

Rugby League World Cup No10 Reception speech

Hi everyone, thank you very much for having me here. I want to start by saying a huge thank you to the Elmbridge Eagles for their amazing display. I don't think anything like this has happened before in No10, and I'm sure you can all go home knowing you've smashed some records.

We've had such a great year of major sporting events in this country – first with the Women's EUROs, then the Birmingham Commonwealth Games, and also the World Gymnastics Championships in Liverpool.

But as a proud northerner who grew up just down the road from the Warrington Wolves, I'm particularly pleased to see the Rugby League World Cup rounding off that list.

I was lucky enough to get to a game on Saturday – England's women vs Canada. Sadly they can't be here today because they're preparing for their next game.

But as I said, I watched them on Saturday, and I can tell you it was absolutely brutal. It was such a physical game.

But that's what makes this sport so thrilling – and it's why Rugby League fans are some of the most diehard out there.

So to see places where this sport was born, and where it grew...

...places where rugby league is the lifeblood of the local community...

...to see those places now host matches that are at the pinnacle of the international game has been absolutely brilliant.

It's been a great tournament so far, and we've still got all three finals in Manchester next weekend to look forward to.

And it goes without saying that putting on this kind of event requires an incredible amount of hard work and dedication – particularly when a global pandemic gets in the way. That caused all sorts of delays and difficulties.

But this room is full of people who battled through all of those challenges, and ultimately made this event possible...

...from social impact partners, to tournament ambassadors, to the players themselves.

You haven't just delivered a major international tournament. You've delivered an event that has been genuinely groundbreaking.

For the first time ever, it's one where the mens', womens' and wheelchair tournaments have all been held at the same time...

...one where everyone playing has received equal participation fees...

...and one where women and wheelchair tournament winners will all receive prize money – again, for the first time ever...

Together, all of those things have sent a very loud signal across the world that rugby league is a sport for all.

Those kinds of signals really matter. Visibility matters. Particularly for children and other people who might be thinking of taking up the sport, but who assume it's not for them.

But thanks to your efforts, they'll be able to turn on the BBC and see that it is.

And that's all while the tournament is going on.

But of course there's the legacy, too.

And the last thing that makes this tournament groundbreaking is that we haven't waited for the event to be over to get going on that legacy.

In fact, we've flipped it round.

In the run-up to the event, this tournament had already invested a significant part of the government's £30 million pot of funding into the grassroots, through its social impact programme.

It did so by partnering with multiple organisations – many of whom are here today...

...and that programme has already funded the refurbishment of dozens of clubhouses, changing rooms and artificial pitches – as well as all sorts of equipment, a mental fitness programme, international development and a special volunteer scheme.

And that was before a single try was even scored.

It's a fantastic achievement, and proof that in the end, an event like this is about so much more than sport.

It's about uniting communities...

...it's about instilling a real sense of pride in the towns and cities that get to host the games...

...and most of all, it gives us all something to feel good about – in a way that we don't often get with other things.

That's what makes sport so powerful – and you all played a role in that.

So thank you, and I hope you have a wonderful afternoon celebrating your achievements.