

## 1st XV rugby squad trip to Edinburgh for the Merchiston Castle Festival 2022

With the introduction of the 2 week half term the 1st XV were available to enter the Merchiston Festival for the first time. A tournament very much in its infancy it was lovely to get a slot to test ourselves against opposition we don't normally play against on our usual circuit. The group stages pitted us against Uppingham, Ipswich and St Benedict's with the position in the group dictating our place for the Sunday knock out stage.

The tournament started exceptionally well taking early control of the Uppingham match and bolting out to an early lead. The forwards looked in fine fettle and we controlled the game well. Uppingham came back towards the end of the game, but we were in the driver's seat and won out comfortable 17-7 victors.

The next game was played against Ipswich School, eventual winners who it's fair to say had some gargantuan teenagers in their side. Having watched them dominate the St Benedict's team it was clear we'd have our work cut out. We again started brightly, working extremely well as a group in defence, on kick chase and hunting together going forward with the ball. Whilst we conceded one try in the first half, we created two gilt edged opportunities of our own and a 7-5 half time score to Canford would have been deserved. Sadly, both opportunities slipped from our grasp, and we ended up going in 5-0 down but still well in the hunt. The boys really fronted up in this match, but Ipswich had a little too much firepower in the end. The result was 17-0 to Ipswich but a very credible performance from the Canford boys across the board having much to feel proud of. Effort and determination were excellent and there were some great moments in terms of game management and tactical nous.

The next game saw us up against St Benedict's. We were notional favourites for this match given our performances so far and Benedict's loss to Uppingham. Unfortunately, things didn't quite go to plan with an extremely fired up Benny's catching us after the Lord Mayor's show late on the first day's play. Inconsistency has been something of an Achilles heel this season and it reared its head once more. We started well enough taking the lead and looking set fair to control the game, but Benny's weren't going to let us get away with an easy ride. A mix up in our dead ball gave them a way in and then our discipline started to slip allowing St Benedict's opportunities to gain ground up the field and relieve pressure when we were pushing hard for another score. The game finished 5-17 to our opponents and something of a disappointment after two gutsy performances earlier in the day.

By a quirk of the competition, we qualified 2nd in the group and proceeded into the top half of the draw. Our first opponents for Sunday would be Boroughmuir, a team whose coaches had been talking themselves up all Saturday. Despite feeling a little heavy legged from Saturday's efforts, the Canford boys dominated huge swathes of this match up, we did however spurn a couple of easy goal kicking opportunities with the wind behind us and whilst we looked like we might break the dam at any moment and unleash a flurry of scores the Boroughmuir defence held firm and we had to make do with a 3-0 lead at half time. Playing into a strong wind it looked like Boroughmuir might have the advantage now but time and again the Canford defence was excellent in its collective effort and the scrum made huge gains as it has done for large parts of the season so far, giving us opportunities to relieve pressure through penalties or by winning balls against the head. Boroughmuir did knock a penalty over to tie things up and despite our best efforts to see them off the game ended up going to golden point. By his point in the game, we'd had a few decisions go against us and in the golden point period we did struggle

to manage to referee. After conceding a string of penalties we found ourselves defending a series of lineouts and attacking thrusts close to our line. The defence had been excellent up to this point, but Boroughmuir did manage to squeak over eventually and steal the game 8-3. Once again, a game that slipped away after a sterling Canford effort overall and on another day a result we could have ended up on the other side of.

The Seaford match was another gutsy performance but for a couple of lapses in concentration we once again controlled and led most of this tie, with Seaford rallying to steal the victory in the dying moments. We look forward to hosting Seaford in a couple of weeks' time in our block fixtures. A match we should be capable of repaying the favour with interest in.

By now the squad was showing some wear and tear, which had an impact on the rotation of fresh legs to inject into the fray. Barnard Castle was a similar story, on another day the game could easily have ended in our favour, even though we looked a little out on our feet we went ahead early. They came back at us, we then worked hard to nudge ahead once more and then the heartbreak of Barney's just going ahead at the death to seal the game.

On the face of it won one lost five might not seem like a productive weekend's work but these trips are valuable in lots of tangible and intangible ways. The competition volume itself is useful as a learning tool. The determination of our squad to keep going over the two days is another successful area. Several boys put in a great shift over the course of the weekend and demonstrated their steely leadership qualities. Some of the rugby played both in its sheer power or magical intricacy cannot be overlooked. We have ability across the park and every boy in the squad had moments to show their team mates just how capable they are as players; it is a joy to see. Our lineout and scrum are two areas of real strength and it's great to see how we're able to use these weapons to our tactical advantage. We need this to continue into the 2nd half of term.

We also got to spend quality time together as a group, something all high performing teams need to do, singing together and sharing 18th birthdays. The importance of these moments in each other's company cannot be overestimated and stand us in good stead go forward into the remaining XV's fixtures. This is a useful trip that we can look forward to repeating for the years to come with benefits we hope to see beginning to blossom in the coming terms.





