

Feature

# Saints give thanks for their feeder school

Brendan Gallagher continues his series looking at rugby's great schools



WE have featured the likes of Campion and St Peter's Gloucester flying the flag for state schools rugby and

in the category few have done better in recent years than Northampton School for Boys.

In its various guises over the centuries – it started as Northampton County GS in 1541 – the school has contributed massively to Northampton Saints, producing over 50 first teamers and 16 England Schools internationals since World War 2. In 1992 it morphed into a grant maintained school before becoming a secondary modern in 2004 while it has now tweaked things again and is an Academy.

Their heritage is rich ranging from Saints legends such as Roger Horwood, Andy Johnson, John Raphael, Bob Taylor, Geoff Allen and Bryan West to more modern day stars like Steve Thompson, Paul Diggin, Ian Vass – a current coach at the school – Courtney Lawes, Tom Collins, Ollie Sleightholme and James Grayson.

During the 1950s, where there was rarely an England Schools XV without a player from Northampton GS, they were also well served by a succession of excellent coaches led by the head of sport, England wing Frank Sykes, while at various times England full-back Roger Hosen and highly-rated coaches such as Martin Underwood and Phil Taylor all played an important role.

In recent years NSB have proved solid competitors at the sharp end of the national tournaments and all that despite making a conscious effort to excel in all sports, in particular soccer in which they have won national trophies, athletics, basketball and cricket. On three occasions NSB have been voted the state school of the year for sport. Their crowning triumph in rugby should have been 2012-13 in the Daily Mail Cup but timing is everything.

Dulwich were at their absolute zenith that year and proved too tough a nut to crack in the final. NSB mounted a formidable campaign, though,



Double: Oliver Hartfield of NSB breaks through to score during the Daily Mail U18 Cup final against Dulwich



Resistance: Conor Bullivant against Dulwich



Left: Courtney Lawes, sixth, in the middle row

with a devastating, very young, back division being the key.

Conor Bullivant controlled everything from ten while out on the wing was future Saracen Rotemi Segun and another flyer in Jack Spittle who has also made a mark in senior rugby. Spittle scored a wonder length-of-the-field try for Nottingham against Yorkshire Carnegie which was voted try of the season for the Championship in the 2019-20 season. It was one of five he scored that day and the tall, powerful wing has been in good form

for Doncaster Knights since signing for them.

Tom Hammersely, just 15, was another to star behind the scrum while up front a light but mobile pack featured Ollie Hartfield, a tireless flanker and forager. The long-striding Jacob Connor was another key man in an extremely mobile back row.

NSB might have benefitted from a couple of early byes but thereafter had to earn their place at Twickenham in a Cup run that became increasingly testing. Wellingborough were dealt with 50-0 but Adams GS (24-7) and Oakham (30-17) offered significant resistance before a cliffhanger in round six against Kings Worcester (10-8). Even closer was the quarter-final against King's Macclesfield which was decided with a single score, a penalty from Bullivant.

All of which set up a semi-final against the highly-rated Warwick team, champions in 2007. The match was held at Broadstreet and initially nerves got the better of NSB who went 10-0 down in no time with the usually uber reliable Bullivant missing a couple of kicks. After the break, though, he found his range, landed a penalty, converted a try from Hartfield and then landed the match-clinching penalty to

reach the final.

Dulwich circa 2012-14 had an invincible feel about them as they landed three straight Cups and a big victory looked in the offing when they raced into an 18-0 lead at Twickenham as NSB again made a slow start.

But thereafter it was a much more even contest with that man Hartfield scoring twice and Bullivant kicking two conversions and a penalty as they eventually went down 27-17. No disgrace in that.

## "The school has contributed over 50 first teamers for Northampton"

With such a young team hopes were high for the following season but sometimes things just don't work out. A number of players moved to Moulton College while in round four they were ambushed by the Perse School who were pumped up for the encounter and claimed a 12-3 win.

NSB didn't have long to wait for their next day in the sun with a famous march to the U18 Vase Competition at Twickenham in 2016. Following the disappointment of losing to Oundle 24-18 in the second round of the Cup, they reset their sights and con-

centrated on the Vase. They knew they had an exceptional team that year and wanted something to show for it. The secondary competition proved gruelling and very competitive but victories over King's Grantham, Loughborough GS, Welbeck, Norwich School and Hereford Sixth Form College earned a quarter-final place against St George's Weybridge who they defeated 30-17 in a high quality encounter.

The semi-final with Bloxham was an agonising 20-20 draw with Jake Johnson and Jake Diggin scoring tries for NSB who had drawn ahead only to see their lead eaten into. Indeed Bloxham had a difficult last-minute conversion to win the game. That sailed wide and, with both teams level on two tries apiece, Northampton progressed by virtue of having scored the first try of the game which was the next tie breaker. Having enjoyed that piece of good fortune they were in determined mood at Twickenham and proved good value for their 17-12 win over St Ambrose College.

Callum Inwood and Josh Ari-moro scored the tries for NSB while scrum-half Conor Tupai, son of a former Saints favourite Paul, slotted a late dropped goal to see his side home. Tupai was soon to become an Academy professional at Saints alongside NSB

contemporaries like Ollie Sleightholme and James Grayson. Nor was this the end of NSB's appearances at Twickenham. In 2019 their strong U15 team got all the way to the Natwest final with the youngsters also experiencing a nail-biting semi-final against QEGS Wakefield which they drew 10-10 but advanced on tries scored. In the final they met a top quality Wellington College outfit who proved too hot to handle. Welly won 23-5 with James Kitson scoring the consolation try for NSB.

NSB had gone close before in the U15 tournament with a very strong group, headed up by a young Courtney Lawes, reaching the semi-finals in 2004 when they lost 17-12 to Sherborne. The U15s also reached the semi-final stage in 2009 when they lost to Judd.

Even more recently NSB staged a fine run in the RFU National U18 competition in 2020 which ended only in the semi-final when they lost 32-23 to old rivals Warwick. Agonisingly they let a 23-20 lead slip right at the end, leaking two late tries. In previous rounds they had looked likely winners with particularly good wins over Felstead, Oundle and Stowe while their 22-15 quarter-final victory over the highly-rated RGS Newcastle team ranks as one of the most prestigious in their history.



Flyers: Jack Spittle of NSB Right: Ollie Sleightholme