

League 1

Stags chase Herts and minds

Training nights will be closer to home in 2018. IAN HENSHAW chats to new Hemel coach Jack Howieson

With the Dewsbury experiment consigned to ignominy, and even though they are undertaking most of their training in Sheffield this season, the priority for Hemel Stags has been to signal a return home.

Caught between a rock and a hard place – having entered what they were told was a development league when going semi-pro after 30 years in the community ranks, only to find it an ultra-competitive one instead – the Stags tried to improve their access to necessary playing resource by, in effect, moving to West Yorkshire and returning to Hertfordshire to play games.

Local players were disenfranchised, loyal fans were turned off and the exercise proved to be counterproductive.

So when long-serving coach Troy Perkins left at the end of last season it made sense to link with one of their own as his replacement. Step forward Jack Howieson, native of the borough, introduced to league at the Stags during the amateur days before enjoying a long career at Sheffield Eagles, retiring in 2013.

Now 36, a man who can also boast Scotland international credentials is the archetypal local boy made good.

“I knew I wanted to do it straight away, but was unsure about how it would work,” he says back on his happy hunting ground. “But when I knew that it would be based in Sheffield it made the decision a lot easier. I have a business here and three children, so travelling regularly was not an option.

“I’m proud of being from Hemel and I have such good memories from my time at the club. I literally spent every day there between the ages of 15 and 18.”

Persuader-in-chief of him taking up the cudgels again was Stags chairman Bob Brown, a feisty, intense Aussie who built the club and their Pennine Way ground from virtually nothing, instituted a lottery that many professional outfits would be proud of to fund it, and then took most of the flak for the Rams ‘initiative.’

Howieson recalls: “Bob had a massive influence on my development as a player. It’s only as I’m older and look back that I realise this. He employed me at the club in various roles; glass collector, bar staff and night watchman so I



Confidence boost: A 16-year-old Jack Howieson, back row, fourth from left, lines up with the Stags’ Academy team at Pennine Way. Inset: Some two decades on, he is preparing to coach the League 1 side

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didn’t have to get a ‘real’ job while I was at college.

“He was also the one who encouraged me to start my coaching career with the junior age groups from the age of 16.

“I remember my first game for the U16s in the old English Schools competition. We played Oldham, who had a number of future professional players in their ranks. One was Kevin Sinfield, he captained them

that day. I was skipper for Hemel, we were a bunch of misfits and ended up losing 96-0.”

Such an education was par for the course in his early days and served only to strengthen Howieson’s resolve.

“I’ll never forget making my debut for Hemel’s first team a few days after my 16th birthday,” he says, with a wistful look

Skipper: Hemel’s Joe Sheriff at the 2018 launch in Huddersfield *SWPix.com*

into the distance. “We played in the Alliance League [a bona fide reserves competition, somewhat ironically given the current debate] away at Rochdale.

“At the time, we had loads of Aussies and Kiwis in the squad and I really looked up to them. I held my own. It was a massive boost for my confidence and it was at that point when I realised that I actually had a chance of playing professionally one day.”

He did that with distinction, making 275 appearances for Sheffield, including captaining them to a Championship Grand Final win over Featherstone, and donned the Bravehearts jersey 11 times, including during RLWC2008. He was a redoubtable, reliable, hard-working prop, qualities he now wants to instil in his charges.

“League 1 will be a tough competition. There are obviously some very established sides who, with their current squads, would compete in the Championship, so there are going to be some really tough games.

“But I’m just looking forward to getting going. I like a challenge. I want to create a squad that are close and want to play for each other – that’s half the battle.

“Last year, we were on the end of a couple of thrashings from the clubs at the top of the table and we are working hard for that not to be the case this season. We want and need to be competitive if we are to win back our respect.”

