Phoenix – Water polo article

(Dan Lewis)

Just a year into their existence, Glamorgan’s water polo side are looking to round off a promotion winning season in style when they face Dundee in next week’s cup final (12 May).

With promotion to the second tier secured, all attention now turns to the Shield Final where Glamorgan will come up against a tough University of Dundee side who, like Glam, won all three games in the league to reach the final of the competition.

With all the success, it would be easy to mistake this Glamorgan team as an established outfit, yet just 12 months ago this side didn’t even exist.

“The team was actually entered before we got the players in place,” one of the side’s star players, Tom Greenfield, tells *GlamSport*.

“Captain Graham Harrington got a Sports Scholarship, and [Head of Sport] Tudor Williams felt it would only be right to then help set up a team, before getting the right numbers to compete.”

It’s certainly been a season to remember for the men’s water polo side, though as Greenfield tells us inside the £32 million Cardiff International Pool – the side’s current training base – recruitment for players is not easy, though recent success will certainly help.

“Often I’ll say to people, ‘why don’t you join the team,’ and they didn’t even know we had one - so it’s a case of getting others aware of it. Though we train out in Cardiff Bay and Llantrisant, which isn’t exactly local which doesn’t help us.

“We got a mention at the recent sports’ award night, where we were nominated for the best team award – it was nice to get recognised for this, which can again help with getting others to join in. That’s the key now to try and get more players into the system to build on our success.”

Greenfield represented Great Britain in swimming last year in the European Short Course Championships in Poland, as well as the European Grand Prix in Holland and Belgium which he puts down to “a lot of hard work which paid off in the end.”

The third year chiropractic studies student – who picked up a silver medal in the Senior British Nationals with a personal best time – played a big part in helping Glam establish themselves in the sport, alongside Graham Harrington, who took up the role of captain.

Harrington, who has also represented GB in his sport, reckons that Dundee will provide Glam with a tough test in the final, something which hasn’t been the case so far for these BUCS debutants.

“UWE were the only side to come within two goals of us, all other games have no necessarily been a walk-over, but have been fairly comfortable,” he said.

“As of yet in the cup we haven’t really had push on to win games, we’ve been relatively comfortable, but we’re expecting it to be a different matter when we face Dundee. Cup finals are a one off, so all form goes out of the window.

“We had the Celtic tri-nations event down here last month, and three of the Scottish team were from Dundee, which includes their best player and two of the bench players – man for man it is going to be a close contest.”

Despite having the chance to win the league and cup double when they face Dundee, Harrington is keeping his feet firmly on the ground and already preparing for what will be a tough campaign next season, where the standard will be as high as ever.

“We’ve already advertised to get more people to participate next year, where we can hopefully get a second men’s side, and a women’s team going.

“We’ve done great this year, especially considering it’s our first season. There are a few of us who have played water polo before this year, but for nine others this was their first time playing, so to get that top spot is a brilliant achievement, and we’ll have to now build on that next time around.

“The standard of water polo is stronger than expected at university level. You’d expect the standard to perhaps be a step down, but even in the top leagues there is varying levels – you have players who have played in the National League, Division 1 and Division 2, and then some players who haven’t reached that level. Overall the standard is relatively strong at university level.

“Any newly promoted side will be looking to consolidate in their new division, but like with any uni sport, there will usually be a large turnover of players who are leaving – fortunately we are only going to lose one player at the end of this season, so hopefully we can press on next year.”

Despite having the ability to succeed even further in the sport, Harrington is firmly focusing on his history degree, believing that the gruelling training schedule – which was put in place in January – actually helps with his studies.

“Realistically water polo is never going to be a huge sport in this country,” he continued.

“History is something I have always enjoyed doing, so I would like to carry on with it, get a degree and see where things end up.

“Training provides me with a nice break from uni work. I’ve always found that these sessions - whether it’s an hour or two hours – will help to freshen me up to allow myself to push on with work afterwards.”

Harrington shares the views of teammate Greenfield in terms of player recruitment, where the side will need to push on following their recent success in the sport, despite coming into the current season simply looking to gain experience.

“It was surprising to have been as successful as we have been this year, because so many of our players were new to the sport. Our main target coming into the season was to basically make sure everyone knew the rules and gained some experience before pushing on next time around.

“It’s a popular enough sport. A lot of my friends were interested in it when I told them about it, so it’s a case of getting others down here and watching it and being aware of it.

“Water polo is a great sport to play, and is obviously really good for you in terms of fitness. There’s also that team element as well that swimming alone won’t give you. We’ve got a tight-knit group here, but we’re happy to take on new players in the future should they wish to join us.”

Following the London Olympics last summer, coverage of the sport – which dates back to the 1900 Olympic Games – began to increase, though it is still lacking in mainstream media exposure, which Harrington reckons could be down to wider issues such as funding.

“Coverage of the sport increased around the time of the Olympics, but that was the same with all sports. In the build up to the London Games, Sky Sports put together a highlights show which helped to improve the coverage, but it is still nowhere near the level which it should be at.

“The sport is struggling in terms of funding so it’s difficult to get others taking part at grass roots level, but as this university team has shown there is interest there.”

Though funding may be a key factor in whether the sport pushes on in the future, Glamorgan have this year shown that with the right attitude to succeed, anything is possible.

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