

Pre-match build up...



by Gordon
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As the long, hot, tropical Scottish summer has now finally given way to our more traditional weather the thoughts of many will be turning to the return of our national sport, football. (Disclaimer: That weather forecast may not turn out to be 100% accurate but, due to the idiosyncrasies of publishing deadlines, this is written while we're still experiencing near 30-degree temperatures!) Also, talk of football 'returning' when the World Cup in Russia has been apparently omnipresent on TV screens may seem strange and inaccurate. But this month we feature two articles on 'real' football – not the overpaid, over-pampered, egotistical demigods of the World Cup, nor even the not-quite-so-overpaid yet still over-pampered wannabees of our Scottish professional game, but the genuine grassroots kind.

According to the Scottish Football Association website, Scotland has almost half a million registered footballers. Since the professional game can only account for a small percentage of those, it's clear that football is our major participation sport and is hugely popular, important and influential in everyday Scottish life. This month, iScot Magazine offers two inspirational stories of what ordinary people can achieve *within* their communities and *for* their communities...



Dundee United Women's FC - Doing the right thing



WHEN A football team goes through their entire inaugural season as double-winners with a 100% league record you would expect that to be big news... but can you name the team? That then followed that up in a higher division with a season featuring only two defeats and finishing as runners-up... are you any closer to recognising them? Now halfway through their third season with another unbeaten record on the cards... take a bow Dundee United Women's Football Club!

Women's football is one of the fastest growing participation sports worldwide and the showpiece tournaments, like the World Cup and European Championships, now attract major sponsors and international live TV coverage. In Scotland, the game is growing apace but without the same level of promotion and media interest in the domestic leagues. There are currently 178 clubs and 410 youth teams registered with Scottish Women's Football (www.scotwomensfootball.com) and the number of registered players stands at 5,681 at the time of writing, an increase of 113% since 2011! The credit for this impressive growth lies with an army of players, coaches, volunteers, administrators and supporters, quietly working away in the background, in virtually every community in Scotland.

When Justine Mitchell joined the board of Dundee United in 2013 she was following in the footsteps of her father, mother and brother in what was truly a family affair. As she recalls, "Dundee United ran in the family. My father, Eddie Thompson, had moved

from Glasgow to Dundee after he got married, about 1965, and he chose to support United. When we won the league in 1982/83 there was a huge party in Dundee, the whole house was going mad, big celebrations and I remember thinking 'I want a piece of that! I really did want to be involved and, the following season, I started going with my Dad - I got my first half-season ticket for Christmas! I went to every home and away game with my Dad until I was 18, then still continued to go to as many matches as I could when I was a law student at Aberdeen University'.

The family's commitment to Dundee United reached another level when Eddie Thompson bought the club in 2002. He became Executive Chairman, with son Stephen joining the board as a Director, and the plan was for Justine to enter the family business too. Yet after a double tragedy in 2008, her father and husband Ken both passing away within days of each other, Justine understandably took a step away from the football scene. In 2013 she eventually returned, joined the board and felt that she needed to focus on a particular niche within the club.

"When I joined the board I started thinking, why don't we have a women's football team and what can I do about that? I think a football club should be there for the community and I felt passionately that Dundee United is such a big club that it should have a women's football team. There had been a previous women's team that had used the United name many years ago, but it wasn't official. Other big clubs haven't had women's teams, even Manchester United are just setting one up at the moment and they're the biggest club in the world! I indicated to the board that I wanted to set up DUWFC and they were happy for me to do that. I believed, and still do, that it was simply the right thing to do."

And that's where the hard work really started - how do you build a football club from scratch? Justine explains, "I looked around at the other clubs for information and ideas and saw that Hibs and Motherwell, for example, had set up their women's teams through their community trusts, which can help with funding. So, we decided to do the same through United for All, which has since been renamed Dundee United Community Trust. I originally wanted to also set up a girls academy to run alongside the football club but, after speaking to many people and researching it, I felt

that it might stifle the development of the game in the area because it would attract all the best players from the other local clubs, deplete their resources and not grow the game. So, we concluded that we would get the team up and running and then go into partnership with local clubs. In that way we would help with coaching and provide a route for their girls to progress into the women's game."

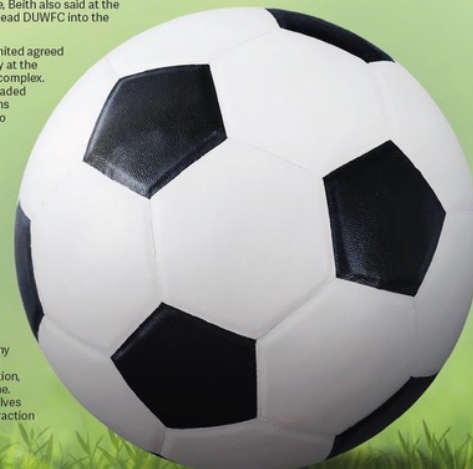
The first step was to recruit a Head Coach and for that Justine enlisted the then manager of the men's team, Jackie McNamara, to help in the selection process. They were looking for someone whose role would 'encompass all areas of developing the women's team at the club and include building the foundations to support women's football at Dundee United for the foreseeable future'. In June 2015 Gavin Beith, a former professional player and UEFA qualified coach, was appointed to the position, saying "this is a fantastic opportunity for me to use my experience to introduce a new Dundee United women's team, ensure that the team plays in the right manner, and produce a competitive team to represent the club in the Scottish Women's Football League". Justine was delighted with this appointment, stating "Gavin was the outstanding candidate in the many applications we received. His ideas on how the game should be played links in with what Dundee United as a club believes but also what we want to encourage in the Dundee United women's team". As a potential hostage to fortune, Beith also said at the time that his ultimate ambition was to lead DUWFC into the Championship League...

With a Head Coach in place, Dundee United agreed that the new team should train and play at the club's Gussie Park all-weather training complex. Since renamed the GA Arena, and upgraded to a new 3G playing surface, this remains the base for DUWFC as they continue to progress through the leagues. All that remained were the small matters of recruiting players, applying to join the SWF, and raising funds to cover all of the necessary expenses involved in running a football team - playing and training kit, travel, physiotherapy, referees, and a whole host of other things that pass beneath the radar of the average fan!

Paul Reid, Head of Business Development at Dundee United, used his contacts within the football industry to help Justine with initial sponsorship and fundraising. He explained, "it's increasingly hard to attract sponsorship as there are so many competing organisations. It helps if the product you're offering is a new innovation, which the women's team was at the time. Sponsors generally like to align themselves with success, so that's definitely an attraction given the team's progress so far."



Action from Dundee United v East Fife (Credit: APP Photography)



Dundee United and Deveronvale players supporting the Show Racism the Red Card campaign (Credit: APP Photography)



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