

Forever an Exile

August 2015

There are many rugby union teams who are called or nicknamed the “Exiles”, teams such as the Scottish, Irish or even Welsh Exiles, Dubai Exiles, Hamburg Exiles and at one stage a Nigerian Exile team playing in London.

This though is the story of the East Anglian Exiles RFC, an amateur team that claims on our Facebook site to be a “group of happy misfits who occasionally get together to play champagne or Guinness rugby”.

In October 2015, only two months away, we are going to Afghanistan to play a team of Afghans in Kabul, provided our players can get permission from their wives, girlfriends and mothers (and in some cases all three) to pop away for a few days just before England meet whoever in the Rugby World Cup at Twickenham (fingers crossed on the England part).

The necessary family permissions will be the hardest part, the rest of the tour obstacles (getting approval from the RFU, sorting sponsors, getting flights, visas, security, insurance!, generating publicity for the game and the reasons behind it) pale into insignificance. After all, in our short (2 year) existence we have managed a tour to Leeds and Belfast, so Kabul should be a walk in the park.

However, before we start on this epic journey we need to look back and explain some of the background.

Dick Waterson and Costa Coffee

Every amateur club (any sport) has their version of Dick Waterson. For Woodbridge Rugby Club in Suffolk he was the bloke who helped dig the foundations to the original club house and carried on playing well into his 60’s. He organised the “Night Owls” the midweek veterans team and I was proud to be part of that team playing the game to his ethos of hard, fair and fun rugby.

Dick finally stopped playing even in cameo performances (veterans don’t do impact substitutions) when the brain tumour dictated it was time to stop. He is sorely missed by his family and all of us.

Woodbridge held a game in memory of him which neither my son, Peter (you’ll hear from him soon no doubt as he can never resist having his ‘penny’s worth’ which is my fault for having a son who originally played 9 before becoming a flanker though in time, like his old man, he will gravitate to the front row) or I could play in and we were somewhat surprised/disappointed/annoyed given all he had done for the club that there was not to be an annual game each year.

Now seems as good a time as any to interject with my ‘penny’s worth.’ I was lucky enough to play many a game with Dick Waterson. In fact, my first game for Woodbridge was for the thirds and Dick was our captain. I was put out on the wing and all he said to me was, ‘Those knees won’t last forever so use them while you can.’ Words of wisdom. My first tour for the club also involved Dick. Obviously I can’t divulge details as ‘What happens on tour, stays on tour’ but he made the tour what it was. He was the backbone of the club in my opinion and epitomised everything that I love about

rugby. As my father mentioned, we were somewhat surprised/disappointed/annoyed that the game did not continue.

Over the years, Peter and I have done a lot of thinking in Costa Coffee shops and Pubs. Game plans, Christmas present lists, career moves and bullshit have all been discussed either before or during Guinness or the inevitable Costa coffee that follows such detailed discussions. We often compose letters of advice to powers that be in the RFU on what they are doing wrong and how they need to play. We even go through the trouble of selecting their team for them. Alas, no responses. Indeed, the CIA and British Security Services should give up trying to intercept everyone's emails, just bug every Costa Coffee shop and they'd find out what is REALLY happening.

And so, in Costa Coffee Malton, North Yorkshire (where we were now living) Peter and I discussed over a two medium lattes ("for here but can you put them in take away cups" because those thick glass mugs always look like they need a good clean) putting together a social rugby team to play a few games each year, raise some money for charity and have a laugh, always remembering Dick Waterson and his wonderful warm personality.

The East Anglian Exiles were born.

But Why Afghanistan?

I'm going to let Dad take this one. It makes him feel important.

I am not here to moralise about the war, the loss of life was enormous and every soldier or civilian contractor who lost their life or were injured was one too many. I spent a lot of time in-country working with Afghans trying to make a living in a war torn country.

Additionally, thousands of Afghan civilians were 'collateral' damage and killed or maimed in bomb attacks (IEDs) or misguided 'friendly fire'. There is no NHS and no life insurance. Many families lost their main source of income. There isn't a lot of press cover over these losses or the impact.

Whilst the extended family would look after the family as is then Afghan way, frequently the loss of the main bread winner resulted in children having to leave school to work earlier than usual and a retrospective step in social progress.

Rugby is about respect. Players and fans are encouraged to play a fair game and to respect both the officials and the players. Mini rugby amongst children is a great way for them to exercise but also to build up team work and develop life skills.

Through my contacts I met Asad Ziar, the CEO of the fledgling Afghanistan Rugby Federation and the idea to play an amateur game between a local team and the Exiles was born.

The First Exile Game.

I'll take this one Dad. You have a rest. I know how hard it is typing with just your index fingers.

Going back to the birth of the Exiles, over our Costa Lattes (in to go cups...) we scribbled a team sheet of a 'Dream Team' of players from our old club, Woodbridge RUFC, that over the years both Dad and I had played alongside and that had also played alongside Dick. The idea of an inaugural game against Woodbridge RUFC second team (known as the Saxons) took hold.

Unfortunately, a lot of the team selected still played and would most likely be playing for the Saxons. So we knew the players left would be, shall we say, experienced and probably still need to treat their boots. Then we remembered the group of players that, sadly, many clubs depend on to stay above drop zones. Students! Written on the back of a receipt, we selected 18 players. By the time we finished our last sip of our Latte, we had sent our emails, organised the game for the start of September to coincide with the First team's first home game, and still had time to get the groceries we had be sent out to get.

The Friday before the game, we all met at the local rugby pub in Woodbridge, Ye Olde Bell and Steelyard, to talk tactics, lineouts, strategies, and partake in one or two beverages. This has now turned into an Exile tradition despite our better judgement and the unavoidable morning that follows. We drummed up some support from the locals who promised to come down and watch, helped secured the pubs future for another 3 years after drinking them out of Guinness, and went to bed for a nice early night like the true athletes we are.

The next morning we rose, some feeling better than others, and went for a, you guessed it, Costa coffee. After some more tactic talk, we headed over to Woodbridge Rugby Club and began our other, soon to be, Exile tradition: The Exile Warm Up. I'll let Dad go into detail on this one. He is really the leader of the warmup.

Traditional 'touring team' warm ups consist of trying not to be sick and after a quick attempt at touching your toes finishes with all the Forwards trying to kick 'drop goals' or pretend conversions from acute angles. All amateur teams have a (*several*) forward who thinks he is Zinzan Brooke or in the case of the Exiles – Mal Gregory.

So the game kicked off and everyone had fun. There was some true Champaign/Guinness rugby played and at various points we had more watching our game than the first team. There are only a few moments in the game that I really remember: The look Dad gave me after I didn't pass him the ball; The look Dad gave me after I did pass him the ball, just above his head and The first Exile try scored by Josh Kimber. However, the best memory I have is halfway through the second half. I just took a moment to stop and look at everyone. I looked at our players, the Woodbridge players, those on the touch line watching, and noticed one commonality: Smiles. Everyone was smiling, everyone was having a great time, and everyone was loving the game of rugby. I imagine, up there above us somewhere, Dick Waterson was also smiling. I looked at Dad and he looked back at me and we smiled. We both realised something. We both realised that we had done something special. What we didn't realise was just how special it really was.

