

Underdogs triumph at the Launton tournament

Move over Leicester City, here is the latest remarkable story of footballing underdogs; and it has unfolded right here.

Chesterton Primary School, competing against girls' clubs from around Oxfordshire, caused a genuine footballing upset as they triumphed at the Launton Ladies Under 12s football tournament on Saturday. To make their achievement even more impressive, the Chesterton Lionesses, made up of three current Year 6 pupils and three Year 7 former pupils, were playing together for the first time in nearly a year.

The story began nearly two years previously when I organised a girls' football friendly to see how keen they were. After seeing the enthusiasm and talent on display in that game, we promptly set up a club for the girls to develop their skills and arranged for them to play friendly matches against other local schools. The Chesterton team were soon chalking up victories against larger schools and completed the season by winning every game. Seeking an extra challenge, the girls and I decided that they would enter the Launton Ladies tournament in June 2016. Clad in their new neon pink kit and with the sole aim of scoring just one goal, the team were delighted to reach the semi-finals, scoring four goals along the way. With half of the team moving onto secondary school that September, it seemed as if their footballing adventure together was at an end.

However, it transpired that there would be an Under 12 event taking place at this year's Launton tournament, enabling the 'Pinky Blinders' as they were christened by a grandparent, to take to the football field together for one last time. Despite only setting out to enjoy their reunion, the Lionesses began the group stage by picking up their first point with a hard-fought 0-0 draw, before an unlucky 1-0 defeat to hosts Launton in their second match. However, Chesterton bounced back quickly with a thumping 3-0 victory in their next match. Star striker Jasmine Kirby, 11, with her 50th and 51st goals for the school, sandwiched either side of a Lucy Hayes volley. Knowing that qualification for the knockout phase was in the balance, Chesterton, managed by dads James Kirby and Ian Mansley for the day, ground out further tense draws courtesy of excellent goalkeeping from Charlotte Kavanagh and commanding defensive work from Millie Mansley. The girls now had to wait for other matches to conclude before learning their fate.

After an anxious half an hour, Chesterton learnt that they had equalled last year's achievement by qualifying for the semi-final. However, they were soon celebrating going one better as yet another vital goal from Tottenham-supporting Jasmine Kirby fired them past Hook Norton and into the final 1-0. As I had been managing the Under 9s team to their own place in the semi-final, it was only at this point that I was able to join the nervous parents and Chesterton supporters as the team prepared to take on Witney Vikings for the title. There was everything to play for as the two teams had drawn 0-0 in the group stage. After a goalless first half that included tenacious tackling in midfield from Jess Rotherham and Lucy Hayes, the game turned on fantastic work on the right wing from Hayes who eluded two defenders before sending in a cross that strikers dream of. In true poacher's fashion, there was Jasmine Kirby again with an improvised finish (off her shinpad/knee!) that her hero, Harry Kane, would have been proud of. 1-0 up with about four minutes left on the clock, it was now time to battle to hold onto the lead. Player of the tournament, Inés Piaget-Thompson, produced yet another assured performance as the pinks looked to keep Witney at bay, while the potential for a counter-attack always remained at the other end.

Sure enough, with less than a minute to go, captain Hayes had the ball under her spell again before playing a defence-splitting pass through to Jasmine Kirby. With the crowd willing Jasmine to put it anywhere to run the clock down, Geoff Hurst 1966 style, Kirby had other ideas as she brought it under control before calmly dispatching into the corner of the net to seal the victory and send the Chesterton section of the crowd into delirium. They hoped it was all over – it was now!

The celebrations went up another gear as the final whistle went, as the realisation of what the girls had achieved began to sink in. A team of six talented footballers, none of whom play outside school and who hadn't played together for a year, had taken on club sides and, against all the odds, had won. The smiles certainly hadn't left the girls' faces by the time they walked up proudly to collect their trophies to a huge ovation from the gathered spectators. If that turns out to be their last match as a team, what a way to sign off!

While all this was going on, the Under 9s team, some of whom had only played one competitive football match before the day, were enjoying success of their own as they chalked up two victories in the group stage to reach the semi-finals. The highlights being a hat-trick from Ruby Evans and some heroic goalkeeping from Katie Smith. Unfortunately, they came up against very strong opposition in the shape of AFC Portchester (Hampshire) and lost a close game 2-0 to bow out with the pride intact. This won't be the last we see of this team and it certainly looks like the future of girls' football at Chesterton is bright.

Quotes:

Iain Horner (Headteacher)

"I am so pleased for the girls – they couldn't deserve it more. Since the very first friendly match that they played, the individual talent was evident, but it is the way that they gelled as a team that was the most impressive. I also applaud their enthusiasm and willingness to take on a challenge. When I suggested that we give the Launton tournament another go this year, the response was overwhelming. However, we never dreamed that we'd actually win it! It has been an absolute privilege to work with them and Saturday was certainly one of the proudest moments of my teaching career.

At Chesterton, we are keen to give all our pupils the chance to participate in sport and I am convinced that, if the children take those opportunities, it will have huge benefits for them in a number of ways. Our girls footballers have epitomised that and have set a shining example to our younger pupils. We might not ever manage to match their achievements on the football pitch, but I think that this cohort will leave a legacy that breeds future enjoyment and success in sport and you can't ask for more than that."