

# Making his mark at Wanderers

Those familiar with the highly acclaimed television series starring ex-England cricket captain, Andrew “Freddie” Flintoff, would surely identify with what is going on at Murrayfield Wanderers rugby club.

The programme shows Freddie helping youngsters from less than salubrious backgrounds become model citizens through sport.

For Flintoff read Marko Mladenovic, himself an international sportsman of – admittedly – lower profile than Flintoff but someone who has come up the hard way, of which more later.

Appointed Youth Development Officer at Wanderers three years ago, Marko is now seeing the fruits of his labours.

“A while back the club launched a Friday night project called “Wandies Young Aspirers Hub” recognising that this was the time bored youngsters would most likely turn to things like booze, smoking, vaping etc.

“It was a struggle at first but now we have achieved capacity numbers and what’s more are fielding teams at various age groups and pushing the occasional player into regional set-ups.

“It is very rewarding and best of all we teamed up with Leith and Penicuik to form a side which reached the semi-final of an East Shield under-16 competition losing to Kelso only on

'first try scored' when all other tie-break methods were equal."

As Marko says Wanderers have provided a platform and soon players will be fed into the senior set-up much like he was as a young player, becoming a full cap (with Cyprus) aged just 17.

But go back further and you find a dogged determination and family survival instinct the 33-year-old ex-flanker draws upon to this day.

"I've always had a fighting instinct believing that whatever the odds I am in with a chance" he says.

This can be traced to early days in Croatia living near the Serbian border during a well documented conflict.

"Neighbours literally knocked on our door and told us we weren't welcome to stay after a bombing raid took place a few miles away; my dad organised for us to be on one of the last flights out ... to Cyprus.

"There I was a rough-and-tumble sort of kid until my mum noticed something in the newspaper about rugby and enrolled me."

He never looked back, gaining an international debut away to Azerbaijan and going on to win 45 caps against the likes of Bulgaria, Finland, Monaco, Croatia and Serbia.

Rugby also took him to Bristol where he was part of the Bears Academy, a club near St Etienne in France and Currie before settling at Wanderers, his playing days ended by a knee injury earlier this year.

So Marko, whose wife Rosie is a diving instructor at the Royal Commonwealth Pool, concentrates on coaching with opportunities occurring such as in the Scottish women's representative game while a colourful assignment lies ahead next May.

“I have been asked to assist the Cyprus sevens team at a ‘small Olympics’ competition in Andorra against the likes of Luxembourg, Monaco and San Marino” he says.



