**Girls Football in Northumberland Schools**

When I first started teaching at Shiremoor Middle School in 1982, there was no organised football for girls in any of the three local authorities’ schools. In fact, I don’t think I would have considered offering girls in Shiremoor Middle the opportunity to play if it hadn’t been for the fact that there were so many male staff in the school, each of whom took a boys’ team, that I didn’t have the chance to run a football team at all.

I decided I had enough time to start lunchtime clubs for girls to play football. The girls were basically learning the game from scratch at 11, 12 or 13 years old, and this led me to devoting many hours to the development of the game in the school, All of which was rewarded by the keenness, enthusiasm, spirit and a sporting attitude from the girls which, certainly in the early days, was so different to the entrenched aggression in boys’ football.

In the first few years in the early 1980’s, it was extremely difficult to find other schools to play fixtures against, as no girls football was on any PE curriculum in any school – probably a national situation as well. The first matches were 7 or 8-a-side friendly matches using corner flags as goals against a very able St Anselm’s team, which was run by Christine Morrison – a team which was trained by the sixth formers at that school and included successful players such as Lynsey MacLean and Kerry Davison, the latter of whom became one of the first football-playing PE teachers in the area, who would herself develop the game in the local school. So in the early years it was very frustrating, but also challenging for pioneering teachers, and also players, who wanted regular fixtures.

A definite highlight of the girls game at Shiremoor Middle was the playing of the annual Tommy Green Memorial Trophy match at the Shiremoor Miners’ Treat, when Shiremoor girls would play a local school – initially St Thomas More, and later Monkseaton Middle, where Tracey Chappell was starting the game off. Indeed, North Tyneside became the area where most of the girls football was initially played on a more organised basis. In the late 1980’s I started organising a county-wide U13 Girls Football tournament at Shiremoor, which grew from a 3 or 4 entries to about 12 over the next few years, and the standard of play definitely improved.

Soon the Northumberland Schools FA started to get interested and from 1992 onwards the growth has been terrific. The County executive sanctioned and introduced The Merchant Navy Cup for Under 16 Girls, and ESFA introduced a national competition, The Vimto trophy as it was called, in which Seaton Burn did very well. Northumberland’s first ever County Girls team played in a game against Cumbria in 1997, which they won 4-2 at Morton School, Carlisle., and from there it has gone from strength to strength. Both Whitley Bay High School, with Nick Brain and then Stephen Tupling and Walker School, under Patrick Powlett, and Vicki Booth were strong in the development of Girls football in both schools and at county level.

In the ensuing years the game began to snowball. The first 7-a-side leagues in North Tyneside were important and with the help of colleagues such as Helen McGarry at Wensleydale, Julie Grant at Stonelaw, and Simon Lowe at Seaton Hirst, leagues developed in East and South Northumberland as well. Soon there were girls leagues in Newcastle, and then West Tyne as the industrious June Lomax established the game there.

It has to be said that it was not all plain sailing. The evident enthusiasm in the middle schools was not always matched in the High Schools where opportunity was often limited by a whole range of factors, some historic, some to do with the entrenched positions of the established sports of hockey, netball etc.and also in the teenage years, many girls lost interest and stopped playing.

Following the enormous pioneering work of some of those mentioned above, in 2000, the NSFA took an important decision to invest nearly £5000 in equipment for Seven a side girls Football at under 14, under 16 and under 18 level and to run league competitions every Wednesday afternoon at Cramlington High School for all High Schools that could take part. The success of this decision is to be seen in the fact that in season 2010-11 there were 16 schools taking part at under 14; 16 teams at under 16 and 10 at under 18…It can be a bit of a headache organising matches on many pitches at the same time on a Wednesday after school, but when it works it’s brilliant. Its fun, its rewarding and it shows that there is a very bright future for girls football based on the formative foundations described above.

The NSFA County Under 16 Team has also improved massively, thanks to the dedicated work of team managers. June Lomax has been a tower of strength, and has worked closely with Schools but also with the burgeoning Girls clubs where regular 11-a-side football is now flourishing.

# Nigel Shields