THE EDUCATION GUIDE FOR TALENTED YOUNG RUGBY PLAYERS
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   ENGLAND HEAD COACH

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As a former PE teacher and now father to two children I recognise fully the value of education and I personally feel I benefitted hugely from the education I received at St Bees in Cumbria and from Leeds Metropolitan University and Carnegie where I studied my degree. Throughout my career as an Academy Manager at Leeds and more recently as Head of Elite Player Development at the RFU I have always encouraged young rugby players to commit to their study. A good education and qualifications are not simply a foundation for the future but increase their personal and leadership skills in the present, so improving their rugby performance.

As players dream of a future in professional rugby and even playing for England, this ambition must be tempered with the knowledge that only the very talented will achieve the levels to make a sustained career from the game. Even players reaching the heights of professional rugby must plan for careers after the sport and this is best done by balancing their rugby development with education.

It therefore gives me great pleasure to welcome this guide which I’m sure will provide support to both players and parents as they plan the sporting and education choices that lie ahead.

Best wishes,
INTRODUCTION
This guide has been written for young rugby players and their parents/carers and advisors who are considering the possibility of a career in professional rugby yet are unsure how this might fit with continuing education and a longer-term career beyond the sport.

It sets out to summarise the main pathways to becoming a professional and the decisions that might need to be made along the way regarding educational and career choices. It describes some factors to take into account in making those choices and provides some statistical data to help evaluate those factors.

It is of necessity a general guide and represents only a start-point for the talented player and parent to investigate the options and consider the specific situation of the individual; accordingly the Guide points to the variety of persons who might provide personalised advice. It also sets the context for considering that advice.

There are a variety of education and player development pathways to consider, which makes for a complex set of choices facing the talented player. Inevitably, even though this Guide is only a start-point, it reflects this complexity; nevertheless we would urge its study in full to get to grips with the options available. We have presented at the end of the Guide some player profiles to bring alive some of the range of pathways followed in practice.

The talent pathway and avenues for rugby development for female players continues to grow at a great pace. Whilst the Guide focuses on the breadth of alternatives for male players, the options, considerations, support networks and therefore the central principles in making decisions as an individual about the future are the same for talented female players. A clearer and consolidated system for these players is being formed currently and once it is fully in place this Guide will be updated with more specific information aligned to that pathway.
THE PLAYER PATHWAY
FOR ALMOST ALL YOUNG PLAYERS, THE RUGBY JOURNEY BEGINS THROUGH PARTICIPATING AT SCHOOL OR A LOCAL RUGBY CLUB. THE JOURNEY FOR SOME PLAYERS CAN THEN FOLLOW THE PATH TO COUNTY REPRESENTATION, AND IN EXCESS OF TWO THOUSAND PLAYERS ARE ENROLLED NATIONALLY IN ONE OF THE TWENTY NINE CB SCHOOLS OF RUGBY WHERE THEY RECEIVE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES.

Some one thousand players between the ages of fourteen to eighteen attend Elite Player Development Groups (EPDGs) for weekly coaching, conditioning and specialist support.

As the diagram below shows, players may be in the EPDG (for example 14-16) then follow the AASE path (16-18). There are others who will follow only the EPDG from 14 through to 18 years old (e.g. players at independent schools).

The Elite Player pathway

From school year nine Regional Academies begin to engage players who show potential in Elite Player Development Groups. Regional Academy is the term given to each of the fourteen academies licensed by the RFU to develop elite rugby players in England. Each works in a specific geographical catchment area.

In season 2012/13, these academies are located at eleven Aviva Premiership clubs, Leeds, Newcastle and Bristol from the Championship.

At the end of year eleven significant numbers of young people change schools, often reflecting their individual aspirations and circumstances. Regional Academies have been in existence for over ten years and have developed strong relationships with a host of education providers from both the state and independent sectors and are committed to support a player’s rugby development regardless of their chosen education path. The AASE programmes involve a selected school or FE college that works in partnership with a Regional Academy to deliver a rugby development programme to identified players alongside their academic commitments.

**Post-school pathways**

Due to the range of factors that influence an adolescent’s development in a physical sport such as rugby, even inclusion in junior international age teams is not a guarantee of future progress to the professional and senior international game. Nevertheless, international representation commences at Under 16. Following a programme of county and divisional matches an England side is selected to experience their first taste of international competition.
At the end of year thirteen, academies support a relatively small number of talented players who demonstrate the potential to progress into the professional game. Representative rugby also continues and sitting alongside the performance pathway through the Regional Academy and EPDG is an ‘aspirational’ pathway (England U18 Clubs & Schools, England U20s and England Students) which allows talented players to remain on the radar from which they may later graduate to premiership squads and national representation. Typically, four players per Regional Academy are offered academy contracts by the club and these players either commit full-time to their rugby development or combine training with education or work. The vast majority of these players receiving academy contracts at eighteen years old tend to have been educated at independent or grammar schools, or on one of the AASE programmes. Roughly half of those awarded academy contracts at a Premiership club have been educated on one of the AASE programmes.

The length of stay in the Regional Academy will vary for each individual but will often be longer for later maturing positions such as front five forwards. Most players will expect to be in the academy for a period of 2-4 years. Approximately three players per year graduate from the academy into senior professional playing squads, giving a success rate of 75%.

Professional and semi-professional contracts are available in both the Premiership and the Championship, however for simplicity in the following paragraphs we have provided data only on the profile of careers in the Premiership. Approximately 600 players are employed by Aviva Premiership clubs (both academy and senior squads). The average age of all players in the Premiership (academy and senior) is 25 and a recent survey revealed that players hope to continue playing until on average the age of 33. On-going employment in professional sport is dependent on a number of factors and an analysis of Premiership players highlighted 18% did not obtain future Premiership contracts at the end of the season. This rate is the same for players both below and above 25 years old. A modest number of players leaving the Premiership received contracts overseas while a few others pursued professional or semi-professional options in the Championship or the National Leagues.

Premiership players on average are paid currently some £85,000 a year. Some top players are paid several times this and also obtain additional money through sponsorship etc. The salary for young academy players can vary greatly and depends on a number of factors such as geographic location, circumstances, potential, etc. These players will typically earn less than £10,000 but as stated this is quite variable across the country. Salaries in the Championship are rather lower however, typically averaging less than £25,000 a year for even a senior player. A full-time contracted England Sevens player receives a salary in the region of £25-30,000 per annum.

The nature of a contact sport such as rugby means that injuries are an inevitable aspect of the game. Each year players retire from the game, and some will be a consequence of an accumulation of injuries. Despite the perception that the speed of the game is increasing and collisions are getting greater, the risk of injury from training or playing in the Premiership has remained relatively stable over recent years. The number of players forced to retire each season following a single injury is around 3% most of whom are over the age of 25.

When considering the educational background of Premiership players, 60% have A Levels or equivalent as their highest academic achievement, 20% are graduates, whilst 2% have obtained a post graduate qualification. Of the non-graduates, 25% are currently studying part-time for a degree whilst employed as a Premiership player.

Once contracted to a Premiership club, an academy or senior player will receive the support of a Player Development Manager from the Rugby Players Association. Among a wide range of important matters such as considering the financial implications, this individual will provide advice and practical support to arrange further academic studies and work experience in tandem with the rugby career.
4:

EDUCATION OPTIONS
AND DECISIONS
WHILST PURSUING THE AMBITION OF A CAREER IN RUGBY, YOUNG PLAYERS AND THEIR PARENTS WILL ALSO BE KEEN TO ENSURE THAT OTHER EMPLOYMENT AND CAREER ASPIRATIONS ARE NOT COMPROMISED.

Most individuals want to combine both avenues if at all possible to achieve their academic potential as well as their rugby goals. The most important decision points therefore usually occur when there are natural transitions in the education pathway of the individual - at 16 (post GCSE) and at 18 / 19 (post school or college and moving into higher education).

There are two main types of qualification post 16: a) the traditional GCSEs, BTEC Level 3s and A levels; and b) the more job related qualifications on the Qualifications and Credit Framework. Some colleges also offer the Diploma qualification for 14 to 19 year-olds and in addition, you can take qualifications in Functional Skills - these are the essential requirements that employers look for.

Another option available to players in one of the RFU academies has been the Achieving Academic and Sporting Excellence (AASE) programme. This sees learners undertake a qualification in Achieving Excellence in Sports Performance alongside A Levels or a BTEC Level 3 qualification (such as BTEC Diploma in Sport). The Achieving Excellence in Sports Performance provides a player development framework for players aspiring to gain professional contracts and involves them undertaking 2-3 hours of rugby related activities daily.

CHOOSING WHERE TO STUDY

Once you’ve decided what qualification and subject you want to study, it’s worth also considering which type of learning environment would suit you best and whether the educational and rugby programme will give you what you need.

In making this decision, players should consider the following questions:

Education Questions
- What type of learning environment am I looking for?
- What learning style will suit me - do I prefer lectures, classroom discussions, or practical workshops?
- How much individual support do I expect from teachers or tutors?
- What is the general atmosphere of the institution?
- Does the institution offer any flexibility in their timetable?
- How close is the institution and what are the travel requirements?
- What other opportunities are available in addition to rugby and gaining a qualification?
- What is the cost of studying for the qualification?
- Are there any bursaries or scholarships available?
- What type of accommodation is available?
- How did the institution perform in its most recent educational inspections and/or Ofsted report?
- What are the pass rates of students on my favoured course(s)?
- Where do students typically move on to, in terms of academic progression or employment?

Rugby Questions
- Does the institution have links to the Regional Academy?
- What training facilities are available on site?
- What level of coaching is provided?
- What is the provision for strength and conditioning coaching?
- What sort of feedback and analysis is provided to players?
- What is the level of competition that I will receive?
- Does the institution provide a fixture list which is sufficiently challenging?
- How many games can you expect to play in a year?
- How much competition is there from other players who play the same position?
- What requirements will the institution have of me as a player?
- Will the institution encourage me to play representative rugby?
- Will I be allowed to play for other teams?
- Will I be entering into an agreement which may restrict future career and rugby choices?
- How does the institution balance rugby and academic requirements?
- What rugby clubs do students play for when they leave?
- What set of values does the institution promote?

EDUCATION CHOICES AT 16+

1. Sixth forms
   You may be able to study at your own school’s sixth form, the sixth form of another school, or at a sixth form college. They offer a wider range of options than you’ve probably had to date, and the environment is usually more relaxed than in Year 11. Sixth forms vary a lot in size, and in the courses and facilities they offer. Sixth form colleges tend to be larger and more informal than school sixth forms.

2. Further Education colleges
   Further education colleges can offer similar courses to sixth form colleges. They also vary a lot in size, and in the subjects and facilities they offer. Your fellow students may include adults of all ages as well as young people.

3. Specialist colleges
   Some further education colleges specialise in particular areas. Going to a specialist college may involve a lot of travelling. If it’s a long way from home, you may need to live there during term time. If so, you might qualify for financial help.

EDUCATION CHOICES AT 18 / 19+

1. University
   Every university is different so it is worth doing some research to find out what courses are available and also what else the university can offer in terms of providing other career opportunities and life experience. The application process can seem daunting so here is a brief overview:

   Some universities have a General Entrance (or “matriculation”) requirement, a basic minimum set of qualifications that all students need to have. For most students this is not a problem as they will meet the requirement easily, but it is worth checking to make sure.

   Each course will also have its own entry requirements, both in terms of subjects you must already have studied and the examination grades required for entry. Many universities provide entry profiles on the UCAS website, a more detailed guide to entry requirements and what the university is looking for is usually summarised in a prospectus. The UCAS website should be consulted to give specific details on course requirements and entry profiles.

   On some things most universities are in agreement:
   - At least two, preferably three, subjects should be taken as complete A Levels (AS + A2).
   - Applicants with four or five AS levels will not be at an advantage.
   - Neither Key Skills nor the Advanced Extension Tests will be compulsory.

2. Flexible Degrees
   An increasing number of universities including the Open University now offer more flexible options for degree study. Part-time courses provide one option and there are numerous distance learning packages. The main advantages of these courses are that they allow the student to choose when and how they study but they still require a high level of personal commitment and offer a very different learning experience.

   You can also study full-time or part-time for a Foundation Degree. These are equivalent to the first two years of a bachelor’s degree. Foundation Degree courses are designed with a particular area of work in mind, with the help of employers from that sector. This requires students to make a specific commitment to that area of work and often to placements with an employer during their time in education.
There is plenty of information available to support this research particularly online. This information will help the player to explore both the educational and rugby credentials of specific institutions.

Local authority education pages are required to provide specific detail on the education network in their area. In addition, every school, college and university will have a website which more often than not includes information about both their academic and sporting programmes. For example Ofsted reports are a good source of information on school and college performance.

On the sporting and rugby front, on-field success and off-field indicators can be viewed through competition results services and the other governing body websites for each sector. The webpages of many rugby clubs with academy programmes will also provide information about their academic links.

The following are examples of where players and their parents can follow signposts to background information about educational institutions and their sport/rugby in England. It is not an exhaustive list by any means and players are encouraged to draw on as wide a base as possible when doing their research:

- https://www.gov.uk/browse/education
- https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/
- https://www.hmc.org.uk/
- https://www.isc.co.uk/
- http://www.aoc.co.uk/en/about_colleges
- http://findfe.com/
- http://www.ucas.com
- http://www.rfu.com/FixturesAndResults
- http://www.bcsport.org/
- http://www.bucs.org.uk

There is a great deal to consider and a player’s background research is a very important part of making decisions about the balance of their future academic and rugby ambitions.
6: INDIVIDUAL SUPPORT
THE YOUNG PLAYER CAN EXPECT THE “SUPPORT GROUP” INVOLVED IN THEIR LIFE TO EXPLORE, DISCUSS AND FIND THE BALANCE THAT IS RIGHT FOR HIM OR HER AS AN INDIVIDUAL; THE OPTIMUM BALANCE THAT WILL MAXIMISE THEIR RUGBY TALENT WHILST ALSO MAXIMISING THEIR OWN ACADEMIC ABILITY.

WHAT DISCUSSION SHOULD BE EXPECTED?

As outlined previously, there are numerous options and more flexibility than ever in education.

With this being the case, what should the discussion be about? A key question that ambitious players will ask themselves is “Where should I play my rugby to have the best chance of making it?” usually quickly followed by “Where should I go to school or college to get the best rugby?” and “How will it fit with my education?”

Younger players can expect to be provided with information for them and their parents that outlines the options that they could follow at age 16 and again at 18/19+

Players should also expect to be encouraged to think about their long term career beyond rugby. What is the academic “input” required to continue to work beyond their time as a player? This may be within rugby and sport or outside the sporting arena. Of course, part of the discussions should consider whether a professional rugby career is appropriate or whether an alternative career should be followed involving non-professional rugby (eg in National One) alongside pursuing another profession.

Whichever it is, it is part of what the player should expect to be discussed.

WHEN SHOULD THE DISCUSSION BE EXPECTED?

When young players have a clear talent it is in everyone’s interest to give them the support to help them realise their full potential. It is usually around the age of 13 or 14 years old that they themselves and their parents or coach will start to look at how they might best do so.

This guide has been produced in order to help players think about their options at those critical times in their academic and rugby development. Players in Schools of Rugby and those playing county rugby will receive this guide during the Under 13/14 years and in many cases there will be a short session within the School of Rugby programme to help outline the importance of academic choice alongside rugby development and some of the things to think about.

After GCSEs the rugby options for players with greatest potential will involve the Academy much more and this is when players should expect to have 1:1 conversations with the group of people in the diagram below who can all provide specialist support. You can expect these conversations to be much more specific and tailored to your individual needs and future career.

WHO SHOULD YOU EXPECT TO BE INVOLVED IN THE DISCUSSION?

The focus of all the discussions should be the player him or herself as an individual. There is a group of people who should all have some input to help the player look at the options and find the optimum balance referred to earlier.

Teachers or tutors where the young person is currently educated can support with advice on academic choices. The player’s rugby coach at their school, college, club or in their representative pathway can support with advice on the choices for rugby. The Academy Manager also plays a vital role in facilitating these conversations and will be able to bring neutral advisors in to ensure the decision-making process is supportive and balanced.

The Rugby Players Association’s (RPA) Player Development Managers linked to the professional clubs are also a good support network for these discussions. It is not their core work but they can provide further career advice to young players and parents.

FURTHER INFORMATION

There are numerous websites which offer further information and advice. Below are just a few examples which will give you a good start in researching your educational and career paths.

www.rfu.com/TakingPart/CareersInRugby/Programmes
www.ucas.ac.uk/
www.direct.gov.uk/en/educationandlearning
www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/
youngpeople/qndlearning
www.nus.org.uk/cy/advice/becoming-a-student
Dave ATTWOOD

Dave Attwood started playing rugby at the age of 9 for his local team and represented his county representative teams from the age of 14. He was educated at a comprehensive school that had obtained a very good name for its rugby. Dave was also picked up by the local Premiership side’s junior academy system but was told that he wasn’t good enough to make it to the top level of the game.

Undeterred by this knock back, by the age of 18 Dave was playing senior rugby for a local club in National 3 South. It was at this point that he began to receive national recognition and represented England Under 19s, including at the Under 19 World Cup. Dave maintained an open mind about his future career path, however, professional rugby was not on Dave’s agenda at the stage as he recognised the hazards of a career in rugby and felt that going to university and to study a subject that would give him a good grounding for any career he subsequently chose was sensible.

However, the Premiership Academy that had previously rejected him, reignited their interest and, through their links with the local university, were able to suggest that he looked at joining the club’s senior academy and apply for a place at the university. Dave duly took up a place to study for a BSc joint honours degree in Physics and Philosophy and joined the academy set-up.

Strong links between the club and the university were developed and these allowed Dave to thrive both academically and at rugby, and, having represented England Under 20s, Dave signed a first team contract at the start of his second year at university. Dave played for the university throughout his time there and consequently was able to continue his rugby development to the point where in his third year he was selected to play for his club first team in the Premiership.

Dave was conscious when he started his degree that he would struggle to continue developing his rugby, but his playing time was managed appropriately for him to take part in all BUSA fixtures as well as all available Premiership A League fixtures and consequently not inhibiting his academic studies. Time management is often the most important area of concern for players traveling this road, but regular meetings with the Sports staff and lecturers at the University, and coaching staff at the club, helped Dave to balance both effectively and he left university with his degree and a full time career in professional rugby awaiting him.

Dave has since gone on to play for two other Premiership clubs and has been capped by England.

Jamie GIBSON

Jamie began playing club minis rugby whilst also attending prep school. Aged 14 and in his second year at a co-educational independent school, Jamie played some local club rugby and gained the attention of the regional academy programme. Subsequently, Jamie continued to be closely attached to the academy as he gained England honours throughout the remainder of his time at school, playing for England Under 18s, England Under 19s the following year and England Under 20s in his final year at school.

It was always Jamie’s primary intention to attend university. Rugby was something of a secondary ambition; in part due to there being no history of rugby players in Jamie’s family and so the pathway into top flight rugby was not a familiar one for him. However, the advice of the regional academy and the Academy Manager in particular was crucial at this stage: Jamie took the decision to apply for university to study Classics, play for the university and train with and occasionally play for the premiership club when possible, providing a gentle introduction to professional rugby.

In practice, Jamie played only a handful of games for university before injury struck; on his return his development at the club accelerated such that he ended his first season having played fifteen 1st XV games for the Premiership club. During his second year, Jamie’s 1st XV commitments increased further, although he did manage successfully to complete his second year studies.

Jamie’s rugby development was, in effect, a year ahead of plan. However, touring with England Saxons at the end of his second year at university resulted in a change of focus as it soon became clear that, in his case specifically, the time and dedication required for his pursuit of international rugby was incompatible with full time study at university.

Accordingly, after a term of his third year, Jamie decided to take a year out from university. This decision was primarily made on the advice of both his university academic tutor and the management at his club, whilst his RPA Player Development Manager also offered advice.

Nevertheless, Jamie was still determined to finish his academic studies. During this year, again on the advice of his university tutor, he made a decision to transfer his degree to the Open University, in order to complete a full honours degree whilst being able to pursue his rugby career to the fullest.

In the summer of 2012 Jamie was called up to the England tour of South Africa.
Toby Flood

Toby was educated at an independent school, obtaining A levels in History, Geography and Sports Science whilst playing Rugby for his local junior club. At school having played for the 1st XV since lower 6th, Toby was selected for the North of England 11’s and then went on to represent England Schools “A”. This all happened quite late in his schooling and he had no real aspirations to become a professional rugby player, so he had applied to university to study Business Management. When the call came to join the Regional Academy he jumped at the chance but thankfully the coach at the time, encouraged him to continue his studies at university.

For the first 2 years it was very manageable as he was an associate player which meant he trained with the academy but played rugby for a local club 1st XV. He felt that this was a brilliant experience as he was introduced to playing open age rugby against bigger, stronger and more experienced players.

Toby made his Premiership 1st team debut in 2005 aged 10, whilst in his 2nd year of studies at university. His performances for the team that season meant that he was offered a full time contract and time management became more of an issue meaning that he had to go part time with his studies and spread the final year of his degree over two years. The university readily agreed to this.

Toby gained his first England cap in the autumn of 2006. During two years. The university readily agreed to this.

Carl Fears

From a relatively early age Carl had identified that he wanted to pursue a career in professional rugby. Whilst a career in the police force was a potential “Plan B”, rugby was always his first choice. As a 15 year old he attended school and played his club rugby locally. In that year he also represented his county schools, North of England and England Under 15’s a year early. It was at this point that Carl was offered the opportunity to join a rugby-playing independent school in the north and for someone hoping to become a professional rugby player he felt this was a good opportunity.

Carl’s rugby talent developed and he was awarded a scholarship. As his single-minded ambition to become a professional rugby player also became clear, he was encouraged to follow this pathway by the school and he continued to excel, representing England for a second year at Under 15 level and then playing for two years at Under 18 level, acting as captain on the tour to Australia. With such a pedigree, selected in the England junior ranks and at the school, it was inevitable that Carl would attract the interest of Premiership clubs. Following completion of his A levels he then joined the Regional Academy straight from school.

Carl made his first team debut in October 2008 and subsequently joined another Premiership club in 2011. He recently toured with England in the summer of 2012 and helped them to beat the South African Barbarians South and North in the two midweek tour games. This followed his nomination for the IRB Junior Player of the Year award for his performances at the 2009 Junior World Championship for the U18 team.

Jonathan Joseph

Jonathan started out in the game at the age of 9 with his local club and when his family relocated he continued his junior club rugby. Jonathan also excelled at other sports including tennis and football (having been scouted by two Championship Football Clubs) but rugby had always been the priority and it started to become more serious from the age of 15 with trials for the region’s 15s and selection for South West Under 15s as a fly half.

Having previously been educated at state school, Jonathan now took up a scholarship for the 6th form at an independent school. This provided the opportunity to play at a higher standard on a more regular basis along with the enhanced educational benefits. This decision was made in conjunction with his parents. During his final year there, Jonathan missed out on selection for England via the traditional trials route and it was only following his performances for his school that he was selected for England Under 15s.

It was at this point that rugby truly took off for Jonathan and whilst he had always harboured the hope of playing rugby professionally, it was at 18 that hope became a real possibility and he was offered the chance to join the regional academy after he finished his A levels. Following advice from his father, the England Under 18 coaching staff and the Academy Manager, he accepted the offer.

Jonathan did initially attempt to pursue professional rugby with a university education, however; a combination of picking an inflexible course and rugby being his priority, meant that university was put on hold. In reality, the decision to study full time was largely driven by others and for Jonathan a full time degree course was not the right fit. He had felt it was something he should probably do rather than being truly motivated by it.

At present, Jonathan has no plans to go back to higher education but would be keen to look at a career in coaching after rugby.

Will Fraser

Will started playing rugby at primary school and later played for his local rugby club. He had a strong passion for rugby from very early days and was heavily supported in this by his father.

At 15 he started training with his regional academy’s player development programmes two nights a week on top of his school sporting and academic commitments, obtaining good grades at GCSE. He then moved to an independent school 6th form for his A level studies. This move was prompted by Will’s view that the school was well known for the quality of its rugby players and its coaching.

Will achieved three good A Levels and despite the strength of his desire to have a career in rugby, he applied to university on the advice of his parents and teachers as a precaution against not obtaining a professional contract. As it was, he was offered and accepted a regional academy contract with a premiership club and over the next two years focused on his rugby development, a period that included a five month spell playing for Western Province in South Africa. On returning to England, Will has combined a regular first 1st team place with studying for an Open University degree.

Will reflects that he was fortunate throughout his school days to have teachers who understood his driving passion to play rugby and who, whilst facilitating his rugby development, gave very good advice on making sure he hadn’t put “all his eggs in one basket”. This advice was supplemented by his parents making sure he didn’t miss out on his education.
Matt KVESIC

Matt took up the game at his local club as a junior and attended an independent school with a rugby programme that allowed him to develop as a player. However, an opportunity from a Premiership Rugby club arose to join their well-renowned AASE scheme and complete his A-levels at a local college.

Before taking the decision to move schools, Matt discussed the move with his existing teachers, the Premiership Academy staff, his family and also a friend, who had been through the exact process a few years previously. After weighing up all the options, it was decided that this would be the right option to take to further his Rugby career in tandem with his studies.

At the college he worked hard to achieve A levels in Physical Education, Biology and Business Studies and completed an AASE in rugby, whilst being contracted for the Premiership club full time. After A levels the option of taking a university course was considered, however Matt was unable to identify a course that was right for him and he decided he wanted to focus purely on his Rugby.

Matt made his debut whilst his club were in the Championship and played in four England U18 matches in 2009-10. Chris went on to lead England U20 eight times in the RBS 6 Nations Championship and the IRB Junior World Championship in South Africa.

After ten years with his local club, he joined an RFU Premiership Academy progressing through their strong and positive links with the AASE provider and has enjoyed loan spells with two Championship sides. In 2009, he helped his team to win the senior Yorkshire Cup. After making his first team debut in the U15 Cup in 2010-11, Chris was promoted to the first team for the following season and showed he was ready for the challenge of first team rugby, demonstrating his natural ability and maturity to be a key player in the squad.

He is now a member of the first team squad. Through the strong foundation provided by the AASE programme, Chris is now picking up his studies studying for a BA (Hons) Leadership & Management distance learning and part-time degree facilitated by The Rugby Players’ Association Player Development Programme.

Chris WALKER

Chris began playing for his local team at the age of six and his dream of becoming a professional rugby player was born. He attended the local school until he took his GCSE exams before moving schools to pursue his sixth form studies for a BTEC Diploma in Sports Performance and an NVQ in Sporting Excellence. This programme of study was supported by the Regional Academy and the AASE programme.

His passion for rugby is first and foremost in his life and he looks to his family and coaches for advice. With rugby his passion, thoughts of balancing further education at degree level was not a consideration at this stage. Chris captained his school team, represented England U16 and played in four England U18 matches in 2009-10. Chris went on to lead England U20 eight times in the RBS 6 Nations Championship and the IRB Junior World Championship in South Africa.

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Matt HOPPER

Matt showed promise within rugby from an early age but it soon became clear that as much as he enjoyed the game, there were other things in life he wanted to achieve first. Whilst a career in rugby alongside teaching was constantly in the back of his mind, it was traveling around the world that took his immediate interest following the completion of his A levels at independent school. Whilst at school, Matt also played rugby for the local championship and ultimately premiership club in the town up until the age of 16; the club his father had captained during the late sixties. During sixth form, Matt played in the final England Schools trials, two years running and was offered a place in one of the premiership club rugby academies in the south west, along with offers from other clubs.

Whilst rugby played a huge part in Matt’s upbringing, it was clear that his love of being near the sea and ‘the endless summer’ lifestyle would eventually lead him to the opposite side of the world. After 6 months of travelling Asia and Australia, he returned to study university in South Wales to study criminology & education. Whilst at university, he obtained a degree, captained his university at both varsity level and in the International Hong Kong tans and was offered a number of contracts to play in the Welsh Premiership. Following university, Matt moved back to Australia to the shores of Manly, to experience life and rugby on the other side of the world.

Upon returning to England, due to a bout of meningitis, Matt decided that life as a professional rugby player was now the path he desired. He decided to just ‘show up’ at a training session at one of the top championship sides in the south west and after a short talk with the coaches, they decided he was allowed to stay. After 6 weeks representing the 2nd team he was given the opportunity to start in the firsts and made the centre spot his own. After two seasons, Matt was signed by another championship side in the region and a year later by one of the London premiership clubs, and he subsequently won an England Saxons cap against the Irish Greyhounds.

Will WARDEN

Will came late to rugby, taking up the game at grammar school only in Year 7. But he soon stood out and represented his county at U15, U17 and U18 as a lock forward. Despite this rapid progression, and playing for a club affiliated to the region’s premiership club, he determined that he would not seek a professional career at the expense of studying for a degree.

Will’s university of choice was where he completed a three year degree in Physics and Management. This laid down the foundation for a career in either teaching or in business. Following this degree, Will studied a Masters degree in Sport Management, this enabling him to enhance his academic qualifications whilst allowing further time to improve as a player by playing for the University in National League 2 (North). His continuing rugby development saw him captaining the 1st XV for two years, and also becoming captain of England Students. These rugby and academic achievements resulted in him facing a decision at age 23; whether to seek employment as a full-time professional in the sport or follow an alternative career whilst playing rugby at a lower level. He decided on the latter course because it offered an earlier entry to his chosen longer-term career within the insurance industry, but also allowed him to play regular 1st team rugby at a suitably high enough level. One of the main driving reasons behind this decision was that had he turned professional, he may have been a ‘replacement’ player for some time, without the regularity of 1st team games. Will now works in the City and plays in National League One.
Tom MITCHELL

Tom was first involved in rugby when he played for his local mini’s Under 8’s and continued playing for the county throughout his time at school. Although he played rugby whilst at school it wasn’t until Tom started at university that rugby became a more serious interest.

Tom went on to study English and Philosophy at university, where he was selected for the university rugby team. Rugby became a more serious commitment when Tom was invited to trials and subsequently selected for the England Students Squad in his 2nd and 3rd years at university, a side that Tom went on to captain.

Whilst at university, Tom went to the Safari Sevens in Kenya. That was the start of an interest in Sevens and, after gaining experience playing for various invitational Sevens sides, he was selected for the FIRA-AER European Grand Prix Tournament with the England Students Squad.

Although Tom played rugby from a young age it wasn’t until Tom entered the RFU’s Academy scheme at school that rugby became a more serious interest. He did not grow up in a rugby oriented environment and his primary aim was to focus on his studying and completing his education. Tom went on to study English and Philosophy at university, where he started at university that rugby became a more serious interest.

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