



Widnes LDSL being put through their paces with a training drill

ROCKING IN THE RAIN: THE WORLD OF LDSL



It is a Wednesday evening in March in a small industrial town in the north-west of England. It should be taken as read that the weather is foul. The rain is lashing sideways against the faces of around 15 hardy souls as a beanie hat sporting, athletically built man barks instructions. "This is like herding cats, this!" shouts the man in a gregarious Lancastrian accent as a training drill falls apart in front of his eyes. This is, after all, the first training session of the new season. This is Learning Disability Super League.

The man is Sean Mellor, a former Leigh Centurions winger who is now the Community Development manager at Widnes Vikings. Widnes are one of a growing number of professional clubs

to field an LDSL side. The rules are the same, with one exception - tearing off one of two pieces of fabric attached to the waist of an opponent replaces the bone-crushing tackling of the senior game. The advantage of making the sport non-contact is that a truly diverse range of competitors are attracted. Players from the age of six to sixty have come through the doors of the DCBL Stadium to develop their skills. A broad spectrum of learning disabilities is represented amongst the competitors, from those with less pronounced forms of autism to those with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD).

Sean has been running the side for almost five years. Despite almost 'falling in' to becoming

Vikings LDSL coach, he has developed a passion for the role that shines through. He said: "They needed somebody adequately insured and badged up and they said would I do it? And a few people said to me 'Oh, you'll love it. You'll love it.' I was a bit sceptical, but you know what, I do absolutely love it."

Mellor recalls a match against his former side, describing a photograph of Leigh LDSL player Gareth Jones celebrating scoring a try as 'encapsulating the joy of sport'. He said: "We invited Leigh - who are in our division - to come and play at half time. Leigh have a decent travelling support. It was Leigh's LDSL team against Widnes LDSL team and it was great. I've coached all sorts of teams and people and this, that...

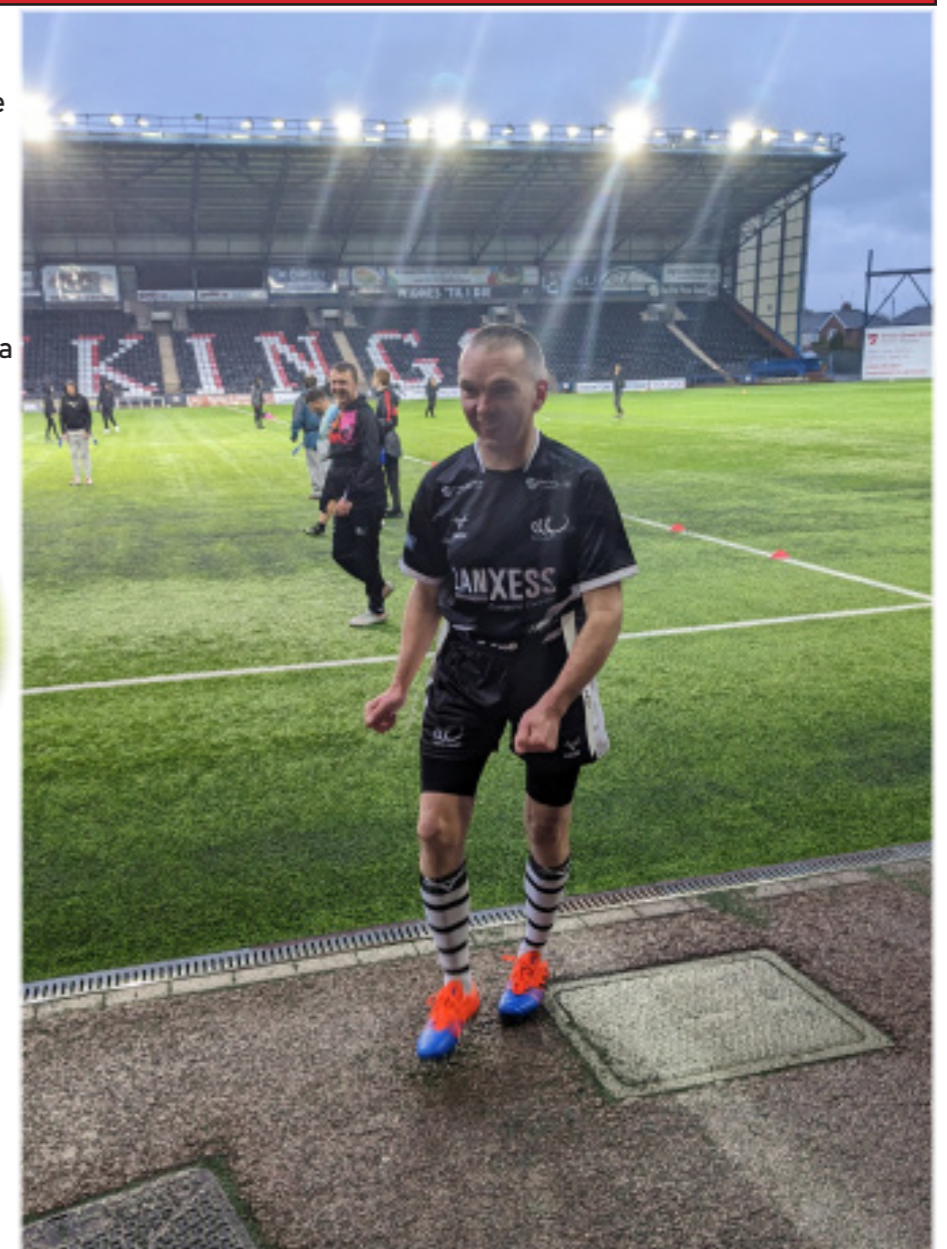
and the other. It sounds a bit twee, but if I had to list a few highlights, that would be one of them, because the fans, who can be a bit toxic at times, were absolutely united. "They loved this game at half time, and they cheered every try. It didn't matter who scored. If anyone watches the game, they'll see a load of people really, really having a great time."



"I'm a great believer in if you put people who are of similar ability on a pitch, they'll have an enjoyable, competitive game."

- Sean Mellor

Mellor manages the rare feat of remaining unflinchingly positive but never patronising towards his players. He refers to the group as his 'rockers' and receives several hugs of appreciation. Small achievements that would be taken for granted by most are picked up on and praised, whilst occasional lapses in attitude or performance are addressed with good humour. This is a view shared by Dylan Bunting, one of the squad's high achievers who has coached in local schools. He described Sean as: "A good coach, he's always enthusiastic. I just love playing the game. I played at Anfield in



David Roderick of Widnes LDSL

my first year here. I scored a try, but I'm a United fan!"

A team of dedicated volunteers help run the session, such as Sara Jones, who was presented with the 2022 Chairman's Award for services to the club. Jones works with Vikings LDSL player Ian Toole, and believes the sessions offer a vital outlet: "He enjoys going to LDSL as he makes friends. He enjoys scoring tries. Ian gets a lot of out of going as he has made a good friendship group, become part of a community and also it is great for his fitness and mental health."

In an age of increasing awareness of issues of diversity and inclusion, LDSL is providing a platform for sporting achievement that would not have been thought possible in previous years. Coach Mellor has the final word: "We like to think we are genuinely inclusive, and they get a lot from it. I'd much rather us never win a game than upset some of the players because they felt they had not been involved enough. "Most people feel like they've won, whatever the score. They've had a good time, they've improved, it's a win-win on so many levels."

Words and photos by James Cranford