



PENGUIN INTERNATIONAL RUGBY FOOTBALL CLUB

Rugby Football Union
Kent County RFU

Support Coaching to the Ukraine National Team Rugby Europe Trophy Match v Croatia, Zagreb 17th to 22nd October 2022

By Grant Hathaway and Craig Brown



Following the successful Penguin Charity Lunch held in London on 21st September to support Ukraine Rugby, the Penguin International Coaching Academy set up a coaching support trip to assist with the build-up to Ukraine's first competitive match in 2022, with their visit to Zagreb to play Croatia in the Rugby Europe Trophy Competition.

The Penguin International Coaching Academy was delighted to bring on board England Rugby's Coach Developer Grant Hathaway who was on his first Penguin assignment. Grant is a very experienced

Level 4 coach, has coaching at many levels and is a professional coach developer so was an ideal fit.



With the war back at home still being fiercely fought by their friends, family members and teammates, the best available playing group was assembled. The team had a long journey travelling all the way from Ukraine to Zagreb by bus – look on the map to see how far that is – it is close to 1000kms!

Penguin International Coaching Academy aims of the trip were simple; to help the group kickstart rugby back to being a point of pride for the country and a positive distraction to the difficulties they face elsewhere in life, through offering direct player coaching and coach support as an assistant to the team coaching staff.

Grant observed there was a considerable amount of skill, knowledge, and experience within the



playing and coaching group, so it was very much an idea sharing experience with mutual benefit. With so much to do when bringing a team together for a game like this, being an external who might provide a fresh pair of eyes would definitely add value. This meant at times being the “friend with questions” and at other times an “ally” to add energy and confidence.

Arriving on the Monday evening Grant was able to meet Sergei the backs coach and Oleg the trainer, who kindly came and sat while I had a late dinner. We did our best to converse about the basics of our

backgrounds and the job at hand. The first of many conversations where all parties had to concentrate, communication with very few English speakers in camp made for an interesting challenge.

The Tuesday was spent on the bus for two hours to the beautiful coastal town of Rijeka, where we explored town in wonderful warm temperatures, a welcome break from the English and Ukrainian autumns. This seemed like such an important day for everyone mentally, the chance to refresh and recharge amidst all the pressures of this week and their lives back home.

The Wednesday morning was the first session where Grant was straight into the action and asked to run a defence session. With the players being well prepared physically, Grant tried to implement some basic practices to encourage a few core principles which were pre-discussed with the coaches over breakfast.

There was mixed success due to Grant's ability to communicate, but he tried to pick up some words on the hoof and this at least got some laughs from the players! The beauty of rugby and especially defence, you can convey through emotion and encouragement which tend to be more international languages.

The players were good enough to perform whatever was asked, it was clear that keeping things simple and repeatable mattered much more for these players, having been dislocated from the sport for so long.

The general pattern was to train twice a day and loading for the players was relatively high. Moving to and from the hotel between sessions, players were able to eat heartily and rest in their rooms as well as going to nearby cafes and into Zagreb central. Typically, players would train for up to 90 minutes, practicing patterns of play and combinations in their unit skill work.

As the week ended the training tapered, and we encouraged much more player leadership. This is clearly something the coaches see as important and want to do more of leading into future matches.

On the occasional evening, the staff managed to enjoy one or two of the very fine local beers across the road from the hotel, discussing various topics from around the rugby world and progressively sharing more about each other beyond the common ground of sport.



It is tradition the night before the match for the host union to bring together representatives from each side, the match official team and the match commissioner, to speak ahead of the game and build relationships. The atmosphere at a small local restaurant was outstanding and Grant can testify with more of those tasty beers that were not mentioned earlier - I think (!) and an outstanding array of local dishes, vegetables, meats and then desserts.



After a lovely evening where some of us met for the first time and others renewing old friendships, we parted to ready ourselves for the game.

The match was played in front of a larger than expected crowd who were passionate in their support for the home side. However, a strong contingent supporting the men in blue and yellow were left in tears of joy singing songs of triumph after a nail-biting win of 22-27 to Ukraine. It was 86 minutes of brutally physical, confrontational, and exhausting rugby which had something for every rugby fan. The game itself had many swings of momentum, neither team ever really getting true handle or control. Perhaps typical of two very proud and committed nations throwing everything they have into the contest.

Even though the Ukrainians managed to have a good lead on the score board at half time, the Croatians were motivated by this and played a smart tactical game to quickly race back into contention. But as the replacement benches emptied Ukraine were able to do just enough and dig in to claim what will go down as a historic win for rugby in the country.

As Grant reflected, this match was the epitome of why I am still in love with the game and why everyone falls for it. It had full commitment from all players, staff, and supporters alike, in a truly visceral sense. Our sport is all action and this match had a long list of edge of the seat moments. When the final whistle went the contrast in emotions for each of the teams was the only shame in some senses, a wonderful host team in Croatia had contributed so much to this occasion. But perhaps it was fitting that Ukraine were able to hold on in this fight, too.



We worked hard together all week, building trust and respect but that period of time after the final whistle is a shared experience of celebratory tears and laughter that has forged friendships that will remain.