

Captains Log-Year 8 Football Team, English Schools Football Association Finalists, Reading, The Madejski Stadium

The feeling for us as year 8 footballers to really be playing in the final of the PlayStation under 13's small schools cup began to really sink in at around 1:00pm Sunday afternoon. All our bags were packed and we all about to leave our homes in order to arrive as a team at Caistor Market place. We were about to be playing at The Madejski Stadium, home to Reading football club.

The team arrived as individuals in the Market place along with our bags and equipment. We were accompanied by our coaches, Mr Shutes (our manager), Mr Shepherd (assistant coach), Mr Goudie (assistant manager number 2) and Mr Johns (Physio and water-boy). The headmaster, Mr Hale, even departed with us on the Sunday afternoon. We eventually left Caistor and headed for Reading at around 1:50pm after saying goodbye to our families and loading the coach.

Some members of some families came with us on the bus. All of the team was on the bus except Jamie Wallace who was due to meet up with us in Reading. The team leaving was Joe Laverick (goalkeeper), Harvey Dent, Harry Strange, Angus Haswell, Cormac Knowles (defenders), Jamie Wallace, Alex Knox, I Jack Tasker the captain, Jacob Lawson, Nethan Ramesh (Midfielders) and finally Alex Dawson (the striker).

The whole journey was around 4 and a half hours including a relaxing 45 minute stop half way to Reading, to get some fresh air and food as needed. We arrived at Reading around 6:15 pm. We were handed our bags to sort out before heading for some tea. Our rooms there were to be occupied by only two members of the team, or two members of staff, except for Mr Hale who had his own space.

After sorting out our bags we headed for Pizza Hut behind the Madesjki. We ordered our meals and enjoyed the team meal before returning to our hotel rooms at around 9:00 pm. Our coaches sat downstairs in the lobby area and discussed the schedule for the next day, the big day! A member of staff then turned up at one of the rooms to inform us of the times for waking up and breakfast.

Once we all had had a good night sleep, the big day had arrived, the day we all had been waiting for since we reached the final. As everyone went for breakfast you could feel the excitement in the air. Breakfast was over and it was time for a relaxing swim in the hotel's indoor swimming pool. I Jack Tasker did not go in the water. I sat at the side with ice on my knee, resting and preparing it for the game (I had hurt it playing for my team the week before). Dried and changed into our school uniform we headed to Morrisons to buy some lunch full, preferably full of carbohydrates to help us prepare e.g. pasta. We were ready and excited so after Morrisons we returned to the ground and entered it for the first time. This was to ensure that we understood the whole moment and could take in the atmosphere and surroundings (also to watch another game).

We, as a group, watched a brilliant game, full of some excellent football, which ended up going to penalties! The excitement and nervousness was kicking in, butterflies began to appear in our stomachs, and everyone was raring to go.

Once this game had finished it was time for us to start! First we had to prepare so we walked up to 'The Dome', Reading's training centre. We got changed into our match kit, shorts and socks and wore our white p.e tops to train in. The facilities were tremendous, 3g astro-turf covering the whole floor of the inside training centre. It was amazing, everyone's adrenalin was high and excitement was over the limit. We were very fortunate to have Derby County's Charles Vernom (left the school at the end of the 2012/2013 year to join Derby County Football Club) train us along with the help of Mr Shutes and Mr Shepherd. We then left the training area and got fully changed into the kit and footwear that we would be wearing during the game.

We gradually made our way to the player's lounge inside the stadium. During this long nerve-racking walk we were giving a fantastic, motivational speech from our very proud headmaster, Mr Hale. As a team we left our bags in the players' lounge and headed for the tunnel for the first time. I, would have a very proud moment as captain by leading the team out to get warmed up on the actual pitch, and to get a sense and feeling of the atmosphere. We stepped onto the pitch. The 120-130 Caistor Grammar students that had travelled down that morning went crazy. We all felt honoured and privileged to be representing our school. The students (fans) were terrific and we, as a team, could not thank them enough for their support.

We had our mini warm up on the pitch and had, had our pre match team talk so, we walked backed down the tunnel and lined up next to the opposing team, Downend Technology School, from Bristol. The referees walked out first the two teams lead by their captain, I was very proud to lead my team out. We were met with the loudest cheers that I have ever heard in a football match that I have been fortunate enough to be a part of. Singing and chanting for their schools the fans from both schools were, fantastic. My job as captain was now to introduce all of my players to the headmasters of both schools and to the Chairman of the ESFA. It was a huge honour for me. The players then shook hands with the opposing team and the referees. We separated into our teams and got into our positions, the start of the final was beckoning. I met with the other captain and the referees to decide who would have kick off, it would be us. Caistor Grammar School's year 8 football team were about to begin the final that had been awaiting us for far too long.

15:30 pm, the game was underway. We kicked off with our usual tactic- try and gain territory in the opposition half and we did successfully. It was Downend though that started the better of the two sides creating a few clear cut goal scoring opportunities. It would be them to strike first through some good work on the right wing and an excellent cross driven across the floor, perfect for the oncoming midfielder to slot home from twelve yards.

Gradually we grew into the game and this showed as we were creating opportunities for ourselves. Jacob Lawson headed over at a tight angle and Jamie Wallace went on a super run and was just unable to connect with the shot. The half ended 1-0 to Downend and deservedly so over the course of the half.

We had our half time team talk where we were told to keep on pushing and pressing, hopefully to create some good changes.

Once again I lead my team out onto the pitch for the second half and still the fans from Caistor were terrific, backing us all the way. Our confidence was lifted through this amazing cheer as the game restarted. It was once again, Downend who started with more pace in their game. Joe Laverick would pull off some amazing saves to keep them out on numerous occasions. Joe gave us hope through his performance and we began to push higher and I adopted a more attacking midfielder role as well as the formation changing to enable us to have two upfront, Nethan Ramesh and Alex Dawson. The game started to become tiring and hard wor,k but we were still giving everything for our

teammates and the school. The game became more spread out and there was more space to work in. I found myself on the left on a few occasions in plenty of space, but Alex Knox was unable to find the right pass, despite his very best efforts. Dominic Ellis and Cormac Knowles were proving hard to beat on the wings given good cover through Harvey Dent and Jake Doughty. As the game went on and legs became tired on a very large pitch the Downend team capitalised and proved too strong. They got in behind our centre backs of Harry Strange and Angus Haswell. They scored again, this put a spanner in the works for us, however we still fought on! As did the fans, chanting and chanting, they just didn't stop.

We knew it wasn't to be our day when Harry Strange put in a late challenge and was shown a straight red card. This was to the shock of everyone in the ground including the opposing team Downend. The tackle was not worthy of this punishment.

I broke through the middle of the pitch with support from Harvey Dent and Alex Dawson, I shot and had our only shot of the game that was on target. The match ended, still with the fans cheering for us. Downend celebrated and rightly so, they had just won the final of the Under 13's small schools competition.

It was time to announce the man of the match. He would get a PlayStation 4. Our fans chanted 'Joe, Joe' etc. It was Joe Laverick who was given the man of the match, this shows how well he did even though we lost 2-0.

Presentation time and we went to collect our runners up medals, we then watched and applauded the winners Downend Technology school as they collected their medals and lifted the trophy.

We walked back down the tunnel and clapped the fans, they really were outstanding! We got changed and a couple of the team had showers. We retrieved all of our bags then went up to have a post-match meal. It was pasta, we were also allowed to play on PlayStation 4's!

The day had ended with no winner's medal, however the whole experience had been amazing and there were moments none of us would ever forget. We returned to our bus and endured the trip home. We were picked up and congratulated for our efforts from the Market Place in Caistor at about 10:45pm. It had been a long and unforgettable day. Even though we lost, we still had all the feelings and experiences that none of us thought possible.

We must thank many people for making this all possible and hope we all can give out our thanks. The most important people to thank are our families, teammates, coaches, headmaster and our fantastic fans. Thank you all!

By Jack Tasker