**Algarve Walking Football Cup 2022.**

The Algarve Walking Football Cup 2022 competition began on a beautiful morning. A clear, bright sky greeted the 20 registered teams.

This festival of Walking Football would be staged over two days beginning with the **Group Phase** on Day 1. There were four groups of five teams ready and eager for the contest to commence. Birmingham WF were placed in Group 2 meaning that they would enjoy the cooler morning kick off times for their first set of matches.

*Day 2 would see the tournament’s last round of qualification games and the* ***Final Stage.***

**The Finals Classification Cup** was the principal prize that the stronger teams would be competing for. The pursuit of success in three other ranked categories would serve to keep ALL teams involved for the full duration of the event. This ensured that a defeat in any given game did not mean elimination and the end of that team’s interest in the tournament.

*Birmingham's squad of players would quickly have to adapt to a 3 touch format and some other rules that they would not normally encounter in their domestic competitions. All of these would need to be assimilated to prevent needless early infringements being made in the initial games.*

A team of referees were assembled to enforce the competition’s rules and players were told to expect a strict clampdown on running and excessive physical contact.

First up for Birmingham WF were Oakville Whites from Canada who were making their second visit to this venue. Some friendly banter between both sides before the pennant/badge exchange and kick off set the tone for an extremely enjoyable match, played in an exemplary sporting fashion.

*Oakville's goalkeeper excelled in repelling strong periods of Birmingham pressure. This resistance was broken and a vital first half lead was achieved when Mark Evans skilfully converted a penalty kick. Mark managed to master a technique to keep himself within the incredibly compact penalty taking zone that was marked out at the edge of the penalty area. The five a side format suited Birmingham's play with Steve Dixon and Roy Williams linking with Mark Evans and Roger Purchase very effectively. A further goal from Roger Purchase settled the contest and Birmingham WF comfortably closed out the game and got off to a winning start.*

Browns A (the locally based side from the Algarve) were expected to provide a sterner test in Game 2 .Birmingham's game plan was to start games strongly and make changes according to how the matches were panning out. This would prevent early burnout caused by playing in hot, sticky conditions on a damp grass surface. Birmingham’s squad included Steve White and Joe Hall who were to provide this much needed support. It is important to note that Birmingham entered the competition without a recognised out and out striker.

Browns A found it difficult to match their opponents movement and Birmingham were clearly on top during the first half. However, Birmingham failed to score the goal they richly deserved. Browns A did, in short bursts, carry some threat and goalkeeper Bart O'Shea was forced into action on two occasions to prevent his team from falling behind.

*The second half continued in a similar vein until Birmingham were awarded a penalty which was, again, dispatched expertly by Mark Evans. Superb game management ensured that another three points were gained and Birmingham's fine start continued.*

Birmingham's success was being matched by Sauchie Juniors A who displayed excellent form in their opening games.

*So then, Game 3 was sure to be Birmingham's toughest so far as it was to be against Sauchie Juniors A.*

This was soon borne out on the field of play (which was now drying out).Birmingham were behind early in the first half when their defence was breached by their Scottish rivals. Their heads did not drop, far from it.They rallied strongly and were rewarded when Steve Dixon scored at the perfect time; just before the half time whistle.

The turnaround was complete early in the second period when Steve struck his second goal of the game.Sauchie Juniors A were visibly shaken by the events that had unfolded and took time to regroup. Birmingham controlled the rest of the game on their terms and were never in any real danger of surrendering their lead inspite of being forced to play with a man short for the final minutes of the match.

*The team's strong position would now allow room for some squad rotation to be used in the final group match. A single point was required to finish the day as group winners.*

Goals from Steve White (a fine finish from the right of the pitch) and Roy Williams (a half volley from the edge of the area) were enough to see off Exeter Strollers. Exeter will, however, have been delighted to find the back of Birmingham's net in between their opponent’s decisive strikes. Joe Hall put in a terrific shift for his team in this match.

Day 1 had ended with Birmingham achieving maximum points and deservedly sitting proudly at the top of Group B.

**Day 2**

Birmingham began the **Finals Day** stages with a match against Witney. Birmingham started confidently. However, their opponents also began in a determined fashion. Bart O'Shea had to make two fine saves in the first period to deny Witney gaining the advantage.

When the game settled down two goals from Mark Evans were to be enough to ensure further progression for the team in blue. The second goal was arguably his side's best goal of the entire event. A brilliant and stylish passing move created the chance that Mark put away with aplomb.

The 2-0 victory was well deserved and maintained Birmingham's perfect start to this prestigious event. It is important to recognise that this match proved that Day 2 would see the standard of the competition rise to a higher level, and Witney provided stern opposition and gave a very creditable account of themselves.

*The draw then set up an intriguing tussle with Portsmouth WF. The match turned in Portsmouth's favour following a freakish opening goal when the ball ricocheted agonisingly past goalkeeper Bart O'Shea and into Birmingham's net. An excellent game of Walking Football saw both sides driving forward with real purpose. The pressure on Birmingham grew as they knew they had to chase the game after conceding so early and in such unlucky circumstances. The need to search for an equaliser had to be tempered by a degree of caution as they could not leave themselves exposed to the considerable danger posed by Portsmouth's attack.*

The worst case scenario became a reality for Birmingham when, after a period of dominance, in which they failed to convert a couple of presentable opportunities, they were dealt a hammer blow. A devastating Portsmouth break finished with a powerful shot into the bottom of the Midlander's goal. This clinched the game for Portsmouth as Birmingham had too much to do in such little time - but to their great credit they all made a valiant effort to try to find their way back into the contest.

*The outcome of this contest meant that Birmingham could no longer compete for the Final Classification Cup.*

The downward spiral in Birmingham’s campaign continued into the next contest. It was a rematch with their initial opponents in Game 1, Oakville Whites. Fatigue was now playing its part for every team. Added to this, the high temperatures experienced in the Algarve made it even tougher for the players.

*No-one could have foreseen what was about to happen in this game in what was supposed to have been a routine victory for Birmingham WF.Mark Evans scored another excellent goal that beat the Canadian teams very capable goalkeeper; this was a lead that Birmingham maintained until half time. The second period saw a dramatic turnaround in fortunes. This started when Oakville were awarded a penalty kick that was despatched confidently into the bottom corner of the goal. To the delight of Oakville's entire squad they gained an unexpected lead when a powerful, but deflected shot from distance, completely wrong footed Birmingham's goalkeeper before glancing off the post and into the goal.*

Inspite of laying siege to Oakville's goal, Birmingham could not force an equaliser and on the final whistle the Canadian contingent erupted in celebration whilst the entire Birmingham squad were left to feel a deep sense of disappointment.

The final match was against Tweedvale WF from the border counties. Birmingham’s group of players were determined not to let their recent unfortunate results spoil what had been hitherto a very successful tournament. This turned out to be a low key encounter that was dominated from start to finish by Birmingham WF. It was also another game when every member of the Birmingham squad enjoyed game time. The outcome was never in doubt and goals from Mark Evans (his sixth of the tournament) and Roger Purchase completed a comfortable 2-0 victory.

*Although Birmingham’s Finals Day results were mixed, they will reflect positively on beating the eventual winners of the festival Sauchie Juniors 2-1 on Day 1 in an enthralling and exciting game. Birmingham also went toe to toe with runners up Portsmouth WF in a game where they can count themselves rather unfortunate to have been at the wrong end of the 0-2 score line*.

Birmingham WF scored 12 goals across 8 games - it was pleasing that the goals were shared around a squad that didn’t have a recognised strike to call on.

Birmingham's final position in the rankings was 3rd place in the Final Classification Plate and 7th out of the 20 competing teams.