

Faith, hope and Welsh charity

Doing his bit for good causes in Wales, *Forty20* columnist IAN GOLDEN has completed an admirable new project

Books



100 Months of Rugby League in Wales

by Ian Golden

Paperback, 152 pages, £10.00
Available at
www.walesrugbyleague.co.uk/

Almost exactly 12 months ago my 100th rugby league column was imminent, the spark that lit an idea for some much-needed fund-raising.

The result is *100 Months of Rugby League in Wales*, a 152-page compilation of those articles published in *Forty20* and *Rugby League World*, plus several guest articles about the Welsh game. And the charities to benefit are Scott's Angels and the Danny Jones Defibrillator Fund.

While working with Wales' national side I got to know Danny well. His death in May 2015 hit us hard. I was friends too with Scott Bessant and his horrific injuries from what we believe to be a brutal attack nearly two years ago, has left him severely brain damaged.

Both magazines kindly agreed that I could reprint anything and it was good to reflect on Welsh achievements leafing through. Any win over England is good; Wales Students and the U16s recording memorable victories this decade. Yet my favourite spread was the one published in *Forty20* in September 2015 wherein Ysgol Gyfun Gymraeg Glantaf won Year 7's Champion Schools Final at Wembley.

That's my wife's former school and *Forty20* also printed her views in Welsh. In the same piece, 80 years of rugby league's European Championship were also celebrated and I wrote about the WRL Grand Final as well. Phew!

When compiling the book, I tried not to change original articles, even if my predictions were atrociously wrong.

The launch in Cardiff on Friday 3 May – the fourth anniversary of Danny's death – was a huge success, being also a charity dinner organised by Welsh Charitables RFC on behalf of Jonathan Davies. I spoke to both and they kindly allowed me to make a speech to the few hundred people in the room, mostly long-term union fans.

Thankfully, the patrons were there to spend money. One bought a signed Welsh union shirt for over £1,000. He, and others, could certainly afford to spend an extra £10 on my offering while Welsh Charitables also offered to cough up £1,000 to buy the first defibrillator for a Welsh RL club. Jiffy, with many other ex-WRL internationals from the 1990s, signed a couple of copies, so watch



Support: Ian meets 'Jiffy' and Lizzie Jones *WRL*

out for a 'legends edition' auctioned soon.

Next day it was up to Torfaen Tigers' first home match in the Southern Conference season, Torfaen being one of Scott's old clubs. I met his parents for the first time, who gave me hugs and a bottle of scotch in thanks. It brought home the reality of how grateful they are for everyone's efforts.

Their son now lives in hospital. He's not

on life support but fed through a peg in his stomach and can't really do or say anything. It's really sad and no-one has yet been caught for this crime. Hopefully, the money from sales of my publication will help.

On Sunday 5 May, I took a trip up to Halifax versus Barrow after the home side allowed me to sell copies in their club shop. On the same day, Paul Emanuelli, the Wales Students' coach, took a box up to Keighley, so the books are now on sale at Cougar Park too. At Halifax, it was good to meet Lizzie Jones for the first time and speak about the good work her charity performs.

I managed to get myself into pre-match corporate hospitality alongside injured Welsh international Sion Jones, going round all the tables and making a few more sales.

To conclude an exhausting weekend, I returned to South Wales via North Wales, dropping a box off at the Crusaders.

I can't thank everyone enough for their purchases and feedback. On thicker paper than I envisaged, the quality is outstanding. That's also due to the graphic designers at *Rugby League World* and *Forty20*.

At time of writing, we'd sold nearly half the stock, with only around 250 left for sale. So to help such good causes please visit www.walesrugbyleague.co.uk/magazine and we'll pop your copy directly in the post.



Cardiff women show way

Inclusivity is on the agenda at the Blue Dragons and Brixton Bulls, as IAN GOLDEN discovers

The news that Wales hopes to form a women's side for RLWC2021 was most welcome and long overdue.

The nation has experimented with the odd schools game north and south in recent years and, in 2013, South Wales Scorpions formed the 'Wasps', who folded after a few training sessions. A proposed RLWC2013 team to be run by ex-WRU international Non Evans didn't emerge. Last year, West Wales Raiders launched a ladies side, but they haven't played any actual games yet.

This latest WRL launch feels more positive, with everyone pulling together. Players from East and West Origin teams, Bangor University – the first such Wales side to form this year – and Welsh-qualified players in the Women's Super League and Championship look set to come together soon and collectively face England.

West Wales Raiders report that their Ravens will play a role in the West Wales Origin squad and Valley Cougars are to form links with WRU ladies set-ups in the area. But it's the Southern Conference side Cardiff Blue Dragons who have really got the ball rolling, staging initial trials late last month with 14 attending the first session.

WRL board member Gareth Kear, father of Wales's men's captain Elliot, is also an ex-Wales rugby union women's international coach, so has plenty of experience running a female side. If the Blue Dragons' first run-out is anything to go by, coupled with the enthusiasm shown by interim head coach Alf Harvey, the development is a winner.

"We saw a gap in the sport and part of Cardiff's vision is that we engage the sport right across the community," says Harvey. "There isn't any women's rugby league being played in clubs in Wales right now and we'd like to be the pioneers."

"Women's sport in general is becoming more and more prominent. I don't think it's been taken seriously enough in the past and it's something that this club wants to do properly. We don't want to have 'Cardiff



Getting the ball rolling: The first training session at Cardiff Blue Dragons proved a big hit *Ian Golden*



Blue Dragons Ladies' and 'Cardiff Blue Dragons Men'. We want to have 'Cardiff Blue Dragons', everyone playing under the same badge, be it male or female."

Never mind Wales, according to the Rugby Football League website there was only one other women's team in the Southern Conference, Brixton Bulls but they have folded, so the Cardiff side may need to travel a fair distance looking for fixtures, but that seems not to bother them.

"Gareth Kear will be looking for games for us," Harvey continues. "It'll be friendly matches this year of course, and I've also been in contact with colleagues at the RFL who deal with the women's game. There are

a number of sides along the M62 corridor and we are happy to go anywhere to face them. We'll get those games on, no matter what the cost is to us.

"When we held our first get-together in June, it was a proud day for the club and we are pleased to have Louise Morgan as our women's participation and development manager. She is massively enthusiastic and will be speaking to all the right people to get this sport maximum publicity."

"I'm confident that at the Blue Dragons we'll give our players the ammunition and tools to go on and represent their country. The people who want to be involved will have a great opportunity with this club."

Perhaps Cardiff versus Catalans could be the first head-to-head on the calendar?

All that would then be required is five or so more active ladies sides in the south and a Southern Conference women's league could soon become reality.





Climb every mountain

Our columnist IAN GOLDEN is enthralled as the first season steams into the national play-offs

Time flies when you are having fun and the inaugural Southern Conference League is already at the business end, with the Eastern Division's seasonal split.

Now all nine sides have met once, the top four – Wests Warriors, Hammersmith Hills Hoists, London Chargers and Bedford Tigers – have gone on to compete in a new mini league to determine their quarter-final positions, with competition points naturally carried over to the second phase.

It meant that Bedford were pretty much out of the running for a home quarter-final after week one, but the other three were all very much in contention for top spot.

The remaining five are playing off for the 'East Division Plate' and the points have been reset – something I campaigned for in the League 1 Shield when the finalists were often confirmed as early as the second week of a seven-game campaign. Thankfully the RFL have seen sense this time.

Valley Cougars have run away with it in the West, clinching top spot with two weeks to go. Torfaen Tigers, with just the Cougars left to play, came second and the All Golds third. Sadly, Cardiff Blue Dragons pulled out of their remaining fixtures and forfeits saw them finish bottom of a five-team league, Swindon St George fourth.

That both clubs struggled at the foot of the table despite each fielding two sides this season was a surprise. And it went from bad to worse for Wales's capital club after their U16s had to withdraw from the Grand Final



Golden shot: All Golds' Marcus Brown attacks Torfaen Tigers at New Panteg *Lewis Mitchell Photography*



despite finishing top, due to many players being away on holiday or rugby tours.

Cardiff however did host Wales's first women's game following last month's first training session, beating Rhondda Outlaws 50-12. They won the return leg in the valleys too, but by the closer score of 30-28.

So in the Southern Conference, quarter-final ties for August 31 are thus: Cougars host Bedford (G3), Torfaen will be at home to Hammersmith (G4), All Golds will travel to London Chargers (G2) and Swindon will doubtless struggle away to Wests (G1).

The semis are on September 7 with the final staged a week later in Aldershot. We'll be previewing that in next month's *Forty20*.

The Cougars must be favourites given so many players with League 1 experience, former Scorpion Zak Williams among them. He played in West Wales's historic first win in July – but for the opposition!

Returning to Coventry for the first time this season, he and ex-Cougar Cobi Green, on loan from Bradford, could do nothing to prevent a shock 44-16 reverse for the Bears.

The rest of the Western Division may have a mountain to climb to catch the Cougars, but three of the Valley side will literally be doing just that very soon – in the Himalayas!

Price, Lewis and Dafydd Hellard are on their way to Mount Everest Base Camp in aid of two charities – 'Checkemlads' and 'Velindre Hospital', who have supported Hellard in his ongoing fight against cancer.

"Daf's the main reason I'm doing this," said Lewis. "I've been in some very dark places, nearly thrown my life away, and then you look at someone like Daf who has really had a tough time."

"It makes you realise things aren't that bad and drove me to get back on my feet and find myself again."

"I'm lucky to be part of the Valley Cougars family alongside Daf and it's made me a lot stronger in a short space of time. This is my chance to give something back."

"I can't wait to see the sights of Everest and have a ball with the boys."

National play-offs structure

Quarter-finals

Game 1 – E1 v W4

Game 2 – E2 v W3

Game 3 – W1 v E4

Game 4 – W2 v E3

Semi-finals

Winner G1 v Winner G4

Winner G3 v Winner G2

Final

Aldershot, September 14



Climbing high: Wests Warriors beat Hammersmith Hoists in London in June.
Inset: Dafydd Hellard
Valley Cougars



Londoners at the double

Our columnist IAN GOLDEN was there as the season prepared to come to a head in Aldershot

This column was written on Saturday 7 September at Nelson RFC, temporary home of Valley Cougars, as London Chargers celebrated a feisty semi-final win. It ended the Welsh side's 32-game winning streak, their last loss against the Chargers in Hemel in the last SCL final on September 17 way back in 2016.

The 'defending champions' now take on fellow London side Hammersmith Hills Hoists in the Grand Final in Aldershot on September 14, who beat another previously unbeaten 2019 club, Wests Warriors, 32-6 in today's other semi-final.

Cougars' cause wasn't helped by having ten players unavailable, three of whom were climbing Mount Everest – see last month's *Forty20* – with others either injured or back earning money playing rugby union.

Chargers led 22-0 after a mystifying 56-minute-long first half, the depleted Cougars giving it their all but unable to break the visitors' strong defence, despite winning a couple of penalties near to the London line.

They built their lead up to 30-0, scoring three times when Cougars were down to 12 men, before ending the game with a 36-18 triumph, the Welsh scoring none of their tries with a full complement and their first when down to 11 (one yellow, one red).

"We're really pleased to be in the final," said player-coach Mike Butcher, "especially when you consider Cougars' record. We played good rugby even though it was a scrappy affair. We expect Hammersmith's best team in the final but if we turn up and play like the first half, we'll be confident."

The quarter-finals were a week earlier with the top four from the East and West facing each other in straight knock-out.

Swindon, who finished fourth in the five-team Western Conference, announced before their final regular season game, a



Final effort: Luke Rosvall of London Chargers drives hard into the Valley Cougars defence *Ian Lovell*



62-24 drubbing at the hands of third-placed All Golds, that this was their last game of 2019. There was not even a "we're not turning up" to Wests – they'd had enough and weren't going to travel down the M4 for another defeat.

With the unbeaten Warriors top over in the East, into the semis by default, there was just one game in London on August 31 when Chargers easily dispatched a plucky All Golds to qualify for the Welsh trip.

Up in Nelson on the last day of August,

the one-way traffic was more extensive as the Cougars beat Bedford Tigers 60-16. The visitors, who apparently complained that the grass was too long, had few answers to Wales' best community club, extending their winning run to three years and 32 games.

Their man Daniel 'Shakey' Blakemore said: "We expected a physical encounter and weren't disappointed, with Bedford looking to mix it up in the middle of the park."

"The game got really feisty once we took such a big lead in the second half and Bedford were seemingly more interested in fighting than playing rugby, but we stood strong and kept our discipline."

Fifteen miles down the valley at New Panteg, Torfaen Tigers were taking on the Hoists in what was always going to be the closest encounter on the road to Aldershot.

The Hoists had been shaky of late so Torfaen fancied their chances. One of their U16s, Jermarie Chatham, was scoring an outstanding try for Wales U16 in a defeat to England 70 miles down the road in Llanelli, a score that was eventually nominated for RFL Try of the Week, and their senior side collected a few good tries of their own as they went 10-4 up. But three tries without replay gave Hammersmith a 20-10 lead.

Torfaen pulled it back to 20-16, before the visitors got another unconverted effort which eventually proved to be enough.

Four minutes before time, Raiders' dual-reg man Liam Silver scored their fourth try with Morgan Cochran converting to pull it back to 24-22, but Hoists held firm to earn their semi-final, and eventual final, place.



Capital couple: London Chargers booked a date with the Hills Hoists in Hampshire *Ian Lovell*

England's wheelchair team roll on, having beaten Wales 54-40 in a compelling Tri-Nations final at Plas Madoc Leisure Centre, Wrexham, to maintain their 100 per cent winning record against sides from the British Isles.

Eight points down with three minutes remaining was the closest Wales had ever got to getting one over on the old enemy, who took a second minute lead through a Fred Nye try that Tom Halliwell converted. And that lead was increased when Jodie Boyd-Ward grounded in the corner.

Halliwell couldn't add that conversion but made up for it by scoring England's third try and tagging on a goal to that.

Stuart Williams struck back for the Welsh, his try converted by Stephen Halsey after 20 minutes. But after Andrew Higgins was forced into touch near the line for Wales, Boyd-Ward finished off a length-of-the-court set and Halliwell's second try and third goal gave England a 26-6 lead on the half hour.

An uncontested charge through the centre by Josh Butler, goaled by Halliwell, further increased their lead before Rob Hawkins went over for England's next, converted by Nathan Collins this time.

Higgins – who scored his 100th goal for Wales in the match – then punched a penalty, but the England led 44-10 at the break after a slick passing move ended with Butler scoring. Collins converting and Higgins adding another penalty.

Wales scored first in the second half via Harry Jones. Jason Owen followed him over and Higgins again converted to make it 44-22. All then went scoreless for 20 minutes before Lucie Roberts broke the deadlock for Wales and Halsey converted.

Stuart Williams scored on the restart and when Halsey converted Wales were suddenly just ten points down – quite a comeback. However England clinched it with five minutes to go through Hawkins.

Scotty Trigg-Turner got another try back for the Welsh that Halsey boosted, but Hawkins further extended the lead in the final minute, Halliwell with the goal.

Wales and England reached the final after big wins over Scotland on Saturday.

In their commanding 90-12 victory, the Welsh were 18-0 up in seven minutes and hit the break 48-6 ahead. Richard Carver then celebrated his Welsh debut by scoring his country's 13th try of the game.

In another group stage game, England then outscored a tired Wales in the second half of their first game of the event to win 48-24 after leading 24-18 at half-time.

England sealed their final place by hammering the Scots, 136-1, on the back of a 64-0 half-time lead in which James Hazel got a hat-trick. The century came up when Scotland lost a man to the sinbin.

But the Scots had the last laugh. Not wishing to be scoreless, Dan Grant punched a drop-goal with three minutes to go.



Pride of the nation: The English lift the 2019 Tri-Nations trophy after holding on in North Wales *RFL*

England still on top

IAN GOLDEN was in Wrexham to see a gutsy challenge by Wales overcome



Wales 90-12 Scotland

Wales tries: Stephen Halsey 4, Stuart Williams 2, Scott Trigg-Turner 2, Jason Owen 2, Andrew Higgins, Lucie Roberts, Mark Williams, Richard Carver, Gary Taylor. **Goals:** Stephen Halsey 7, Andrew Higgins 4, Gary Taylor 3, Mark Williams. **Scotland tries:** Michael Mellon, Dave Anderson. **Goals:** Daniel Grant, Michael Mellon. **Referee:** Steve Abel.

Wales 24-48 England

Wales tries: Scott Trigg-Turner 2, Mark Williams, Harry Jones. **Goals:** Stephen Halsey 4. **England tries:** Fred Nye 2, Rob Hawkins, James Hazel, Nathan Collins, Lewis King, Tom Halliwell, Jodie Boyd-Ward. **Goals:** Tom Halliwell 8, Rob Hawkins 3, Fred Nye. **Referee:** Matt Ball.

England 136-1 Scotland

England tries: Josh Butler 5, Rob Hawkins 5, James Hazel 3, Tom Halliwell 2, Jodie Boyd-Ward 2, Nathan Collins 2, Fred Nye 2, Lewis King, Nathan Muirhead. **Goals:** Nathan Collins 10, Tom Halliwell 8, Rob Hawkins 3, Fred Nye. **Scotland drop-goal:** Daniel Grant. **Referee:** Steve Abel.

Tri-Nations final: Wales 54-40 England

Wales tries: Stuart Williams 2, Harry Jones, Jason Owen, Lucie Roberts, Scott Trigg-Turner. **Goals:** Stephen Halsey 5, Andrew Higgins 3. **England tries:** Rob Hawkins 3, Jodie Boyd-Ward 2, Tom Halliwell 2, Josh Butler 2, Fred Nye. **Goals:** Tom Halliwell 5, Nathan Collins 2. **Referee:** Matt Ball.

England Wheelchair Ashes touring squad

Sebastian Bechara (*Catalans Dragons*); Wayne Boardman, Jack Brown (*Halfax*); Nathan Collins, Tom Halliwell, Ryan Richardson, James Simpson (*Leeds Rhinos*); Joe Cloyd, James Hazel, Lewis King (*Argonauts*).



Record breaker: Wales's Alan Caron *Ian Golden*

During the weekend, Alan Caron became Wales's record Test cap holder, his 32nd against England confirming a position ahead of men's senior Test players Ian Watson, Jordan James and Rhys Williams.

Since formation in 2012, Wales Wheelchair have now played 36 Tests, the only ones missed by Caron being three games in the 2014 Four Nations, plus one in same competition in 2016 when he was recovering from a knock and resting.

"I didn't think I'd ever achieve this," Caron said. "It's mind-blowing. The sport of Wheelchair RL has grown so much in seven years. In our first tournament, there were just six of us competing [eight were named, but two didn't turn up!] and now there's a pool of players to choose from as well as

Wheelchair Tri-Nations

youngsters coming through. It's one of the biggest achievements in Welsh rugby league this decade, if not the biggest."

The tournament itself, organised almost completely by Wales Wheelchair head coach Steve Jones and manager Mark Andrew Jones, was part of a big weekend for North Wales RL generally. As England Lions U19 were seeing off Wales 26-20 in soaking wet Colwyn Bay, East Wales were about to beat North, 12-10, in horrid weather on Deeside.

It was all nice and dry indoors at Plas Madoc, where favourites England were also preparing for their historic tour of Australia. From 15-25 October, they will take on North Queensland Cowboys, Queensland, New South Wales and play two Tests against the national 'Wheelaroos' in Sydney.

And in fact the Welsh have beaten the Australians twice, at RLWC2013, still the only time Wales have bested the Aussies in any form of international rugby league save for a Welsh League XIII win over the very first Kangaroos in January 1909.

Ireland's withdrawal from what should have been a Four Nations tournament gave Wales a fantastic promotional opportunity. Fans were invited down to the court to take part in a training match in wheelchairs. Your reporter had a go and now aims to join a club and target a Welsh cap. I've got plenty of time. I'm only 47 and the world record oldest international player is Wales's John Doyle. Currently injured, he was 65 when he scored during the 2019 Celtic Cup in April.

All three nations played on day two despite Scotland's failure to make the final. Club side Leyland Warriors filled the gap left by the Irish as they took on Scotland in a friendly, and the poor Celts fell again, this time losing 122-5.

As for Caron, he won't rest at 32 caps. With the Celtic Cup or another Tri-Nations on next year, plus RLWC2021 on the way, he is determined to end the England hoodoo.

"We are getting closer and closer," he says. "I said so after our game on the first day of this tournament and we were even nearer in the final. It would be wonderful to be in a team that finally beats them."

"My goal is to play in the 2021 World Cup, which would be my third event, and review things after that. I just love pulling on that red shirt."

● Wales's Wheelchair team claimed a fourth Celtic Cup title in as many years after easily seeing off Scotland and Ireland in Halifax.

As in previous years, a three-game one-day tournament featured 80-minute matches with two Welsh victories maintaining a 100 per cent eight-win Celtic Cup record.



Results: Scotland 10 Wales 102; Ireland 42 Scotland 52; Ireland 8 Wales 109.

Round 1 fixtures

2020 Coral Challenge Cup First Round draw:

Rochdale Mayfield v London Chargers, Great Britain Police v Torfaen Tigers, Edinburgh Eagles v Ashton Bears, Leigh Miners Rangers v Stanningley, Underbank Rangers v Lock Lane, West Bank Bears v Royal Navy, Featherstone Lions v West Bowling, Mifflin v Wigan, Oulton Raiders, Normanton Knights v Longhorns, Barrow Island v Rhondda Outlaws, Pilkingtons Reds v West Hull, Thornhill Trojans v Thatch Heath Crusaders, York Acorn v Hammersmith Hills Hoists, Sidal v Saddleworth Rangers, Sherwood Wolf Hunt v Wests Warriors, Wigan St. Patricks v Dewsbury Moor, Dington v Bedford Tigers, Milford v Wigan St. Judes, Upton v Jarrow Vikings, Skirghugh v Harrogate Club Parkside, Royal Air Force v Bentley, Ince Rose Bridge v East Hull.

Second round: January 25-26
(22 first round winners)

Third round: February 8-9
(11 winners, plus 11 Bedford League 1 clubs)

Fourth round: February 22-23
(11 winners, 13 English Bedford Championship clubs)

Fifth round: March 14-15
(12 winners, plus four Bedford Super League clubs - Huddersfield, Hull KR, Toronto, Wakefield)

Sixth round: April 4-5
(8 winners, remaining 8 Bedford Super League clubs)

Quarter-finals: May 9-10

Semi-finals: June 6-7 (double-header, details TBC)

Challenge Cup final: Saturday 18 July

Stars align: IRL insist 9s are league's future NRL, Imagery



Men's World Cup 9s

Pool A: Australia 25-12
New Zealand; Papua New Guinea 27-10
United States; New Zealand 18-17 PNG;
Australia 41-11 USA;
New Zealand 46-0 USA;
Australia 26-0 PNG

Pool B: France 8-12
Lebanon; England 25-4
Wales; France 23-6 Wales;
England 13-16 Lebanon;
Lebanon 14-25 Wales;
England 38-4 France

Pool C: Tonga
Invitational 7-30 Cook
Islands; Samoa 32-17
Fiji; Samoa 17-4 Cook
Islands; Tonga 21-17

Fiji; Fiji 10-12 Cook
Islands; Tonga 20-24
Samoa

Semi-finals: Australia
25-8 Samoa; New
Zealand 22-6 England.

Final: Australia 24-10
New Zealand

Women's World Cup 9s

Pool stage: England
25-4 Papua New Guinea;
Australia 22-8 New
Zealand; Australia
24-12 PNG; Australia
42-4 England; Australia
30-6 PNG; New Zealand
33-4 England

Final: Australia 15-17
New Zealand

Pool stage: England
25-4 Papua New Guinea;
Australia 22-8 New
Zealand; Australia
24-12 PNG; Australia
42-4 England; Australia
30-6 PNG; New Zealand
33-4 England

Final: Australia 15-17
New Zealand

The launch of a Wales Women's side and their win over England Lions in November was a highlight of Welsh RL's most productive year since 2010.

Back then, Wales won the European Championship; Super League's Crusaders, coached by Forty20's Brian Noble, made the play-offs; and South Wales Scorpions, led by the current Brisbane Broncos coach Anthony Seibold, did likewise in League 1.

It may not have hit such immediate giddy heights but when, on 29 July 2019, Cardiff Blue Dragons beat Rhondda Outlaws, 52-10, it set in train something with the potential to be huge in future.

Less than four months' later, nine of the 34 women who took part in that game then represented Wales against England Lions and, what's more, won 24-20 in St Helens.

Instrumental in setting all of this up was new Wales RL CEO Gareth Kear, former WRU women's head coach.

Remarkably, for many in the side that was only their fifth game of rugby league and, with the exception of Armed Forces player Vicky Lea, the rest had played even fewer than that. The Welsh had to wait until the 59th minute before taking the lead, when Shaundi Davies went over for the first of a brace of four-pointers, England having been 16-10 up at half-time.

Captain and Wales's first ever female dual-code international Rafiuke Taylor also contributed a brace of tries and was understandably emotional at the end.

"I was so excited," she said. "We had a steep learning curve after losing our first match [three weeks earlier against Great Britain Teachers], naively thinking that our rugby union background would pull us through. They beat us through experience, nothing we could do about it. So we had training sessions, watched as much league on TV as we could, listened to coaches and each other and the win was the result."

"Becoming the first female dual-code international is an honour. I didn't think that was going to happen, even when I first started playing league. It's something I'm always going to be proud of."

Under the tutelage of Craig Taylor, the Welsh team learned quickly from the GB Teachers match, Emily Hughes having nevertheless barged over for the historic first Wales women's try in that game and Kathryn Salter converting. The Teachers however, with seven Women's Super League players, fought back from a 6-4 half-time deficit to win 30-6.

The women's game is set to expand in 2020. Cardiff and Rhondda are expected to compete in the Challenge Cup, while Bridgend Blue Bulls also hope to join the fold and create a three-team eight-game league next summer.

"We'll also look at more international fixtures and training camps," confirmed coach Taylor, no relation to Rafiuke.

The two women's internationals this year were part of double-headers with a



Four Nations education: Keiron Lewis scores the winning try for Wales Students v Ireland James Kaye

A very good year

IAN GOLDEN looks back over a highly encouraging 2019 for Welsh RL

Wales Dragonhearts side celebrating a bit of history of its own, having represented Wales in amateur internationals for 25 years, their debut coming against England in 1994.

In 2019, they began by grinding out a tougher-than-it-should-have-been 26-20 win over Southern England Lionhearts in Neath. A fortnight later, there followed a 58-0 win over newcomers Lithuania at Cardiff Arms Park, before a record defeat to England Lions, 68-0, brought them crashing back to earth. Finally, they faced Malta in Bridgend.

The Knights fielded three professionals – NSW Cup-based brothers Tyler and Kyle Cassel, and their jewel in the crown, Wigan's Jarrod Sammut, who scored ten of their 18 points. Wales though did

well, 22-18 up with five minutes to go before late tries from man of the match Jarrod Hinm and Mike Hurley, who had a personal haul of 18 points, sealed a 34-18 victory.

For the first time since 1997, there was to be no 13-a-side fixture for the seniors

this year, Wales like England travelling to Australia for the World Cup 9s. As detailed in these pages last month, that event was a mixed bag, defeats to the English and French lightened only by a 25-14 victory over Lebanon.



As expected, Regan Grace, who had helped St Helens to a Super League title and would have lit up a drab GB Lions tour had he been selected, was the shining light in Sydney.

On the student scene, Wales prepared well for a Four Nations in Scotland after a domestic season in which Cardiff Met won the Western Division title, just ahead of Swansea, riding high in the 2019-20 season that is currently underway.

Head coach Paul Ewanelli fielded a young side to build towards RLWC2021 and inexperience showed with a 52-16 defeat to England and 30-8 loss to the Scots. A battling 18-12 win over Ireland restored a little pride, with 16-year old Keiron Lewis scoring the winning try with two minutes remaining.

There might be Dragons:

Shane Lee congratulates try-scorer Sam Pridgeon v Malta, left; Wales Women beat England Lions, right; Rafiuke Taylor, inset above

Ian Lovell: WRL

Lewis won seven Wales caps in 2019. He played in all three student internationals and four Wales U19s matches in a packed programme under head coach Ant Walker. The latter began well, convincingly beating Ireland home and away, 34-10 and 20-4, before a 26-20 reverse to England Lions in Colwyn Bay and a runaway 62-0 defeat to the full England Academy side in Llanelli.

A number of players in that final match were involved in a memorable encounter two years ago at U16 level, when the Welsh triumphed for the first time at that age. This year a side led by GB legend Lee Crooks lost out, England winning 38-16. Among the highlights was a wonder try from Torfaen's Jermarie Chatham, a name for the future.

The Welsh domestic competition entered its 17th season, Rhondda Outlaws beating Bridgend Blue Bulls, 34-22, in the Grand Final. Bridgend compensated by winning the U12 final, 10-8, over Aber Valley Wolves and the U14 one, 38-6, over newcomers Cynon Valley Cavaliers. Wolves took the U16s title, beating Torfaen Tigers, 42-30.

Torfaen's senior side were one of three Welsh outfits in the Southern Conference League, finishing a creditable second in the Western Division before falling in the play-offs to eventual winners Hammersmith Hills Hoists. Unbeaten in the regular season, Valley Cougars made it a step further, losing in a tough semi-final to London Chargers.

Meanwhile in Betfred League 1, after a winless 2018, West Wales finally got one. Coventry were seen off 44-16 at Llanelli in July, the only 2019 success. Head coach Kim Williams is off to Huddersfield Giants but the Raiders will go again in 2020.

North Wales Crusaders won nine games to finish seventh, and their 'A' side finished eighth in North West Counties Division Four. They, along with rivals Chester Gladiators, provided the bulk of the North Wales Origin community side that had a three-game series with East and West, East taking the trophy. North Wales finished a creditable second.

Marry all of that with the heartening and continued growth of the wheelchair game – Masters RL too coming to Wales for the first time in five years, Cardiff Blue Dragons and North Wales Buccaneers holding festivals – it's now possible for all-comers to play rugby league in Wales whether able-bodied or not, from primary school to bus pass.



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