

suppose 'quietly confident' would sum up our mood at the minute. Everyone is excited at the prospect of playing the Hurricanes at (Sewell Group) Craven Park, and the players are keen to prove themselves against a professional side.

"However we are under no illusions that this will be a difficult tie for us, but also one that will be important in determining that we can hold our own in the NCL top flight this year."

Ashton Bears are breaking new ground by facing Dewsbury Rams.

The match will be played at the League One club's ground because Ashton are unable to find a suitable venue in Wigan, but open-age manager Wayne Haselden said: "We are excited more than anything about the opportunity to have a crack at semi-professional opposition for the first time.

"They're the highest-ranked club we have ever faced but we will go there without fear and hopefully give them something to think about and do the club and the town proud at the same time.

"Nobody will give us a chance, and that's understandable from the outside, but we will just use that as motivation more than anything."

The Bears, meanwhile, have confirmed that their scorers in the 28-12 first-round win over the British Army were, contrary to those supplied to League Express, Tyler Pilling and Matty Smith, with a brace apiece, while Dec

O'Donnell scored a try and a goal and Alex Ashby touched down. Rob Sexton also landed a conversion.

Dublin City Exiles will travel to Orrell St James after their comfortable victory at Hammersmith Hills Hoists.

Exiles official Clifford Newton said: "It has been a great experience entering the competition after a 20-year absence. The RFL and indeed hosts Hammersmith were very accommodating and put on a well-organised fixture.

"To be the first Irish team to come away with a victory in the Challenge Cup has been massive for us and is reward for the hard work the club has put in, both on and off the field.

"We were delighted that we did not let the pressure of the occasion get to the team, who put in an outstanding all-around performance."

He continued: "This time we head into the heartland of Rugby League, to face a team in Orrell St James with a renowned passion for, and history in, the sport.

"As recent North West Men's League Premier Division champions, they obviously have a pedigree in winning. We are hot on the heels of organising the logistics for the fixture, while assessing the opposition to plan how to compete in real terms.

"The Exiles boys are well up for the challenge and relish the opportunity to really be tested in a hotbed of Rugby League such as Wigan.

"There is a real belief in the team, after our

CHALLENGE CUP SECOND ROUND FIXTURES

Saturday, February 25

Ashton Bears v Dewsbury Rams (2.00pm at the FLAIR Stadium, Dewsbury)

Brentwood Eels v Wath Brow Hornets (1.30pm)

Cornwall v Rochdale Mayfield (1.00pm – live on BBC iPlayer)

Fryston Warriors v Stanningley (1.30pm)

Hunslet ARLFC v Pilkington Recs (2.30pm)

Lock Lane v West Bowling (1.30pm)

Myton Warriors v Leigh Miners Rangers (2.00pm)

North Wales Crusaders v Royal Navy (2.00pm)

Orrell St James v Dublin City Exiles (3.00pm)

RAF v York Acorn (2.00pm, RAF Cranwell, Lincolnshire)

Saddleworth Rangers v Thatto Heath Crusaders (1.30pm)

Siddal v West Hull (2.30pm)

West's Warriors v London Chargers (Wasps RUFC, 2.00pm)

Sunday February 26

Doncaster v Oldham (3.00pm)

GB Police v Westgate Common (2.00pm, Portico Panthers)

Hull Dockers v Midlands Hurricanes (Sewell Group Craven Park, 2.45pm – live on The Sportsman)

Hunslet v Heworth (3.00pm)

Rochdale Hornets v London Skolars (1.00pm)

Workington Town v Ince Rose Bridge (2.00pm)

historic win, that this is possible. The players are in very high spirits and are focused on the big challenge ahead."

Orrell coach Sean McHugh said: "It's a very interesting tie as the clubs don't know anything about each other.

"But we believe Dublin will be a stern test, coming over as all-Ireland champions. We will be well prepared after a tough first-round win at Distington. The lads are looking forward to another great day for the community of Orrell, and are hoping to do everyone at Orrell St James proud."

Elsewhere Great Britain Police are at home to Westgate Common, of Wakefield, courtesy of an impressive win at Featherstone Lions.

The tie will be played at Portico Panthers, of St Helens, on Sunday, and team manager Chris

Cowling said: "We anticipate a very tough game. Westgate had an excellent result in the first round, beating NCL team Crosfields, and we know they are a good, well-drilled side. We will have to be at our very best to progress to the next round.

"The spirit in the team has been excellent and we are looking forward to getting back on the field and hopefully putting in another solid performance.

"Our preparation has been good and it's important we build on the last result, not only to progress in the Challenge Cup but also in preparation for the year ahead."

Fryston Warriors, who accounted for Thornhill Trojans at the opening stage, have been rewarded with another home tie against NCL Division One opposition, with Stanningley

next up.

Phil Hartshorne, from the Castleford outfit, said: "Everyone at the club is really looking forward to another home game.

"On top of that, the lads are ready to test themselves against another team in a much-higher division. The mood in the camp is really good and everyone is hoping we will have another bumper crowd behind us."

Thirteen of the 19 ties will be played on Saturday, including Cornwall's Challenge Cup debut against Rochdale Mayfield (1.00pm), which will be shown live on the BBC iPlayer.

Of the six Sunday fixtures, the match between Hull Dockers and Midlands Hurricanes will be streamed live by The Sportsman on their Rugby League Youtube channel from 2.45pm.

STUDENT RL

Results

Wednesday 15 February

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP: Liverpool John Moores 35 Gloucestershire 0; St Mary's 16 Leeds 46.

NATIONAL TROPHY: Oxford Brookes v Cambridge -nr; Warwick 12 Oxford 36; Leicester 0 UCLan 72; Cardiff v Exeter A -nr; Nottingham 52 Nottingham Trent A 0; Nottingham A 0 Northumbria A 62; Edge Hill 30 Hull 16; Loughborough A 46 York St John 10.

NORTHERN CONFERENCE CUP: Manchester 62 Huddersfield 8; Manchester Met 35 Newcastle A 18.

MIDLANDS

TIER 1: Lincoln v Northampton -nr.

NORTHERN

TIER 2A: Salford v Manchester Met -nr.

TIER 2B: Sheffield Hallam v Huddersfield -nr.

SOUTH EASTERN: Reading v Oxford A -nr.

COLLEGE RUGBY LEAGUE

PREMIER DIVISION: Salford Red Devils 19 Furness Raiders 20.

NORTH WEST: Carmel v Oldham Sixth Form -nr; Wigan & Leigh 40 Warrington A 22.

YORKSHIRE

EAST DIVISION: Hull FC A v Wilberforce Sixth Form -nr.

Fixtures

Wednesday 22 February

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP: Exeter v Liverpool John Moores; Leeds Beckett v Leeds; Loughborough v Newcastle; Northumbria v Nottingham Trent.

NATIONAL TROPHY: Exeter A v Cambridge; Nottingham v Oxford; Northumbria A v Edge Hill; UCLan v Loughborough A.

NORTHERN

TIER 1: Leeds A v York St John.

TIER 2A: Bangor v Lancaster; Manchester Met v Salford.

TIER 2B: Sheffield v Huddersfield.

SOUTH EASTERN: Oxford Brookes v Cambridge; Oxford A v Brighton.

COLLEGES

PREMIER DIVISION: Furness Raiders v Castleford Tigers.

NORTH WEST: Carmel v Runshaw.

YORKSHIRE

EAST: Hull FC A v Pontefract; St Mary's v Leeds Rhinos.

PENNINE LEAGUE

Results

Saturday 18 February

DIVISION ONE: Rochdale Mayfield 0 Fryston Warriors 18.

DIVISION THREE: Clayton 32 Woodhouse 18.

FRIENDLY: Upton 24 Featherstone Lions 36.

The 2022-23 season has now concluded.

SECOND-ROUND DRAW PROVIDES PLENTY OF INTRIGUE

I'M not sure whether I'm imagining it, but interest in the Betfred Challenge Cup among amateur teams seems to be higher than usual this season.

Perhaps Lock Lane's exploits in beating Oldham last year has helped galvanise the grass roots.

I don't know, but the appetite of those who are involved in the weekend's second-round games, whether through winning in the first round or through simply being invited at the second stage, seems to be nicely whetted.

Plenty have responded to my request for their thoughts on their prospects and readers can learn, elsewhere in this issue, what they think.

Meanwhile I offer my own thoughts – concentrating, in line with this column's remit, primarily on the amateur sides, including those who have been paired with professional opposition in the shape of Betfred League One teams.

Looking, first, at the Saturday games, I'm sure that Ashton Bears of the North West Men's League will acquit themselves well against Dewsbury Rams.

But, having had to relinquish home advantage through the unavailability of a suitable ground in Wigan, the Bears will be up against it in facing a team rebuilding after demotion from the Championship.

Cumbrian giants Wath Brow Hornets, meanwhile, always seem to be coping ties in London (maybe they should buy property in the capital) but the Impact Performance National Conference League giants should be too strong for a gallant Brentwood Eels.

Rochdale Mayfield, though – many fans appreciate and I'm GB Police against Westgate

Talking Grass Roots

with PHIL HODGSON

ANY NEWS ON AMATEUR RUGBY LEAGUE?

Contact Phil Hodgson on 07786 980909 or email: philhodgson2@aol.co.uk



like Wath Brow, of the NCL top flight - might not be without hope at Cornwall, who are making their first appearance in the competition.

I doubt I'll be the only person tuning in to live coverage on the BBC iPlayer anticipating a rousing affair in which Mayfield's hooker, the very experienced Sean Penkywicz, could be key.

What about Fryston Warriors versus Stanningley? Well, the Warriors beat another NCL Division One team last time out, in Thornhill, and many folk Castleford way insist they should have seen off another (Normanton) in the recent BARLA Yorkshire Cup final, only for a 26-4 lead to be overhauled. This could be a real humdinger and, for me, is too close to call.

Hunslet Amateurs, now up and running following the merger of NCL champions Club Parkside and the Warriors, should be too strong for Pilkington Recs, who are a tier below, although they could come unstuck if they take the visitors lightly, and much the same can be said of the clash of Lock Lane and West Bowling.

NCL Division Two outfit Myton Warriors are at home to Premiers Leigh Miners Rangers, who you'd expect to prevail. But, as always, mindset could be crucial.

League One side North Wales Crusaders are rather stronger than

struggling to see them losing at home to the Royal Navy, although the visitors should certainly be fit, as will the RAF against visitors York Acorn, who did well to avoid relegation from the NCL Premier Division last year after having looking doomed early on.

Back in the North of England, Orrell St James versus Dublin City Exiles is intriguing, for sure, but I expect the Wigan side's deeper knowledge of intense Rugby League to tell.

And I also expect Thatto Heath Crusaders' high pedigree of recent years to count at that grand club Saddleworth in a meeting of teams in the third and top ranks of the NCL.

That cannot be said of the tie between Siddal and West Hull, both of whom are likely to be battling for the NCL title. Stand well back and enjoy!

And, if you're in London, do exactly the same at Wasps RUFC, where West's Warriors are hosting London Chargers on a day in which, wonderfully, three Southern amateur teams (Brentwood being the other of course) are involved in the Challenge Cup.

A professional outfit – London Skolars – are at Rochdale Hornets on the Sunday, when you'd favour the hosts to progress.

Another meeting of two League One teams, Doncaster and Oldham, isn't easy to call.

I expect Hunslet, of League One, to win, but I also expect NCL Division One side Heworth to do themselves and the amateur game proud, as they always have done, going back to the days when they set the template for the ethos that was central to the launch of the National Conference League.