

Member Profile - John Leithead

Club Captain for 3 Seasons 1976-77 to 1978-79.

Club Coach for 4 Seasons 2001-02 to 2004-05.

(1st XV Caps 282)

Education

Whitburn Junior School; Lynemouth Junior School; K.E.V.I. Grammar School; Chester Physical Education College.

Employment

Glossop High School 1969-1970; K.E.V.I. School Morpeth 1970-2003; Hirst High School Exams Officer 2003-2007; North East Partnership SCITT 2004-2016.

Favourite Band/s

M People, Dire Straits, Queen; Most music from 1960's.

Favourite Concert/s

Mark Knopfler, Chris Rea, Caro Emerald.

Favourite Film/s

Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid, Yesterday, Just Mercy.

Playing Career/Position

Ashington RFC 1964-1966.

Morpeth RFC 1965-1995 – played in Colts while still playing for Ashington - this caused a family dilemma with a Dad who was a lifelong member and stalwart of Ashington and then played occasionally when away studying and in my first job.

Chester College 1966-1969.

Manchester RFC 1969-1970.

Hooker or Back Row.

In my latter playing days I moved to scrum half and enjoyed playing there, I am not sure if our fly halves did!!

Most Difficult Opponents

The Gosforth Front Row - Colin White (4 England Caps), Duncan Madsen (14 Scotland Caps), Feidlim McLoughlin (1 Ireland Cap), Brian Keen (4 England Caps).

Early in my senior career I played against S.A.M Hodgson (11 England Caps) at Durham City when you were still allowed to 'hook' with your head - I didn't win many scrums that day!!

In 7's 'Desperate Dan' - Eric Paxton from Kelso (2 Scotland Caps).

Favourite Morpeth Player/s on the Same Team

I had a long career and enjoyed playing with many players, friends, and former pupils.

The 1974/5 team must get a mention.

Most Memorable Matches as a Player

There are many but a County Cup quarter final against Tynedale and a match at Selkirk still stand out. A Staff v Students match - the staff were completely overwhelmed, and the head M.N. Duffy was concussed! Paul Morris was the School Captain.

John's 2 x Morpeth RFC Quiz Questions

Q. Who provided the padding for the first scrummaging machine at Morpeth?

A. No-one. There wasn't any!

Q. Who volunteered to unload a load of straw so Robson Philipson could go to Preston to play Rugby?

A. Isaac Arris Team secretary.

Morpeth RFC Quiz Question

Q. Which hugely competitive Morpeth 1st XV Coach had been known to throw himself to the floor, in frustration, when things were not going well on the pitch?

A. John Leithead...

Club notes for John Leithead and his 1st XV debut season 1966-67

John learnt his rugby at Morpeth Grammar School in the early 1960's and was a member of the Clubs Under 18s that won the Northumberland Under 18 Cup in 1965. The side included several players who went on to play senior rugby at our Club – Mike Bullen, Jim Dirom, Peter Givens, John Casey, Bob Towers, Harry Kennedy while Mike McKenzie and John Hall were to play Championship rugby for Northumberland.

John played for the County Under 21s in 1966 and played his first 1st XV game just before he went to College in October 1966 – against Wigton – we won 30-3 - the side was – R Watson, R Thompson, W Frankland, J Wilson, M Bullen, B Scott, R Fowler, R Scott, P Skelton, F Hall, H Little, B Garnett, J Leithead, J Elliott, J Bates. Brian Garnett had made his debut the week before.

John played a few games for the club while at College and returned to Morpeth in the 1970/71 season when he was appointed to the staff at Morpeth. John was a regular 1st XV player for the next 10 seasons – in his first year he played in the back row with the Pringle brothers and in his second season he moved to hooker where he played for many seasons with Jim Dirom and Mike Stoney.

John played in the 25th Anniversary match against the Luddites and in the 1974 Senior Cup Final against Gosforth which took us into the RFU National Knock out Competition. John played against London Irish when his opposition hooker was Ken Kennedy a double British Lion – 45 Caps for Ireland and 4 Caps for British & Irish Lions. John unfortunately missed the second part of the season when he was seriously ill with meningitis and taken into hospital. He recovered and played in the Northumberland Sevens at the end of the season.

John was Club Captain for 3 very successful seasons - 1976/77 to 1978/79. At the end of April in his first season we had only lost 5 of our 28 games but then lost to Gosforth in the Senior

Cup Final and the 2 W E Laidlaw Memorial games - the second against a full International XV. John's second season was a record-breaking season – record number of points 822, record number of tries 142, 19 tries in one game, and Brian Keenleyside scored 23 tries breaking Alan Gordon's try record of 22 tries which had stood since 1948/9 season.

John retired from 1st XV rugby in 1979/80 when Gavin Cummings took over as 1st XV hooker. John went on to play for and Captain the Stags playing at scrum half – playing with a lot of youngsters and a few old hands like Bill Hewitt and Alan Woolhead in the backs. John played his last 3 games for the 1st XV in November 1985 when Iain Laidlaw was playing for the County XV and John filled in at scrum half – his last 3 games were against Gosforth, Blaydon, and his final match against Tynedale - with his fly half partner Alan Old – it was his 282nd game for the 1st XV.

John was unlucky not to play Senior Championship rugby for Northumberland – at the time Duncan Madsen, the Scottish international, was County hooker - but he did play for the Northumberland side against Edinburgh and District. He was also a very good seven a side player and played in a successful club sevens side for many years - we were invited to the Selkirk sevens as a guest side one year. John played in 15 sevens finals, but he will remember an afternoon at Northern when he played for a Northumberland Sevens side against the England Sevens - preparing them for an International Sevens Competition at Murrayfield – and the England seven won.

John was a tremendously fit and competitive rugby player - he ran the Morpeth to Newcastle Road race with Ken Fraser and he also won the Morpeth and District Super Stars competition for 2 years but more than anything else he was without doubt one of our most talented and skilful rugby forwards – good enough to play for the 1st XV at hooker, back row and scrum half.

The 1966/67 Season

President – Ralph E Appleby, Hon sec. and Fixture Sec – W E Ted Laidlaw, Hon Treasurer P S Stan Driver, Hon Assist Treasurer Joe Routledge, Hon Team Sec. Isaac Arris, County Rep. W E Laidlaw. Chairman W O F Patterson.

We had several sub-Committees – Finance, Ground and House, Entertainments, Selection and Ladies.

1st XV Captain – John Wilson, Vice- Captain Bill Hewitt.

Second XV Captain John Elliott, Vice-Captain Bernard Scott.

Third XV – Captain Billy Ridley, Vice-Captain P A Jackson.

Fourth XV – Captain Angus Taylor, Vice-Captain George Wade.

Newly formed Colts side organised by Gordon Keeley played 25 games and included Ian Pringle, Mick Dungait, Fraser Hunter, John Hunter, and David Scott - all to go on and play 1st XV rugby.

The 1st XV won 18 and drew 2 of their 33 games and used 44 players – John Wilson played every game, Bobby Thompson 32, Mike Stoney in his first season played 26, Brian Garnett in his first season played 25.

1st XV scored 378 points and John Wilson scored 125 (tries were only 3 points), Bobby Thompson was once again top try scorer with 17 and John Wilson 14 tries. Celebrating our 21st Anniversary at the end of the season – attended by the RFU President Mr D H Harrison - we beat a strong Northumberland Presidents XV and finished off the season by once again winning the Northumberland County Sevens at Close House – the third time in 4 years. On the same day, our newly formed Colts side reached the final of the Colts sevens and lost in extra time.

Bill Hewitt played against the British Police and in the County Championship for Northumberland and played at Murrayfield with Brian Keenleyside for Northumberland against Edinburgh and District.

Stuart Reid played in the County Championship for Northumberland, the UAU and the North East Counties at Scarborough with Walter Casey.

Mike McKenzie at Hatfield College Durham played for Durham in the County Championship and played for them at Twickenham in the Championship Final.

County Presidents XV against Tynedale, Rockcliff and Swan Hunters included - Mike Bullen, Jim Dirom, David Pringle, Walter Casey, John Wilson, Keith Lister, and Peter Skelton.

The Northumberland Under 21s included - John Leithead, David Scott, John Harrison, Mike Bullen, and Mike Stoney.