**Algarve Walking Football Cup 2023.**

Players from Birmingham Walking Football Club travelled to Southern Portugal in late September to compete in the 8th Algarve Cup tournament. Three teams were entered into two separate age categories. Birmingham Blues and Solihull Villa were to participate in the +60 section and Birmingham Sky Blues joined the +50 competition.

As expected, the beautiful Algarve region basked in glorious sunshine and temperatures during the first day of the prestigious event were forecast to reach over 30 degrees centigrade in the afternoon.

This festival of Walking Football would be staged over two days beginning with the **Group Phase** on Day 1.

**The Finals Day** would see all of the team’s pursuing success in **four** ranked categories.

The format of the tournament served 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.

***Solihull Villa were the first of our teams to step up and faced Midland rivals Shrewsbury 99s. A very even contest ensued. Both sides displayed determination and endeavour but as is common in this style of tournament (10mins each way), scoring the first goal (which is so important to every side) proved to be elusive.***

***Solihull suffered a real hammer blow in the first period when influential defender Tony Fisher suffered an injury that forced him off the pitch.***

***Glen Alexander started the game as goalkeeper, and he could have hardly imagined the crucial impact he would have on the outcome. His last-minute penalty save made sure his team picked up a deserved point.***

***Further draws were to follow against Tavira in a game that saw Clive Macey netting for the Claret and Blues from the penalty spot. This was followed by an impressive and creditable 1-1 score against Portsmouth Whites. Clive's late, late strike was welcomed by the team’s followers watching from the sidelines.***

***Solihull were unbeaten as their group stage concluded.***

***Tony Fishers's unfortunate injury may just have worked to his team's advantage. Tony played in goal in the second and third games and was able to provide (in his commanding style) organisational guidance for his team. This was particularly vital as a quick succession of blue cards in games left them seriously exposed and vulnerable against some capable opponents.***

***The whole squad played their part in this task with special mention for Rofik for his vital interceptions and clearances made during times of intensive pressure and to Paul McGonigle who was combining his managerial role with important minutes on the pitch as a player.***

***Credit too, to John Sparkes for his"wasp"like performances characterised by energetic, probing play and his ability to move forward to threaten the opponents goal, not to mention his support for key striker Clive Macey. Kevin McCabe would have been proud of the example he set of defending at all costs, putting his body on the line to block incoming shots. In short – he did whatever it took to prevent his team conceding a goal!!***

***Paul McGonigle and Kevin McCabe (Asst. Manager) will have been absolutely delighted that their team had gained qualification for the higher ranking stages of the tournament.***

**Birmingham Sky Blues were ready to take up the mantel when their programme began in the heat of the afternoon of the first day. The Sky Blues paraded an array of talented players who have the ability to move the ball quickly and with confidence. They had an extremely potent strike force at their disposal.**

**They very quickly settled into their renowned pass and move playing style and this proved far too powerful for an Olhao side that were comfortably swept aside by a 3-0 margin with goals from Paul Murtagh and Milan Mazic (2).**

**Hosts, Browns New Boys provided a far sterner test in the second fixture as Sky Blues achieved a narrow 1-0 win with the goal supplied by the ever-reliable Milan Mazic.**

***Birmingham Blues began their campaign against Grimsby Casuals. The side from Humberside provided the Blues with a tough opening encounter that had to be carefully navigated. The game ended in a 0-0 stalemate, and this tells its own story. Both goalkeepers had to make important saves, but chances were few and far apart. The teams fought diligently to gain a match winning advantage but to no avail.***

***In many ways this match set a pattern that was to be repeated in all of Blues' games across the two days of this tournament. Strong, resolute defending provided a platform for the team to patiently build and create goal scoring opportunities.***

***In this game, when chances arose the Blues were denied by a combination of fine saves and bad luck. Birmingham Blues will have been disappointed not to have edged a game that they just about deserved to win, but even more upset by the injury sustained by the versatile Pete Giddings. Steve Dixon (who had taken responsibility for managing the team during the tournament) was also carrying a long-term injury, which had to managed carefully, meaning that after the first game the squad was already thread bare.***

***The second test against Browns Old boys saw more misfortune for Blues with goal bound strikes that seemed destined for the back of the net striking the upright or passing narrowly wide. Mark Evans could hardly believe that he had not opened his account. The same could be said for others and nobody could deny the effort and hard graft put in by Roy Williams and Steve Dixon (whilst being hindered by injury).***

***Defensively, Birmingham Blues were outstanding. Roger Purchase and Martin Barber protected goalkeeper Bart O'Shea with a series of blocks and crucial interceptions. When called upon, Bart was equal to any threat from the Host team. However, a second 0-0 was recorded and Blues still had work to do to qualify for the higher-ranking stages of the tournament on Day 2.***

**Birmingham Sky Blues were impressing most observers with their slick, attractive performances on the pitch. Paul Murtagh led by example, driving his team on using his considerable experience to dictate how each game plan would be executed. Gary Felton controlled things from the back, spraying defence splitting passes to provide Milan and Julian "Foxy" Fox with the ammunition they needed to create havoc in the attacking third. The clever use of the squad had enabled Ashley Mathieson and Rod Thomson to make their own considerable contributions to the campaign.**

**However, in their final 1st Phase group game, a stubborn Grimsby side cancelled out Sky Blues attacking flair and the game - between two strong teams - finished 0-0. Sky Blues goalkeeper Dave Taylor had to be resolute and "switched on" and he produced another excellent display in this match. The team had still not conceded a goal and had comfortably qualified for the next stage of the tournament.**

**This was not yet the case for Birmingham Blues. To be absolutely sure of the level of qualification needed they had to beat Alloa Athletic in their third game. In order to do this, they would have to record their first goal of the tournament.**

***Bart O'Shea, Roger Purchase and Martin Barber had been providing a formidable defensive shield. Roy Williams had added more width to the team. Mark Evans' "lung bursting" energy was clearly evident throughout the afternoon. Steve Dixon had declared himself fit on a "let's wait and see how it goes" basis. So, added to the cover provided by Steve White, Joe Hall and a hampered, but still kitted out for action Pete Giddings, there was an air of confidence that the barren run would soon come to an end.***

**Sure enough, it was Steve Dixon who finished a fine attacking sequence to end the goal drought and provide a victory that was greeted with relief. In truth, it was no more than the beleaguered Birmingham Blues squad deserved.**

**DAY 2**

***The first game on Saturday for Birmingham Sky Blues, in the knockout phase of the cup tournament, against SC Farense was a terrific advert for competitive Walking Football at this level. The game ebbed and flowed, chances came and went for both sides and goalkeepers excelled. In this end-to-end encounter there was little to choose between the teams in a clash that was played in an exemplary sporting manner. It was a joy to watch. It is still difficult to understand quite how 0-0 was the score at the final whistle and the matter had to be settled by penalties.***

***Sadly, for the Sky Blues, the Portuguese side emerged victors of a thrilling shootout in spite of Dave Taylor's efforts for his team in goal. The result meant that Sky Blues would have to compete in the Bowl category of the tournament.***

***Effective use of the squad had allowed all of the players to make a telling contribution to what turned out to be a set of impressive performances. A sense of unity and a spirit of togetherness held the team in good stead as they regrouped to manage their next set of challenges. The important roles played by Ashleigh Mathieson and Rod Thomson was greatly appreciated as they often entered the games at critical times in what can only be described as energy sapping conditions.***

**Birmingham Blues were paired with Shrewsbury 99s in their first game of the Second phase. The squad knew that from now on, drawn matches would go straight to penalties to determine the outcome.**

**A similar pattern to that of their opening games quickly emerged. Blues' game plan - based on solid defence - put them in control but the prospect of taking an early lead never materialised. Frustratingly, chances were missed, the post was hit and a goal that their slick approach play merited eluded the Blues yet again.**

**Things took a turn for the better when an almost perfect penalty contest provided safe passage to the next round. Clinical spot kicks from Mark Evans and Steve Dixon and two saves by Bart O'Shea proved decisive.**

***Solihull Villa's impressive run continued into the second morning. They cruised through the first tie with an emphatic 4-0 triumph over Mansfield Senior Reds with Clive Macey adding a brace of goals to his tally.***

***This was then followed up by a victory over Portsmouth Blues. Solihull's strong performances across the entire squad had created a secure platform for their success. Confidence spread visibly and this latest 1-0 victory over their opponents from the south coast was testimony as to how far this collective togetherness had taken them.***

**Birmingham Sky Blues quest for success saw them produce further confident displays in their next games as they plotted their way to the final of their section. This shared ambition was fuelled by each player being afforded game time. As each contest progressed players interchanged enabling them to inject new energy (when required) thus freshening up the approach play and allowing recovery time for those carrying minor knocks.**

**Sky Blues' game management was extremely effective, so it was no surprise that victories were achieved over Hurst Pretenders 2-1 with goals from the predatory strike duo Paul Murtagh and Milan Mazic and a resounding 3-0 semi - final win over Melksham WF with goals from the same inform goal scorers - this time Paul claimed a brace.**

**There was little time to relax before the final where they would face a very strong Olhao A team. Birmingham knew that a stern test lay ahead, and they would have to be at their very best to lift the trophy.**

**Birmingham Blues came up against Billericay Town WF in their next match. They knew that they were already assured a place in the semi-final of the "Plate" section of the tournament, but this clash would determine the team to move on the semi-final of the Algarve Cup.**

**The first half of this game was unsurprisingly, close, evenly matched with the defences well on top.**

**Fatigue and injuries were now taking their toll. The whole squad were being asked to put in some "tough shifts" meaning Joe Hall and Steve White (who was just returning from his own long-term injury) had to make important contributions to the cause by plugging gaps and generally just keeping the team functioning. Credit to them for providing such vital support.**

**In spite of the Birmingham’s teams courage and commitment Billericay were gaining a strong foothold in the game. They began peppering Birmingham's goal with shots from distance. One effort hit the cross bar, rebounded off the keepers back meaning that the ball had to be scooped away before crossing the line. It was a lucky escape. It was almost inevitable that Billericay would find a way to break Blue's resistance. When it came, the ferocious, cross field shot that smashed into the corner of the Birmingham's net was worthy of winning any game. The only goal of the game ensured that the side from Essex would progress. However, Blues still had the consolation of playing SC Farense in the "Plate" semi-final.**

***Solihull were matched against Birmingham Blues conquerors Billericay Town in their semi - final of the Cup section. They heeded the advice offered by their club colleagues from Birmingham Blues and worked hard to close down Billericay players before they could set themselves up to shoot from distance.***

***Buoyed by the success they had achieved, they produced a display characterised by tenacious defending, swift counter attacking, and having a work ethic that was illustrated by the effort put in by every player in the squad. There was no better example of this than Rofik who simply gave everything for his team. Clive Macey was almost at a point of exhaustion by this time, so others had to step up to help plug gaps. Credit to Paul McGonigle for using his experience throughout the tournament to do what was required to guide his team.***

***When Glen Alexander scored the decisive goal, it meant that his team had gained a place in the final of the top-ranking section of the Algarve Walking Football Cup - a brilliant effort!***

**Birmingham Blues "Plate" semi - final against SC Farense was a more open game and from the start Blues were all too aware of the danger posed by a team choosing to shoot from distance as their main attacking ploy.**

**When, after a spell of pressure, Blues were awarded a penalty kick, they had the chance to gain a significant advantage. This was denied to them when the goalkeeper reached out to turn the well struck kick around the post and away to safety.**

**With the stakes so high (a place in the final) and as the game played out, it became increasingly cagey. Nobody wanted to give anything away and this was reflected in the lack of scoring opportunities for both teams.**

**So, this was another game that finished in a 0-0 stalemate - penalties would be needed again.**

**Penalty takers were finding it hard to convert their spot kicks and the competition was tied at 2-2 until SC Farense's goalkeeper drove his shot into the roof of Birmingham's net, meaning that Blues now had to bow out of the tournament at the semi-final stage.**

**Birmingham Blues were awarded third place in the overall placings in this section.**

**The final of the Bowl section of the tournament was a game that did not disappoint. Birmingham Sky Blues and Olhao produced a thrilling contest that would go right down to the wire. Sky Blues were left reeling as their opponents raced into a two-goal lead. Commentators so often say that a two-goal deficit does not mean that the game is lost, far from it! But the next goal would be vital. A goal for Birmingham and they would be right back in it - to concede a third and they would have a mountain to climb!**

**it was fitting that the tournament's leading marksman Milan Mazic provided the goal that kept his team alive. This inspired Sky Blues to press for what would be a deserved equalizer, but they had to be cautious to keep Olhao at bay fearing that to concede a third goal could effectively end the contest especially as the clock ticked down towards full time.**

***In a pulsating finish, Sky Blues were awarded a penalty which Milan dispatched with aplomb allowing the Club's followers to breathe a sigh of relief.***

**The final whistle meant that we moved towards a penalty shootout. The tension was palatable as players lined up across the middle of the pitch to take their allotted spot kick. When Paul Murtagh and Milan scored their kicks, it was left to Dave Taylor to be the hero as he pulled off a brilliant diving save to give victory to the Sky Blues - a victory they richly deserved.**

**Solihull Villa's final with Odiaxere was a rather subdued affair which is not surprising given the exhausting programme both teams had to play to reach the showpiece event of the tournament.**

***No one can dispute the effort put in by the team as they were draining their energy tanks to squeeze one last drop for this final push. Solihull’s attacking options were restricted in this match and at times it seemed that the ball kept coming back to their own half all too regularly. Tony Fisher kept everyone focused using his experience to guide, cajole and support. John Sparkes did the work of two players, and everyone did their level best to compete. The courage they all displayed was something they can reflect on with tremendous pride.***

**As the game drifted to a conclusion Solihull stood firm and achieved a creditable 0-0 draw. In the penalty shootout Odiaxere held their nerve and came out on top to win the 2023 Algarve Cup.**

**Sportingly, the winning captain acknowledged Solihull's fantastic effort and voiced his admiration of the spirit shown by the team in Claret and Blue. Although feeling an initial sense of disappointment, they knew this would soon evaporate when the reality of what they had achieved dawned on each player.**

**This was a time to celebrate!**