



Newcastle Falcons Supporters Club

CHAIRMAN'S REPORT FOR 2009 / 2010

PREAMBLE

This is the last Chairman's Report that I will be writing.

After three years as Chairman of the Supporters Club, and six years as a Committee member, I am stepping down from the Committee.

In 'retiring' from the Committee, I believe that I leave the Supporters Club in a healthier position than it was in when I became Chairman.

The main task over the past few years has been to recover the Club's financial stability. This has been achieved, and at the same time we have developed the services offered to Supporters Club Members and improved the relationship between the Supporters Club and the Falcons to our mutual benefit.

From a personal perspective the most pleasing achievement has been the fact that we have been able to harness the goodwill and generosity of Falcons supporters to raise significant funds for good causes: in the past four seasons, Falcons Supporters have, under the auspices of the Supporters Club, raised more than £6,500 for good causes.

I have enjoyed my time as Chairman – well most of it – and I have had the pleasure to work with some good people on the Committee. But the time is right for others to take up the challenge.

Thank you for placing your faith in me as your Chairman. I trust that the report that follows – which reflects not only on the past season but also on the three years that I have had the honour to be Chairman of the Newcastle Falcons Supporters Club - demonstrates that your faith was justified.

SUMMARY

The 2009 / 2010 season promised much but delivered little to get excited about for Falcons supporters. Following the massive turn-around in players at the start of the season – twenty departures and seventeen arrivals – perhaps this was not surprising. At the end of the season the Falcons survived another relegation battle and now find themselves looking towards next season with a new Head Coach.

For the Supporters Club, the season saw us continue the process which began a few years ago of sorting out the finances whilst continuing to deliver services to Members.

A few seasons ago, when I took over as Chairman, I warned that we needed to get our house in order. At that time we were facing an end of season deficit of over £4,000 and we had made a loss of nearly £3,000 that year on away travel. As we had a little more than £6,000 in the bank, that was a situation that could not continue – we were heading for financial disaster.

I am pleased to say that at the end of the 2009/10 season we have achieved a small, but significant, surplus of nearly £600. Away travel – which was the biggest drain on our resources - is now under control: whilst we made a loss of less than £50.

We have delivered this turnaround in the financial position of the Supporters Club whilst continuing to develop the services available to our Members.

In 2009/10 we provided coaches to enable Falcons Supporters to travel to 11 matches.

In 2009/10 we provided 5 Talk-In events.

In 2009/10 we provided 7 other social events.

In 2009/10 we handed over more than £4,000 to charities.

In 2009/10 we provided our members with the chance to win many items of Falcons memorabilia – including five signed shirts and two signed balls - match tickets for three Falcons games, tickets to an International match, and tickets to the 'Big Bash'.

In 2009/10 we improved our website considerably and also provided four issues of 'The Review'.

In 2009/10 we continued to sponsor a Falcons first-team player and assisted with the refurbishment of the home team changing rooms.

In 2009/10 we continued to award our Player of the Month and Annual Awards.

Finally, in 2009/10 we increased our Membership Numbers – a symbol, perhaps, that we are delivering services that are valued and appreciated by Falcons supporters.

The Finances and Membership

At the end of the 2009/10 season we have achieved a small, but significant, surplus of nearly £600, the first surplus since 2004/2005, and the balance available to us in the bank is back above £5,000 once again, providing a cushion for investing in the activities that we undertake.

The improved financial position can be attributed to a number of causes:

- In 2009/10 the Supporters Club attracted 336 people to become Supporters Club Members, compared to 207 the previous year. As a consequence, Membership Income increased by almost £1,000 compared to last year (from £1,512 last year to £2,452 this year).
- Away travel – which was the biggest drain on our resources - is now under control: whilst we made a loss over the season, it was less than £50. This contrasts with the situation that existed between 2005/06 and 2007/08 when the losses incurred to provide travel were in excess of £2,000 per annum.
- Fund-raising for the Supporters Club generated a net income of £527.86, whilst Social Activities generated a further net income of £247.
- We received a generous donation of £400 during the year, partly to ensure the continuance of the monthly Player Awards. Whilst the benefactor wishes to remain anonymous, we are very grateful for their support.
- We achieved a small profit on the sale of ‘clappers’ and in the coming season we intend to make more branded merchandise available for Supporters Club Members to buy.

The key to regaining financial control over the past few years has been the management of away travel, and more is said about this in the next section of this report.

Whilst the number of people who choose to be Supporters Club Members is less than in the past, this is probably a reflection of the performance of the team rather than of what we offer as a Supporters Club. The increase in numbers in the last year is however perhaps an indication that the Supporters Club is moving in the right direction to attract members.

We have four Honorary Life Members: Rob Andrew, Dick Godfrey, Matt Burke, and Dave Thompson.

Away Travel

In 2009/ 2010 we have continued to fulfill our commitment to assisting Supporters Club Members to travel to away matches, ensuring in doing so that we provide a quality experience that is cost-effective.

There is little doubt that the organization of away travel places particular demands on those involved, and I am grateful to those who have taken on this task over the past few seasons, but particularly to Steve Richardson who has been Away Travel Coordinator this season: he has liaised with travelers, negotiated with coach operators, and still found time to dress up in some outlandish outfits!

Three years ago we vowed that the major losses that were being sustained on away travel– which reached a peak with the loss of over £3,000 sustained in 2006/07 - were no longer acceptable.

The Committee decided that whilst we would try every avenue possible to get people to away matches – including hiring smaller coaches – if a trip was clearly not viable it would not take place.

We want to get Falcons supporters to as many away matches as possible to cheer the lads on, but we cannot do so if it means threatening the financial viability of the Supporters Club itself.

This season we did not provide coaches to three matches: Bath, Cardiff and Wasps. Whilst disappointing, the lack of support for these trips is understandable given that they all involve considerable travel, two of them took place on a Sunday afternoon, and one did not kick off until 4.30pm and was televised! Had we taken coaches to these three matches we would have incurred losses in excess of £2,000!

To supplement coach fares income, we have developed a wide-range of on-board fund-raising activities – raffles for signed shirts, quizzes and fancy-dress competitions – and we have sought sponsorship.

The most popular trip in 2009/10 did not actually cost the Supporters Club a penny.

The Chairman of the Falcons, Dave Thompson, generously agreed to sponsor the coaches to the Friday night relegation decider at Sale. The Supporters Club organized the three coaches, the Club sponsors provided beer, and we were able to take 125 Falcons Supporters to Stockport, where they drowned out the home supporters and encouraged the players to give possibly the best, and certainly the most important, Falcons performance of the season.

In 2009/10 we provided 14 coaches to take 440 supporters (including 44 Juniors) to 11 matches.

During the season, total income was £6,628.55 whilst total expenditure was £6,676.00. Of the 11 away trips operated, only 4 made a surplus, taking into account fare income, sponsorship and fund-raising activities. Overall we made a loss of £47.45 on fourteen coaches, or £3.39 per coach - quite a contrast to the loss of £228.50 per coach being made two years ago.

The Supporters Club also provided advice and guidance for those who traveled to the European away matches – in Albi, Padova and Montauban.

Looking forward, organizing coach travel will continue to be a challenging task. Fuel price rises mean that price rises are almost inevitable and this will make away travel more difficult for supporters. The Supporters Club will continue to seek out the best deals it can because we know just how important traveling supporters are to the team.

Social Activities and Talk-Ins

The past season has seen a wide range of social activities for Supporters Club Members.

Last season we held two Talk-Ins – ironically, given what has happened recently, one was with then Director of Rugby Steve Bates, and one was Alan Tait.

This season we have held no less than five Talk-Ins!

The guests that were quizzed by Supporters Club Members included:

- The Coaching Team of Steve Bates, Alan Tait, Stuart Grimes, and Andy Smith
- Players Rob Vickerman, Gcobani Bobo, James Hudson and Jimmy Gopperth
- Players Tom Biggs, Filippo Levi, Josh Afu and Chris Micklewood
- Referees Dave Pearson and Craig Wrightson
- Academy and Community Foundation representatives including Mel Magee, Mark Laycock, Gavin Beasley and a number of young players

There have been other social events as well – organized by Emma, Helen, Margaret and Steve.

The season began with a gathering on the beach at Tynemouth as part of the Touch Rugby Festival, and with a Lions Family Day when we watched the Lions test from down-under on the big screen and provided lots of activities for adults and children alike.

Because we were unable to travel to Wasps we had an evening watching the match on the Big Screen in the Hiding Place, incorporating a buffet.

We held the annual Christmas Party in the Hiding Place with Chris Tame providing the entertainment. Not only did everyone who attended have a great time, but we made a surplus of £210 on the event.

In April we held a very popular evening with the supporters from Cardiff when they visited Kingston Park and we hope to build on this next season.

At season-end there was a repeat of the North vs South Quiz held for the first time last year. Closely contested by the nine players who were present, the evening ended in a draw and everyone, players and supporters, had a great evening.

The undoubted highlight of the social season, however, was the Ladies Night. Held in late April, this event saw over one hundred ladies enjoying dinner and much more with members of the Falcons squad. The event raised over £1,780 for the Community Foundation. Such was the success of the evening – magnificently coordinated by Stef Walter – that before the dust had settled on the event there were requests for it to become an annual event!

Supporting Players and the Club

We have continued to show our support for players in a number of ways.

In 2009 / 2010 the Supporters Club continued to sponsor Rob Miller.

Sponsorship allowed us to hold a draw to select some Supporters Club Members to attend the Sponsors' Dinner and receive Rob Miller's framed shirt. This will be the first prize in our Summer Raffle, whilst the match-day tickets that we received as part of the sponsorship package were made available as prizes in other raffles.

Rob is leaving the Falcons to join Sale Sharks, and we wish him every success.

We have continued to award Player of the Month trophies. The winners are voted for by Supporters Club Members and receive their trophy from one of those who voted for them.

The winners of the Player of the Month Award in 2009/ 2010 were:

- September 2009 – Rob Vickernan (Presented by Austin Ware)
- October 2009 – Micky Young (presented by Kay Bendelow)
- November 2009 – Micky Young (presented by Laurie Mawston)
- December 2009 – James Hudson (presented by Paul McLoughlin)
- January 2010 – James Hudson (presented by Beth Atkinson)
- February / March 2010 – Jon Golding (presented by Michelle Jenkins)
- April 2010 – Jimmy Gopperth (presented by Pat Heard)

We also presented a number of Annual Awards.

The Emerging Player award went to Will Welch.

The Unsung Hero Award went to the staff of the Hiding Place, who have shown tremendous support for all the activities organized by the Supporters Club.

In a closely-contested vote, Jon Golding was the choice of Supporters Club Members for Player of the Season. Soon after, Jon was called up by Martin Johnson to be part of the England squad for the tour of Australia!

The Supporters Club also contributed £550 towards the refurbishment of the player changing rooms (home-team only), and we know from feedback from players that this was much appreciated.

Communications

Communications is critical to the success of the Supporters Club: ensuring that Members are aware of what is planned and ensuring that the Committee is aware of the views of its Members.

A survey of Supporters Club Members a few years ago indicated that whilst two thirds of our Members had access to or used e mail, a significant number did not. Whilst I suspect that more Members may now use email and websites to keep abreast of events than did a few years ago, we should never lose sight of the fact that digital media is not the only, and certainly not always the best, means of communication. There is still a place for the face-to-face conversation post-match in the bar!

That said - we have embraced new technology.

Having flirted with various websites over a few years, last year we commissioned a professional website designer to revamp our website. The investment was worthwhile in that it has allowed us a new channel to publicize Supporters Club activities, and a means of streamlining the processes whereby people can join the Supporters Club, can book travel, can vote for their Player of the Month, and can register an interest in attending events.

To counter the risk that with the development of the website people will access our services without actually joining the Supporters Club, we have developed a 'Members Only' area and we intend to develop this further so that being a Member brings access to services and benefits not available to website browsers.

Combined with a growing use of email messages, we believe that we are now able to keep Supporters Club Members informed about Supporters Club activities in a much

more efficient and cost-effective way than we could previously (whilst not forgetting the needs of those who do not have internet access).

Another forum for publicizing Supporters Club activities has been the match-day programme - where our pages have also been graced by the musings of regular contributor 'Perry Green' and two contributions from a guest contributor this season - but we have reduced the number of Match Day Flyers that we produce.

The Review has been through a number of changes in the past few seasons. Two seasons ago we failed to produce a single issue of The Review, last year we produced two issues.

This year we have changed the format of the Review – producing shorter versions that are easier to put together and thus can be distributed more frequently.

We only cottoned on to this concept part-way through the year and whilst we managed to produce four issues, they were all distributed towards the end of the season. However we believe that we may have found the model for future issues.

By emailing the Review to Members and also making them and the Programme musings of Perry Green and others available in a "Members Only" section of the website, we have ensured that our Members get the benefits of these pearls of wisdom and amusement whilst avoiding significant postage costs.

We know that the Review is particularly popular amongst younger Supporters Club Members and those who cannot get to Kingston Park as often as they would wish. We are therefore committed to ensuring that it becomes a regular feature in the lives of Supporters Club Members.

Charity Activities

Three years ago the Supporters Club was very insular. It sought to look after its members but did not look beyond that.

Prior to taking over as Chairman I had already started the process of harnessing the goodwill and warm hearts of Falcons supporters for the benefit of charitable causes. That process has continued and Falcons supporters have responded magnificently – beyond my expectations.

In 2009/10, the Supporters Club has been able, thanks to your generosity, to hand over an amazing £4,642.72 to good causes.

- Cancer Research – in support of staff within the Hiding Place who have been raising funds for Cancer Research, we donated £358, the proceeds of various raffles held on away coaches and at social events
- Falcons Community Foundation – after hearing at a Talk-In of the great work that the Falcons Community Foundation does in the local community, we adopted them as our main charity, raising funds in various ways but primarily from the Ladies Night, so that we were able to donate £2,014.86
- The L'Aquila Earthquake Appeal – this was initiated in response to the tragic events in the Italian city where many Falcons supporters had such a good time in December 2005. Funds were raised last year and this year (including funds

initially intended for the Victoria Bush Fires appeal) and eventually resulted in a donation of £2,269.86 to help the victims of the disaster.

In addition to the funds directly raised for the Community Foundation, Supporters Club Members have assisted with the sale of Man of the Match Shirt Lottery Tickets on match days to help raise another £1,546 for the Community Foundation.

Over the past four years charities that have benefited from fundraising initiated by the Falcons Supporters Club have included:

- The Wooden Spoon Society
- Cancer Research
- Worcester Acorns Hospice
- Bath Hospice
- Ali Johnson Appeal
- Cash for Kids
- Falcons Community Foundation
- L'Aquila Earthquake Fund

In total over £6,500 has been raised for good causes by Newcastle Falcons Supporters Club activities in the past four seasons.

Thanks

Throughout the past three years I have received wonderful support as Chairman from all members of the Management Committee and thank each and every one of them for their enthusiasm and dedication.

Helen, Stef, Steve, Emma, Peter, Tony – I am grateful to all of you for your contributions.

However I particularly wish to place on record my thanks to Margaret Smithurst and Kevin Nergaard, who as Secretary and Treasurer respectively have provided consistent and invaluable support, and without whom we could not have achieved the turn-around in the fortunes of the Supporters Club.

I would also like to thank those at the Falcons who have provided support and assistance – in particular Dave Thompson, Mel Magee, Louise Dickinson, Anna Humphreys, and of course the players who have joined in so readily with our activities – especially Rob Miller, Phil Dowson, Tom May, Matthew and Alex Tait, Ian Peel, Geoff Parling, Mark Sorenson, Joe Shaw, Brent Wilson, Josh Afu, etc, etc

On a personal note I also thank my wife and family for their understanding and support. Being Chairman of the Supporters Club demands time. My family have allowed me that time and have provided a source of support and inspiration throughout the past three years – particularly when things were difficult. For better or worse, you will be seeing more of me this coming year!

Martin F Peagam

Chairman