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RAMPAGES

THE OFFICIAL NEWSLETTER OF RAMPAGES

BY ROSS LOVEDAY

Hi Everyone,

*With the 1st Team unbeaten at present,
there is an air of confidence as Harlow
take on Dagenham who are also unbeaten
and lying second in the table on Saturday
4th December away.*

*The following week is the Past Players
Lunch and a record turn out is expected.
Looking forward to meeting up with old
friends and talking of which a lovely
article arrived by email from Ray Harris.*

Hope you enjoy it and thank you Ray.





THE PERFECT GAME

What is the most perfect game of rugby? We probably all have different criteria for what we believe is the answer to this question. You will therefore have to forgive me for giving just my recollection of the most perfect game I ever saw a Harlow team play.

During the 1980's and 1990's I was privileged to see Harlow first team record wins over every other top Essex team, every other top Eastern Counties team, every other top Herts team and every other London 1, 2N and 3NE team.... except for Camberley, who in our first season in L 1 beat us and got to the National leagues, our paths never crossed again.

I saw games where Harlow put huge scores of 40, 50 and 60 points against teams who at that time were regarded as the top second class clubs in the South East such as Southend, Barking, Staines etc. In the same way I saw tremendous tight games where we overcame all the odds to win by a couple of points, but none of these meet my criteria for the perfect game.

Before talking about my choice, I need to explain the context.

We had just been promoted from London 3NE to London 2N and after completing half our league fixtures we were bottom with no points. Added to this we had suffered some bad defeats, so our points difference was much worse than everyone else. On the plus side there were four sides above us (Ipswich, Old Merchant Tailors, Finchley, and Letchworth) who all had just one win and two points and we still had to play them. Again, on the downside, two of them had a game in hand on us and two of them were long time London 1 stalwarts (previously 7 Counties Merit Table members).

We were supposed to play Ipswich on December 14th, but the game was cancelled due to bad weather and rearranged for February 15th, which meant our last four league fixtures would be against the 4 target teams above, starting with Ipswich. This was crucial as it gave us almost 2 months of training to prepare and, as a lot of past players had only just started to re-join the squad, we had much to do to get fit enough and good enough to compete with these teams

Looking at all the remaining fixtures for the bottom five clubs we felt if we could win those last four fixtures then eight points would be enough to stay up and it had to start with beating Ipswich.

Having fought our way up from Eastern Counties division six to London 2N over the previous 6 years, we were now just one more promotion from the target that Marcus Russell and I had set ourselves when we started coaching Harlow seniors ie to see Harlow RFC at the top table of 2nd class rugby in the South East. We could not get relegated if we wanted to achieve this.

Whilst we had 2 months to prepare, which was great, we still had seven fixtures to fulfill before then. For the first time in my life, I really did not care whether we won or lost those fixtures, all I wanted to see was week by week improvement in our fitness, skill level and confidence.

There was one last thing I had to do and that was to go and watch Ipswich play in our free week, so Richard Drage, who was the Playng Chairman, and myself went to watch them at Tabard. When the teams walked out onto the pitch it did take our breath away. The Ipswich 2nd rows were 6ft 6" and 6ft 8", their No 8 was 6ft 4", and a real odd one, their tight head was only 5ft 7". Their backs were stocky lads, but they hardly ever tried to run the ball as they relied almost totally on their kicking to create lineouts and scrums in order to move them up the pitch.

Tabard obviously had a hard time winning ball, but they had some big forwards as well, so when they did secure possession their physicality in the loose was too much for Ipswich to cope with. Tabard won but not by much. Richard and I drove back to Harlow, and we hardly spoke because both of us were thinking the same thing, "how are we going to win any ball".

Marcus and I produced what we thought were the only answers

1. Ipswich used their small powerful tighthead to lower the scrum on the opposition put in making it difficult to hook the ball and difficult to stop the scrum collapsing.

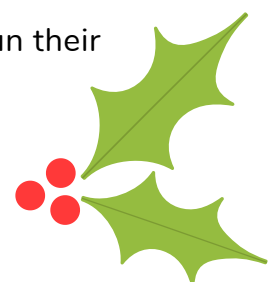
The Plan - We had to find a not too tall loosehead who was immensely strong, his name was Pete Claridge. We needed a hooker who could hook the ball with his nose if needed, his name was Trevor Ray.

2. We could not let them have any opportunity to throw the ball in to the lineout and on our throw ins we had to have a strategy that negated their height advantage.

The Plan - We would not put the ball out of play at all and on our throw in's we would change the numbers at almost every lineout so they could not get their jumpers and support players set in time.

We also had two good lineout jumpers ourselves in Darren Addicot and Dave Dogger Gordon, even though they were much smaller than the Ipswich guys. The aim was to cause confusion which meant our forwards could be jumping against support players or in gaps instead of against their tall guys.

3. We had to move the ball to where there was space at every opportunity and run their forwards into the ground





In the 2 months before the fixture, at various times, we saw the return of Martin Polkinghorne (9), David Hurley (10), Dave Oastler (12), Keith Handscombe (14) and John Price (15), already there were Lee Smith (11) and Alan Price (13). This was probably the greatest back division capable of moving the ball to space and exploiting space that Harlow had ever put on the field of play. All these players came together as a unit just a week before the game.

The Plan - No matter where we were on the pitch, we would run the ball to space. Whenever these attacks broke down our back row would have to be on hand to secure possession again.

4. We had to beat their forwards to every breakdown and support the backs attacks.

The Plan - We did not have the biggest set of forwards but those mentioned above and with Mark Coombes at second row, Richard May along with Adam Mace completing the back row and led by a quietly spoken but inspirational captain, Julian Heath would achieve this

The 8 weeks of training we had before the game would be concentrated around three areas: -

- Lots of ball skills work
- Technical work. The backs - moves to create space out wide, through the centre and on the blind side. The forwards - winning our scrums and our lineouts
- The hardest fitness regime we had ever put the players through during a season so whenever an attack broke down, we would have more players there than Ipswich in order to retain the ball

The training started in earnest on the 17th December and in the next few weeks we saw the return of a number of players, a few of whom were older players who just felt they wanted to help. Numbers training increased to between 25 and 30 which allowed us to run unit and team drills against opposition which was invaluable.

Each session started with either what we called THE HILL or something we called THE BACK ROW TRAINING.

Following this the whole squad would spend the next 45 minutes pounding up and down the pitch practicing ball skills.

Then we would split, forwards on scrums and lineouts backs on moves. when we could at the end, we would fit in team drills against opposition.

Sometimes we did not finish till way past 10pm but no one ever complained.

In the next two games the team improved rapidly and on January 11th we played Woodford in a league match. 4 weeks previously I had not thought we would be ready to win against a team that were in the top half of our division but, in a hard-fought low scoring game we scored two

fabulous tries from David Oastler and Bill Bailey plus an incredible game from our No8 Pete Keeling and won by 13 pts to 7pts.

We were still bottom, but this did wonders for the confidence in the squad and over the next 4 weeks no matter what we put the players through in training, the standard of individual skills, unit skills and fitness reached levels I had never seen in 10 years of coaching.

February 15th - The Game

Harlow team containing 13 EX HARLOW COLTS

- | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. Pete Claridge | 2. Trevor Ray | 3. Julian Heath (Capt.) |
| 4. Dave Gordon | 5. Mark Coombes | 6. Richard May |
| 7. Adam Mace | 8. Darren Addicott | 9. Martin Polkinghorne |
| 10. David Hurley | 12. David Oastler | 13. Alan Price |
| 11. Lee Smith | 14. Keith Handscombe | 15. Johnny Price |

Subs - Ray Ball, Don Smale



The club house was packed as there was a five nations match on at the same time and when the ref blew his whistle to start the game there were only about 20 spectators on the side of the pitch ready to watch us play.

It would be impossible for me to describe the game in detail, it would take a novel to do that, but I had never seen anything like the storm that Harlow subjected Ipswich to from the very first minute. After 10 minutes of relentless pressure from attack after attack, all starting from on or around our twenty-two, each with incredible pace, incredible support play and incredible skill we were 9 pts to 0 in the lead and Ipswich were hanging on by the skin of their teeth. Word got into the clubhouse and people rushed to the sidelines to witness what was happening. Those who got there in time would have seen a try that started with us winning a lineout about fifteen meters from our own line. A bullet of a 20 m pass from Martin Polkinghorne, a big miss pass from David Hurley, who was stood on our own line, to Alan Price who received at pace and straightened, he drew the outside centre towards him creating a gap which Johnny Price also hit at pace. John drew the winger leaving Lee Smith to tear down the pitch. I cannot remember who scored, may have been Lee or he may have passed back inside for someone in support, but the move summed up how we played the whole game.... almost.

The whole of the first half continued in the same way with attack after attack - out wide, through the centre, down the blindside, from the back row and even some driving lineouts. It was relentless

By half time we were 39 pts to 0 in the lead and Ipswich had not had one single throw into the lineout.

At half time Ipswich improved their scrum in that they realised taking the scrum low on the tight head side was killing them because the whole of our front row could take it lower, so they tried to keep it as high as they could. In the lineout they changed to man mark each of our forwards which did allow them to pinch a few of our throws.

In the second half we scored another try and another penalty from Dave, we had to replace Alan Price and Richard May with Ray Ball and Don Smale due to injuries. We still dominated but around 65 minutes you could see that the team were beginning to slow down. It did not matter because they had played the perfect game and I was very happy, then, on 70 minutes we won a lineout on our 10 m line and I couldn't believe what happened.... Dave Hurley kicked the ball down the field, and it bounced into touch in the Ipswich 22. For a few seconds I was totally devastated, we had got to within 10 minutes of denying our opposition a throw into their lineout but when I looked at our players trudging up the pitch, I knew they were happy with Dave's decision, so I calmed down. They threw the ball in, and we pinched it, the forwards drove towards the posts and Dave dropped a goal, the match finished with a win by 49 pt. to 0.

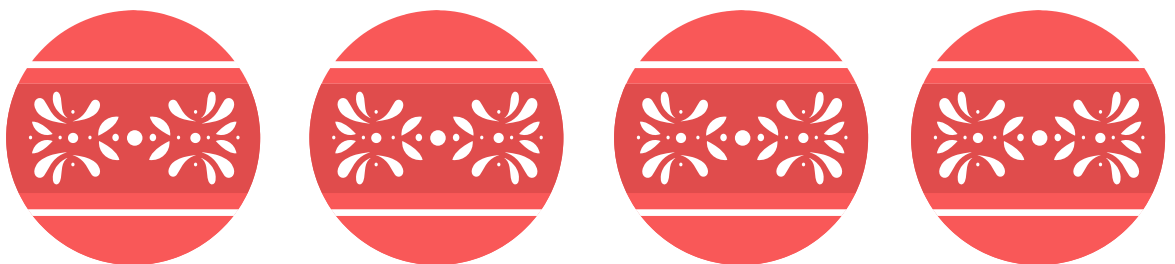
We did not knock on, drop a ball, forward pass, or give a kickable penalty away in 80 minutes of rugby. The tempo with which we played the game was incredible, no Harlow player stopped the game for an injury, even if they were carrying a knock. At every lineout and scrum our forwards were there ready to go immediately and, as soon as the ref allowed the ball was in. I had never seen anything like this level of skill, commitment, and determination to succeed before or since.

I was so proud of all the players who had given everything to me and Marcus, to the club and to each other. I knew then we would win all our remaining league games, and I knew we would win this league the following season - and we did. If I forget everything else as I get older, I will never forget those 8 weeks and what those Harlow boys went through to achieve that win.

I still wish we could have gone the last 10 minutes without giving them a lineout throw though, surely would have made the Guinness Book of Records.

This was my perfect game.

Ray Harris



REMINDER

1ST XV HOME GAMES AND LUNCHES

11th December - East London

8th January - Old Cooperians

12th February - Upminster

Sat 4th Dec 2021	Dagenham v Harlow I XV	2:00pm	League	Dagenham RFC
Sat 4th Dec 2021	Rams v Wanstead	2:00pm	League	Harlow RFC
Sat 4th Dec 2021	Saints v Westcliff	2:00pm	League	Harlow RFC
Sun 5th Dec 2021	Ladies I XV v Cuffley	2:00pm	League	Harlow RFC
Sat 11th Dec 2021	Harlow I XV v East London	3:00pm	League	Harlow RFC
Sat 11th Dec 2021	Romford & Gidea Park v Rams	2:00pm	League	Romford Gidea Park RFC
Sat 11th Dec 2021	Canvey Island v Saints	2:00pm	League	Canvey Island RFC
Sat 18th Dec 2021	Braintree v Harlow I XV	2:00pm	League	Braintree RFC
Sat 18th Dec 2021	Rams v Stanford	2:00pm	League	Harlow RFC
Sat 18th Dec 2021	Saints v Dagenham	2:00pm	League	Harlow RFC

