

Cllr Millard: Hello and welcome to episode 15 of Talk Richmond, I'm your host Jim Millard, and in this week's episode I'm talking to the Harlequins, the professional English rugby union team whose home ground is the Twickenham Stoop. Joining me from the Quins is Peter Cooper, head of operations, and later on we will be talking to Quinn's professional rugby player, Tom Lawday. We will be talking about the process of turning the Stoop into a mass vaccination centre and what this is meant for the Harlequins players. So, first of all, hello Peter. Welcome to talk Richmond

Peter: Hello Counsellor, thank you for having me.

Cllr Millard: It's a great pleasure. Peter, it's fascinating to hear, I mean, the stoop in Twickenham. I understand seats 14,816 spectators. Am I right?

Peter: That is very correct. Yes, very accurate.

Cllr Millard: and it obviously hasn't seen anything like these numbers in a very long time now. Sadly, very unfortunately, instead, though, the ground recently became a high capacity COVID-19 vaccination centre to help the NHS deliver the biggest immunization programme in its history. So, Peter, as Head of Operations you must have played quite a big part in organising this transformation, and I wanted to know more about this. Did the NHS request the use of the stoop and how did you have to prepare?

Peter: Yes, they did. I mean if we if we sort of perhaps start back we we've got a long-standing relationship with the NHS as we use the site or have done very regularly for blood donation sort of for a number of years now and the relationship very early on in lockdown sort of last March there was a request by them for us to sort of keep the facility open so that we could kind of continue to help them facilitate that that that part of their operation and sort of from conversations around that that developed into actually the plasma programme, which was a programme to sort of aid in the development of the vaccine and sort of trials and on the success of that, then came further conversations around how we might be really able to support the sort of the vaccination effort and use the site for that. I think there's sort of the unique, perhaps opportunity for us is, as you sort of mentioned already, that we're not really open, and we're not running sort of operations as we would do normally, and we aren't welcoming sort of those spectators in. But further to that, I the conversations with the NHS very quickly sort of moved into understanding what sort of level of support that they needed, really, and I think as a sports ground that has on-site facilities teams, has access to stewarding companies that can help with sort of people management that we can sort of very quickly sort of change or put in infrastructure to help.

Cllr Millard: Yes, absolutely, and it must have been a lot of work. I mean what specific changes did you have to make?

Peter: Very, very minimal sort of power requirements for equipment. There's a lot of sort of signage and information, sort of space markers, and if you're if anyone's familiar with the A316 you'll see a lot of signage sort of directing people to the right areas. And again, just making sure that we sort of manage the space and the flow around how people kind of come into the car park and then providing them with support of getting into the centre, making sure that it's all clearly identified that we've got sort of registration areas with hand sanitizer and have all the facilities available for people to come in and feel safe and obviously there's an amount of considerations around how and where people queue and what space is needed to be available and how we how we set up those rooms, sort of adequately to achieve this sort of the clinical requirements, but also then then obviously the sort of the wider broader considerations around sort of social distancing and how if we are bringing in the increased volumes of people that can happen in a safe manner.

Cllr Millard: Yes, well, it's quite clearly an amazing scale and as you say, bringing in these volumes. Do you know how many people have been vaccinated at the centre so far?

Peter: Yeah, we. We've just recently hit the 10,000 mark. So, a very opportune time to be sort of discussing this as we reach the 10,000 mark at the back end of last week, which was which was fantastic, and we probably will see a really increase in in in that number over the coming weeks, as we've been sort of probably on average, seeing about 500 people come through a day. But from yesterday so we have upscaled that to about 1000 people coming through the vaccination centre now. So, we've doubled the effort - or the team over there - have doubled the effort. And essentially, we'll be looking at consistently rolling out that that number of vaccines every day now moving forward, and aside from match days where we do close the facility, they are looking to open seven days a week and run through an operation 8 till 8 and really try and maximize the amount of people that we can have through that facility. So, we'll probably see that number jump up very quickly in the coming weeks

Cllr Millard: Well, that's fantastic and without the stoop, what are the players and staff having to do differently?

Peter: So day-to-day most of the staff are continuing to work at home with just a small team on site. And then we're able to kind of maintain that separation when the players come in for their team runs and again, we've sort of barriered off aspects of the stadium so that so the players sort of can continue with their usual match day preparations, as it were. And it's so far, touch wood counsellor, it's working well and we be hopeful that we can really continue that relationship through the summer and make sure that that it we have or we were able to support it, really continuing and sort of see those numbers increases as we go through the whole sort of vaccination effort as it were.

Cllr Millard: Absolutely, and I'm sure a lot of residents listing will be agreeing there, we really hope to see that. I just also wanted to ask about also about the Harlequins Foundation, which I'm aware it does a lot of work with communities in the local area, and obviously some of these projects might be on hold temporarily due to the lockdown, but can you tell us about the foundation and a bit more about the projects it delivers?

Peter: Yeah, sure, the foundation really is about using the club as a catalyst for social change and we really want to make a positive difference within the community. They see the sort of there is a power in sport and it can be used to drive sort of positive change and then they sort of focus in sort of three main sort of areas of skills, wellbeing and inclusion and really the Learn grow partnership, perhaps one of the key initiatives, is really about the development of children through physical activity and with a real focus on having fun and trying to sort of improve their physical and mental wellbeing. There's been a number of programmes that we've kind of had to move on online, just as a number of, sort of, people have had to and we've been running sort of physical activity programmes where we've been doing sessions, they recorded them live at the Stoop and then and then people or young people are able to sort of engage and go along with those. We've been developing or being hosting a series of webinars around equality, diversity and inclusion, and we sort of recently celebrated the anniversary of our sort of Pride match, which focused on the LGBTQ sort of role in sport and how we can sort of represent that community within the game. There's been support for sort of mental health and workshops, sort of based around that. We had offered our vehicles to deliver hot meals to vulnerable residents within the community as well - whilst continuing sort of a number of our education and employability programmes.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic, that sounds amazing. I have to say it will be great to revisit this when life returns to some kind of normal. In terms of getting spectators back into the Stoop, when do you think this is likely to happen? If you can say that and what measures will Quins have to take to support their return?

Peter: Our primary focus is around that May 17th. So, from that point we are on the understanding that we could potentially have up to 4000 spectators in the stadium. And that's really where we're focused on, and that would sort of include our last two fixtures of the season or the regular season against Bath and Newcastle. The planning is has been sort of really intensive, and as you can imagine, has sort of brought in a whole new array of differing sort of considerations for us and I mean really for me it starts with our safety advisory group – Again it's a sort of a very, it's an established sort of group for every sport stadium to have that's chaired by the Council and we we've been hugely supported by that group with our plans, and we take our considerations to them and there is, or there has been a real collaborative effort to really ensure that what we're proposing and how we would look to manage the return of spectators in a really safe way.

And we were obviously really fortunate to host a pilot last September, which really tested a lot of the initiatives that we that we were looking to adopt on these matches. And I think by all it was seen as a huge success and we continue really to sort of build on those, but perhaps just to kind of give you a bit of detail into some of that really, there's a lot of it is around that, that that communication piece early on and advising sort of spectators or our members what they can expect when, when they arrive and us defining a spectator code of conduct and how we need them to sort of a aider to the protocols that we have in place, whether that be things like wearing face masks throughout their day, listening to the instructions of stewards, following sort of one way flows around the ground, and ensuring that they understand the changes into the in the matchday experience and that they come fully briefed on what to expect. And listen, it broadens out to considerations around how do people get to the stadium speaking with sort of local transport providers around the capacities on networks. And again, sort of underneath all of this and within the communications with our safety advisory group, it is about limiting the impact of local residents in the area and just providing that that reassurance that we're going through all these steps.

Cllr Millard: Well, thank you very much for sharing all that is a great insight into what you've been doing and best of luck. Thank you very much, thank you. Thanks very much, Peter.

Cllr Millard: So now Tom, thank you very much for joining us on Talk Richmond.

Tom: Thank you very much for having me.

Cllr Millard: It's great to talk to you. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself how long you been playing with Quins and what position do you play in?

Tom: So, I'm a back rower. Usually place six or eight - there my kind of preferred positions. And I've been at Quins is my second season with Quins. Before Harlequins, I was at Exeter Chiefs for a couple of seasons and they pick me up through playing rugby at Exeter University, that's kind of how I got into the professional game.

Cllr Millard: Fantastic and obviously you know it's been great to be in Twickenham and then this happens and it's been quite a change. I was chatting to with Peter about all the work that's been done turning the stoop into a mass vaccination centre - what has that meant for you and your teammates?

Tom: To be completely honest, that hasn't changed a lot for us. We train down in Guilford so there's not a lot of time that we do spend at the Stoop. We usually do kind of, you know, a short team run there the day before a game, but you know the stoop turning into that vaccination centre, which is obviously great for the local community, hasn't really impacted us at all.

Cllr Millard: Brilliant, brilliant, and the key question, I think is, is it odd playing rugby without a crowd watching?

Tom: Yeah, it is strange. But it has been the norm now for quite a long period of time. There were probably eight or nine games last year that were played behind closed doors. And there's probably been about 15 this year, something like that. So, it is pretty normal which is a bit of a shame to be honest because you know big stadiums can be quite echoey and the crowd plays such an important factor in certain areas of the game, so you know we're looking forward to getting everyone back in and cheering us on again.

Cllr Millard: But it's great that you're able to play the games anyway that they are carrying on, and that's really important for people to be able to watch and remotely. And what about the impact of COVID more generally, have you or any of your teammates experienced COVID? And how else has it impacted your life as a professional sports person?

Tom: Um so. I haven't tested positive, however, in during the first lockdown I did lose my sense of taste and smell for 4-5 days, but at that time they weren't considered symptoms, so I'm not entirely sure if I've had it, I'll probably lean closer towards yes then no but as I said, since the testing programmes come in, I haven't tested positive, but

I think we've had 2 positive tests since they started testing week in week out, which is great shows just how much hard work the players are doing kind of outside of rugby to make sure that there being as safe as possible, but from what I've heard it's you know the players that have had it, you have had a tough few days and you know I've been pretty tired and haven't really been kind of back to full energy and proper fitness for a little while after they after they kind of get over it.

Cllr Millard: And I see from my notes you're 27 years young, is that right?

Tom: That's right, yeah

Cllr Millard: So, it's unlikely that you've been invited for your vaccine yet, but when it comes, will you be getting your vaccine?

Tom: Yeah, I think so. Yeah, yeah, I'm not going to turn it down. I'm definitely not a anti vaxxer and if it's going to protect people around me then then yeah all for it.

Cllr Millard: And I guess it's all part of helping us get back to a bit more normality and maybe yeah, starting to be able to have crowds again and exactly play live sport would be fantastic

Tom: Yeah, it's bigger picture stuff

Cllr Millard: what are you most looking forward to about the changes that can happen when we get our vaccinations?

Tom: Just going for a beer with a few mates. Just really looking forward to that. You know all the vaccination centres are doing such a great job and then they kind of contributing to making the UK a safer place so you know when that happens and when it's the right time. Yeah, just meeting up with a few mates I haven't seen for a long time and going down the pub having a few beers and then

yeah, as we've talked about previously getting fans back in the stadium and for them to be making a bit of racket.

Cllr Millard: Definitely. Yeah, it's all part of that, isn't it? So finally, I just want to ask for any non-rugby fans out there who might not know how you doing this season. How's it going?

Tom: we've kind of turned it around this - It's going really well at the moment. The first half of the season was fairly rocky. Ups and Downs couldn't really find consistent performances. There was a short break in in January where the European fixtures were postponed, their postpones until a later date but potentially cancelled. And so, we had two weeks, we kind of regrouped. There was our director of Rugby at the time, moved away from the club. Billy Millards come in and kind of taken over as a as a general manager,

Cllr Millard: Billy Millard? My name is Jim Millard, maybe he's like a distant cousin,

Tom: Mate, he's an Aussie.

Cllr Millard: Oh Right, probably not.

Tom: So yes, since that that's happened, we've managed to string some consistent performances together. We've won four on the bounce. And yeah, kind of out of the last seven games, we've won five, which is which is really good and picked up picked up losing bonus points in the losing games so haven't kind of lost them by big margins or anything. So yeah, there's a real buzz around the around the place there's you know, a lot of confidence spreading through the squad, which is great, and, you know, we really feel like we can do something pretty special this year, so hopefully we kind of continue on the path that we're going down. And yeah, we'll see what happens.

Cllr Millard: Brilliant, the mighty Quins. We're very proud of you will see as a local team and I know that a lot of people listening will be wishing all the best and all looking forward to as we say you know, getting back to it and doing that in a way that's safe and it works and it's been a pleasure speaking to you. Thanks very much for joining us.

Tom: Thank you very much having me.

Cllr Millard: It's been great speaking to Peter and Tom. It's clear that an incredible amount of work went into setting up the stoop as a vaccination centre and that this work continues whilst we work through the vaccination programme and you know on behalf of the whole borough, I'd like to thank all the amazing and NHS staff, volunteers and all those at the Quins and the Stoop who have helped to set up the site and are keeping it running. And of course, good luck to the Harlequins for the rest of the season. If listeners have any questions or feedback or encouragement for the Quins, do email us on [talk@richmond.gov.uk](mailto:talk@richmond.gov.uk). If you've enjoyed this episode, please do leave a review. Give us a good score. I'll try not to disappoint. Sorry about that. And subscribe even. Why not? It helps others find a podcast. I'm Jim Millard, thanks for listening.