

Cheshire Netball completes a superb tour to Scotland

On a snowy weekend at the beginning of February, Cheshire Netball Under 16 and 18 squads made their way north of the border to chilly Glasgow. A total of 73 players, coaches, umpires, team managers, first aiders and spectators travelled.

A fully packed weekend of netball was on the agenda, and the Cheshire players gave the National Scottish squads great competition in preparation for their U17 and U21 European competition later in the month.

Saturday saw Cheshire U18's first up against Scotland's U21. This was the first of two matches between the squads.

Cheshire took the fight to Scotland from the first whistle, with Alicia McKenna impressing in centre court with her pace and excellent vision to release shooters Courtney Perks and Bev Stokes. Both were firing on all cylinders, matching the older Scottish Squad goal for goal. The 1st quarter ended 14-13 to Cheshire.

In the second period, Cheshire's defence increased the pressure across the court, with Katie Hamilton and Rosie Sheward, in particular, forcing some key errors from Scotland to take the initiative. Cheshire scored four goals without response at the start of the quarter, but Scotland came back strong forcing errors, which they converted to again close the gap to 27-26 at half time. Coach Rowley introduced Hayley Preece and Jana Evans to the wings replacing Corinne Kinvig and Emma Taylor who had worked tirelessly against the Scottish mid court.

The third quarter started in much the same vein with Charlotte Burgess driving to the front of the circle with authority, releasing Stokes into scoring space under the post. Once again the quarter ended with a one goal difference at 36-35 to Cheshire.

The fourth quarter continued with action all over the court and neither team wishing to give an inch, however Scotland forced two errors and took full advantage with their excellent shooter scoring from the edge of the circle. Cheshire refused to lie down but could not break the Scottish play and the final whistle went with the score 51-45 to Scotland. The Cheshire Shooters of Perks and Stokes were impressive throughout with Perks scoring 82% (31/38) and GA Stokes at 70% 14/20

The Under 16 squads then played the East and West Scotland development squads over forty minute games. This allowed Coach Brien to give all her squad court time, and assess the qualities of her players before making final decisions for the following days' internationals. Cheshire Under 16's won both games; 50-14 and 28-10

The under 18's again took on the Scotland Under 21's in another hard fought game where both coaches used their full squads.

Cheshire led 8-6 at the first interval, with Emma Taylor and Jana Evans linking positively with shooters Heather Snape and Sarah Coleman who were outstanding in the circle. Defensively, Cheshire was impressive, with Jess Harrison, Kate Hamilton and Lauren Joseph snapping up any loose Scottish possession. Burgess replaced Evans at the start of the second period but there was no noticeable change of pace from Cheshire and with Joseph taking some impressive aerial interceptions at WD, Cheshire led 18-14 at half time. The third quarter was similarly impressive, despite the best efforts of Scotland, with Kinvig, Taylor and Snape driving the ball through court to Coleman at lightning pace. Cheshire led 28-24 with 15 minutes to play.

However, Scotland refused to be overcome and kept up the pressure forcing some turnovers and reducing the deficit to 2 with five minutes to play. However Cheshire held their nerve with Snape truly outstanding putting away every chance to maintain a conversion rate of 92% Cheshire ended the game as victors 36-34 to level the series and the honours even over the two games.

The Cheshire Shooters of Snape and Coleman were impressive throughout with Snape scoring 92% (23/25) and GS Coleman at 72% 13/18.

A special thank you goes out to Rachel Chadwick, U18 player, although injured supported the team and played an essential part in the weekend as time keeper. A big thank you also goes to the umpires that travelled with us, and the contingent of parents that came to support the squads.

U18 coach Kevin Rowley said, "This was a fantastic squad effort and all the players were magnificent all over the court. The standard of play was excellent, everyone thoroughly enjoyed the game, and the hospitality of the Scottish was fabulous"

Scottish Coach Fiona Bruce said "Thank you very much for the weekend. All the players got so much from the matches as they do not usually have the opportunity to play teams outside Scotland. The Scottish Uni teams also really enjoyed the matches and the very good competition. You have a very committed team of people with the County squad, and we have a lot to learn from this. Please pass on my thanks to everyone who covered all the tasks and organisation on the day. "

Sunday was the turn of Cheshire's U16's to play against Scotland U17's. The B game was a good game with Cheshire winning by 5. Coach Chris Brien used the form players from the day before and saw the defensive duo of Emma Jones and Emily Illot outstanding in the defensive circle. Chelsea and Courtney Fumerola and Florence Jeffrey ably supported them in the midcourt with shooters Holly Byrne and Hannah Phillips playing well they deserved their win.

The A match saw a much closer game, with the youngsters of Cheshire rising to the challenge. Cheshire's youngsters gave their all but came up against an experienced and determined Scottish U17 side who used their experience and physical strength to edge home by one in a thriller of a finish. In a pulsating match, Cheshire were by no means disgraced, pushing Scotland all the way with some superb all court defensive work by the outstanding trio of Laura Spence, Katie Porter and Victoria French and some clinical finishing from Lauren Bradley and Megan Rowley which at one point allowed Cheshire to lead by 2 goals. At the end of the first quarter, it was all square.

In the second quarter Centre Jasmin Lane forced some excellent tips on the centre pass to turnover the ball and with Laura Spence making life intensely difficult for the Scottish Shooter the pressure increased on Scotland. Rachel Porter at WA was outstanding feeding from the circle edge, time after time, feeding Shooter Megan Rowley and by the end of the 2nd period Cheshire led by 2.

The third quarter was an intensive, tough affair, with neither team prepared to give way. Katie Porter and Victoria French continued to harry and hassle the Scottish attack.. Scotland scored two early goals, Cheshire countered, and so the passage of play continued. Bradley was in unstoppable form and the third quarter ended all square.

However, the Cheshire side was not prepared to relinquish the match, and galvanized their efforts in a thrilling final 15 minutes. With Rachel Porter and Jasmin Lane tireless in the midcourt, the game was end to end with each goal being countered by another. Entering the final 30 seconds the scores were level but Scotland had the advantage of the centre pass and threw the ball to the shooter at the edge of the circle whose speculative shot hit the rim of the post and dropped in to give them the win 21-20. Coach Chris Brien, who won the Warrington Sports Personality of the Year "Un Sung Hero Award" whilst we were in Scotland, was extremely proud of her team. Saying "We played fantastically well against a strong physical and well disciplined Scottish team. All the players gave their all I can ask no more than that. They all deserve a medal for that performance. This is what Netball is all about, a fantastic opportunity for these players to experience netball at a higher level."

The Under 18's played matches against the University of Scotland U21 squad and a local premiership team which were both hard fought close games with Cheshire narrowly winning.

Scotland officials also utilized the weekend's excellent standard of netball competition to umpire all the matches, which also gave them the opportunity for some essential mentoring by their A umpires and the table officials present also gained some valuable experience.

Cheshire have now played Ireland in Dublin 2007, Scotland in Glasgow in 2008 - maybe next year it will be Wales in Cardiff or further afield- watch this space!!!!