

Balyna U10s represent the Parish in Europe



At the Pan European Youth Gaelic Football Tournament held at Madrid Harps

"Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover." – Mark Twain

After dipping their toes in the water in terms of competitions outside the county earlier in the year at the Peter Cassidy Memorial Under 10.5 Football Tournament in Carryduff Co. Down (and taking home the Shield Trophy), the Under 10s embarked on an even greater journey to play our beloved game.....in Madrid! The following is a diary of accounts which unfolded over those few days.

The team, mentors and parents met up in Dublin Airport on Thursday afternoon October 23rd for our 16.20 flight to Madrid. The players attracting plenty of attention all kitted out in their Balyna Zip-tops sponsored by Today FM, and questions from passers-by were aplenty. We touched down exactly on schedule and were met off the flight by Brendan Lowe from Madrid Harps who was more than courteous and genuinely delighted to have us over. We reached our hotel which was a short shuttle journey, had a meal and soon after headed for the beds, a long action packed weekend lay in store. We had Friday to ourselves and pre-booked a guided tour of the Bernabea stadium, home of the legendary soccer club Real Madrid which the lads and parents equally enjoyed. On our way home on the underground metro the 'Rattlin' Bog' got a blast, to many of the passengers listening in amazement and wonder. We knew at this stage an unbreakable bond had been formed between these outstanding kids. That evening, we had a meal together again close to our hotel in a fantastic restaurant, our mantra to keep the team together throughout the whole experience. We didn't delay too long as the business end of things lay in store the following morning.

Tournament Day

Our coach picked us up at 8.30am to take us to the tournament. On arrival to the grounds we were greeted by the organisers Keith, Brendan and Carlos who it must be said were more than accommodating. There were seven clubs represented at the event with 14 teams in total some clubs with up to 3 teams and some like ourselves with just a single team – Balyna, Bruxelles, Valencia, Kilmacud Crokes, Los Penascales, Naomh Barróg and Madrid Harps the host club.

Matches

Our first match was against Naomh Barróg's C team. The lads went out all guns blazing to leave it 2-05 to no score at half time. The sun was also beginning to impress its power and we were glad the halves were just 10 minutes long trying to keep the lads hydrated in the 25°C heat, unprecedented temperatures in Madrid for the end of October. The second half brought 3-04 more to a stunned and scoreless Barróg outfit leaving the final result 5-09 to 0-00.

Already heads began to turn as Balyna soon became the talk of the place. One organiser said "I'd a sneaking suspicion early on you guys weren't just here to make up the numbers".

The second game brought the challenge of the host club's B team who proved to be a tougher challenge but the result was never in doubt, we lead at half time 0-04 to 0-02 and in the second half our lads stepped up a gear, scoring 2-05 to 0-01 leaving the final score 2-09 to 0-03.

Lunch was served to all, and a relaxing break in the shade was welcomed as the organisers worked frantically to regroup the teams in order of ability. To our lads credit, they were designated a place in the A Championship along with Kilmacud A and Barróg A which was a big step up from the opposition in the group stages but we felt our bunch of lads were up for the challenge. So what if these so called 'super-clubs' from Dublin have well in excess of 100 players at U10 and we only possess one fifth of those numbers, only 11 of which available to travel to Spain? So what if they had additional subs to throw on when the sun began to drain players? Our lads have been used to competing and winning as a squad for over 3 years at the top division in the North Kildare Leagues, we'd come this far; why not give it a go and get a real measure of the Balyna contingent under serious pressure?

The semi-final against Kilmacud started off at lightning pace with both teams not giving an inch under the searing sun. At half time the score was in our favour 1-03 to 0-03. Such was the standard of pure football on show crowds began to file around the pitch to witness what was later labelled the match of the tournament.

Kilmacud came out in the second half to their credit and threw everything at us to draw the match after normal time 2-03 to 1-06 in a battle which Sky Sports would have paid for the rights of, a game which could have been used as an example to all up and coming juvenile players in Ireland and indeed throughout the GAA world. Two halves of extra time was to be played of just 2 and a half minutes aside to settle the encounter. The pressure was on and neither team was going to be beaten easily after travelling over 1500km to get this far. Balyna scored a point followed by a goal in the first period without a reply from the boys from Stillorgan, we had a real chance now to make the final. Kilmacud came at us with venom in the second period and registered a goal almost instantly followed by a point to even the game with just over a minute on the clock. We went ahead again and they equalized just before we nicked a well worked point from play before the final whistle. So much effort from the lads throughout, there were tears at the end and not just from the kids it must be said.

The final was played 40 minutes later against Naomh Barróg who had a much easier route to the final playing a local team of a lesser standard to Kilmacud who actually beat Barrógs in the group stages by 4 points. The pitch was larger and the halves marginally longer at 12mins a side. Things never got going for us until a few minutes before half time when we registered 3 scores in succession to leave the score 3-04 to 2-02 in favour of the boys from Kilbarrack. The beginning of the second half saw Seán McKeon picking up an injury and coming off for 7 minutes something we couldn't recover from. The final score read 4-08 to 3-04.

We were gutted there's no denying it but we pulled it together shortly after accentuating the positives, and there were many. 140 kids played that day and our 11 lads were very very close to coming out on top. Their sheer belief in themselves and self-respect both to themselves and their opposing teams would bring any coach to tears, and I can honestly say it did. We regrouped togged in and got ready to leave the tournament with our heads held high.

Tournament Reception

We were driven by coach to a private venue where food and drinks were laid on for everyone involved, kids and adults alike. A trophy and medal ceremony took place where our team were singled out by the organisers as the stand out team at the event both on and off the field of play and announced that Balyna Juvenile GAA should be very proud of the calibre of the kids in every facet of their behaviour. A raffle took place with 4 great prizes up for grabs; the Balyna parents took 3 of the 4, which was hilarious, collecting their prizes to the chants of "Ooh Ah Balyna, Say Ooh Ah Balyna!"

The lads spent the night as a solid unit playing charades and singing songs along with us coaches and kids from other clubs, who sang, played the bódhrán among other talents. The 'Rattlin' Bog' was sung yet again and has been tipped to become the anthem of our Club in the future! The evening finished up with a group rendition from the kids and parents of 'Amhrán Na bhFiann', a fitting end to an enchantingly cultural day all round.

The following day [Sunday] we all went into the centre of Madrid for sight-seeing and flew back that evening. Again people stopped us regularly asking what club we were from and amazed at where we had been and how we had performed.

Reflection

"If you are not willing to risk the unusual, you will have to settle for the ordinary". – Jim Rohn

I would strongly recommend this to anyone involved with young teams in our club and beyond in the wider Gaelic Athletic Community. This trip was something which they will remember for life as will the parents who travelled also.

Coaches, I urge you to be proactive and find clubs who want to do likewise, there are clubs all over the UK and Europe just waiting for coaches to contact them, it can't be recommended enough. I know Brian, Alan and I would do this again in a heartbeat for our squad.

Thanks to Brendan, Keith, and Carlos tournament organisers from Madrid Harps along with their on-site nurse who was called upon a few times and treated the lads with care.

Thank you to the parents who got involved and travelled at such short notice and bought into what it was all about, helping out throughout the trip in every way possible.

Finally we must thank everyone who helped with fundraising and sponsored our team in various ways locally and through business, namely Today FM, The Hamlet Court, Moyvalley Golf Club, John Sisk & Son Ltd, Taconic, O'Neill's Londis, Wallace O'Donoghue and Tesco Maynooth.

Team: Ian Coogan, Luke Kennedy, Joshua Lacey, Luke O'Connor, Seán McKeon, Josh O'Donoghue, Ciarán Carey, Seán O'Haire, Ryan Rainey, Ultan McIntyre & Pádraig Bennett. Mentors: Seánie Bennett, Brian O'Donoghue & Alan Carey.

Adiós por ahora,

Seánie Bennett

Balyna U10 Team Manager