

# RUGBY FOR ALL



**The aim of Wooden Spoon funded projects is to enhance the lives of children and young people with disabilities or living in disadvantage in local communities across the UK and Ireland.**

## INCLUSIVE RUGBY FESTIVAL OFFERS VALUABLE EXPERIENCE

It might seem like a long time ago now, but Saturday 8th June 2019 continues to live long in the memory.

On one inspiring, inclusive and hugely enjoyable day at Ballyclare Rugby Club, more than 900 young disabled people joined together to take part in the annual Wooden Spoon International Tag Rugby Festival.

A lot might have happened in the ensuing two-and-a-half years, but organiser Gary Dorman remains hopeful that a similar festival will take place in the not-too-distant future.

Recalling the festival, which attracted teams from across the UK to the small town in County Antrim, Gary said everyone involved had a day they would never forget.

He said: "The first festival actually took place in 2014 but the last one, in 2019, was our biggest yet.

"As the anniversary of the club was coming up, we thought this would be an ideal time to have it at Ballyclare Rugby Club.

We were fortunate to have a few British Lions attend from Ulster and we attracted 35 teams from the British Isles.

"It was such a fantastic event for so many different reasons. There was a great ethos and a bit of competition, but the overriding thing was just the taking part - rather than who wins.

In keeping with the community feel, everyone from Ballyclare's first XI to their minis section helped run the festival.

**"All the players made friendships which will last for years. Their friends and families were able to see them enjoying a day of fun and friendship and the whole community witnessed how young people with learning disabilities can play sport to a high standard."**

If helping to organise the event was special, what did it actually feel like to play in it?

Gary's son, James, explained: "I thought the festival was excellent. My favourite part was when I saw all the teams arrive and we got to play against teams from all around the UK."

Generous fundraising from Wooden Spoon helped organise the event and James admitted he would love to see a similar festival held in 2022.

He said: "It was all played in a great and friendly spirit but there was also a nice competitive edge which helped develop their understanding of the game.

"The players gained valuable experience in tournament rugby and against teams they wouldn't normally play. At the end of the festival, everyone got together and enjoyed a disco.

"There was a great, holistic, wellbeing feeling for everyone. Both physical and learning disabilities were able to participate alongside each other, there was a great camaraderie and it was all very inclusive.

"Having not been able to for the last couple of years, we would love to organise a similar event so hopefully it will be a case of watch this space!"