

Lancashire U20s got their Jason Leonard U20 County Shield programme off to best possible start with an emphatic 69-0 victory over hosts Staffordshire U20s at the County Ground, Stafford on Sunday.

The “Beast from the East” weather front hadn’t quite made it by Kick off, in fact bright winter sunshine resting on a bed of clear blue sky was the order of the day as the squad left Preston on route South. It was noted on arrival at Stafford RUFC (not as easy as that sounds) that it was certainly “a bit Baltic” when the wind got up. Undaunted Lancashire Coaches Martin Scott & Neil Ryan sorted out a much needed warm-up for the Squad. Looking at the Team Sheet it was clear Lancashire had the edge, fielding 6 players who played for England at U18 or U20 last season plus several with Divisional experience. However nothing is ever won on paper and sometimes sides with a lesser perceived pedigree can cause an upset and no County XV at home are easy.

Staffordshire kicked off attacking the clubhouse and the first opening minutes were a little tentative however the first of many barnstorming runs from No.8 Hallam Chapman (Sedgley Park & MMU) penetrated deep in the Staffordshire territory and a couple of direct lines of running on the left flank opened a gap for Tom Carleton (Fylde & Lancaster University) to dart over for the opening try. Fly half Harry Finan (Vale of Lune) saw his conversion attempt just fail to the left of the posts. Three minutes later again with Chapman to fore along with Skipper Nick Ashcroft (Fylde & Lancaster University) driving deep once more, Staffordshire began to run out of defenders. The ball squirmed out of a ruck and in to the path of Tight Head Prop Matthew Woodward (Sedgley Park & Newcastle University) who like all good Props dived on it and set up another ruck..... except he didn’t, trapping the ball like a stocky Bobby Charlton he executed a weighted fly-hack toward the Staffordshire in goal area. Now the covering defender was faced with a race to the ball which had just about stopped over the tryline with a clearly eager Woodward following up, this Reporter is going to say that Woodward was quicker some may say the defender hesitated either way Woodward touched the ball down and put Lancashire 10-0 after nine minutes. Two minutes later some quick interchange of passes opened up a gap for Finan to run thru and score the third Lancashire try which he duly converted.



Pic: Winger Sam Fisher (Fylde) snuffs out a Staffordshire attack.

With the Staffordshire scrum on the back foot and a solid defensive line from Lancashire the Forwards created turnover ball in the home sides 22 which led to Flanker James Torkington (Fylde) crashing over for the first of his three tries, conversion good, Lancashire now 24-0 up after 19 minutes and the try bonus point secured. The busy Torkington dotted down again as Staffordshire just kept running out of defenders trying to stop the big Lancashire ball carriers, Finan added the conversion and it was 31-0 with 15 minutes of the half to go.

Hooker Ben Gregory (Fylde) was next over the whitewash following up another break down the left Flank. With 3 minutes left in the half Torkington completed a fine first half hat-trick from which Finan ended the scoring with another successful conversion.

Half-time Staffordshire 0 Lancashire 43

Lancashire changed the entire Front Row at the break and the opening exchanges saw a determined home side try to take the game to visitors in an attempt to get on the scoreboard. Lancashire weathered this and began to claw back territory. From a lineout on the Staffs 10 metre line the ball was moved quickly to the backs and Centre Will Hunt (Vale of Lune) ran a hard line under the posts from 30 metres out, Finan added another two pointer and 50 points rang up on the scoreboard.

Lancashire emptied the entire bench and replacement Flanker Alex Tenev (Firwood Waterloo) broke thru two would be tacklers to add another to the try tally on 66 minutes. The next try came courtesy of pushover for Chapman as the pack drove hard from a scrum on the 5 metre line and that was swiftly followed by Centre Sam Stott (Preston Grasshoppers) finishing off some decisive running and handling in the backs for the game's final score.

Good showing from all 22 Lancashire players and travelling reserve Rob Jones (Tyldesley) who despite the cold weather carried out H2O duties efficiently.

A good day at the office for Lancashire and a battling against the odds display from Staffordshire who never let their heads go down. Next up for Lancashire are Northumberland at Wigan on the 18th March.