



HERE COMES UKRAINE AGAIN

MICHAEL O'HARE charts the development of Rugby League in Ukraine, an eastern European success story for the sport so far.

ALTHOUGH THE STORY OF RUSSIAN Rugby League, while one of considerable trauma, goes back more than 30 years (see RLW September 2012) the country's next-door neighbour Ukraine has a more modest history in the sport. The game kicked off as recently as 2006 when the nation's first club Legion XIII took part in the Russian championship. And in 2007 Kharkiv students played counterparts from Russia, before Great Britain's students showed up the following year. Since then the game has grabbed a secure foothold. The Ukrainian Rugby League Federation, from its hub in the east of the country, has joined the Rugby League European Federation and administers its own national championship with full government recognition for the sport.

And unlike most fledgling Rugby League nations, the sport has yet to suffer the kind of internecine warfare that has beset so many others, including Russia. Nonetheless, in a region of Europe isolated from many of the other League-playing nations, any help is always welcome, and their Russian colleagues – well aware of the struggles involved in bringing a new sport to a new public – have been eager to assist. They are no doubt spurred on by a keenness to have a fellow nation close at hand, especially following the collapse of governmental diplomatic relations

between the Kremlin and Georgia, another eastern Rugby League outpost, back in 2008.

The city of Kharkiv, home of Ukrainian Rugby League, is close to the Russian border in the east of Ukraine and half of the population are native Russian speakers. Likewise Rostov-on-Don, a key centre for League in Russia is in the south of that country and relatively near the Ukrainian border. With the Russian students team who are playing in their world cup in 2013 based in Rostov and keen to test themselves against international opposition, paying a visit to Kharkiv, a mere 200 miles away, was a logical development.

Julia Bennison, the former regional co-ordinator for the Rugby League European Federation, is now working independently with both Russian and Ukrainian Rugby League. "We visited the Russian students in Rostov in May to help with their world cup preparations," she says of the trip she undertook with colleague Gareth Pratt, former head coach of the England Students team. "And we were keen to help them continue their development when we heard they were visiting Ukraine in October for a training camp and a series of matches in Kharkiv." Pratt, a former professional player, also accompanied Bennison to Ukraine to continue the work he had begun earlier in the year, with skills, game

preparation and conditioning, match analysis and indoor work.

It's a steep learning curve for both the Ukrainian and Russian Rugby Leagues. "We knew that the Russians had to continue their development if they were to achieve the standard necessary to compete at the Student World Cup," said Bennison. "So the chance to be able to help them at the same time as the Ukrainians was a great opportunity." The Russians scheduled their visit to coincide with the annual Memory Cup, named in honour of the late Ukrainian Rugby League founder Artur Martyrosyan Senior, who first played Rugby League for Vereya Bears in Russia before bringing the game home to Ukraine.

Three days of training for the teams participating in the cup under Pratt's supervision were followed by three days of competition between Rostov Students and local teams plus Nara of Moscow who had also travelled across the border from Russia. Rostov women's team also made the journey to pick up experience from the camp. The tournament was eventually won by Ukraine's Legion XIII, who had already benefited from Pratt's coaching when they toured England in 2011 and had improved enough back then to beat the established team at Leeds University. "The Ukrainians were at a higher level than

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positive. “Gareth and Julia brought their contagious enthusiasm which, coupled with Gareth’s sports psychology skills, helped the players through what was a period of intense competition. Although the team we brought was not the full Russian student world cup squad, we will use what we learnt at all levels of the sport.” With a student competition now underway in summer in Rostov, Kushnerchuk is looking towards further growth in his region. “Gareth’s coaching has inspired at least four of Rostov’s players to take up coaching and gain Level 1 certificates,” he went on. “And obviously our next target is the world cup.”

It is to be hoped the Ukrainians can follow in the Russians’ footsteps. There are now eight open-age teams and nine youth teams competing in the national championships. All 18 matches in the open-age 2012 championship were completed with Legion XIII taking the title ahead of Donbass Tigers, but the Tigers won both youth tournaments. More competitions are planned in different age groups and also for women with the cities of Krasnoarmeysk, Simferopol and Odessa expanding the spread of the sport, while recently four coaches completed Phase 2 of the Rugby League European Federation’s technical coaching strategy. But more than anything the Ukrainian RLF sees international competition and government support as the key to success, hence the administration’s delight in welcoming both the Russian teams and the British coaching delegation. The nation is also part of next season’s European Bowl, a competition Ukraine won in 2009, and will be playing matches against Norway and the Czech Republic.

“I hope the development work we are putting in continues to a higher level over the next few years,” says Pratt. “There’s a lot of work to be done in both Ukraine and Russia, but there is great commitment.” As Bennisson says: “Given the right support in development including international fixtures, their progress could be unstoppable.” If the Ukrainians avoid the mistakes made by other fledgling leagues, and they really do receive the backing they need, then maybe – just maybe – we’ll have a success story on our hands. True, Rugby League might not know what the heck to do if they pulled it off, so used are we to seeing our international ambitions implode in acrimony or a lack of support, but wouldn’t it be nice if it happened? ●

Even our coach driver was a team player, spending most of the days underneath the bus, fixing the latest problem. And Julia was a great translator, although her Ukrainian dancing needs to improve... ”

“It was great experience for all involved,” admits Bennisson. “And especially vital for the Russian students in their build-up to the world cup. But I was especially pleased to see the progress made in Ukraine from my first visit in 2006. From the outset they had a target of a national championship and a competitive national team. The championship kicked off in 2009, the same year that Ukraine began playing in European competitions. Since then they have progressed to become the 12th ranked European nation and are aiming even higher. Ukraine has achieved a good standard on and off the field very quickly down to hard work, dedication and a passion for the game. They have set themselves admirably high standards.”

Vladimir Kushnerchuk, coach of the Rostov students, and driving force behind the wider sport in southern Russia, was also

their Rostov counterparts,” says Pratt, “and they have developed well since I saw them in the UK. The coaching structure is strong and they are keen to learn. All the teams which competed showed real enthusiasm for Rugby League.” Significantly, both Ukrainians and Russians were interested in developing links outside their own countries and competing internationally in the near future.

The Ukrainian Rugby League vice-president Artur Martyrosyan Junior said: “We were impressed with Gareth Pratt when we met him in 2011 in England, and his recent visit to Ukraine was a gift to us. One session with Gareth makes a difference to us and in this case it helped Legion XIII win the tournament.”

“The facilities were superb, and all the players benefitted immensely from the experience,” says Pratt, “and not just on the field but learning about the game generally plus developing people skills and team spirit.

