



Connecting with other people and being active are at the heart of the Farmstrong Scotland movement. We spoke to Russell Mill - who will be pulling on his boots for a charity match that is very close to his heart - about the vital role his local rugby club plays in people's wellbeing...

this June will see the third staging of an annual rugby match, the Come Ashore Cup, and there can be no doubt about how much it means to everyone involved.

The low-key simplicity of the Come Ashore Cup, which is formed from a traditional Orkney bridal cog mounted on an engraved Caithness stone base, belies the huge role it has played in helping a community come to terms with the loss of one of its own.

Farmer Alexander Mill was just 45 when he tragically died in April 2021. His cousin, Russell Mill, explains that the name of the trophy comes from Alexander's propensity to invite people in with the words, "come ashore."

"He was a much-loved husband, father, son and brother who was so very well thought of in the local community," recalls Russ, who spoke to us on behalf of the Mill family. "If he wasn't on the farm he'd be working in the livestock mart, having a chat and a laugh with everybody. He was passionate about his North Country Cheviot sheep and very well respected for his knowledge and the quality of the stock that he bred.

"We all grew up playing rugby, all us cousins - Alexander, me and my brothers William and James. We all went through young farmers together and Alexander was especially talented when it came to tug-of-war, having many successes with the Forss team including winning two Scottish Championship medals.

"When the pandemic came the lockdown hit Alexander particularly hard and he just couldn't find his way back. His death was something that nobody ever expected and although everyone was in shock we were all united that we wanted to create an event to remember him.

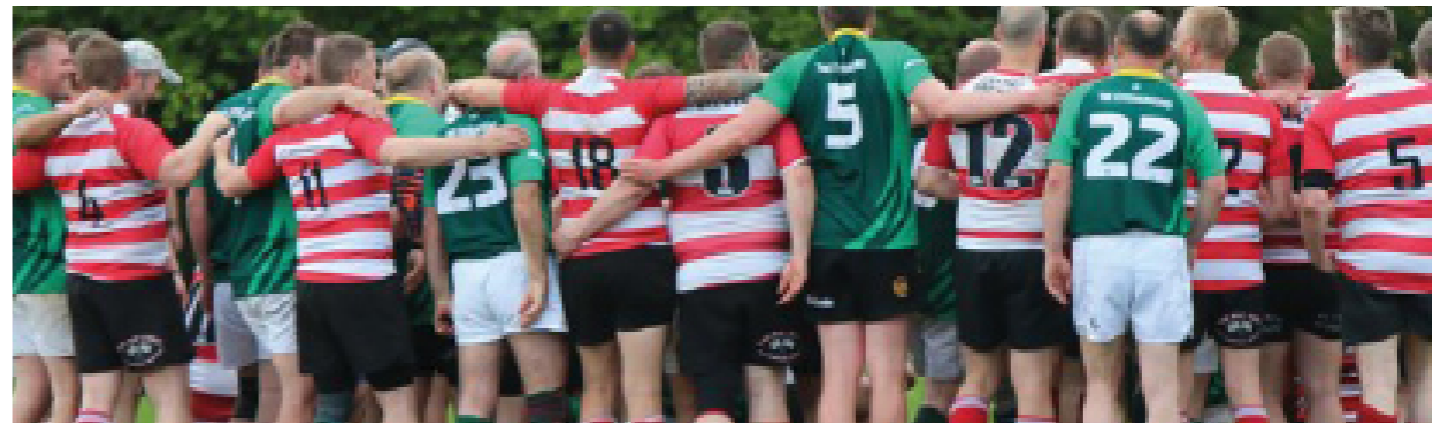
We wanted to get everybody to come together - to come ashore. We also wanted to encourage people that it's ok to talk about things.

The Come Ashore Cup has succeeded in being both things - a coming together of people and an opportunity to talk. Getting the veteran team going gave me and others an important focus, something to get stuck into during the darkest of times."

49-year-old Russell will be once again turning out for the veteran Caithness Evergreens team, when they go head-to-head with the Orkney Vikings, also made up of older players.

"It's a great fixture as Alexander went to college on Orkney so there are a lot of players who knew him," explains Russ.

"But more than that, Orkney is an isolated rural area - like us - and has a large farming community so it's important that we spread the word that they are all very welcome to come down and watch the match; that it's good to talk.



It feels like the Come Ashore Cup has already had a big impact in getting people together and will be a lasting legacy to Alexander.

The farming community will always have a special invitation to come down and join us; to give themselves a day off - it's an invite that will always be there for them."

This year's match will return to Caithness Rugby Club, where the inaugural Come Ashore Cup was held in 2022 before alternating up to Orkney in 2023. It will take place on Saturday, June 1st.

The two rugby clubs have a long history as playing rivals, with the first recorded game between Orkney and Caithness taking place in 1879 when the Kirkwall Football (Rugby) Club played the Thurso Club.

A match that wasn't without its controversy, with the Scottish Football Union recommending that in future "two people should umpire as one person can't be expected to see everything!"

"Everybody is welcome," says Russell, who reveals that last year the event raised an incredible £8,319.50 for Farmstrong Scotland, which thanks to matchfunding from the charity Movember made a total donation of £16,638.

"Everybody playing was over 35; with the oldest being 72. On a personal note, it was wonderful to be playing alongside my two brothers and everybody came off with a smile on their faces.

"The event meant so much to so many different people, but Alexander was key to bringing it all together.

The Come Ashore Cup has already become so much bigger than we could ever have dreamed of, with conversations had and new friendships made.

"Orkney Rugby Club is our traditional rival but just recently I had a 'phone call from an Orcadian to check in on me and have a chat. Of course, it's so very sad that it had to take what happened to Alexander for us all to get talking in the way we now do, but I'm sure he would be very proud.

"When times are tough it's easy to retreat into yourself and getting down to the rugby club and seeing people has made a real difference, not just to me but to so many people.

Everything about Farmstrong, the whole emphasis on the importance of looking after yourself, has struck a chord."

John Scott, Chairman of Farmstrong Scotland, said he was "overwhelmed" by the donation made from last year's rugby match.

"Everything Russell and his family have said about how important it is for farmers and crofters to get away from work and meet up with others is so very true," he said.

"The wonderful support network and camaraderie found at rugby clubs like Caithness and Orkney are an example to all of us.

I wish them every luck with this year's Come Ashore Cup and can't thank them enough for the support they have shown Farmstrong."



Tried & Tested: Three simple wellbeing wins Caithness Rugby Club has given Russell Mill

- **CONNECT** Connecting with others. It's impossible to go down to the rugby club and not talk to somebody.
- **Give** Volunteering. It's good for your own wellbeing to give your time for others. Serving the club in different roles over the years and helping organise the Come Ashore Cup has provided focus and structure during difficult times.
- **BE ACTIVE** Keeping active. Some of the veteran players only stayed on the pitch a matter of minutes because of old injuries, but they all had a smile on their faces. Exercise makes you feel better.

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