

Final of Northumberland Senior Shield - Sat March 23rd 2002



Tynedale Raiders 27 v Northumbria University Cobras 20

AFTER four barren seasons, Tynedale Raiders regained the Northumberland Senior Shield, winning an epic final against a polished, confident Northumbria University Cobras side.

Played at Northern on a bright breezy afternoon, the Raiders looked ominously second best in the early exchanges as the University moved the ball around with the air of a side who expected to win. Things looked worse when after only two minutes the University scored a rather soft try, catching the Raiders' defence cold with a quickly taken tap penalty. The try was converted to give the University a 7-0 lead.

At this stage the Raiders were struggling to get their hands on the ball, with their lineout being at best unreliable. Unable to put any passages of play together, the Raiders had to grit their teeth and tackle which they did to good effect.

After 20 minutes the pattern of the match began to change with Mark Walton marking his timely return to rugby with several telling breaks. From one of these breaks the dynamic duo, Richard Ponton and Simon Jewitt, drove forcefully at the opposition, gaining a penalty decision which Simon Allen gratefully converted.

The University quickly replied with a penalty of their own in what was a penalty-ridden first half, but it was now the Raiders who were in the ascendancy. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the set scrums where the power house trio of Bartie Milburn, Mark Conley and Andy Neal, and the second row engine room of Pete Steadman and captain Chris Irving were giving their opposite numbers a real torrid time.

Indeed, after several scrummages on the University line, the Raiders may have felt aggrieved not to have been awarded a penalty try when the scrum dramatically collapsed as it crawled unerringly towards the University try line. Unfortunately, as a result of this collapsed scrum, Andy Neal was injured and had to be replaced by the equally proportioned Alan Howe.

It was vital that after all the Tynedale pressure they did get some reward and their deserved score came right on the stroke of half time when Allen converted his second penalty after some good incisive work by Walton and Irving.

Recognising that they needed to strengthen their scrum the University made some tactical changes during the half time interval and these changes proved extremely effective as they stole the first two Raiders' scrums in the opening ten minutes of the second half.

These two scrums looked as if they had swung the game distinctly the University's way, the first leading to a penalty which was duly converted. Worse was to follow when, at the next Tynedale scrum on halfway, the University fly half broke away, resulting in their second converted try, giving them a healthy 20-6 advantage.

As expected the Raiders refused to buckle and the second half followed a similar pattern to the first, with Tynedale gaining supremacy as the half progressed. With the tackling on both sides immense it did look, however, that a fourteen point lead would prove sufficient as the match entered the final ten minutes

The intensity of the Raiders attacks increased and after several tap penalties, the University defence eventually broke with Justin Wolff getting a deserved touch down which Allen converted to set up a grandstand finish.

By now the University discipline was distinctly lacking as they repeatedly incurred the wrath of the referee. With the match deep into stoppage time the University transgressed once too often and from the resultant lineout the Raiders pack drove the students mercilessly back over their own line, Milburn gaining the important try.

The conversion was still needed to take the match into extra time and it was from a far from easy position. The cool-headed Simon Allen stepped forward and planted an exorcist-style conversion which dipped, weaved and finally soared upwards between the sticks to bring the scores level, the referee immediately blowing for full time.

The ten minutes each way of extra time was played out with the same level of commitment from both sides, with the pace of the match seeming to increase. The University had two opportunities in the opening period but missed both their penalty attempts so the scores were still level as the final ten minute period kicked off.

With five minutes of this epic encounter remaining, the Raiders scored the all-important winning try with full back Graeme Jeffrey creating the opportunity with a typical strong incursion into the heart of the opposition defence. Just when it seemed the move may flounder, up popped man-of-the-match Richard Ponton to lay his hands on the ball. With several defenders around him and 20 metres to the line it looked that setting up another phase was Ponton's best alternative. Ponton however had other ideas and demonstrated his superb fitness levels by accelerating through the University defence like a knife through butter to send the Tynedale fans crazy.

Allen kept up his 100 per cent kicking record with the conversion to give Tynedale a seven points advantage. The remainder of the match, including five minutes of 'stoppage' time, was played out with the University desperately trying to break through but at this stage Raiders defence was not going to crack and the University attackers were continually knocked back in their tracks.

The final whistle signalled the end of a match which can sit proudly alongside the best in the club's fine cup tradition.

Victorious Squad



Back Row: **Dickie Hall, Mark Clark, Richard Baynes, Graham Crosby, Pete Steadman, Simon Jewitt, Stuart Horne, Lee Watson.**

Middle Row: **Simon Allen, Justin Wolff, Alan Howe, Mark Walton, Richard Ponton, Alastair Hopps, Ben Horncastle.**

Front Row: **Peter Hudson, Graham Fox, Graham Jeffries, Chris Irving, Andy Neal, Bartie Milburn, Mark Conley.**