

Boys Sports Tour to Lake Garda, Italy. October 2023.

The tour started with a bang with a 1.30am meet at school as 41 sleepy boys began to load the bus and head for the airport. After a seamless journey and check in process we were informed we had a 6 hour delay due to a technical fault on the plane. This news was not what we wanted but credit to all the boys and staff who just got on with it.

When we landed in Milan the weather was a perfect 20 degrees and sunny, we made our way to the hotel and home for the next 5 days. Gasparina Village was a perfect location for us to stay, it was right by Lake Garda and walking distance to Porta Verona Harbour. The boys enjoyed their apartment style accommodation with 4 boys to a room; breakfasts were huge and full of pastries and fresh coffee as well as eggs, bacon and fruit – just what they needed to start the day.

On the first day we decided to have a team walk along the lake to take in our local surroundings. The boys took it all in and we ended up walking all the way to the picturesque Porta Verona Harbour which was full of local charm and beauty.

We then headed to Parma as we had match tickets to see the best professional rugby team in the area – Zebre. They were playing Ulster Rugby Club in the United Rugby Championship. Zebre's stadium is an amazing open venue with a fantastic family friendly atmosphere and the boys enjoyed the experience in the sunshine. We headed back that evening for some pizza and pasta at the hotel and to watch the England v South Africa World Cup semi-final – which sadly England lost, much to the excitement of our own South Africa born brothers, Luke and Josh, who reserved the bragging rights on this occasion.

Day two saw both the senior and U15 football teams travel to Bergamo where they faced a local academy team called Isola Bergamasca FC. First up was the U15 team captained by Leon. The match started off at a frantic pace but eventually settled and saw Tranby play some excellent football. However, against the run of play Isola scored which really knocked the wind out of the Tranby boys. We were awarded a penalty to level things up but this was saved and at this point the Tranby team couldn't find a way back and conceded a few more goals in their attempts to get back into the game. It was played in the right spirit and a whole group photo at the end brought both teams together and the boys socialised after the game in the clubhouse over some table football and pasta.

The senior football team played straight after and again started at a frantic pace in what was very hot weather for October (21 degrees). The match had lots of quality on show from both teams, but particularly the Tranby team who played some of their best football, led from the front by their captain Freddie (goal scorer). At half time the score was level at 1-1 with both teams still playing with energy and quality in particular from Reuben S in midfield who never stopped. Tranby ended up losing 3-1 but had the majority of the possession and really tested Isola FC who do pull the best players from a wide area. Great game.

After the great hospitality at Isola Begamasca Academy FC we then headed into Bergamo to watch the Seria A match between Atalanta and Genoa. The coach dropped us close to the ground but we did have a bit of a walk and loved watching all the local fans with their flags and flares – the Italians really take their football seriously and on Sundays it is literally like a religion to many.

We had great seats for the game and the atmosphere was amazing, fans standing, singing, chanting and beating their drums. The away fans of Genoa never stopped making noise either and the odd flare or firework they let off was pretty scary!

Fun fact: Mr Henderson proposed to his wife in Verona. He got down on one knee next to the Ponte Pietra bridge in the heart of Verona – she obviously said yes.

After enjoying the time in Verona on another scorching day the Tranby touring squad travelled to Negrar FC for their evening football matches.

The reception in Negrar (a small village in the Valpolicella region) was lovely, lots of local people came to watch the matches from the small stand and clubhouse.

This time the senior team were up first and as soon as the match started it was clear it would be tough, however a very early goal from Tranby's Archie settled the nerves and we began to play some nice football once again. The opposition did have chances but Tranby keeper Joshua kept a clean sheet and it ended up 1-0 to Tranby. First tour win!

The U15 had a point to prove now, having lost their first game and watched the seniors win they really wanted their own victory on foreign soil – so they went for it. Energy from Ethan (and a headed goal) and a wonder goal from Reuben O and an overhead kick from Will Q meant Tranby were in the driving seat and when Ollie B struck a lovely long range effort in from outside the box we thought it was job done – we were wrong. Negrar had some strong subs and they began to fight back and eventually held on for a 4-3 win with Bobby and Leon doing their bit in defence.

It was time to celebrate and the Tranby squad enjoyed some of the best local, traditional pizzas after the match – the atmosphere was brilliant, those two wins had really brought the whole squad together.

Day four saw our luck with the good weather come to an end, the heavens opened up and it was torrential rain. We decided to continue with our plans anyway and after breakfast we headed to the little peninsula town of Sirmione just up the road. We 'enjoyed' a beautiful boat trip around the area, taking in the grand houses that overlooked that part of Lake Garda including one owned by the Italian Royalty. However, the rain continued – but not to be deterred and in typical English fashion the Tranby boys enjoyed some of the local ice-cream which was absolutely delicious.

After drying off back at the hotel it was time to prepare for the rugby matches against Valpolicella RFC that evening. The club has a rich tradition for producing high level players (many internationals) and I know that after missing the first rugby match due to our flight delay it was really important that our rugby tourists played well.

The U15 played first and captained by Rollo they put in a brilliant performance, the rucking from Richard and Darcy in particular and line speed from the boys was brilliant. We controlled much of the game and defended in a really committed organised manner when needed. Tranby won 38- 26.

The rain continued for the senior game, and this proved to be a bit of an issue with handling errors from Tranby and rapid attacks from Valpolicella which left Tranby behind at half time.

It was a valiant effort in the second half from Tranby against a very well drilled Italian team but the final score 28-7 to Valpolicella; lots to take from the way we played, and every player gave it their all. The best part about touring is the comradery from both sets of players after the game and it was all smiles and handshakes as it should be. The hospitality back at the clubhouse was brilliant, loads of

interactions despite the language barrier and many of the boys swapping shirts too. A warm welcome by the opposition coaches and their wives and some 'man of the match' speeches were given over large plates of homemade pasta and cake. There was even a dance off at one point.

The last day of the tour saw us depart from the hotel after breakfast and on our way to the airport make a stop at the iconic San Siro Football Stadium in Milan, this is the home of both Inter Milan and AC Milan. The tour included behind the scenes look at the changing rooms of both teams and the pitch. We also went through their museum of football gaining an insight into the rich history of the two clubs and the Italian national team too.

Our flight home was all on time and we all landed safely back at Tranby school as scheduled where we handed some very tired boys over to their loving parents who unbeknown to them had a bag of damp smelly sports kit waiting for them!

This was without doubt a fantastic tour where at some point or another I had the opportunity to see how brilliant each and every pupil who toured was, both on and off the pitch.

The behaviour from all of the boys was exemplary and it was a pleasure for me, Mr Parra, Mr Boddy and Mr Freeman to spend time with them in a beautiful part of Italy.