

South East Region Water Polo Girls Squad

The First 10 Years 2010-2020

Knowing how and why initiatives, opportunities and events evolve helps us to understand how the future may evolve, and how to shape it. This is a fairly short passage to record what happened, over this period, it is not at statistics mailshot. The other aspect that I decided to omit is the naming of top or influential players. Some of these I was home coach to, for extended spells, often in their early careers. There have been a fair number, and inevitably somebody deserving might be omitted. It is also difficult to cite particular individuals, as some were fortunate to play in strong teams that achieved a great deal, others with equal or greater claim, not so.

Back in 2010, as a club coach with a junior section, I received an email enquiring whether I had any girls I felt capable of playing in a South East Region Under 18 Girls team, I duly nominated the two I had, and heard no more. In late 2010 I spoke to the emailer at a tournament in which we both played, and asked what had happened, to be told there was no coach, therefore there had been no team. Indeed there had been no SER Girls squad or team since the region was formed in 2007, we were also the only region not to have had a girls team play in an IR tournament.

I was disappointed by this, as one of our two girls was full age, and would not get another chance to play at this level, and I also realised as a parent, that my daughter might travel this route at a later date. So with some experience of coaching with club and county, I agreed to take it on. We held our first training session at Crowborough that winter, in preparation for the U16 IR, to be held in February. In different times, this training session and friendly match was held jointly with London, coached by the excellent Richard Collins.

We went to the U16 tournament, inevitably at Walsall, with 13 of the 14 known players, and we did ok, we didn't come last, and we stood up well with a team that had few full age players, we all learnt a lot. The under 18 tournament in the summer of 2011, held at the brand new Hengrove pool in Bristol, was a big reality check, we had some older players who barely knew each other, we battled and we lost most games by one or two goals, and it was the only time we finished last.

From this experience was born the SER girls training sessions, about 10-12 times a year, often held at K2, using a combination of lanes and diving pit, this was crucial to building a cohesive squad of players, who, in many cases, despite the many miles between them in our region, became firm friends, and in these early years Kim Collings, TM, support and advice was invaluable. By the time of the U16 IR in February 2012, we had a strong cohesive outfit. We took the tournament by storm, beating every team we played in the group stage, then London in the semi-final, we found ourselves re-matched against the North West in the final, but this time over four quarters, ultimately the longer match, our inexperience against

stubborn, organized opposition, from players, through to coach, told, and we came away with a silver medal, nevertheless, a first for the region.

Hard work lay ahead, and with this group of players, we maintained good results at U18 level, gaining several bronze medals. Behind this the years 1999-2002 did not easily yield young players, ultimately the players born in years 1999-2001 did appear, however the numbers in 2002/3 remained stubbornly low, we won more medals at under 18 level with the 2000s and 2001s, which included the very good 2002s we did have.

Inevitably the lack of numbers in the 2002/3 squad led us to dig deeper into the younger players, particularly 2004s. The only tournament we elected not to enter over 10 years was the inaugural U14 IR, held in 2015, due the clash with a swim competition leading to a lack of players. After this, we placed a very young team into the U14 IRs, narrowly avoiding last place in December 2016, however, a lot was learnt that weekend, not least how to get organized, and win, turning round a 4-8 defeat against one team, into an 8-4 win the following day, to avoid last place. Many of the same young players played in the U16 IR (Division 2), held in Liverpool on a glorious July weekend in 2017. We took risks, we took a promising keeper with no tournament experience, as a 2004 playing in a 2002 competition, and despite some challenging matches, we avoided last place, due a wonderful performance from our captain, who was also tournament MVP.

The 2004s went into the December 2017 U14 IR as a cohesive group, and we found ourselves one of three very good teams. This was the second of three occasions down the years, where I feel refereeing standards cost us at least one position, and we had to settle for a bronze medal, which was less than we deserved.

The following July 2018 at Millfield, we again took many of the 2004/5 group, and we became only the second region to enter a 2nd team in IR competitions, all held under one roof in that idyll dual pool location. It was also an unforgettable weekend. We finished second in our group to a very strong, rounded and well organized Ireland team, but we had troubled them in spells, despite losing. The following day we took on North East in our semi-final, got our tactics right, rocked them at the start, and with great support from the gallery, held on to win.

So it was Ireland we played again in the final. At half time we were 2-6 down, struggling with the physicality they were being allowed, the girls dug deep, remembering the nearly was final of 2012, I told them never to give up, keep at it. They redoubled their efforts to move an increasingly heavy handed defence, and pulled it back, with the score at 8-8 and seconds on the clock we scored a wonder goal from about 13 metres, and then fended off a similar Irish attempt in the dying moments from the restart, a first trophy and title for the region.

Since then we have challenged in the top five teams in all three age groups, our introduction of U14s is greatly improved, we are capable of entering two teams in some competitions and are seen as a region that regularly develops players who go on to national squads and international competition, which gets less credit than deserved.

In 2010 the squad numbered less than 20, today numbers approach 40, in those years between 80 and 90 girls have represented the region in IR competitions held all over

England, everywhere bar the South East. Players referred on to national squads number 15 plus, and there have been a good number of players who have gone on to play junior and senior international polo for GB, England, Scotland or Wales. There have been some great TMs, Kim Collings, Jill Rogers and Helen Bullock in particular, and in recent years, good coaching infrastructure, and some great team captains.

Where there was nothing, there is now something significant, something that has allowed a large group of young people to develop in a team sport, something bigger than any individual, something that can withstand adversity. Growth has not always been linear, there have been low points and we should remain vigilant that narrow, destructive self-interest damages things far faster than it takes to create them.

In the longer term, we should consider the consistent strength of our teams, and the consistency of the players we produce as our quality measure, and in doing so we should ensure that other parties treat our part in doing so with the respect it deserves.

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