

# Try Learning: Taking study support into the sports club

*Lisa Fenaroli, Centre Manager at Try Learning, explains what has made the scheme, which is part of the Department for Children, Schools and Families' Playing for Success initiative, so successful at improving children's literacy, numeracy and ICT skills.*

The 2007/08 season has been very successful for Harlequins Rugby Club both on and off the pitch, with a top six finish in the Guinness Premiership for the Rugby Union squad – along with some exceptional performances, notably against Wakefield in the Carnegie Challenge Cup for the Rugby League team – and the establishment of an innovative and exciting study support centre 'Try Learning @ The Twickenham Stoop'.

The new educational facility that uses the power of rugby to inspire academic achievement was launched by the centre's patrons, Jason Leonard OBE and Henry Paul, on 10 March 2008.

The Try Learning Centre is delivered in partnership between Richmond upon Thames and Harlequins FC and Harlequins RL. Part of the Department for Children, Schools and Families' *Playing for Success* initiative, it aims to improve literacy, numeracy and ICT skills of Key Stage 2 and 3 pupils through a rugby themed educational programme.

The *Playing for Success* initiative has been running for ten years, with the programme now serving an impressive 54,000 pupils per year, as a result of the hard work and quality study support provision of 152 centres, covering 18 different sports across the country.

The application for a centre at Harlequins was submitted following a meeting in June 2006 of Harlequins club contacts and Richmond upon Thames Education and Children's Services representatives with Rex Hall, a pioneering figure for *Playing for Success* and now responsible for the day-to-day running of the initiative. The process to seek approval required agreement and testimonials from club and council, with the application finally approved in April 2007. The

process of recruiting an experienced teacher to provide a vision for the centre and take responsibility for its management then began in earnest. With a centre manager and teacher in post by January 2008, the work commenced on the design of the space and curriculum with the intention of opening its doors after the February half-term of 2008.

The centre will serve 360 pupils per year from 47 primary, eight secondary and two special schools, with each child attending for six weeks and receiving a total of 20 hours study support.

The intentions of the centre are clear in our mission statement:

“Through our programme of study, our aim is to provide inspirational and exciting educational experiences that develop self-esteem and motivate pupils to become more effective and independent learners, raising achievement in the core skills – literacy, numeracy and ICT – using the power of rugby and the Harlequins club name and brand.”

The centre asks schools to identify pupils from Yr 5 and Yr 8 who are currently underachieving, show signs of low self-esteem and lack motivation within the conventional school environment.

On commencing and completing their course at Try Learning, the pupils undertake a self-assessment questionnaire focussing on their attitude to learning and their perceived abilities with regard to specific aspects of literacy, numeracy and ICT addressed during their time at the centre. Much of our work revolves around bringing the pupils out of their shell and developing their communication and social skills. We place great importance on involvement, independence and ownership, with pupils taking greater responsibility for their own learning. Thus, we see ourselves

as facilitators to learning rather than teachers.

It is through a varied, creative and high impact curriculum, fostering group and independent work, that student motivation and attainment will be improved and a more positive attitude to learning will be encouraged. The contribution of many businesses, bodies and charities has enabled us to create a curriculum with real wow factor, which captures the imagination of the students.

Below is an outline of some of the activities undertaken by the pupils, which have been made possible as a result of club and local investment and involvement.

1. RFU supported and funded tours of Twickenham Stadium and Museum, providing the impact to inspire the students to produce creative writing pieces on apple mac comic life software. Pupils are provided with titles such as 'My first England cap', 'The ghost of Twickenham Stadium' and 'A night in the museum' to prompt their work and complete a task sheet with questions such as "What can you see? What can you hear? How do you feel?" to inform their writing as they are taken on the tour.
2. Cannons Gym Twickenham have offered their facility and staff to enable students to explore heart rate and recovery rate activities to create tables and graphs for analysis and interpretation.
3. A documentary of the Stoop stadium making use of digital video recorders and state of the art macbook computers purchased with a £25,000 grant from the Wooden Spoon Charity. Students download their footage into *imovie* and edit their documentaries adding transitions and music.
4. Conscience Alley drama activity

encouraging pupils to argue a view point relating to the Mark Cueto disallowed try in the 2008 world cup final against South Africa.

5. Harlequins Player interviews (pictured), encouraging pupils to develop their questioning, speaking and listening skills in a relaxed informal setting. Once the hot seat session has been conducted, pupils write up their interviews in the form of a report on a website called 'Making the News' and publish it live on the internet.
6. Harlequins merchandise session, linking budgeting and design, whereby pupils design their own clothing and accessories with price plans and special offers and then present their ideas to the clubs merchandise manager using persuasive speaking to sell their products.
7. Rugby-themed acrostic poetry, specifically relating to Harlequins rugby club. All writing activities are supported by displaying keywords and spellings on the whiteboard and pupils have their own word banks where difficult words to spell are recorded.

### Success

Try Learning is staffed with a centre manager and teacher and supplemented by a small number of volunteers recruited through a variety of networks. In its first year, it has been extremely well-received by schools, parents, the club and local community. The feedback obtained from all associated with the project, especially the pupils who have attended, has been very positive and this is reflected in the following statistics and comments:

- Primary school attendance of 94% and Secondary school attendance of 88%, above target set of 85%.
- 100% of children attending rated their time at the centre as good or better, well above target set of 85%.
- 100% of parents commented that they think their child's confidence and self esteem had improved.

A parent from Heathfield Junior School commented: "My daughter didn't stop talking about Try Learning all evening and being that she is generally very quiet I definitely noticed her enthusiasm after just 1 session." Comments from attending pupils included "wicked", "really good" and "great fun".

Alison Colenso Yr 5 Link Teacher from Heathfield Junior School



commented:

“Try Learning has provided our children with opportunities that they wouldn't normally get in the conventional classroom. As a teacher it has been wonderful to witness so many of the participants develop as individuals in their confidence and ability to relate to others. Their enthusiasm for the scheme has been evident each week as they relay to their peers the activities they have enjoyed. I'm sure the benefits of the scheme will continue to be reaped for those pupils over the coming months.”

This has supported the findings of NFER's strategic evaluation of the scheme, which took place in the early days of Pfs and showed that young people made significant advances in literacy, numeracy and ICT that were quantifiable, as well as reporting that improvements to self-esteem and confidence were noticeable and that children saw a purpose to education and were finding learning fun again. After four years of vigorous assessment, evaluation was then left to individual centres, with results still indicating that gains are being made and sustained over an extended period of time beyond the Pfs experience. The general consensus of all involved with the initiative is that these centres offer quality study support and are an excellent, cost effective means of raising standards in literacy, numeracy and ICT as well as improving student motivation and encouraging positive attitudes to independent learning.

It is our aim to build on the good practise of the first year of Try Learning and through steering group discussion the following targets have been set for year 2:

- Satisfaction – 90% of attendees will rate the Pfs experience as good or

better.

- Attendance – 90% attendance across primary and secondary age range.
- Impact measures – 90% of attendees will show improvement.

The centre also needs to consider its position with regard to sustainability, as funding for Pfs is only secured for five years. Most centres look to generate funds through the inclusion of daytime provision or hiring out the Pfs space. Initial contact has already been made with other departments within the local authority to provide non-Pfs programmes for groups such as looked-after children, travellers and excluded children, as well as providing behavioural support for schools, training for teachers and NQTs and adult and family learning. Some schools outside of the authority have also registered an interest in being involved in a Pfs-style course during school time, so we have a number of avenues to consider with regard to extending the provision and accumulate funds to secure our future at the club.

Personally speaking, the difference in the pupils from week one to week six is quite remarkable and very satisfying to see. Coming from a position as Head of Physical Education to manager of a Pfs centre, I can honestly say the gratitude and enthusiasm shown by pupils, parents and schools involved with the initiative has made 12 weeks of Try Learning more rewarding than 12 years of teaching in a formal secondary school setting. If the only comment made by pupils and parents to improve the service offered continues to be for the courses to be longer, then I will remain very happy and eager to move the centre forward, extending the provisions offered and improving the quality of study support delivered.