



Yorkshire's Adam Lyth.

Just two County Champ divisions

THE County Championship will return to a two-division structure from next season, meaning Yorkshire will be back playing in Division One. The previous two seasons have been played under a different structure during the pandemic, with the introduction of the Bob Willis Trophy in 2020 and a three-group seeded system used for the 2021 campaign.

This return to two divisions will see the Championship played under the conditions originally agreed by the counties in 2018.

That will see 10 teams playing in Division One and eight teams in Division Two - with a two-up, two-down promotion and relegation system.

Each county will be placed into the division they would have been set to compete in had the 2020 County Championship taken place, with Lancashire, Northamptonshire and Gloucestershire having won promotion to Division One and Nottinghamshire having been relegated to Division Two.

The return to two divisions, where each team will play 14 matches, was voted through by the first-class counties.

2022 Division One: Essex, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Kent, Lancashire, Northamptonshire, Somerset, Surrey, Warwickshire, Yorkshire.

● Two of Yorkshire's players are heading out to Australia this winter.

Harry Brook, who averaged nearly 38 in first-class cricket in 2021 and was among the top 10 run scorers in both the T20 Blast and The Hundred, has been signed by Hobart Hurricanes to play in the Big Bash League.

Meanwhile, his fellow Yorkshireman Matthew Fisher has been selected in the 17-man England Lions squad to tour Australia. He will depart on November 4.

IN TIME OF STRIFE, LET'S LAUD RUGBY UNION



SPORTS DIARY

by NATHAN ATKINSON
Sports Reporter

IT'S been a tough old 19 months hasn't it?

Life as we knew it shut down last March due to the coronavirus pandemic, and even now, things still aren't quite back to normal.

Well over 150,000 UK citizens have lost their lives due to the virus, but the impact goes way beyond even that devastating statistic.

There are thousands still suffering with the effects of long Covid, which has meant several previously fit and healthy people suddenly cannot work, play sport, meet friends for drinks, all things they took for granted a short time ago.

And what about the mental toll of the pandemic?

I have struggled on and off with anxiety and depression for over a decade, but the impact of Covid saw me plumb new depths.

Fingers crossed, I'm back on the right track, but it hasn't been easy.

Anyway, enough about me, how is this relevant to a sporting column you might ask?

Well I wanted to talk about rugby union, a sport which has arguably suffered more than any other during the pandemic.

Cricket, incredibly, has managed almost two full seasons of action. Football, while stop start, came back late last summer. Rugby league began again months ago, while golf and angling barely stopped in 2020 before they got going again in some form.

But when our local union teams played on March 14, 2020, little did they know they wouldn't return to proper competitive action again until last month, with a handful of friendlies, many with adapted rules, the only games they had in between.

It cannot have been easy for those involved in the amateur game.

Imagine how it impacted poor Neil Spence, Bradford Salem's head coach.

He spoke candidly to the T&A last December about his early onset dementia diagnosis, saying: "It's a daily struggle, just doing chores takes a lot longer than normal, things I used to be able to do in my sleep.

"Lessons at school and sessions for rugby take more planning.

"The worry is that it gets worse and I can't do those jobs any more.

"There's no definitive prognosis as such, it could be a rapid decline over the next 10 years, or it could be a slow one where I plateau.

"People have said it's changed my personality, where I used to be very outgoing, now I'm often anxious, confused and depressed."

It hardly bears thinking about, dealing with all that in the middle of a pandemic, when you haven't even got the solace of competitive matches



Bradford Salem head coach Neil Spence (right) has had a tougher last 19 months than most people.



Wibsey (dark shirts) taking on Bramley on Saturday. Pic: Alex Daniel.

to think about, a staple of rugby union every single winter.

And even though that is an extreme case, what about the average player; and how much they missed out on?

Talking last month about the lost time at Baildon, their player/head coach Jake Duxbury said: "We've been away for so long and there were so many ups and downs in that time.

"You'd be getting told you could return, and then all of a sudden, you couldn't, so it's exciting to be back.

"Personnel wise, we've made a few new additions to the squad, but a few lads have left to chase employment and money elsewhere, which you can't blame them for."

Keighley head coach Dan McGee admitted in January that protecting the squad's mental health was a priority.

He said back then: "On the playing side of things, we've kept going since day one of this pandemic.

"When we've been able to hold

training, we've averaged about 25 lads per session.

"We're not playing games, but we're working hard for when we can again.

"It's a fitness and social thing too, and it's helped everyone's health and well-being."

Those comments from McGee came just a few days after the country was placed into what turned out to be a three-month national lockdown, so there is no doubt that much of that positivity was eroded in that time.

But with some sevens tournaments taking place from June, and 15-a-side friendlies beginning again the following month, the good weather brought a few rays of sunshine.

There was further good news from the Rugby Football Union ahead of the season, with scrums and mauls finally reintroduced into the game, a welcome relief for forwards up and down the land.

And so it came to pass, that 18 months on from the start of an event in the UK which has changed all of our lives, rugby union came back as normal on the first weekend of September.

Keighley are now flying at the top of Yorkshire Two, while Wibsey and Bradford & Bingley are floundering at the bottom of Yorkshire Three and North One East respectively.

But in the grand scheme of things, who cares? Rugby union, and our lives, are slowly, hopefully, getting back to normal.