

U16 Boys Inter-Regional Championships - Cardiff 10/11th July

East Region report

Whilst England cricketers were putting the cocky colonials to the sword down the road, the most important contest in Cardiff was taking place in the International Pool: 10 water polo teams, all with the desire and dreams of winning.

Having been involved with the England Talent Coaching of this age group, I knew how level the competition might prove to be as 120 players trialled back in 2014 and all teams were missing key players due to holidays.

We were drawn with North West, North East, South West and London B. This was by far the strongest league on paper and the results backed this up (North East winners, South West runners-up).

I have long believed that at this age having fixed positions for field players is counter-productive to their development because the biggest skill the players have is, hopefully, swimming speed. Therefore motion is critical because it causes confusion in the defence and chaos ensues because the play is not predictable.

The players worked hard on this in training and I think they enjoyed the different approach and the sense that they could all get into attack and score, which is the main aim of the game. Before the competition all we lacked was the opportunity to put it into practice in a meaningful game.

The South West, seeded 3, would be the first team to experience it. We started brightly with lots of drives in front of goal but the opportunities created were missed by the feeders as everything happened so quickly. However, it made for a thrilling game and with 45 seconds to go the scores were level at 5 apiece, then we gave away a penalty. On losing the ball in our last attack a speculative shot slipped under the goalie's arm: 5-7 defeat. We scored 2 out of 3 man-ups with the missed one coming after a TO!

Having lost the first game we faced the best team in the contest, who had just had a shaky start, drawing with the NW. The North East, unseeded, has a good percentage of the best players in the country at this age. They started with real intent and were 3-0 up in two minutes. East steadied the ship and at the half were 3-5 down. North East raced away again to a 5 goal lead before we pulled back 2 goals. The game ebbed and flowed as we rushed attacks to catch up and long passes missed their intended targets. Then the young referee made a very poor penalty call and in my desire to educate him (my profession after all) he stumped me with a red card as the ball in my hand fell into the water during my visual replay of what had actually taken place: not my first and very likely not my last! Two losses meant we had no chance to make the top 4 and we couldn't afford to lose any more.

North West, seeded 2, had no chance against us and East ran out comfortable winners 7-3, followed by London B 13-1. Chaos was beginning to reign coupled with our defensive tactics. Also Ricky

Eatough, in goal, positioning himself better for the speculative shots, was making some excellent saves.

Day 2 started with the South East, who having no answer to the speed and accuracy with which the team was playing, were pushed aside 12-3. North West's second team were the weakest in the competition and, as these things go, it was our most inept performance even though we won 11-3. Our passing was sloppy and driving game almost non-existent. These were worrying signs as it meant that the team were allowing tiredness to affect their performance. We still had Wales to beat to finish 5th.

Having demonstrated my passion to the team we started brightly and went into a 2-0 lead. Then like many a British tennis player we made a couple of mistakes and it threw our concentration. Back came Wales with some morale-boosting goals and a swim-strangling press to lead at half time by 5-4. We exchanged goals without gaining parity and half way through the half Wales still lead by one: 6-7. They then managed two unanswered, jaw-dropping goals, so with 2.38 to go the scoreboard read East 6 Wales 9.

TIME OUT REF!

What do you do? Emphasise the need to swim, to create chaos and make that seemingly risky pass and take your shots.

14 seconds later Will (shot-shy) Eggleton scorches the ball into the net (his 11th of the tournament: 7-9 24 seconds later he unleashes his 12th: 8-9. 31 fast ticking, tense seconds pass by before Fin (I can score from anywhere) Parnell dispatches his 19th goal: 9-9 and 1.17 remaining. A draw will secure 5th and Division 1 polo in the future.

Wales attack and shoot at Ricky who bodychecks it, counter-attack is launched and the ball is thrown to the driver instinctively and with 45 seconds remaining East Fin(ally) regain the lead 10-9: 20 goals. Wales have one attack and 10-10 is good but the team want more. Good team defence wins the ball and is safely in the goalie's hands. Jarryd Myburgh receives the ball and turns his man; exclusion. Fin jumps to the left post, pass equals 21 goals and a compelling 11-9 victory.

5 goals in 2 minutes cannot be predicted. It was quite magnificent to watch. It encapsulated what this team was all about and the sudden, necessitated belief in themselves and what they were trying to do.

I had a difficult job selecting the MVP with Will Eggleton suddenly finding his shooting confidence; Ben Chapman working tirelessly down the wings; Thushira Kamarage's calm defending at centre-back and Adam Frost's intelligent defence and distribution when coming off the bench.

However, we started the campaign without a goalie and Ricky Eatough showed up and filled the position with ever-increasing confidence, improving game on game. He got the nod. Fin's 21 goal haul turned out to be the best in the competition and he is the first East player to achieve that. Well done boys!

This, however, is a team game and I was mightily impressed with the performances of all the players, especially those coming off the bench. Below are the team stats with goals first and majors second.

Ricky Eatough (0/2); Fin Parnell [capt] (21/5); Ben Chapman (4/2); Max Dawson (4/1); Will Eggleton (12/3); Thushi Kamarage (5/5); Jarryd Myburgh (4/0); Dan Harris (3/2); Tom Fairchild (8/0); Dan Eaton (0/0); Adam Frost (1/0); Cameron Gilmour (0/2); James Underwood (2/1).

My special thanks go to Alison Harris who having recently qualified as a Team Manager, at the first East Region Water Polo camp, accepted the role and took a lot of the workload.

All the regions have parental support at these events, and I may be biased, but I think ours are the best. It's not just at the tournament but all the miles to club and regional training sessions. Many, many thanks for your continued support of the Region. The best is yet to come!

Tim Whitwham