

Spartans Girl setting records

✘ by Edmund Brown

It's a bitterly cold Sunday afternoon in the middle of February and the Spartans Academy at Ainslie Park is bustling with activity. An under-12 match is underway on the main pitch and the parents of many of the players are in attendance. The clubroom café that overlooks the game is packed, full of people all queuing for a much-needed warm cup of tea and afternoon refreshments. Sitting quietly in the corner, awaiting my arrival, is the club's all-time record goalscorer, dressed in her Spartans tracksuit and nursing that necessary hot drink. With the rest of the team preparing for the season's first friendly, Diana Barry appears restless, betraying her longing to be back on the field with the club's women's team, having suffered for over a month with a severe stomach virus.


As one of the Spartans' longest-serving members, she has been part of the women's section since its inception in 2008, and this No.9 has been frustrated at being unable to take part in pre-season training and drink in the atmosphere and hype that comes with preparing for a new campaign. "It's been difficult not being able to train with the girls but I am slowly getting back to full health, so I will hopefully be ready for the start of the season," she says.

Barry was brought up in the Edinburgh area, and football was a part of her life from an early age. She was lucky enough to have a big garden to kick a ball about with her brothers and her dad – the memory sticks in her mind like it was yesterday. But, it was during the time of the "Hands off Hibs" campaign that truly brought the importance of football to the fore, and she feels that was a pivotal moment in building her desire to play the game. "I can still see the events in my head, heading down to Easter Road with my dad, to support the campaign," she

remembers. "I think from an early age I realised the importance that football brings to people, and I loved playing the game both with my family and at school. I was part of the boys' team in primary five and six and then went on to play for my high school team at St Augustine's where we won the Scottish Cup on three occasions."

Whilst playing for the West Edinburgh secondary school, Di was persuaded to join the Hibs Girls' team, coached by Walter McGill, who is now the Spartans WFC Chair. He said:- "For as long as I have known her, and that has been about 14 years, Di has been an exceptional player with quick feet and the natural ability to score goals. I believe that Di has scored some of the best goals I have ever seen and many of them have been from impossible angles. Her records speak for themselves and the three seasons she played for my Hibs under-17 team she scored over 50 goals a season."

It is no surprise to Walter that the Spartans' goal machine has been rewarded with Scotland caps at all levels. Diana, the team's vice-captain, also won the league's Player of the Year award for the 2010 season, a year in which she tallied 43 goals in the Scottish Women's Premier League. She remains modest about her considerable achievements. "It was a team performance and there is no way I would have scored so many goals and played as well as I did without the help of everyone in the team," she says. "Even though it was amazing to win and I am honoured to receive it, it really is an award showing how hard the team worked both in training and on matchdays for the entire season."

Winning this accolade is truly remarkable as Diana, along  with every member of the Spartans women's team, has to juggle training and playing with their full-time jobs. Last year, Spartans finished second in the Scottish Women's Premier League, a setup that retains an "amateur" status, meaning none of the players receive a wage for playing. At times, they even have to cover some of the costs of turning out for the team.

Diana herself is in the process of gaining a qualification to become a History teacher and, like many students, her main concern is balancing her footballing career with her education. "The course has a lot of placements as well as a lot of preparation for classes so my concern is that I will be putting so much effort and energy into gaining this qualification," she said. "Getting a job once qualified is an issue as like most areas there are limited opportunities but I will have to try and clear that hurdle when it arrives. Right now, I am just concentrating on getting the course completed."

However, even with the complications of balancing her work, football and personal life Diana is determined to keep helping the team develop and feels this season could be the toughest yet with the standard of clubs in Scotland developing quickly. "As a club we are seeing the fitness and talents of the players coming in increasing all the time but, likewise, we are seeing the same development with the opposition's players. Some of the teams that we would have comfortably beaten a few seasons ago are now providing us with some extremely hard games – which is great for the league. It does also mean everybody has to up their game and try to compete at the highest level on a consistent basis."

Taking into account the rise in standard of female players in this country, Diana finds it difficult to predict how Spartans will fare this season. "This year is the first time the league will split in two at the half way stage so of course the first objective is to be in the top half," she said, "and a trophy would be nice as well!"

Spartans kick off their Scottish Women's Premier League campaign with a home game against Falkirk on Sunday, March 18. Kick off at Ainslie Park is at 1pm.

Photos Carson Ralton