

Congratulations to the Saint Ninian's High School S2 Football Team who won the Under 14 British Isles (Allen McKinstry) Cup, crowning them International Champions.

The tournament started on Sunday 21 May 2023 in Athlone, Ireland. Saint Ninian's represented Scotland as their National Champions, thanks to their efforts in winning the Schools Scottish Shield in 2022. England, Wales & Northern Ireland were also represented by their National Champions. Ireland were represented by their National Champions & runners up, to bring the total number of teams to 6.

Game 1 V Ireland

Saint Ninian's first game was played at Athlone FC, against Marist College, Ireland's National U14 runners-up 2022, and U15 Irish Cup Winners 2023. Saint Ninian's started the quicker team of the two with a lot of positive play coming down the left-hand side from Conor Baillie who tackled assertively and distributed the ball with drive and precision.

The first goal was the result of a sweeping move with a lethal finish from Rory Kelly. The move started with John Joe Leddy playing a ball into his right back, Matthew McAllister who then found Rocco Di Giacomo in the middle of the pitch. Di Giacomo cleverly beat his man and drove at the heart of the Ireland defence. He held onto it and waited for an Ireland player to come out of position and close him down, realising that space would open up as a result. This is exactly what happened. As the Ireland left back came out of his slot to close Di Giacomo down, the Saint Ninian's player delivered a beautifully disguised pass with the outside of his boot into the path of his right winger. Kelly fizzed a net-bursting finish into the top left corner leaving the Ireland goalie with no chance.

However, Marist College pulled one back after a penalty late on, meaning game 1 ended in a 1-1 draw. A shout out to Timothy Kelly whose hard-working approach down the right hand side encapsulated the ethos of the team as they dug in, especially during difficult moments. Nevertheless, Saint Ninian's played some expansive football over the course of the game and on another day could have added a goal or two more. It turned out to be a ferocious affair with seven yellow cards brandished in all, as well as a red for the Scottish side.

Game 2 V Wales

Saint Ninian's then went into game 2 against Wales in the later kick off (against Ysgol Greenhill) knowing they needed to win to progress into the final. Saint Ninian's played the ball from the back and attempted to play through the thirds with some intricate passing. Di Giacomo controlled the tempo of the game and consistently demanded the ball even in the tightest of areas. However, due to the pace of the game, free kicks and corners were plentiful for both teams.

The Welsh opposition targeted Goalkeeper Elliot Dunn with direct balls lofted into the box. Elliot was a picture of calmness and safely collected every contested ball which has exemplified his outstanding contribution to the team all season. Throughout game 2 and beyond Elliot also showed his technical ability as he stepped up to receive the ball under pressure and played accurate forward and progressive passes to his teammates sending them on the attack.

Game 2 also saw several changes in the Scottish side to freshen the starting 11, and two players, Ethan McGillivray & Anthony McIlvaney took their places in the team and were extremely impressive. Ethan played off the left-hand side and consistently demanded the ball, attacked his marker and put dangerous balls into the Welsh penalty area. Anthony McIlvaney on the other hand was a stalwart in defence, aggressive in his tackles and positionally very astute. This was indicative of both players who are assured and valued members of the team.

The opening goal was not the prettiest but took hunger and desire to make sure the ball nestled in the opposition net. The goal came from Di Giacomo picking up the ball high up the pitch and drawing a foul. He then floated a deep free kick into a dangerous area. At first it looked like the Welsh goalkeeper was going to come and collect it. But out of nowhere came Saint Ninian's centre back John Joe Leddy to put the Welsh goalkeeper off, making him spill the ball into Leddy's path. Leddy still had work to do, but he calmly slotted the ball past the goalkeeper sending the Saint Ninian's players, coaches and fans into jubilation. Joe McAndrew continued to pressure opposition defenders twisting one way then the other. McAndrew was in the wide left area of the pitch and a ball was fired into his feet. He took one touch as if he was going to dribble back into his half and then almost instantly took another, going in the opposite direction, leaving the Welsh defender wrong-footed. McAndrew then fired a ball across goal which somehow evaded the Ysgol Greenhill net.

St Ninian's second goal was a piece of magic by striker Connor Sweeney. The move started with a foul just into the Welsh half of the pitch. Jikiemi, Saint Ninian's ace centre back, expertly spotted the run of Connor Sweeney and dinked a lovely ball over the Welsh defence from within his own half. Sweeney calmly lobbed the ball over the goalkeeper, giving the team a crucial two goal cushion with seven minutes remaining and sending Saint Ninian's into the British & Irish Cup Final. This was arguably the team's best performance of the season. The game was played in fantastic spirit with the Wales and Scottish players making friends on & off the pitch.

Game 3 V Ireland

The final game was against the Irish Champions, St. Joseph's Patrician College, Galway, who won their first 2 games and seemed confident of success. However it was Saint Ninian's who dominated possession from the outset and were in control, attempting to play an attacking brand of football. Shay McCracken continued his fine form into the final, cutting out opposition through balls, making tackles before the Irish opponents reached the defensive line and started various attacks with his accurate passing. McCracken settled the team's nerves displaying his natural leadership qualities which saw confidence grow in the Saint Ninian's players as the game progressed.

The breakthrough moment came 7 minutes before half time as the Irish Champions went long from a free kick into Saint Ninian's box. However once again Leddy won his 1 V 1 duel with the attacker and then lofted a pass to Di Giacomo. The captain took one touch to control the ball, another to turn and then a third, beating his man and racing over the halfway line. Driving forward into the final third, Di Giacomo played a through ball between the centre halves to Connor Sweeney. He instantly cut the ball back to Sam Gallagher, who swiftly passed it to Luke O'Donnell, who finished off the lovely passing move just inside the box. O'Donnell had an action packed and at times, controversial tournament but this goal showed his quality and perhaps, more importantly, his resilience.

As ever, Connor Sweeney led the line brilliantly, pinning centre backs firmly on the back foot. He won a corner kick by battling hard just before half time. Gallagher whipped in an excellent ball and Jikiemi was unlucky not to put Saint Ninian's further ahead with a headed shot that was too close to

the goalkeeper. Gallagher also found himself through on goal after tremendous hold up play again from Sweeney & Kelly, but the number 11 tried to prod the ball to the left, allowing the centre back to challenge and clear the ball. The second half of the game was a much tighter affair and the Irish Champions pushed for an equaliser. Daven Milne who was excellent all tournament snapped into tackles and refused to let St. Joseph's Patrician College gain any momentum. The final 10 minutes saw a tired but resilient Saint Ninian's hold off some last gasp attacks and secure the victory.

Under 14 British Isles (Allen McKinstry) Cup Champions

The tournament finished with Saint Ninian's as the only undefeated team and saw goalkeeper Elliot Dunn concede the least number of goals (1). Rocco Di Giacomo was player of the tournament which was mentioned by the organisers and opposition managers alike. A special mention also goes to Matthew McAllister who was in terrific form in the full back position, pinning opposition wingers inside their own half with driving runs with and without the ball, whilst staying resolute in defence giving nothing to the opposition.

Last year the team enshrined themselves into Saint Ninian's folklore by winning the first National Title at the Under 13 age group. This year the boys enshrined themselves into Scottish Football folklore by lifting the Under 14 British Isles (Allen McKinstry) Cup in Ireland against the Irish Champions as well as retaining the League & League Cup. From their first game against Lenzie Academy at the start of S1 to their final game of S2 against Irish Champions, St. Joseph's Patrician College, the team have shown outstanding commitment, bravery and resilience whilst always attempting to play an attacking & assertive brand of football. The trip to Ireland will live long in the memory of players, parents & coaches alike and to quote Captain Di Giacomo, 'the best moment of my life'.

Team & Representing Country	Points
(C) Saint Ninian's High School (Scotland)	7
St. Joseph's Patrician College (Ireland)	6
St. Columb's College (Northern Ireland)	6
South Hunsley School (England)	6
Marist College (Ireland)	2
Ysgol Greenhill Tenby (Wales)	0

Results:

- Game 1. Saint Ninian's High School (Scotland) 1-1 V Marist College (Ireland)
- Game 2. Saint Ninian's High School (Scotland) 2-0 V Ysgol Greenhill Tenby (Wales)
- Game 3. Saint Ninian's High School (Scotland) 1-0 V St. Joseph's Patrician College (Ireland)

Squad List:

Anthony McIlvaney, Connor Sweeney, Conor Baillie, Dara Jikiemi, Daven Milne, Elliot Dunn, Ethan McGillivray, Joe McAndrew, John Joe Leddy, Luke O'Donnell, Matthew McAllister, Rocco Di Giacomo, Rory Kelly, Sam Gallagher, Shay McCracken, Timothy Kelly.

Written by: J. Lough & R. Di Giacomo