

MR LEICESTER

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Regimental honours in sport

I am grateful to Mr Philip French, social history curator at Newark Houses Museum, Leicester, home of the Royal Leicestershire Regiment collection, for sharing his research into army sport.

Mr French writes: "Good sports facilities and traditions were a useful recruitment tool in the past, but while regimental pride was understandable, I feel suggestions that army teams were at one time a match for professional sportsmen may be pushing it a bit.

"Although the Army provided its first gymnasium at Cork Barracks, Ireland, in 1852, it would be 10 years before Army Physical Education staff were appointed, when all new barracks were built with gymnasiums from 1862, with the emphasis on physical fitness and training, rather than team sports.

"Organisation of local and national Army shooting competi-



ARMY RUGBY STARS: Lt Douglas Kendrew and Lt Tony Novis

tions, such as the Wimbledon Cup, with results published in The Times, started bringing Army sport to prominence, followed by reports of army athletic results from 1876.

"Despite their success in shooting and equestrian events, it took the soldiers time to make their mark in team games. Then the Royal Engineers, all officers, entered the first FA Cup competition in 1872, losing 1-0 to Wanderers in the final at The Oval.

lands started making their presence felt, never again would amateur and military teams challenge in top flight football.

"Their loss of status led to the introduction of the Army Football Cup in 1888, probably in response to football's booming popularity, in an attempt to recruit football enthusiasts - meaning ordinary people took sport into the Army rather than the Army being an agent for popularising sport."

Philip says 1891 was the first year he found evidence of the Leicestershire Regiment playing team sports, when they played Shield Regimental football and cricket competitions.

The Glen Parva Depot football team played in the Leicestershire District League from the 1900s and later dominated the Leicestershire Thursday League, while battalion teams played in the Army Cup, which was won for the first time in 1927 after being runners-up the previous year.

The Army Rugby Union was formed in 1906 and Leicestershire (Rugby) Football Club played its first game against the United

Services in 1905-06 season, with the Leicestershire Regiment playing in what appears their only "Tigers" derby in 1908-09 when they lost 38-0 to the Welford Road Club.

Despite this heavy defeat, the Regiment's 1st Battalion rugby team won the Army Rugby Cup in 1908, 1911 and 1912, and were runners-up in 1910, a domination of the competition never repeated, although they were twice runners-up in the 1930s and semi-finalists three times.

During this period the regiment fielded arguably their two most significant sportsmen, Lieutenants Tony L. Novis and Douglas A. Kendrew, who while playing for the Regiment and the Army, both captained the England rugby team in 1927 and 1930 respectively.

Kendrew, later knighted and a Major General, made 10 appearances for England, played for the British Lions on their 1930 Australia and New Zealand tour and 30 games for Leicestershire, while Novis, capped seven times, played for Blackheath, and also turned out for Leicestershire on three occasions.