

Words by ALEX JACKSON
Photos by OXFORD CITY CASUALS

OXFORD CITY CASUALS



The Oxford City Casuals

“MORE THAN PLAYING FOOTBALL”

WHEN Oxford City FC embarked on a new project to get more people with a learning disability involved in football, they could never have imagined the impact it would have on the local community two years on.



Based at Court Place Farm on Marsh Lane, Marston, the oldest football club in Oxford, run completely by volunteers, is a thriving community hub of 'activity', with no less than 38 teams representing the club across all ages. However even for a club so embedded in local culture, a move towards a competitive team made up of players with learning disabilities, was a new and exciting step into the unknown.

With the intention of simply creating a small team of players and running a weekly training session at the club, it started off as a community project that would gradually build over the years. Yet two years since its formation and the Oxford City Casuals – a name resurrected from the club's history- has four teams and boasts more than 70 players.

“It has been a marvellous success story which has taken us all by surprise,” said the club's Managing Director and Charity Trustee, Colin Taylor.

“It was meant as a small project which we would try out and see what happened. Never did we envisage the scale of growth over such a short space of time.”

Word of mouth is a great thing and has certainly proved key to the success of the Casuals with an under 16s, ladies and two open aged men's teams playing



Players and Supporters take a break

competitively in the BOBi League and registered players ranging from eight to 42 years old.

The BOBi League is a successful new league aimed at increasing inclusion in sport. Oxford City, MK Dons and the county Football Associations (FA) in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire worked together with the Sport Partnership to form the league specifically for people with disabilities.

Colin said: “We have a great set of volunteer coaches and there is a lot of valuable input from the parents and carers, which helps organisational issues no end. The Casual's success is down to them all working so well together and there is a real buzz around the club.

“The Casuals have now become an integral part of the club and provide people with a learning disability a chance to experience the benefits of football, learn new skills, improve their fitness and most importantly gain general confidence and build on their existing social skills.”

With the tagline stating “More than playing football” attached to the Casuals team, it is apt that the club are now developing a whole range of opportunities alongside sport focusing on their community and educational links.

Initiatives this year include the Casuals Active project, which organises activity days during school holidays. Other options reflect the club's strong educational focus with numerous short courses available with the support in particular of Ruskin College and the Professional Footballers Association (PFA). In addition to sporting courses in coaching, refereeing and first aid, more formal subjects include classes in numeracy, literacy and a range of general subjects aimed at strengthening CVs.

Alongside these, although still in its infancy, is the workplace experience scheme, which the club is developing to offer apprenticeships and experience at the football club and other businesses in the area, such as Fusion, who run the city council's sports facilities.

Centre forward, Sean Cooney, who is supported by Ridgeway, said: “I really enjoy going to training every Sunday and get on well with the rest of the team. I'm looking forward to next season and hope to beat rivals Banbury next time around.”

Peter Simmons, whose son Matt, pictured, and two daughters, all play for the Casuals, said: “It is a unique place which has built its own small community around a love of football. The club, a registered charity, also has planning permission for a new full size floodlit artificial football pitch, six netball courts and a new pavilion scheduled for completion in early 2011.

Colin said: “It is a great time to join the club and we would encourage anyone interested in playing football and making new friends to come along to our Casuals training sessions and give it a go!”

Training sessions take place every Sunday from 10.30am to noon and will commence again for next season on September 5th. For more information about the team visit www.oxfordcityfc.co.uk or ring Colin on 07817885396. ■



Matt Simmons Celebrates scoring

“It is amazing the amount of effort by volunteers to see this succeed and it is nice to celebrate something so cherished in Oxfordshire.”