Newly promoted City of Salford played their first Super 8s game at Bacon’s college; the home of 2012 KO Cup finalists Swiss Cottage.

The first set began with both teams showing some nerves, siding out to 4 all, which Swiss Cottage then stretched to a 3 point lead at 7-4. With some side out chances missed, City of Salford failed to secure their service enabling Swiss Cottage to increase their lead further to 16-9. City of Salford changed their setter / opposite combination, Tulpova & Freinik for Gregson & Hulme. The trading of players seemed to have a positive effect for City of Salford, who managed to reel off 5 consecutive points to peg the score back at 14-17. However, soon after at 16-17, the home team regained the service and with it, control of the set, closing it out 25-16.

The second set started with City of Salford leading the game, applying pressure on the opposition with a more consistent service and the hitter’s smart plays, using efficient roll shots & tips. However, Swiss Cottage kept the lead low, with Vajdova leading the offence. At 8-6, Phil Chanin temporarily put back the Gregson / Hulme duo. Similarly, Coach Primus introduced setter Pykalova to replace Madeddu at 6-11; also putting Turner into the opposite slot, replacing Bjelica at 14-17. City of Salford still managed to keep a two point lead till 23 all, when Swiss Cottage came back fighting hard, but eventually lost 32-30.

The third set started with a new line up for Swiss Cottage, which saw Vajdova in the opposite slot, new player, Shearer with Turner in the outside slots, while keeping Pykolova to direct the game and the original two middle players, Yalkin & Joyce. City of Salford kept the same line up which won them the second set. However, the visiting team missed the first serve, leaving Swiss Cottage to gain a two point lead to 3-1, which was then levelled back by City of Salford at 6-6. Both teams kept on stepping on each other’s tail, but strong service from Yalkin and Pykalova gave Swiss Cottage the lead at 15-11, brought then to 20-13 by Shearer’s wicked serving and defence. The home team consistently used their serve, good blocking & clever attacks to weaken the opposition, ending the set 25-19.

The fourth set started as a repeat of the third, with Swiss Cottage leading 7-2 thanks to a challenging service from Vajdova. The home team kept a comfortable lead throughout, staying on top at 8-4; 11-8; 12-9; 15-10; 19-12. After a few shaky points and the recurrent setter / opposite line-up change from City of Salford at 13-19; Swiss Cottage successfully ended the match 25-19.

This was a promising debut for the visiting team, who have left no doubt about their drive to do well in the Super 8 division. The more experienced home team will have to weigh all the positives & negatives, to ensure the winning streak started this season doesn’t end prematurely.
Saturday 20th October 2012

Polonia IMKA London vs Malory Eagles


After a week off from the Super8’s, Polonia not only had their first home match of the season, but they were up against London rivals Malory Eagles. The anticipated derby match has been recently dominated by Malory with two 5-set wins in the second half of last season.

Despite the visiting team boasting two Olympic players, the match started tentatively, and it was Polonia who had the upper hand. The home team had a clear game plan and knew execution was going to be key. Serving specialist Sophie Szyszko led Polonia from the baseline, applying pressure to force Malory into errors at the business end of the set as Polonia won the opener 25-19.

Both teams recognised the importance of the second set, and it showed as the intensity on court increased. The play was point for point; solid passing from Aga Sochan in the back court helped keep Polonia’s rhythm flowing, enabling setter Ildiko Dobos to find Katja Gless who was aggressive and particularly effective at the net.

Set point came and went for Polonia, the potential to go two sets up and almost guarantee them victory was not to be. GB Olympic volleyball player, Lizzie Reid, instead made the most of her offensive reach at a crucial time. A number of disputed calls for setting violations from the referee added to the frustrations of Polonia, who eventually went down 27-29 in the second with an ace by Lizzie Reid.

Set three saw Polonia’s backcourt play step up. Libero Jo Healy had been slow to start but found her feet in defence, as Aga Sochan also worked hard to keep the ball alive. However the Polonia attack was under pressure. Middle players Grace Lazard and Ioanna Karelia were unable to find the floor past the Malory block, and Luca Toth struggled to find attacking rhythm in the opposite position. Malory held on, taking a seemingly diminished home team into the fourth set with a 2-1 advantage.

Polonia had to do something. Coach Mark Kontopoulos made adjustments to the team line up, changing the outside hitters by re-introducing Katja Gless to the game alongside former Greek international Evdoxia Argyropoulou who was making her first Polonia appearance of the season. The impact was immediate. The passing unit of Gless, Argyropoulou and libero Jo Healy found good rhythm while the home team also found life in their bench players, as the support and drive urged by Sofia Vlachou created belief in the team. Malory had no answers. Frustration crept into their game as they handed Polonia a convincing 25-15 win going into the tiebreak set.

Polonia’s small home stadium was full with spectators eager to see the match through. Malory stormed to a 0-4 lead, but after a Polonia time-out, momentum started to shift, although Malory retained a small advantage until the change of ends at 6-8. The home support suddenly began to sink in, and the Polonia ladies took advantage. Ildiko Dobos used her experience to fuel the team, and displayed excellent poise as she set up Grace Lazard who scored some crucial points at the net. With the momentum in hand, young gun Sophie Szyszko was brought on to court and stepped up to the service line at match point. And that was it. A great final block from Ildiko Dobos and Ioanna Karelia sealed the match for Polonia, whose bench raced in excitement to celebrate with the rest of the team on court.
Team Northumbria vs City of Salford VC

Result: 25:10, 27:10, 20:20 (3-0)

Team Northumbria women recorded another volleyball victory this weekend to continue their Super 8s success. The Sport Central stars saw off visitors City of Salford 25-10, 25-10, 25-20 and incredibly are yet to drop a set so far this season.

“It was a comfortable victory,” said TN’s head coach Dave Goodchild. “We had two or three injuries yesterday so we only had seven players to choose from. Alanna McDonald, our second setter, started and played very well. I think Magda Ropiak played as well as I’ve seen her play in two or three seasons at Team Northumbria - she’s just getting better and better. She had 15 kills and only one error so I’m really pleased for her. Both Ropiak and Whitney Phillips are already in contention for the Super 8s’ MVP award. They are in good form at the moment and consistently playing well.”

Next week TN’s women make the journey south to take on Birmingham in a cup encounter. And Goodchild is confident of his team’s chances. “We’re struggling with injuries a little bit but the teams we are putting out are still strong,” he added.

“For example - Alice Harkness is only 18 but she’s getting really good experience at the moment and will be starting for the next couple of weeks. Birmingham are either a league or two leagues below us. And with our team, I’ll be very disappointed if we don’t make the final of the cup and win it. They are all good professional players who are dedicated and work really hard and I set the team the challenge of winning it. The backroom staff are all pulling in the right direction - I’ve got Joel Brannigan (TN’s Strength and Conditioning Expert) working with them day in, day out and we should have a full strength squad before Christmas - if not, then just after.”

“It’s a big team effort - I need all the staff and it’s excellent that they are all contributing.”
Saturday 9th November 2012

Ashcombe Dorking vs Portsmouth


Ashcombe needed 4 sets to overcome Portsmouth in what started as a scrappy match but finished with a powerful Ashcombe display in the third and fourth sets. Playing in her last home game for Ashcombe, Lucy Boulton confidently hit Ashcombe through to victory with a stunning attacking performance from both the front and back row.

Mid-way through the first set, libero Mia Lowney came off court with an injured back. Ashcombe chose not to re-designate the libero and instead played with middle hitter Claire Greenwood across the back row and replaced Nicky Schmidt with Patricia Russo. The changes slightly unbalanced the home team who had to fight to come back from behind late in the set from 17-20 to take the set 25-22.

A nervous start to the second set allowed Portsmouth to creep ahead and Ashcombe were unable to reclaim the difference, losing by the same margin they won the first set by.

By the third set, Ashcombe had adapted to the Portsmouth game. With little in the way of powerful attacking coming from the South coast team, Ashcombe needed to learn how to deal with the frequent volleys into the corner, tips and roll-shots. However once familiar with this style of play it wasn’t difficult for them to impose a far more aggressive game onto their visitors.

Building up a comfortable 18-4 lead in the fourth set, Olivia Obaseki and Emily Buchan were introduced to the game replacing Carol Fogarty and Lucy Boulton. The teenage stars immediately impacted the game with steady setting from Buchan and the developing power and range of shots from Obaseki causing further problems to the stumbling Portsmouth defence.

The win gives Ashcombe a valuable three point boost and lifts them clear of the relegation zone. They will need to overcome City of Salford to stay out of danger. The last time those two teams met Ashcombe narrowly missed out in a tense 5 set thriller in Dorking.
On Saturday 16th February, Swiss Cottage played host to current Super 8’s leaders, Team Northumbria at Bacon’s College in London.

In the first set, Northumbria started strongly with powerful services and consistent attacks. Swiss Cottage responded with a stable defence but were unable to convert these opportunities into points. As Northumbria continued to apply the pressure, cracks started to appear in the home team’s composure and Swiss Cottage finished the first set 12-25 down.

However, the highlight of the match was certainly the close-fought battle for the second set. This saw the best volleyball played by the home team so far this season. Swiss Cottage edged out a lead with a more consistent service and the hitter’s smart plays, using efficient roll shots & tips. These attacks, plus a great hustle in defence from Swiss Cottage saw an excellent second set of volleyball that thrilled the home crowd. Northumbria were not to be beat however, and due to a string of errors from Swiss Cottage in the final few points, Northumbria just pushed through took the second set 25-22.

The third set saw the away team dominate with strong serves as Swiss Cottage failed to recover from the disappointment of the previous set. A shaky reception meant Swiss struggled to make up the points and despite the best efforts from the London team, Northumbria finally took the match in straight sets.