josh Hannay	Centre
Jamie I'Anson	Prop
Mark Lennon	Utility
Darren Mapp	Second row
Terry Martin	Second row
Damien Quinn	Stand-off
Aaron Summers	Prop
David Tangata-toa	Prop
Jace Van Dijk	Scrum-half
Chris Vitalini	Loose forward
Ian Webster	Utility
Neale Wyatt	Loose forward
John Dixon	Head coach



SALFORD CITY REDS

Luke Adamson	Second row
Malcolm Alker	Hooker
Luke Ambler	Prop
Andy Ballard	Wing
Stephen Bannister	Second row
Chris Borge	Utility
Andrew Brocklehurst	Second row
Karl Fitzpatrick	Full-back
Mat Gardner	Wing
Paul Highton	Prop
Lee Jewitt	Prop
Phillip Leuluai	Prop
Stuart Littler	Centre
Richard Myler	Stand-off
Stephen Nash	Prop
Robbie Paul	Scrum-half
Stefan Ratchford	Utility
Ian Sibbit	Second row
Adam Sidlow	Prop
Craig Stapleton	Prop
Jordan Turner	Loose forward
Leon Walker	Second row
Jason Walton	Centre
Paul White	Wing
Daley Williams	Wing
John Wilshire	Full-back
Shaun McRae	Head coach

TODAY'S OFFICIALS

- Ben Thaler Referee
- Richard Cowling Touch judge
- Paul Grundill Touch judge
- Richard Silverwood Reserve referee
- Paul Marklove Reserve touch judge
- Ashley Klein Video referee
- Steve Nicholson Match commissioner



The RFL would like to thank all sponsors and partners for their support of the game throughout the year

RUGBY LEAGUE

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THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO



Andreas BAUER	Centre
Alex BENSON	Prop
Kyle BRIGGS	Stand-off
Joe BROWN	Wing
Tom BURTON	Centre
Chris BUTTERY	Hooker
Mark CASTLE	Prop
Dean COLTON	Full-back/Utility
Paul CROOKS	Stand-off
Ayden FAAL	Second row
Luke GALE	Scrum-half
Peter GREEN	Second row
Michael HALEY	Prop
Jason HART	Prop
Scott JONES	Centre
Corey LAWRIE	Hooker/Loose fwd
Craig LAWTON	Prop
Zebastian LUISI	Wing
Gareth MORTON	Centre
Wayne REITTE	Wing
Lionel TEIXIDO	Second row
Kyle WOOD	Scrum-half
Eilery HANLEY	Head coach



Chris BAINES	Second row
Simon BALDWIN	Second row
Jason BOULTS	Prop forward
Matty BROOKS	Half-back
Daryl CARDISS	Utility
James COYLE	Scrum-half
Tommy GOULDEN	Second row
Tommy GRUNDY	Second row
Danny HALLIWELL	Utility
Simeon HOYLE	Hooker
Phil JOSEPH	Utility forward
Gareth LANGLEY	Wing
Richard MERVILL	Prop
Mick NANYN	Centre
Paul O'CONNOR	Full-back
Lucas ONYANGO	Wing
Rob ROBERTS	Second row
Adam ROBINSON	Second row
Neil RODEN	Half-back
Marcus ST HILAIRE	Full-back
Said TAMGHART	Utility
Alex WILKINSON	Centre
Lee WINGFIELD	Second row
Steve DEAKIN	Head coach



Mark BUTTERILL	Prop
Daniel CASTON	Centre
Paul DRAKE	Stand-off/Centre
John ELLIKER	Loose forward
Sean FLYNN	Full-back
Chris GARDNER	Prop
Steven GILL	Second row
Shaun GILMOUR	Utility
Graham HARRISON	Hooker
Neil HESKETH	Prop/Second row
Danny JOHNSON	Utility
Daniel LAVERY	Second row
Richard LEESE	Prop
Andy McGANN	Wing
Matt MULHOLLAND	Centre
Jon NICHOLLS	Loose forward
Danny O'CONNOR	Second row
Kevin O'HARE	Hooker
Scott PENDLEBURY	Half-back
John RICHARDSON	Wing
Gareth THIRSK	Second row
Thomas WEBB	Hooker
Tony WILLIAMS	Scrum-half
Liam WILLIAMS	Centre
Steve WILLIAMS	Scrum-half
Mark WOOL	Loose forward
Dan CLEMENTS	Coach

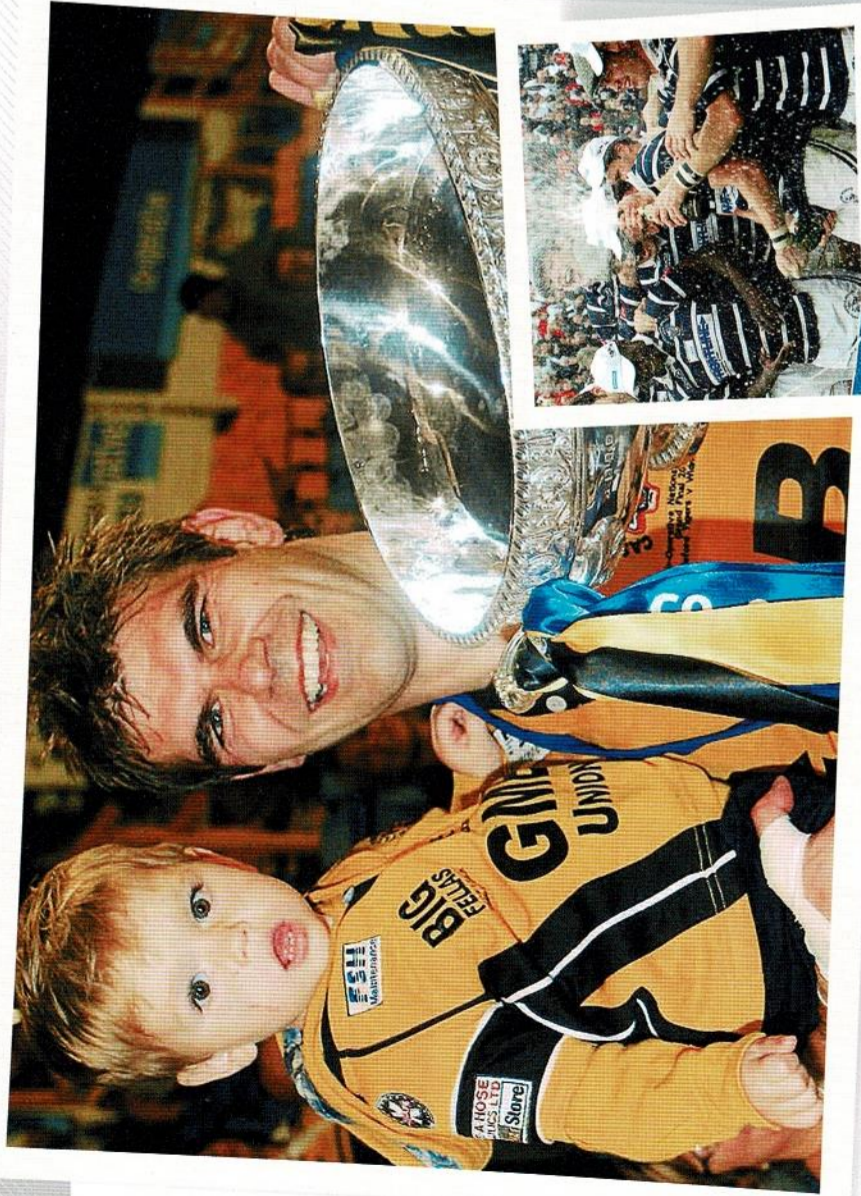


THE CO-OPERATIVE RUGBY LEAGUE CONFERENCE NATIONAL

TODAY'S OFFICIALS
 Ron LAUGHTON Referee
 Robert STOKES Touch judge
 Mick WILSON Touch judge
 Dave MERRICK Reserve referee
 John FARRELL Reserve touch judge
 Phil BENTHAM Video referee
 Tony RANDERSON Match commissioner

TODAY'S OFFICIALS
 Matthew THOMSON Referee
 Paul MARKLOVE Touch judge
 John FARRELL Touch judge
 Brandon ROBINSON Reserve referee
 Tony MAHAR Reserve touch judge
 Adam GILL In goal judge
 Jonathon ROBERTS In goal judge
 Steve NICHOLSON Match commissioner





THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE FINALS DAY 2007

Last year, Headingley Carnegie witnessed a thrilling day of Rugby League

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE ONE

With a prize of promotion to the engage Super League for the winners, The Co-operative National League One Grand Final was billed as the 'biggest game in British Rugby League'. The match at Headingley Carnegie featured the top two sides, Widnes Vikings and Castleford Tigers, who had been locked in an epic season-long battle for supremacy. The Vikings had clocked up an average of over 55 points per game in the first three months of the season, and had beaten their rivals in the Northern Rail Cup semi-final. However, Castleford had overhauled the Cheshire side to finish top of the table, then gained a psychological advantage by winning the Qualifying Semi-final. When Widnes defeated Halifax in the Final Eliminator, the scene was set for a classic rematch.

In the event, Castleford won 40-6 in a performance which coach Terry Matterson described as 'close to perfection'. The Yorkshire side held a 13-4 half-time lead, but after the break they ran riot, with Aven Guttenbell scoring twice and Michael Shenton, Joe Westerman and Ryan Clayton once each in a one-sided rout. For Vikings coach Steve McCormack, it was his fourth Grand Final defeat in a row. "We saved our worst performance for the most important game of the season," he later admitted. "It's hard for anybody associated with Widnes to take."

THE CO-OPERATIVE NATIONAL LEAGUE TWO

After two years in the bottom rung of Rugby League, Featherstone Rovers returned to the sport's second tier after a 24-6 win over Oldham Roughyeds in The Co-operative National League Two play-off final. In the first half, an 80m interception try from Adam Hughes seemed to swing the initiative towards the Roughyeds, but centre Wayne McHugh replied for Rovers, who went in at half-time with a 10-6 lead. However, Featherstone were well in command 10 minutes after the restart thanks to converted tries from Paul Handforth and Gavin Swinson. Rovers' Richard Blakeway was sent off late on, but Featherstone held on to complete a memorable day for the town.

THE CO-OPERATIVE RUGBY LEAGUE CONFERENCE (NATIONAL)

Earlier in the day, Featherstone Lions got the party started, providing the first half of a double celebration for the Yorkshire town. The Lions had pushed Bramley Buffaloes all the way at the top of the Conference (National), but when the two met in the Grand Final, it was the Lions who ended up victorious. The 42-30 scoreline flattered Bramley, who were 30-4 down after an error-strewn first half, however in a late flurry, the reigning champions scored three tries in the final six minutes of the game to reduce the deficit. ■

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