

Winning the league 2003/04 as told by Dave Blyth

Let's start by looking at the seasons before the title winning 2003/04

I've had to go back through the records and in my brain to figure things out, but I've got a picture now.

From the previous season we had great continuity – Tony Pugh as President, Ian Aitchison (Aitch) as Director of Rugby and Tony (Biff) Handley as club captain.

That was great, but let's start with the season prior to that 2001/02. We got relegated from National 2 after a really bad run. We didn't handle professionalism well and we had just come off the back of losing and losing. We were competing against teams that were either fully professional or certainly had more resources than we did. It was soul destroying. A lot of that team started improving and despite having come through the ranks of losing heavily over three years, we managed to stick together as a bunch of mates through the hard times. So, when our turn of fortunes started happening with the arrival of Phil Winstanley and Aitch coming back, we just stuck together. And when we started winning, we started enjoying ourselves. We were just happy that we were not getting battered week in and week out so it was a really strong team spirit that we took into the Championship season.

The season started in September, winning all games, do you have particular memories of that?

Just the fact that we had come off a better season in 2002 / 03 – we came fourth. So we now a new mindset with new targets and aspirations for the season - Phil Winstanley said that he wanted to picture Biff holding the cup in the last game of the season at home. That was our target but you never know in the first few weeks of the season how the other teams have prepared. It was great to hit the season with wins, because we had had a strong summer of training – we had worked really hard and were full of belief. We were winning and winning well, scoring 40 points, 50 points at times. We just had real confidence and we had a couple of Cup games as well, so we were able to try other players out. It was a great start.

In the Cup we had two good wins against Hull and Preston Grasshoppers but then at the start of November we faced Pertemps Bees.

We were doing well, but Pertemps Bees were a very strong team. We went down there losing 40 - 24. They were in a league or two above us but we gave a good account of ourselves, but between us we said "OK, it is not such a bad thing as we can focus on the league now."

In the run up to the end of year we won all of our games, confidence continuing to grow?

If you look at the teams that we were beating, they were no pushovers, especially the north east teams, Blaydon and Darlington Mowden Park – strong teams. Fylde were always good; Liverpool St Helens had their rugby league renaissance and our local rival New Brighton were on the up. Our chief rival was Halifax who we beat just before Christmas 18-6. That was set up to be a really big game. I had broken my arm in the home game against Blaydon and was out for six weeks. So to go into

Christmas unbeaten them was great. We had a few drinks to celebrate a good first half of the season.

You make a broken arm sound like a minor inconvenience

It was just annoying as I wanted to play all the games. If you play rugby you are going to get injured and I think I have had my fair share and the break was just an innocuous tackle. I cracked my arm and I was annoyed as there was such a great team spirit and I didn't want to miss out on games. But it did heal quickly and it was nice that there was an extra break over Christmas to give me a few more weeks to recover, ready for the start of the new year.

What about characters in the team?

We were all mates and we have great memories of stories from the back of the bus that you can't always tell people! We came from all walks of life – Cheeky from Cameroon, Paul White now a very senior Merseyside Police Officer, Dominic Mackenzie Headmaster of Formby High. There were also solicitors, mechanics, teachers and barmen – great company to be around. We did enjoy socialising a lot together with the same immature sense of humour.

So we carry on winning into the new year

It is important that rugby teams manage the Christmas period well. We didn't tell everyone to just "Go home, drink and eat turkey" – we had good fun, but there was a two-week period which we could use to really get ahead of other teams. Traditionally over the Christmas period we train a lot and then by the end of January we had done a lot of aerobic based running, not so much contact work because at that stage of the season you have to manage bodies. We did what we call 'The stations run' between Hall Road and Blundellsands train stations, which is about a 12-minute run. We did two of those most training sessions and introduced evening weight training sessions. We tended to win a lot of our games in the last 15 or 20 minutes, which is what you see the likes of the All Blacks doing. It is the simplest thing to improve, not necessarily the easiest. But we were pulling away from teams that were probably equal to us in terms of ability as we just had that 5% fitness and strength over them.

As a spectator you did seem to be the fittest side in the league

It also meant that we could play good attacking running rugby. I think our back three, Hitchmough, Kerfoot and Janni (Deventer) scored almost 90 tries between them. It was very attractive rugby for the supporters to watch, even though as an ageing forward I watched a lot of those tries from our own half trying to keep up with play! It just gave us the opportunity to play attractive rugby when it was on. But on muddy winter days we could still grind out a win through our forwards. A lot of that was down to our conditioning.

So we come through to a crunch game with Halifax away in April

Ourselves and Halifax had been leading the league neck and neck right the way through the season. It was a warm afternoon and they were a strong team. I think that they had some financial support at that stage and had ex-Leeds players and ex-League players but it was very disappointing to lose 24-28. They just pulled ahead of us in the league table, but we had a game in hand after Blaydon had cried off in January. We were on the bus halfway across the M62 to Blaydon and we got a call

to say their pitch was waterlogged. My brother is a policeman in Newcastle and all the local inside information at the time was that Blaydon had an injury crisis and were struggling to field a team. So their "waterlogged" pitch was very annoying for us.

We lost to Halifax, which was a blow, but at that stage we knew that we were promoted and we could still control our own destiny to be champions if we won our game in hand.

I remember a big travelling contingent at Halifax cheering you on

It was obviously one of **the** key games of the season and we had a really good travelling support which was great because when you are winning, it doesn't matter what level you are, everyone is happy on and off the pitch. It was disappointing for all of us and the crowd. But then again, the crowd all throughout that season was incredible – very vocal, very supportive and the fact that we were mostly local boys helped the crowd to identify with us. They had seen players coming up through local schools such as Merchant Taylors, St Mary's College and the mini & junior section. Everyone knew each other – we had a local club.

At Halifax the supporters took up their positions as though they were on Boozers' Bank

The VIPs, the upper elite of Boozers' bank always position themselves closest to the bar.

Indeed. So, you beat Blaydon away 43-24 to set up nicely the home game against Longton.

We hammered Longton at their place 58-0 on the rebound after the Halifax game. We were still in second place and had to win the last game to finish as Champions. There were rumours circulating that Longton wanted to concede the game, which would give us the points and make us champions without even playing. But unbeknownst to us Phil and Aitch had said, "No, we want to play the game and win it at home." I had torn a muscle in my back and there were a few injuries in the squad, but we went into the game confident, not complacent. So the game against Longton started, with a huge crowd looking forward to it. Longton brought their 'A' game and we just couldn't click into gear! We led at half time about 5-3 and we were really under the cosh, we were worried that we might fall victim to a huge upset and have our dream ruined. The crowd was quiet and worried too. However, we refocused at half time and ground out our 30th win of the season in a staccato match, it was not our finest game. The final whistle went and there was almost a muted celebration. But as we started jogging back to the corner to clap Longton off, we smiled and said to ourselves and the crowd, "Come on!, We've done this" and as we trundled back, the volume of noise on Boozers Bank rose and rose. Everyone was then in full swing, cheering with people taking the champagne out of the ice buckets.

I do remember the final whistle going and you and Biff hugging in the middle of the pitch. It looked a mixture of relief, ecstasy and absolute knackeredness

You have nailed that exactly right. I think the first reaction was relief to be honest, after having made hard work of the game and then a growing realisation and euphoria that we were Champions. Biff and I have known each other since we were

England Colts, an awfully long time ago. As I said at the start, we had come through some bad times together and it was just great to win and achieve something with Waterloo together. A couple of us older heads Paul White, Wolfie (Chris Wolfenden) had been in the 1st team since the late 1980s and it was great to have done it. Relief initially and then it kicked in – absolute joy.

Then we had a crowd invasion onto the pitch.

After we clapped Longton off, the families came onto the pitch first and then everyone wanted a piece of the action. It was marvellous – at whatever level you play, winning games, winning leagues is a fantastic feeling for everyone. It was the start of quite a large party.

Do you recall the Griffin doing a streak down the length of the pitch?

I do but I can't remember who it was. I have asked the lads and we can't remember. No one is owning up to it, probably because they know this is going to be published. It was just another highlight of a great day.

The streak ended with a swallow dive between the posts

I could think of a few culprits but I'm not covering for anyone.

All of this was 16 years ago, which is a long time, but it was just an epic journey. If you look at the team that stuck together and Aitch and Phil Winstanley have added to, it was just a very strong team. We had a huge front row of South African Buller, Chris Tyms and Les Bone, plus Alan Davis, Sean Gibney, Darren Clarke and David Giles which would scare anyone nowadays. Duke (Paul White) was an absolute fitness machine and a hard case who shared second row duties with myself, Dave Mercer and Rob Newsham. We had a very quick back row (when I wasn't playing), Cheeky, Palms (Dan Palmer) and Dan Smith. It was a very strong pack of forwards who would dominate opponents in the set piece and about the field. The back line was really exciting with the very fast Craig Aikman at 9 and John Broxon, Biff pulling the strings at 10 and then outside we had phenomenal talent, Gareth Davies and Freeman Payne in the centre, two very big blokes (The carthorse and racehorse), two very fast wingers Jlo (Jan van Deventer) and Neil Kerfoot and Rob Hitchmough, ex-Premiership player at full back cutting sides to shreds.

We had good strength in depth with players who easily step into the breach such Dom MacKenzie (now club chairman), Andy Hogg, Wolfie, Fergus Griffies and Mark Tattersall. Paddy Young developed the "new age" of video analysis of games and Richard Baxendale was second to none at forgetting to bring the playing kit and taking us through the woods on the team bus!! ***If I have missed anyone out, please let me know and we can update this record.***

We were very fit. Dick Greenwood often used to say that we need to win 'the sponge count'. We had fewer injuries because of our muscle structure and strength – we could take the hits. The idea of 'winning the sponge count' is to not need the old guy (used to be Dave Ward!) running onto the pitch with a bucket of cold water to treat bumps and bruises. We did not pick up that many muscular injuries because we were in good shape, which meant that we did not have to mess around with the squad selection too much – That gave us great continuity. We had a superb medical network who looked after us, Brian Findlay and Reg the physios and all the doctors who helped, Mike Hayton, Paul May, Andy Taylor, Paul Thomas, Nige Jones, Simon Scott, Pete Hughes and Biff's wife Helene. We would get treated very quickly to get

us back onto the pitch. It was such a good set up that Phil and Aitch had put together - Phil did most of the coaching, he put simple things in place and trusted us to get on with it. Aitch's management of the who set up within the club revolutionised what had gone before. For the following two or three years we had really good systems in place that propelled us to even more success and promotions. It was a good model that we had and it was very enjoyable.

My final memory is standing in the players bar with a beer in my hand after the players were changed, when a very loud voice asked for silence followed by the announcement "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Champions of National 3 North . . . Waterloo." The place erupted.