

Staffordshire Social Merit League Pilot

GAMEON!

The 2019/2020 season saw Game On principles introduced to all adult male and female rugby outside RFU Leagues and Cups. It allows teams to agree to apply flexibilities to match length, player numbers, substitutions, line outs and scrums to help to keep games on. A new Social Merit League in Staffordshire has applied these principles with positive effect.

Rugby Development Officer Simon Hincks and his team have been able to provide a flexible, local, competition to overcome challenges faced by clubs in Staffordshire not being able to access enough local fixtures. Late opposition cry offs linked to player availability, opposition being too strong and long travel distances to find appropriate opposition were all identified as problems.

Teams from Barton-Under-Needwood, Bloxwich, Handsworth, St Leonards, Essington, Aldridge, Wheaton Aston and Penkridge and Willenhall have all taken part in the league's pilot year. These were identified as all having a 'social' team with a small pool of players who wanted to play rugby more often.

Having consulted players from the eight clubs, the consensus was that the ideal playing offer would be a 'not too serious' league aimed at adult males who were the occasional, new or returning player, and who wanted to play with likeminded people and/or their friends. In addition, for away fixtures they would happily travel up to 30 – 40 minutes as long as the game was meaningful.

The league has one fixture Saturday scheduled per month, with a host club entertaining two other teams. This allows the clubs to be able to tailor their social rugby offer, by having dates available to schedule in additional friendly fixtures for those players wanting to play more rugby.

Applying the match length Game On principle, games are shortened to 40 minutes each and remain 15 aside, so that each team involved plays up to 80 minutes of rugby. A flexible approach is also adopted on the day, allowing teams to combine to play one singular 40 – 80 minute fixture if there was a shortage of players. Teams also apply any other Game On principles required to ensure the game can go ahead.



The scoring system created supports the application of Game On by helping to ensure any game played was still meaningful. Six points are available for each 'game' and they are awarded differently based on whether there are three games or one joint game completed. Bonus points are also available for the number of players a travelling team arrives with.

The positive impact of keeping the 'Game On' has helped these clubs to provide a positive experience for their players by having fewer games cancelled. It has also helped build positive relationships between these clubs. A total of 60 players took part in round one games, with this increasing to 112 by round 6. In addition, approximately 30 of these players are brand new to the game. Round 6 also saw five out of the eight teams fielding 15+ of their own players for their fixture.

(Pictured are Essington 2s, Willenhall 3s, St. Leonards 2s after their round 3 games)

'I loved it! It's allowed us older blokes to keep playing when we may not have had a chance to'. Rob Rochelle, Handsworth RFC.

'It is the epitome of social rugby. The format seemed a foreign concept at first but it has worked well. It has helped to improve the social side of our club too by keeping games on'. Paul Hallam, St. Leonards RFC.