

# FOOTBALL IN THE COMMUNITY

The Football in the Community (FITC) Department isn't just about staging kids' soccer courses and running the Cygnets Club. It is about helping people of all ages to enjoy "the beautiful game", it is about breaking down barriers and helping to provide opportunities where none previously existed - all in the name of Swansea City Football Club.

*One of the biggest success stories for Community Officer Linden Jones and his team is the city's visually impaired football side - the only such side in Wales.*

Swansea City Visually Impaired Players (VIPs) FC is made up of boys and girls aged from 8 to 16 with varying degrees of sight impairment, all of whom make a complete mockery of their disability to play football.

The VIP side was initially formed last year by Linden and Football Association of Wales Trust disability officer Jamie Clewer but is now run by the parents, and in some cases grandparents, of the kids in the squad.

*And what a bloody fantastic job they do!*

Keen to find out more about the VIPs, Linden suggested that I go along to the Leisure Leagues Arena in Cwmdau on a Thursday evening to meet them and watch them train. So off I went with a head full of pre-conceived ideas, expecting to see a group of kids tentatively running around chasing after a ball

that contained bigger and louder bells than St Lukes Church. I really couldn't have been more wrong!

I walked in to find the squad being put through its paces by coach Martin Griffiths, himself visually impaired and a former captain of the Welsh multi-disabled national side. I watched for a while as Martin and the kids completed a number of fitness, agility and ball skills exercises - and although I was impressed by what I saw, I still harboured doubts about their ability to actually play football.

However, those doubts were dispelled when the kids split up into senior and junior sides and played against each other. I can honestly say that if I didn't know that the kids were visually impaired, I would never have guessed - they played the game just like anyone else.

*They ran hard, tackled harder and passed the ball extremely well at pace and there was no shortage of close control on display either.*

Unfortunately, one of the biggest problems the VIPs face is a lack of competition to test their skills against. Despite being our capital city Cardiff has been unable to get a visually impaired team together, although efforts are still being made to do so with the Swansea VIPs helping out in an advisory capacity, and it's the same story in Bristol too.

That means the Swansea side is forced to travel hundreds of miles to take on teams in London or the Midlands or face a total lack of competitive action. And that would be a shame because these boys and girls are good... very good.

*And they've got the silverware to prove it!*

Only a few weeks ago the VIPs travelled to Birmingham to take on teams from across England in the British Blind Society five-a-side tournament and in one of the age groups they walked away with the trophy, beating the likes of Arsenal and Tottenham along the way.

Make no mistake, that was quite an achievement considering the sides they were up against are far more established, have far greater resources and are able to play competitively every week.

That piece of silverware is a well deserved reward for the youngsters that defy their disability and the parents that work so hard to run the side, often battling against the odds to raise much-needed money to keep things going.

*Something tells me that it isn't the last trophy they bring back home to Wales!*



**SWANSEA LEGEND ALAN CURTIS HAS NOW BECOME A PATRON OF THE SWANSEA CITY VIPs... CURTIS IS SEEN HERE POSING WITH SOME OF THE SQUAD... AND "ATFV!" EDITOR NIGEL DAVIES**



**TO JOIN THE VIPs AS A PLAYER... OR TO HELP OR SPONSOR THE TEAM... CONTACT RICHARD LEDGER ON 07977 530274**