OPENING WEEKEND

EVENT PROGRAMME 2026



31th October and 1st November 2026

Sir David Wallace Building, Loughborough University

WELCOME TO OPENING WEEKEND 2026

It is my absolute pleasure to welcome players, coaches, officials, volunteers and supporters to Loughborough University, the home of English volleyball, for the opening weekend of the 2026-27 Super League season.

There is always a real sense of excitement and anticipation at the start of a new season, but this year feels particularly special as, for the first time, every team will play twice across the weekend, providing a fantastic showcase for the very best in our domestic game.

While the summer may have been a quieter period on court, a huge amount of work has been taking place behind the scenes. Working collaboratively with our Super League clubs, we have continued to invest in enhancing the competition, including improved performance analysis technology through HUDL/VolleyMetrics, alongside the introduction of Event Team Managers to help elevate the matchday experience for players and spectators alike.

These developments reflect our collective ambition to continue raising standards, strengthening the identity of the Super League and creating a competition that everyone involved can be proud of.

Of course, defending champions London Giants (Men) and Durham Palatinates (Women) will be eager to pick up where they left off, while I extend an especially warm welcome to those clubs joining us following promotion from NVL Divsion 1.

Finally, my sincere thanks go to our referees, volunteers, clubs and everyone working tirelessly to make this weekend possible. I would also like to recognise MAAREE and DYNAMIK, our respective Women's and Men's Super League sponsors, for their continued commitment and support. Enjoy the weekend, and here's to another fantastic season of Super League volleyball!

Charlie Ford

Charlie Ford,
Volleyball England's Chief Exective Officer



MAAREE WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE

DYNAMIK MEN'S SUPER LEAGUE

SATURDAY 31ST OCTOBER FIXTURES

11:00 - Women

University of Nottingham V London Giants

Ignacio Diez
FIRST REFEREE

Francesca Bentley
SECOND REFEREE

11:00 - Men

Malory Eagles V Newcastle Staffs

Joseph Gore
FIRST REFEREE

Fiona Cotterill
SECOND REFEREE

13:00 - Women

Malory Eagles V Newcastle Knights

Gianni Allan Sutton
FIRST REFEREE

Klaudia French
SECOND REFEREE

13:00 - Men

Essex Rebels V University of Nottingham

Anna Justkowska
FIRST REFEREE

Chris Tsui
SECOND REFEREE

15:00 - Women

Essex Rebels V Durham Palatinates

Fiona Cotterill
FIRST REFEREE

Ignacio Diaz
SECOND REFEREE

15:00 - Men

Richmond Docklands V London Giants

Joseph Gore
FIRST REFEREE

Francesca Bentley
SECOND REFEREE

17:00 - Women

Lionhearts Vinarius V Team SideOut Polonia

Chris Tsui
FIRST REFEREE

Klaudia French
SECOND REFEREE

17:00 - Men

Newcastle Knights V Team Essex Blaze

Gianni Allan Sutton
FIRST REFEREE

Anna Justkowska
SECOND REFEREE

MAAREE WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE

DYNAMIK MEN'S SUPER LEAGUE

SUNDAY 1ST NOVEMBER FIXTURES

10:00 - Women

London Giants V Essex Rebels

Katarina Cepinova
FIRST REFEREE

Giordano Marchi
SECOND REFEREE

10:00 - Men

University of Nottingham V Malory Eagles

Richard Burbedge
FIRST REFEREE

Fiona Cotterill
SECOND REFEREE

12:00 - Women

Newcastle Knights V Lionhearts Vinarius

Roberto Rigante
FIRST REFEREE

Sarah Hanrahan
SECOND REFEREE

12:00 - Men

Newcastle Staffs V Essex Rebels

William Perugini
FIRST REFEREE

Elia Gironacci
SECOND REFEREE

14:00 - Women

Durham Palatinates V Malory Eagles

Giordano Marchi
FIRST REFEREE

Amy Dimmock
SECOND REFEREE

14:00 - Men

London Giants V Newcastle Knights

Katarina Cepinova
FIRST REFEREE

Richard Burbedge
SECOND REFEREE

16:00 - Women

Team SideOut Polonia V University of Nottingham

Elia Gironacci
FIRST REFEREE

Sarah Hanrahan
SECOND REFEREE

16:00 - Men

Team Essex Blaze V Richmond Docklands

Roberto Rigante
FIRST REFEREE

William Perugini
SECOND REFEREE

MAAREE

OFFICIAL WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE SPONSOR

MAAREE WOMEN'S SUPER LEAGUE

DURHAM PALATINATES

HEAD COACH: Paul Welsh

TEAM ROSTER

Valerie Bruk - Middle

Defne Cinar - Outside

Natasha Frost - Outside

Soniya Kandrashuk - Setter

Melissa Morelli - Setter

Cadence Nguyen - Libero

Sylvie Poupaert - Libero

Emma Symon - Middle

Xeva Oldridge - Outside

Jennifer Rates - Libero



DURHAM PALATINATES

The reigning MAAREE Women's Super League champions and double winners will be among the favourites again after another busy summer of recruitment when it comes to North American scholars.

But, as the 24-25 campaign showed, there are no guarantees at this level, with the Palatinates flirting with relegation before being able to secure their top-flight status.
Head Coach Paul Welsh says the club will run with a smaller bank of players for 26-27, having had an embarrassment of riches and huge squad depth in 25-26.

Nevertheless, Durham will bank on their recruitment being strong, and the latest influx of talent includes Setter Melissa Morelli, Libero Cadence Nguyen, Outside Xeva Oldridge, Middle Emma Symon and Middle-cum-Opposite Valerie Bruk, who all boast a high pedigree from their time in the US.

Promising young Brit Jennifer Rates, who played for England at the U20 Beach European Championships this summer, has also made the move to Durham. Among those retained are former England juniors Natasha Frost and Sylvie Poupaert and Turkish player Defne Cinar, ensuring there will be some level of continuity and passing on of the team culture.

A host of stellar names have left following the end of their courses, not least last season's MAAREE Women's Player of the Year, Chloe Thomas. That said, Welsh still wants to be battling it out at the top end of the table "We have lost a few players last minute, but we are still working hard to bring players into the roster.

"I know it's a bit of a cliché, but every single player is important to us... that's how it always is. Everyone needs to know they are valued and part of Team Durham.

"Our goals for the season are the same as always. To be as successful as we can possibly be in everything that we enter. We have a great team and a great culture again this year, so, like last year, we are ready to test ourselves and see what we can achieve.

"We know that going back to back is extremely difficult to achieve and we know teams will be out for revenge. We're looking forward to an extremely competitive season."

VS	Essex Rebels
15:00 Saturday 31st October	

VS	Malory Eagles
14:00 Sunday 1st November	

KEY PLAYER
Valarie Bruk

The 'super-athletic, energetic' middle with infectious enthusiasm has also appeared as an Opposite in the past, having played for both Portland Pilots and San Mateo College in her native USA.

ONE TO WATCH
Melissa Morelli

A talented setter who brings valuable experience to the roster of defending champions Palatinates, having previously played for Hamilton College in the USA.

ESSEX REBELS WOMEN

HEAD COACH: Alex Chinery
ASSISTANT COACH: Euan Fraser

TEAM ROSTER

Heidi Bright - Middle

Marli Cetinich - Opposite

Hannah Cole - Setter

Kate Fundafunda - Outside

Haley Gilfillan - Middle

Danai Karaoli - Libero

Tara King - Opposite

Kate Mitchell - Outside

Sydney Morland - Middle

Hannah Reynoso - Libero

(C) Clare Sheedy - Setter

Catherine Tolley - Middle

Alhana Velazquez - Outside

Lilla Whittaker - Outside





ESSEX REBELS WOMEN

Having finished runners-up at Super League Final 4 to double winners in each of the last two seasons in Malory Eagles (24-25) and Durham Palatinates (25-26), the Rebels have been mightily close to success – and it's an obvious goal for the team to go one better this season.

As is often the case with university programmes, where players have finished their studies, there has been a steady churn of players at the Colchester-based team.

Five of the starting seven have left for new pastures – influential, long-serving Lea Borovec, Makena Smith (now playing in Germany, Elayna Duprey (now playing in Greece), Kathea Schamblin and Savannah Spitzer.

But Head Coach Alex Chinery - also coach of England Women's U18 team that played in the NEVZA Tournament in Denmark in early October – is excited about the talent he has recruited to replace them.

They include four American scholars, led by former NCAA Division 2 All-American Sydney Morland, who will 'light things up' and is expected to be one of the top-performing attacking Middles in the MAAREE Women's Super League, with the help of an approach touch of 10ft 5ins.

Also joining the Rebels for 26-27 are Setter Claire Sheedy, Outside Alhana Velasquez, who Chinery says 'hits the ball harder than anyone I have ever seen', experienced libero Hannah Reynoso, English prospect Yasmin Baptiste and Mia Lee.

Just as important has been the retention of some influential performers from last season, including Canadian Middle Haley Gillfillan, Opposite Tara King and Outside Lilla Whittaker, who all have big roles to play.

Brits Kate Fundafunda, at Outside, and Catherine Tolley, in the Middles, will provide competition, while Danai Karaoli is back from shoulder surgery to challenge for the libero position.

Chinery remains committed to finding the best mix of homegrown talent and overseas import and hopes 26-27 could be the Rebs' year.

"I think we will be in a really good spot this season because the English athletes we are relying on are now super-experienced and have grown to a higher level," said Chinery.

"We have more depth this year and I think that was the killer (last year). Player for player we could match them (champions Durham) at times, and we saw that in the gold medal match.

"They had the options to change things to come back and be really successful against us, but I think the growth we have seen in pre-season means we now have that and I'm excited to see what this group can do."

KEY PLAYER
Claire Sheedy

A creative and experienced American setter formerly of Wingate University who will take on the captaincy role and who is described by Chinery as 'an all-round great person and someone you want on your team'.

ONE TO WATCH
Lilla Whittaker

Converted from a Middle to an Outside two years ago, the Englishwoman has had to be patient for her chance, but the Rebels feels she has now really started to come into her own, and she is expected to push for a regular starting berth.

VS Durham Palatinates

15:00 Saturday 31st October

VS London Giants

12:00 Sunday 1st November

LONDON GIANTS WOMEN

HEAD COACH: Alireza Toloo Khan

TEAM ROSTER

Manuela Nasser - Setter

Miri Francis - Opposite

Nathaly Ramirez - Setter

Grace Lazard - Middle

Angela Egonu - Outside

Laura Fernández-Rey - Outside

Maria Grabovetcaia - Libero

(C) Venous Khodabandehlou - Libero

Leila Anderlini - Opposite

Anna Brady - Middle

Giulia Miuccio - Middle

Chiara Desole - Middle

Yenlik Rahimova - Libero



LONDON GIANTS WOMEN

It's been a meteoric rise for London Giants women, who were admitted to the NVL in the 2019-20 season and now, eight seasons later, are ready to make their MAAREE Women's Super League bow.

Last season saw the club sweep all before them, remaining unbeaten throughout their Division 1 South league campaign. They also demonstrated their credentials in the National Cup where they dumped out Super League Lionhearts Vinarius (London) at the last eight stage and were far from overawed in defeat to eventual double winners Durham Palatinates.

Those experiences bode well for the coming campaign, especially with new Head Coach Alireza Toloo Kian at the helm, who has notched up more than 20 years of experience at elite club and international level, the latter serving Iran's successful volleyball programme.

He will inherit a squad that has largely been kept together following promotion where Venous Khodabandehlou – a key part of the club's journey to the top tier – will once again leading from the front as captain.

The Giants, however, have been boosted by a significant new recruit well-known to Super League followers. England middle Graze Lazard joins from Team SideOut Polonia (London), after initially taking time out at the start of last season, and will be looking to get back to her best.

It will be an engrossing start to the season as their opening match-up – the very first match of the new Women's season – will see them take on fellow newbies, the University of Nottingham, who were also unbeaten in league competition last season.

Toloo Kian is not ruling out an immediate push for an end-of-season Final 4 place, but insists consolidation must be the first target above all else.

"This is a whole new experience for our club and the first goal will be to establish ourselves at this level because we don't want to go back down to the NVL," he said.

"It's hard to say if we will be good enough to make Final 4 because I haven't seen what the other teams can do yet, but the team will certainly try hard to do that.

"We have trained well, trust in the players and are ready to go. Now we will see how we get on in Super League."

KEY PLAYER

Grace Lazard

The experienced England international was named the MAAREE Women's Super League Player of the Year in the 2024-25 season as Malory Eagles swept all before them en route to the double. The Middle will bring presence, blocking know-how and killing power.

ONE TO WATCH

Laura Fernández Rey

The talented Spanish Outside hitter, who can also play as a Setter, boasts substantial high-level experience having played for Tenerife-based Arona Voley in Women's Superliga 2 and is hungry to succeed playing in England.

VS	Univesity of Nottingham
11:00 Saturday 31st October	

VS	Essex Rebels
10:00 Sunday 1st November	

LIONHEARTS VINARIUS

HEAD COACH: Davide Tiberti
ASSISTANT COACHES: Turbo Ka Bo Cheung, Hoi Pui Leung
BENCH PERSONNEL: Cristina Ticchi, Aliya van Aardenne
TEAM SECRETARY: Gloria Francalanci
STATISTICIAN: Joshua Young

TEAM ROSTER

Lyubomira Atanasova - Setter

Lili Bettencourt - Middle

Danna Cheung- Outside

Camilla De Tomin - Libero

(C) Gloria Francalanci- Middle

Kennedy Hagen - Middle

Julianna Nowaczek - Opposite

Alexandra Safryghin - Universal

Chelsea Simmons - Setter

Kersti Sorra - Middle

Maria Sviridova - Outside

Yulia Tokarenko - Outside

Federica Vitali - Middle

Madoka Weldon - Libero

Chung Hei Wong - Opposite

Aliya van Aardenne - Outside



LIONHEARTS VINARIUS

It's been a series of highs and lows for Lionhearts since they came up to the MAAREE Women's Super League, with two seasons of struggle sandwiching their maiden appearance at Final 4 at the end of the 24-25 season.

Last season, the team stayed up in dramatic style, defeating Darkstar Derbyshire in a five-set thriller at Loughborough University to retain their place at the top table of women's volleyball in England, and mirroring their play-off success against Stockport two years previously.

The final stages of the season saw Davide Tiberti, who has engineered much of Vinarius' success to date, return to the Head Coach role after Lulama Musti de Gennaro had been at the helm for the first part of the campaign. He will continue in that position as his side look to push further up the table and challenge at the right end of the table once more.

Certainly, their summer business indicates they are keen to move in a positive direction, with some eye-catching recruitment that includes former Essex Rebels setter Chelsea Simmons, who returns to these shores after a spell in Switzerland with VBC Glaronia.

Highly-experienced Outside Yulia Tokarenko, formerly of Team SideOut Polonia (London), also returns to Super League after a spell playing for Team Essex Trinity in NVL Division 1 South last season.

Other recruits that may be slightly less familiar include Outside Aliya Van Aardenne, signed from London Inter Crocs, two new Opposites in the shape of Helen Wong (Bedminster) and Julianna Nowaczek (Cambridge) and Middles Federica Vitali (London Inter Crocs) and American Kennedy Hagen.

They will supplement those who have stayed on that include a former MAAREE Women's Player of the Year in Russian Outside Maria Sviridova, as well as Bulgarian starting setter from last season, Lyubomira Atanasova, Outside Kersti Sorra (Canada), Danna Cheung (Hong Kong), Alex Safryghin (Italy) and Middle Lili Bettencourt (USA).

Liberos Makoka Weldon (USA) and Camilla de Tomin (Italy), complete the forming of +a roster with a true international feel.

The 40-year-old Gloria Francalanci remains the team's captain and flag bearer, having been a pivotal part of the club since the days of playing in NVL Division 3.

"In women's volleyball, the way players blend and become one unit makes a difference more than in men's volleyball, which can be a lot more physical, " said Tiberti.

"I enjoy working with the players here because there is a lot more work you can do tactically. I'm trying to build my experience as a coach and help improve the standards that can make a difference."

KEY PLAYER

Chelsea Simmons

Finished as a silver medallist with Essex Rebels in 24-25 and hopes to bring the best out of the Lionhearts attack with her skilled setting, backed up by her more-than-useful blocking and leadership skills.

ONE TO WATCH

Julianna Nowacezk

A promising young Opposite who played for Cambridge ARU in the Super League for one season prior to their relegation and has explosiveness and raw power in spades.

VS Team SideOut Polonia

17:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Newcastle Knights

12:00 Sunday 1st November


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MALORY EAGLES WOMEN

HEAD COACH: Carol Gordon
ASSISTANT COACH: Jefferson Williams
BENCH PERSONNEL: Andrew Omoshebi

TEAM ROSTER

Stephanie Coroi - Middle

Ariadnne Sierra - Libero

Jaden Scott - Opposite

Abi Ketley- Setter

Verere Oyearone - Middle

Jada Mitchel - Middle

Sophie Szyszko - Universal

Rebecca Wintjen - Universal

Olivia Casey - Outside

Kayleigh Sullivan - Setter

Georgia Mcgovern - Setter

Diane Ewane - Outside

Jada Mitchell - Middle

Chloe Allen - Outside



MALORY EAGLES WOMEN

After a stunning 2024-25 season when Malory Eagles soared to win a MAAREE Super League and National Cup double, last season proved to be more of a challenge for one of England's most decorated clubs in terms of honours.

While the Londoners made it through to Final 4, they were disappointed to lose both matches at Crystal Palace to Durham Palatinates and Newcastle Knights, which saw them finish out of the medals, and then were beaten again by the North Easteners in the National Cup Final.

Head Coach Carol Gordon – who also leads the England Senior Women's team – was under no illusions that following 2024-25 was always going to be difficult, especially with two of the key catalysts of that success in Grace Lazard and Georgia McGovern having moved on.

But with setter McGovern having returned from playing professionally in Germany to recommence her studies in the capital, alongside a fresh role with the Eagles, optimism is high that this could be a stronger year for those decked out in black.

Joining the English international to challenge for the setter position is fellow England player Abi Ketley, who moves south after completing her studies at the University of Nottingham – and she is not the only new recruit.

Also coming into the first-team squad via the link-up with the University of East London (UEL) are American scholars Rebecca Wintjen (Universal), Olivia Casey (Outside, who captained the university team last season), Jada Mitchell (Middle) and Kayleigh Sullivan (Setter).

Joining them are Diane Ewane, the experienced Outside Hitter-cum-Opposite from Lionhearts Vinarius (London) and Ukranian teenager Sofiia Zadoia from Dartford, who is hoping to study at Oxford University.

Just as important are those retained, with dependable Amercians Outside Chloe Allen and Libero Ari Sierra, who was widely considered the best in the league in her position last season, both staying with the Eagles.

Stephanie Coroi (née Boyce) returns after having a baby and joins first team squad regulars Sophie Szyszko and Jaden Scott, while Zsófia Palánkai-Omoshebi hopes to be back after an Achilles injury.

Pati O'Neal is set to miss the start of the season as she has knee surgery, while Gabriella Nóbrega is struggling with a back injury and Johanna Kruize's availability is set to be limited because of work commitments.

"We were certainly happy with some progress that we made throughout last year because we knew we couldn't really replicate what we'd achieved in 24-25 because the personnel in key positions changed," said Head Coach Carol Gordon.

"We have to be a bit disappointed (with how things went at Final 4) but that's the way it goes in sport sometimes and it would be boring if it was the same all the time.

"We've added a few this season, but not that many, and we have some UEL students who can make a difference, so it's a question of trying to build things up again
and see where we go."

VS Newcastle Knights

13:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Durham Palatinates

14:00 Sunday 1st November

KEY PLAYER

Georgia McGovern

The England international setter oozed class with her playmaking ability the last time she pulled on a Malory shirt and she will again be asked to draw on her now considerable experience when leading the team into battle.

ONE TO WATCH

Jada Mitchell

Nicknamed 'The Happy Assassin' by her coach, the American scholar may be smiley, but is a deadly middle blocker at the net and an exciting emerging talent.

NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS WOMEN

HEAD COACH: Sam Shenton
ASSISTATN COACH: Jodie Amor

TEAM ROSTER

(C) Jodie Shenton - Outside

Lexi Applebach - Libero

Kylie Blessing - Setter

Daisy Boardman - Outside

Isabella Bonatakis - Middle

Emma Burlingame - Outside

Jenna Clarke - Setter

Sydney Gill - Setter

Lauren Howe - Outside

Amber Jarecki-Meyers - Middle

Katarina Knezevic - Outside

Eirini Kokkinaki - Libero

Aryn Markett - Outside

Maddie Monteiro - Opposite

Katie Olley - Libero

Makayla Roginski - Opposite

Daniella Tchandeu - Opposite

Gwynnie Wentzel - Middle

Addison Witkowski - Middle



NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS WOMEN

A 2025-26 that started out with an Opening Weekend humbling to Malory Eagles eventually ended with the Knights clipping the London sides' wings to claim a Final 4 bronze medal.

In between, Sam Shenton's side proved that their promotion as champions from NVL Division 1 was well merited, as they bounced back strongly from that initial eye-opening defeat - with the decision to move Caroline McMahon from Libero to Outside to give the team more firepower proving to be a masterstroke.

While the hard-hitting American is no longer on the North East side's roster, eight North American graduates – either American or Canadian – have been recruited to ensure the Knights can challenge again.

They include Middles Gwynnie Wentzel, Isabella Bonatakis and Addison Witkowski, Outsides Emma Burlingame and Aryn Markett, Setters Sydney King and Kylie Blessing and Opposite Makayla Roginski.

But the team also has a good sprinkling of British players, too, with Daisy Boardman ready to take a central role in her last year and Maddie Montero studying physio to ensure she sticks around for another season.

Former England juniors Katie Olley and Lauren Howe and another international, fresher Daniella Tchandeu, a key part of Leeds Gorse's recent junior success, are also keen to get minutes.

Other players on the roster include returning US duo Amber Jarecki and Lexi Applebach, Katarina Knezevic, Greek international Eirini Kokkinaki, Northern Ireland's Jenna Clarke and Jodie Shenton (née Amor).

"We've got a good mix of players," said Shenton. "Some are new, some are looking to step up this year and others have been around since we were in NVL Division 2, so it's been a nice journey for them.

"It's a really interesting dynamic in terms of what's going on. We've become really strong as a volleyball university, away from all the Super League stuff, with the BUCS stuff too. We're building something here, which is quite nice.

"A few years ago, it was really about going out recruiting to get people in. Now we're in a situation where players get in touch with others and say 'I'd love to come for a visit', and we've got quite a high percentage of acceptance once that's happened.

"I think this year it's (Super League) going to probably be the strongest it's been for years and years. If a team goes down, it won't be a case of they could have done something here and done something there.

"Given the relative strength of the league, not finishing third may still be an improvement in terms of team development, but we still have the same goal... we still try and keep the same trajectory upwards and better than the year before."

KEY PLAYER

Daisy Boardman

Having played at the Commonwealth Youth Games on the beach, the Outside has become an increasingly influential and improved player on Tyneside and is the only regular starter remaining from last year.

ONE TO WATCH

Sydney Gill

The post-grad Setter from Trinity Western University in Canada has the advantage of having player under the same rules and used the same Mikasa balls as she will do in England, and likes to run a quick offense.

VS Malory Eagles

13:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Lionhearts Vinarius

12:00 Sunday 1st November

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTHINHAMHAM WOMEN

HEAD COACH: Freddie Fairbairn
ASSISTANT COACH: Nicholas Brown

TEAM ROSTER

Esther Adesiyan - Outside

Ela Akay - Libero

Duru Beyazit - Opposite

Isabel Brown - Middle

Sophia Chedgy - Opposite

Molly Clark - Opposite

Maia Darling - Outside

Lily Eckstein - Middle

Hajar El Alouani - Outside

Hena Esimek - Libero

Nikki Falahatgar - Outside

Lucy Hatton - Setter

Elisa Jarmon - Outside

(C) Sydney Jones - Setter

Constanza Silva Leiva - Middle

Zoe Tucker - Libero



UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM WOMEN

UON strolled to the Division 1 North title last season with a 100% record and, in doing so, secured an immediate return back to the MAAREE Women's Super League after being relegated at the end of the 24-25 campaign.

But despite their recent success, they are under no illusions that they will face a serious step up in quality at Opening Weekend, and beyond, as they bid to re-establish themselves at the higher level.

The team is likely to remain relatively young, though, and, as is inevitable with university sides with players graduating, there will be a number of changes to their personnel.

Joining for 2026-27 include Super League-ready Outside Hajar El Alouani, Turkish libero Ela Akay and Swiss player Lily Eckstein, as well as Brits Molly Clark, Zoe Tucker and Hena Esinak, the latter another to sign from Darkstar.

A quartet of promising England Junior players have also been recruited in the shape of Sophie Chedgy, Duru Beyazit, Esther Adesiyan and Elisa Jarmon, the latter two who were part of The Boswells School to win at Cup Finals Weekend in April.

Among those returning are Nikki Falahatgar, who has stepped up from the second team and also competes in Tae Kwon Do, Sydney Jones, Contanza Silva and England player Isabel Brown.

But UON have lost the likes of libero Adele Sotgiu and Abbie Ketley, the latter whose progress will be keenly followed by the club as she links up with experienced fellow English setter Georgia McGovern at Malory Eagles.

Post-graduate scholars Ellie Hamm, Hailey Hamlett and Rachel Richardson have also departed following the completion of their studies.

Head Coach Freddie Fairbairn reckons his team will not always be well fancied in a highly-competitive league, but is pleased for it to be that way.

"We are more than happy to be an underdog going into any single game," he said. "I think an underdog is always one that can surprise, so we'll see how many teams we can surprise as we go through, and if we can make the most of opportunities to get on top of teams.

"All of the university teams will gain some momentum as they go through the year, just with the sheer training volume opportunities, and the support services that are wrapped around each of the teams, as well as playing those additional games each week.

"There's the opportunity to make more steps and you have younger players that might also make some huge leaps. I don't see why that can't happen for us."

KEY PLAYER

Hajar El Alouani

A proven performer at Super League level having been a consistent threat in a struggling Darkstar Derbyshire side in recent seasons, the Outside has a strong all-round game, including a powerful serve and ability to finish clinically.

ONE TO WATCH

Sydeny Jones

The setter – formerly of Colgate University – has re-signed for the Green and Golds after she helped the team go up last season and is hoping to lead from the front again in 26-27, having been named captain.

VS London Giants

10:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Team SideOut Polonia

16:00 Sunday 1st November

TEAM SIDEOUT POLONIA

HEAD COACH: Mark Kontopoulos
ASSISTANT COACHES: Hai-Binh Ly, Marken Ziu
BENCH PERSONNEL: Yohana Biavati, Ivo Dobra, Joshua Joseph-Iyanda

TEAM ROSTER

(C) Merve Akin - Setter

Kasey Bell - Middle

Miringiela Beshku - Outside

Sydney Busa - Outside

Maeve Eilise Davitt - Libero

Sarah Elnozahy - Setter

Faidra Karasavvidi - Outside

Anastasiia Konovalova - Outside

Kaija Kunze-Hoeg - Libero

Emilie Menghin - Opposite

Carla Mulli - Outside

Andreea Tudorache - Middle

Kambridge Van Der Veur - Middle

Agnese Venezia - Outside

Margarita Vicente - Middle



TEAM SIDEOUT POLONIA

It was a season of nearlys and what-could-have beens for Team SideOut last season – and they are hoping to bounce back strongly in this campaign.

The team missed out on a spot at Final 4 by the narrowest of margins after ending up in fifth spot – the lowest finish in 17 seasons since Mark Kontopoulos came in, having never previously finished lower than third during his highly successful tenure.

But things could have been so different, with the long-serving Head Coach citing that his team were two sets up in the National Cup semi-final to the all-conquering, unbeaten double winners Durham Palatinates, but could not hold on and were reverse swept. It is just one example of where their mental strength was found wanting.

While there was never any doubting Team SideOut's talent, it was equally clear that they lacked focus and leadership at key times - something Kontopoulos has sought to address over the summer break.

He will get a helping hand in that regard in the shape of 38-year-old Emilie Menghin (née Stewart), a former USA player who has played professionally in Austria and come out of retirement to provide huge experience in the Opposite role, or as a left-sided option.

Other new additions include Middle Andreea Tudorache, from Onyx London, Outside Ghela Beshku, signed from Richmond (having also played for Team SideOut's London League team), former NCAA Libero Kaija Kunze-Hoeg and teenage Middle Maggie Vicente, who is originally from Chile and learned her volleyball in Portugal.

Seven players – Valeria Busquets Estave, Kennedy Snape, Deniz Milli, Kanako Hayashi, Anna Rantala, Grace Lazaard and Alima Kaliyeva - have moved on but the core of the squad – 10 players – remain.

They include setter Merve Akin, who stays on as captain, and dependable performers such as Carla Mulli, Maeve Davitt and Kasey Bell, while Agnese Venezia is another to return to the fray after long-term injury.

"The squad was very tight knit and close friends last season, but sometimes that worked against us in a sense and sometimes there wasn't that willingness to challenge each other and be a bit hard on each other," said Kontopoulos.

"But this year we have talked more about pushing each other and expecting more from each other, without overstepping the mark. As another coach put it... 'high challenge, high support'. That's not just the new players coming in, but a cultural re-set from the whole squad.

"It doesn't happen every year that you retain so many players – on average you're probably turning over 50% in the squad. This time we've only turned over about a third and I think that's definitely an advantage."

KEY PLAYER

Sydney Busa

An important performer until suffering an ACL injury in November 2024 that kept her out for more than a year, the American Outside is now raring to go for a first full season back after a phased return in 25-26.

ONE TO WATCH

Andreea Tudorache

After working her way up through the NVL – starting out at Ashcombe Dorking and also playing at the University of Bristol and London Onyx – the tall and athletic Middle gets finally gets the chance to show her ability at Super League level.

VS Lionhearts Vinarius

17:00 Saturday 31st October

VS University of Nottingham

16:00 Sunday 1st November


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ESSEX REBELS MEN

HEAD COACH: Euan Fraser
ASSISTANT COACH: Alex Chinery

TEAM ROSTER

Davin Altheide - Opposite

Harry Aplin - Libero

Oscar Curzon-Hall - Opposite

Mathias Durfee - Outside

Hassan Farhat - Outside

Carson Hillburn - Middle

Jacob Lloyd-Williams - Middle

Thomas Martin - Setter

Asher Miller - Middle

Gabriel Ocasio - Setter

Joel Smith - Libero

Theo Zaharewicz - Outside

Evripides Kalos - Setter



ESSEX REBELS MEN

After being thrust into the Head Coach role at the 11th hour following expected incumbent Daryl Tay's visa issues, Euan Fraser coped well in what was a difficult first season coaching at DYNAMIK Super League level.

But the popular former Rebels player has had much more time to implement his own style and bring in his own players ahead of the start of the 26-27 season, when he hopes the team can improve on last season's fifth placed finish.

Scotsman Fraser, a key cog in the 24-25 Essex team that won the BUCS title, finished top of the regular Super League table, clinched the National Cup and lost out in the Final 4 gold medal, is relishing the challenge that lies ahead of him and his team.

He aims to be just as successful as his long-term mentor Alex Porter, who spent more than a decade leading the men's programme in Colchester and is now the Indoor Performance Director for Volleyball England.

"It's funny... when I first came to the university as an undergrad at 18, I had no idea what I wanted to do in my life," said Fraser, who insists he will not be playing himself this season. "Alex sat me down and had a conversation and asked what I wanted to do when I was older.

"I said 'to be honest, your job sounds pretty fun - I would love to do that'. It was something in the future I was thinking would be a really cool position to be in, and so when it came up, I was like, 'yeah, I would love to give back to what this programme is'.

"That's not just the kind of volleyball player I became, but also the relationships and who I am as a person... it's all very much tied to this place.

"I think with the group that we have, our Super League goals are to definitely be in the Final 4. I think that's a realistic target for us. If we then get there, it's one of those situations where it's anyone's game, so that's the minimum of where we want to be."

Heading up the list of fresh faces are Middle Carson Hillburn, Canadian libero Joel Smith, 6ft 7ins 'Mr Reliable' Outside Theo Zaharewicz and Australian Setter Tom Martin.

Joining them will be Puerto Rican Setter Gabriel Ocasio, American Opposite-cum-Outside Mathias Durfee, young English player Alfie Harris and Northern Ireland's Josh Sloan.

Among those retained are Hassan Farhat, Oscar Curzon-Hall, Asher Miller, Harry Aplin, Davin Altheide, Evripides Kalos, Simeon Taylor-Preville and Jacob Lloyd-Williams.

Moving on over the summer have been Jacob Kern, Raphael Viens, Ben Butler, Sam Sherwin and Nathan Hall, who have both joined Team Essex Blaze, as well as Thomas Shatimehin, who has moved back to boyhood club Malory Eagles.

VS University of Nottingham

13:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Newcastle Staffs

12:00 Sunday 1st November

KEY PLAYER

Carson Hillburn

Named Rebels captain, he is tipped to be one of the most athletic and aggressive Middles in Super League this season, having previously played for the Alberta Golden Bears in Canada.

ONE TO WATCH

Oscar Curzon-Hall

The former England Junior Middle is expected to see an increasing amount of court time this season, having worked hard to improve his all-round game over the past 18 months.

LONDON GIANTS MEN

HEAD COACH: Alireza Toloo Khan

TEAM ROSTER

Danil Pyvovarenko - Opposite

Peter Selcho - Middle

Trevor Lau - Outside

Dylan Cohan - Middle

Maksim Bacovic - Libero

Spencer Thiel - Middle

Artemii Solodukhov - Outside

George Ivanov - Libero

Khadeem Mckoy - Middle

Soner Yashar - Setter

Zachary Omoshebi - Opposite

Youki Marr - Setter

Nicholas Alzate - Outside



LONDON GIANTS MEN

The double DYNAMIK Men's Super League champions go into the new season having made plenty of changes over the summer, yet there will be few betting against them making a hat-trick of national titles come April.

Alireza Toloo Kian has taken over the Head Coach role from Mihail Stoev and the Iranian will no doubt bring different ideas and style to the Giants play.

And there has also been a big turnaround in players, with only a handful of the squad that beat Newcastle Knights in last season's gold medal match at Final 4 remaining.

Cornerstones of 25-26's success, Amadou Samb, Hamza Ouyachi, Jesus Izaguirre and Dorian Poinc (who has re-signed for Team Essex Blaze) are among those to have moved on, but an impressive array of talent has been signed on in their place.

Experienced Middle Dylan Cohan, will be joined in the ranks by Outside Trevor Lau, who helped lead the University of Warwick to their first Student Cup title last season as player-coach.

Another former Student Cup player, powerful Outside Artemii Solodukhov, has been drafted in from capital rivals Richmond Docklands, while England international Zach Omoshebi provides competition at Opposite, having been limited in his game time at former club Malory by DYNAMIK Men's Player of the Year Nathan Fullerton.

Bulgarian Soner Yashar, who once aspired to play football for his country rather than volleyball, will look to take on the setting duties, and is another one who was with Malory last season.

Those who have remained include Englishmen Libero George Ivanov and Middle Khadeem McKoy, as well as last season's starting Opposite Daniil Pyvovarenko.

Toloo Kian is under no illusions that a third title is the expectation of Giants' top management, given their success of the past two seasons, but that is something he is happy to embrace.

He said: "It's a new experience for me, but I'm very happy to be coaching Giants. I think this is a good club as they are thinking about the development of their own players long term and have a lot of teams, including juniors.

"I respect the history of the club. I understand that to do it a third time is difficult for anyone. I understand the expectation from the fans, from the club's management... everybody.

"But we should focus on the matches and our activities, rather than any pressures and, above all, we need to work hard to ensure that the team is working well and that there is a good level of understanding and teamwork between the players."

KEY PLAYER

Daniil Pyvovarenko

Despite only being 22, the hard-hitting Ukrainian Opposite had already built up a raft of experience playing across Europe before coming to London and proved a go-to player for the Giants last season – form they hope he can repeat this time.

ONE TO WATCH

Dylan Cohan

Having been signed from Malory Eagles, the American Middle already has a solid Super League track record and will hope to add silverware to go with his experience during 26-27.

VS Richmond Docklands

15:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Newcastle Knights

14:00 Sunday 1st November

MALORY EAGLES MEN

HEAD COACH: Carol Gordon
ASSISTANT COACH: Jefferson Williams
BENCH PERSONNEL: Andrew Omoshebi

TEAM ROSTER

Richard Eber Jr - Outside

Nathan Fullerton - Opposite

Victor Jalloh - Middle

Thomas Jefferson - Middle

Benaya Kouame - Outside

Joel Martinez - Setter

Olafs Matjusenoks - Middle

Ephraim Mills - Middle

Cameron Rhodes - Setter

Filipi Rodrigues - Libero

Abdimalik Shukri - Outside



MALORY EAGLES MEN

Not since 2009-10 have Malory Eagles won the top-flight men's title, despite regularly being in the running in the race to be champions.

Last year's campaign produced a bronze medal at Final 4 as the team were beaten in their semi-final by Newcastle Knights before recovering to beat the University of Nottingham in the play-off for third and fourth.

Long-serving Head Coach Jefferson Williams begins his latest campaign for glory having recruited a host of well-known British players that will add strength to their roster, though whether that is enough for them to be able to take the next step remains to be seen.

Experienced England Setter Cameron Rhodes joins from Newcastle Staffs and will be familiar with a number of his new team-mates from international duty, including Ephraim Mills (Middle), who returns to his home city after a spell in Denmark with ASV, and former Essex Rebels Thomas Shatimehin (Outside) and Thomas Jefferson (Middle).

An American UEL student, Richard Eber, has also joined the squad.

A quartet of familiar names have left the club during the summer break, with Dylan Cohan and Zach Omoshebi heading for champions London Giants, Jordan Dalrymple switching to Richmond Docklands and Tai Yat Chau joining London Lionhearts.

But some mainstays remain including the likes of Nathan Fullerton, Olafs Matjusenoks Abdimalik Shukri, Joel Martinez, Filipi Rodrigues and Benaye Kouame, supplementing the new recruits.

"It's good to have recruited some proven Super League players, but at the end of the day, they still have to bring it," said Williams. "It should help that a lot of the players in our squad have played together for England, but it might also be a bit different in style to what Simon (Loftus, England Head Coach) asks them to play.

"It goes without saying that there's an element of pressure because people will see them as mostly the England national team.

"Once the league starts, our objective is to try to get to Final 4 with everybody fit and in shape and ready to go, whilst at the same time trying to get through the National Cup.

"We're putting the building blocks in place and then the guys will keep working towards that and not look too far ahead."

KEY PLAYER

Nathan Fullerton

Who else? Last season's DYNAMIK Men's Super League Player of the Season can do it all and dynamic input and clinical finishing from the England international will once again be crucial if the Eagles are to fly high.

ONE TO WATCH

Victor Jalloh

Big in stature and in promise, the giant Middle excelled for Exeter Storm last season in the U18 Super Series and will be pushing for regular minutes after impressing in pre-season.

VS Newcastle Staffs

11:00 Saturday 31st October

VS University of Nottingham

10:00 Sunday 1st November

NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS MEN

HEAD COACH: Sam Shenton
ASSISTANT COACH: Daniel Livingstone
TEAM SECRETARY: Jodie Shenton

TEAM ROSTER

(C) Oliver Tuck - Outside

Kelechi Bell - Opposite

Christian De Leon - Opposite

Jeremyah Gaston - Setter

Isaac Gibbs - Middle

Caleb Ginnings - Libero

Nathan Hampshire - Setter

Cayde Keates - Middle

James Joseph Ledbury - Outside

Maksymilian Makowski - Libero

Drew McNellis - Middle

Luke O'Neill - Middle

Ryan Peace - Middle

Neil Rea - Setter

Sam Smallwood - Outside

Joshua Sturland - Outside

Louis Van Der Feltz - Opposite

Ryan Waudby - Outside

Jeffery Webb - Outside



NEWCASTLE KNIGHTS MEN

It was an excellent season for Newcastle Knights in 25-26, even if it ended with a tinge of disappointment and defeat to London Giants in the gold medal showdown.

There was no doubting the team's improvement, having finished fourth at the 24-25 Final 4, not just in the regular season, but in the pressure cooker atmosphere at Crystal Palace, as they eased past Malory Eagles in the semi-final.

However, they fell a little flat against the Giants, leaving Head Coach Sam Shenton with the task of reshuffling his pack in a bid to take that final step.

"We've always tried to improve season on season, first getting to Final 4 and then getting a medal, so having finishing second last year, to improve we now have to be going for the title," he said.

It's always a big jump from going, 'okay, we want to get a medal' to now asking the players that we want to win the league, but I think they have bought into that.

"Essex are going to be good this year, Malory look unbelievable and Giants have done some crazy recruitment, but that's where we all want the league to be, right? We want four or five teams that think they are going to win."

Remaining on the roster are the core of last season's successful side – Neil Rea, Kelechi Bell, Oli Tuck, James Ledbury and Isaac Gibbs, while Ryan Waudby returns from injury and promising young English players Josh Sturland, Nathan Hampshire and Cayde Keates will vie for court time.

Two eye-catching signings made by the Knights this summer are talented teenage England international Libero Maks Makowski, signed from Leeds Gorse, and Middle Ryan Peace, who was part of the team in 24-25 and has returned after a year's absence to have another go at glory.

There have been plenty of other signings too, even if they are, prior to the start of the season at least, less well-known to English audiences.

Middles Luke O'Neill and Drew McNellis, Setter Jeffery Gaston, Outside Kale Spencer, Opposites Christian de Leon and Louis van der Feltz and Libero Caleb Ginnings are all American newcomers who are raring to go.

KEY PLAYER
Oli Tuck

The England international Outside was named in the Team of the Season after being a bastion of consistency as the Knights claimed a silver medal, and he will be looking to push on again as his side bid to go one better.

ONE TO WATCH
Jeff Webb

The Canadian Outside has come over to Northumbria University to study for a qualification he needs for his career in teaching, and brings valuable experience to the squad.

VS Team Essex Blaze

17:00 Saturday 31st October

VS London Giants

14:00 Sunday 1st November

NEWCASTLE STAFFS

HEAD COACH: Richard James
BENCH PERSONNEL: Komari Burey, Joshua Slack
TEAM SECRETARY: Hannah Donaldson

TEAM ROSTER

(C) Matthew Smith - Setter

Joshua Ayobamidele - Opposite

Komari Burey - Opposite

Mark Christie - Libero

Stefan Cowley - Outside

William Evans - Middle

Aaron Holloway-Pitter - Outside

Matthew Jackson - Middle

Tayte Keates - Middle

Jacob Lingwood - Libero

Zak McConnochie - Opposite

Owen Menzies-White - Middle

Esosa Obayuwana - Outside

Joshua Slack - Outside

Sepehr Sobhani - Setter

Romario Stambolliu - Outside



NEWCASTLE STAFFS

Last season's Division 1 North champions are determined to make the transition from a team simply enjoying their volleyball to one that is an ongoing force to be reckoned with in the DYNAMIK Men's Super League.

But they insist that will not come at the expense of sacrificing their community-based approach, nor will it mean that they will break the bank in order to compete with the division's big boys.

In a bid to challenge in Super League, Head Coach Richard James has rebuilt the squad over the summer, with only a handful of players retained and a raft of new faces drafted in.

Among those recruited are giant Middle Tayte Keates, who has been at Birmingham City and is the brother of Newcastle Knights' Cayde, Sepehr Sobhani, a Middle-turned-Setter from Coventry and Warwick Riga, and Owen Menzies-White, a Middle who has been at Nottingham Trent University and Nottingham Rockets.

Another making the switch from Rockets is Zak McConnochie, an Opposite who brings high energy and has played in Japan, while young Libero Jacob Lingwood makes the switch from Coventry and Warwick Riga and Aaron Holloway-Pitter, from Leicester, is a promising Outside studying to be a vet.

Completing the list of those incoming are Outside Esosa Obayuwana and arguably the most well-known of the recruits, Will Evans, a Middle who has a wealth of experience from NVL Division 1 side Black Country and who has been in Senior England squads.

They join Northern Irish pair Matty Jackson and Mark Christie, Stefan Cowley (starting his 13th campaign with the first team), Josh Slack and Komari Burey, who are staying on for another year.

The club, however, have lost a couple of key players, with long-serving England international Cameron Rhodes heading to Malory Eagles and James Cox moving to the University of Nottingham as he commences his studies.

James, who has 18 years of experience in volleyball played last year but has now retired to concentrate on coaching duties at senior level, as well as with the juniors, said: "Probably the biggest thing that I've tried to take on is to change the culture.

"In Division 1, it was more of a right, we're going to do this, but have fun with it. But having won the title, we now need to compete, not just have fun with it, and we're setting the standards high. Having a competitive mindset and a development focus is probably my key thing.

"We're a charity funded and voluntary-led, so we know we can't compete with the likes of Giants, Malory and the university teams in terms of recruitment, but we had 267 people apply to play for us, so then it was a question of sifting through and seeing who had the skills we needed and who is going to fully integrate themselves into our programme.

"We will be favourites to go down, but hopefully we can surprise a few people."

VS Malory Eagles

11:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Essex Rebels

12:00 Sunday 1st November

KEY PLAYER

Matt Smith

The Setter was a big performer in the promotion win last season and will be a key cog in the Castle side once again as he looks to dictate the play. He will also provide leadership to a young team as captain.

ONE TO WATCH

Esosa Obayuwana

The Mancunian has captained Manchester Met University and is sure to get people off their seats with his renowned power hitting from his position of Outside.

RICHMOND DOCKLANDS

HEAD COACH: Przemek Soczewka
ASSISTANT COACH: Menaf Al Nasir, Andy Hopper
BENCH PERSONNEL: Chiara Di Cos

TEAM ROSTER

Rob Morgan - Outside

Luke Dyer - Outside

Oliver Harrison - Middle

Michael Hsu - Outside

Leon Gouzinis - Middle

Hoi Pui Leung - Setter

Thomas Stone - Middle

Chi Tak Cheung - Setter

Vuk Kosanovic - Middle

(C) Jordan Dalrymple - Outside

Oliver Franz Schmidtberg - Opposite

Elias Watts - Middle

Zachary Knudsen - Libero

Tomo Iwata-furlonger - Libero



RICHMOND DOCKLANDS

It was a nerve-shredding last few weeks of last season for Richmond Docklands before they were able to avoid automatic relegation and then beat Leeds Gorse in the sixth versus seventh place play-off to retain their DYNAMIK Men's Super League status.

In achieving safety, the club relied heavily on the input of powerful Outside Artemii Solodukhov, Setter Pearson Stiller and the second-half-of-the-season return of another Outside, Joao Alves, who brought leadership to the team.

None of those, along with promising England Outside Jelani Conteh and fellow junior international Dan Sampson – both who are heading to the US for scholarships at American Universities – may be available this season, at least in the early part of it, meaning a rebuild is in order.

That will give Head Coach Peter Soczewksa the chance to reset the overall approach, with a push to recruit players who are fully committed to training, so that the technical and tactical elements can be worked on consistently.

"It was a struggle at times last season," he said. "There was a difference in coaching style between Marcel, who was here previously, and myself that not all of the players bought into. Some decided to stay and some moved on.

"The other big issue was that not all of the players were able to train as much as we would like because of work commitments and so on. We were only able to work on things for one session a week before going into games, so it was very difficult to get things going properly.

"Frustratingly, we knew we had quality, but didn't have enough time together to push it further. This season, we have recruited players who are turning up to every session, so we can train properly. We can work on our style and systems."

While Richmond know they cannot compete with their big-city rivals London Giants and Malory Eagles in terms of recruitment, they know the Super League remains a real pull and hope to find some unpolished diamonds among those not picked up by the top teams, both at elite level and from the NVL.

Their most eye-catching signings include two new Outsides, Rob Morgan, who has joined after finishing his studies, and Jordan Dalrymple, who has come in from Malory, with both adding top-level experience and know-how, while Elisa Watts has returned after a brief spell with Giants.

Others new to the club are Outside Luke Dyer (from Cambridge), Middle Tom Stone (from Southampton), Outside or Opposite Michael Hsu (from IBB Polonia), Setter Jerry Leung (from Essex Blaze) and Opposite Oliver Franz Schmidtberg who has Cambodian and German dual citizenship. Vuc Kosnanovic has returned to the club while beach players Tomo Iwata and the Amercian for NYU, Zach Knudsem, make up the libero options.

As well as losing the aforementioned Conteh, Sampson and Solodukhov, the latter who has signed for London Giants, Orson Purves has joined Team Essex and Michal Hryniewicz has signed for Durham Palatinates.

Docklands have, however, retained the services of Leon Gouzanis and Michael Cheung, while Juniors Ryan Wartnaby and Ollie Harrison will provide other options.

VS London Giants

15:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Team Essex Blaze

16:00 Sunday 1st November

KEY PLAYER
Rob Morgan

The Outside was one of the University of Nottingham's stand-out performers last year as they reached Final 4. While he is not the biggest in stature, watch out for his inventive shot-making that owes much to his strong beach volleyball background.

ONE TO WATCH
Tom Stone

The middle measures well in excess of 6ft, is a strong athlete, has good coordination, a high reach and is hard hitting. He is also known to be a good character with a positive outlook, albeit he is still relatively raw at the top level.

UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM MEN

HEAD COACH: Freddie Fairbairn
ASSISTANT COACH: Nicholas Brown

TEAM ROSTER

Alex Armstrong - Outside

Finley Bullivant - Middle

Joshua Chiziwa - Outside

James Cox - Setter

(C) Connor Crawford - Opposite

George Eaton - Outside

Ryan Morey - Setter

Stuart Perry - Middle

George Ruddick - Libero

Joelson Santy - Outside

Oscar Smith - Outside

Lisle Costard - Middle

Rei Marujo - Libero

Lewis Bunton - Outside

Ollie Beek - Middle



UNIVERSITY OF NOTTINGHAM MEN

With a number of players having graduated, there will be a new-look to the UON squad after they reached Final 4 last year.

As ever, the emphasis is on youth and developing promising English players, with some experienced North Americans scholars also being added to the mix to bring vital experience.

Connor Crawford looks to be an exciting addition as the Opposite arrives from California Lutheran University, while 2m-plus setter Ryan Morey has been drafted in from Carthage Firebirds.

The services of talented Newcastle Staffs Setter James Cox, who helped his former club to the NVL Division 1 North title last season, have been secured, as have those of England U20 captain Oliver Beek and Alex Armstrong.

As ever, Nottingham have one eye on their beach programme and welcome Lewis Bunton and Stuart Perry to the fold.

Although not too many players are returning from 25-26, Lisle Costard, Joelson Santy, Finley Bullivant, George Ruddick, Oscar Smith and George Eaton will provide a level of experience and continuity.

Among those leaving for pastures new after graduating are Oliver Quick, who is heading to Leeds Gorse, and Rob Morgan, who has moved to Richmond.

At the start of a new cycle for many of his players, Head Coach Freddie Fairbairn has mixed feelings, but is ultimately eager to see what his new charges can achieve in Super League.

It's always bittersweet," he said. "It's sad to see players go after the connections and stuff that we build in their time here, but I'm really excited to see where their journey takes them next.

"I'm also excited to see what the new players can achieve. I think there'll be a lot of people that underate my players, but every single one of them has the opportunity to absolutely ball out.

"We have exciting players that have joined the squad and we're going to look very different. I don't think we're going to be miles off the level we were before, I think we're just going to be different... and that's exciting."

VS Essex Rebels

13:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Malory Eagles

10:00 Sunday 1st November

KEY PLAYER
Lisle Costard

As one of the leading blockers in Super League last season and the only starting player from last term to be retained, the Green and Golds will look to the Middle for inspiration.

ONE TO WATCH
Lewis Bunton

Alongside Bailey Harsum, the former Richmond and Deep Dish Crystal Palace player finished in the top 10 in Europe at the European U20 Beach Championships, and he will hope to transition that form indoors.

TEAM ESSEX BLAZE

HEAD COACH: Andrew Tuck
ASSISTANT COACH: Chris Frost, Zoe Dawson
STATISTICIAN: Ethan Barrett

TEAM ROSTER

Mattias Gordon - Opposite

James Bernardi - Middle

Daniel Bunko - Outside

Tim Gibson - Middle

Mattias Godron - Opposite

Nathan Hall - Setter

Adam Ketley - Universal

Ibrahim Marong - Middle

Dorian Poinc - Outside

Orson Purves - Outside

Zach Bullivant - Outside

Connor Reeve - Libero

Sam Sherwin - Middle

(C) Ashley Toomey - Setter

Euan Tuck - Libero



TEAM ESSEX BLAZE

Division One South champions Blaze beat off competition from Cambridge to claim their place in the DYNAMIK Men's Super League – and now their number one aim is to stay there.

It is an identical challenge to the one facing the club after winning promotion to the top flight for 2024-25, when, on that occasion, they rallied well in the second half of the season but were able to fend of immediate relegation.

This time, the club say, there has been a conscious decision to move away from a 'win at all costs' mentality and ensure they remain true to their community roots.

But that does not mean that they will not be doing their utmost to upset clubs who they openly admit have far bigger resources than themselves.

"We want to look after our own homegrown talent, and if anybody wants to join, then they buy into that," said Head Coach Andrew Tuck, who has son Euan is on the Blaze roster, and older son Ollie in opposition in Saturday's season opener against Newcastle Knights.

"We're not without London players - we're half an hour away, and we'd be stupid not to tap into that – but the fundamental basis of our club is guys that have grown up here."

"There's been some good additions (to our squad) that could actually allow us to challenge – not for the top, but maybe fourth, fifth or sixth - that's a realistic target. But first and foremost, we want to stay up."

Setter Ashley Toomey is expected to be an important performer for the Blaze, while Nathan Hall and Sam Sherwin return to the club having been on the roster of neighbours the Essex Rebels.

Mattias Godron also returns south after studying at the University of Northumbria, Orson Purves, previously with Richmond, has signed following a successful trial and Dorian Poinc swaps one championship winning team – last year's Super League winners London Giants – for another, albeit at NVL level, in Blaze.

Other new recruits include Daniel Burford from Southampton and Duncan Gray from Tendring, but they will be without former London 2012 Olympics player Nathan French, who has moved on to Kent Invicta.

VS Newcastle Knights

17:00 Saturday 31st October

VS Richmond Docklands

12:00 Sunday 1st November

KEY PLAYER
Dorian Poinc

Having won back-to-back DYNAMIK Men's Super League titles with London Giants, the Outside Hitter returns to the club where he first played in England and will be a reliable and consistent performer, as well as leader.

ONE TO WATCH
Tim Gibson

A Middle from Canada who has considerable experience in club volleyball in his homeland and, having quicky adapted to life in the UK, Blaze hope he can develop and grow as the season goes on.

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