



Andrew Le Chevalier (centre) with former upper sixth students Ollie Stonham and Ellie Lennon



Felsted: a rugby powerhouse

*In 10 years as Felsted School's director of rugby, former Wasps, Swansea and Grenoble prop **Andrew Le Chevalier** has turned the Essex boarding school into a powerhouse of the game, producing a steady stream of professional players and even an England captain or two, says **Nicky Adams***

Running out onto the pitch at Twickenham as captain of 2016's World Cup-winning England under-20s team, Max Malins became one in an increasingly long line-out of former Felsted students to hit rugby's big time. In 10 short years as the school's director of rugby, ex-professional player Andrew Le Chevalier has successfully created Felsted's own rugby programme, identifying and developing young players and putting them on an increasingly well-trodden path towards the game's top level.

"School rugby is becoming much more competitive – every year there's a new opponent who wants to knock you off your perch," says Le Chevalier.

He continues: "Like at most clubs, at a school there is often an idea that you have to have a winning first team. That's important, because the headlining team is what makes talented players want to come to the school, but you only have to look at South Africa and the other great rugby nations to see that grass roots programmes are the way to

ensure a steady stream of top-class players."

When Le Chevalier arrived at Felsted in 2009 at the conclusion of his own professional rugby career, he quickly realised the importance of looking at the rugby talent coming up. "I start at year 5, the under-10s," he says. "From there you start to build the techniques and a rolling ethos of success in the game. So I don't just coach the first team – I'm coaching everywhere, to lay the foundations for the future."

At Felsted, an all-through co-educational boarding and day school of 1,000 pupils, surrounded by rugby pitches in the north Essex countryside, the first 15 is not exclusively for sixth formers.

"Often year 11s are good enough," says Le Chevalier. "The older players act as leaders and mentor the younger ones, who are being exposed to two extra years of senior rugby and the inspiration to push on and take over the mantle when the time comes. This gives them a better opportunity to develop into all-round players, both physically and mentally."

This approach is certainly taking Felsted →

over the line when it comes to professional rugby success, and not just at club level. In recent years, the school has produced a number of young international stars.

Besides Max Malins, Charlie Kingham has also captained England's youth sides, Ehren Painter has just made his England debut, Rory Hutchinson played with the Scotland World Cup training squad, former upper sixth student Ollie Stonham played his debut for England U18s earlier this year and secured himself a professional Saracens contract post-school. Current upper sixth student Sam Bryan was selected for the England U17 spring training camp and has since been selected for England U18s and will represent them in the spring 2020 matches.

And although only touch rugby is currently on the curriculum for girls at Felsted, former upper sixth student Ellie Lennon played her first match for England Women U18s versus Wales in April 2019, scoring a try in the second half.

"At least one player a year leaves Felsted with an academy place or a professional contract," says Le Chevalier. "Some play at international level, of course; others go into National One or the Championship or they play for top university teams, even as freshers. One student, Tyler Tomlinson (who represented the national Lambs side in 2018 and 2019) has just secured a rugby scholarship at a top American university. The best players usually continue their rugby at a high level."

PASSION FOR RUGBY

Le Chevalier is well placed to advise on a career in rugby. "Rugby is my passion," he says. "My goal is to turn out as many professional players as possible, but I want them to enjoy rugby and experience all



it has to offer – the physical and mental challenge, the camaraderie, winning and losing. There's nothing like it."

However, as a boy growing up in Jersey, he admits he didn't even like rugby.

"My family has a football background – my father was a goalie and my brother could have turned professional. It wasn't until year 8 that my rugby-loving PE coach threw me the rugby ball and persuaded me to give it a go. I never looked back!

"At senior school in Essex I played for Saracens and Harlequins and from there I secured a contract with Wasps where I spent six years as prop, followed by two years at Swansea and then a stint at Grenoble RFC."

Le Chevalier was playing for Ealing Trailfinders in the Championship when he heard from an old school friend, Neil Stannard, who was at Felsted coaching

the rugby forwards. "He told me the school had a good team but the players just weren't gelling, so he asked me to help. They started to have some success and the headmaster asked if I would take on a new role as director of rugby. It meant I would need to leave professional rugby."

He made the leap, taking the job at Felsted and continuing as player-coach at Barking, helping the club to progress from National One to the Championship. "I became more involved at Felsted and realised I could put a lot of my experience as a player and a mentor into the students, so I gave up playing myself."

He confesses that he does miss being out on the pitch. "When it's been your whole life, it can be a gap to fill. My wife Katie reminds me that other players retire through injury, but I'm able to carry on coaching. The success and enjoyment I see on the students' faces when they're playing is great. It's all down to them now."

WHOLE SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

Le Chevalier's skills as a coach have also transferred to the classroom, where he teaches PE, and to the boys' day house, where he was appointed assistant housemaster before taking over as housemaster six years ago.

"The headmaster asked if I could replicate in the house what I do on the field," he explains. "It was something I never thought I would do. When you're playing, the field is your office and there's not much use of computers, apart from for match analysis. But the same kind of coaching techniques work – we're more of a team than housemaster and students.



ABOVE: Former Felsted School pupil Max Malins
LEFT AND RIGHT: Rugby training at Felsted School

“It’s a buddy-type role, like on the field. I listen to their ideas and they listen to mine. We work together and have trust between us.”

Being a teacher and housemaster gives Le Chevalier an insight into the students’ broader school experience and made him realise that there is a need for balance.

“Our first team winger is an outstanding actor and singer and we had to manage him through the last two school productions so he could still play first team rugby as well,” he says. “Most of the students here have talents in more than one area so it’s important that they make the most of all of the opportunities they have at Felsted.”

Sport is held in high regard in the school and there are plenty of resources at Le Chevalier’s disposal. “Felsted has rugby pitches on-site so we can train every day. Under-16s, -15s and -14s train three times a week and the first XV have a tailored training programme with training four days a week plus a video analysis session. We tend to coach for an hour rather than continuing for two or three hours. It’s important to make sure the players have enough downtime because I want them fresh for matches on a Saturday – and awake in the classroom!”

The school’s on-site gym is another bonus. “The gym manager is as enthusiastic about strength and conditioning work as I am about rugby!”

“He takes on the guys I believe have the potential to become first-team players and he devises individual programmes to build their flexibility, strength and endurance, developing them as athletes.

“We discuss the players and their progress all the time.”

Meals are a crucial part of the day at any boarding school, and at Felsted young rugby players are catered for specifically. “Players in professional academies have nutritional programmes drawn up for them, which we carry out here. The other players I advise and educate – we look at the weekly school menu and choose which

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foods they should eat, because there is such a wide variety of options here, all healthy.”

Even non-rugby playing students are keen to support the squad, including those with an interest in technology and media, who help out by filming matches for analysis. These are also shared with parents via the school intranet and increasingly requested by the opposition, as Felsted’s rugby reputation grows. “I always say no!” says Le Chevalier.

“We have had a few spies at matches too. Luckily I know many of the coaches of the other teams so I tend to wave to them on the touchline just to show I’ve noticed them!”

His rugby contacts have come in very useful as he helps to pave the way for his highest-performing players.

“I have a good working relationship with the rugby academies – geographically

Felsted is right in the middle of both Northampton Saints and Saracens – they trust my judgement.

“Similarly, the academies often suggest to me players they have seen who are of quality and would benefit from the education and the standard of rugby coaching we offer at Felsted.”

He also spots rugby talent outside of school by coaching the Lambs (originally

the independent school Barbarians) and by watching club rugby and school matches with his two young sons, who are pupils at Felsted prep school.

“I am very proud when friends of mine with children here at Felsted or in junior teams chat. It’s apparent that Felsted has a very good name for rugby.”

Consequently, there is no shortage of young rugby players who would like to train at Felsted. Scholarships are available, after a rigorous testing process and an interview with the headmaster.

The reward is the chance to develop at Felsted’s in-school rugby academy, where the commitment and facilities, coupled with inspiring coaching, ensures that Felsted continues to feed a steady stream of top-class players into the professional game. 

