

Scotland's over-50s football heroes hope to better silver spot in 2024

Scotland's over-50s football team can look back with pride to 2023 which saw them finish runners-up in a memorable tournament at the Samui International Masters in Thailand, with Edinburgh and the Lothians well represented.

I was lucky enough to be included in the 17-strong squad which flew 6,000 miles to the beautiful island of Koh Samui, and was joined by local players from the professional, semi-pro and Juniors ranks, including skipper Jim Rae, Scott Burnside, Craig Manson, Craig Meikle, Brian Anderson, Mark Dawson, Stewart Siegel, Sean Barr and co-manager Paul Donnelly.

The squad gelled brilliantly on and off the pitch, and despite a gruelling schedule of five 11-a-side games in six days, Scotland – under the leadership of former Meadowbank Thistle and Livingston defender Grant Tierney – surged to the final, only to lose narrowly to holders and favourites Iran.

Scotland won three and drew one of their four group fixtures, but the highlight of the trip was undoubtedly an overdue win over the Auld Enemy, England, with Anderson living out a childhood dream with the clinching goal in a memorable 3-1 victory. “I scored a goal for Scotland against England – the highlight of my football career. That’s the stuff you dream

of as a kid," he said.

"The boys were playing well and were in the lead at half time when I got the nod from the gaffer to get ready. I had mixed emotions – nerves and excitement mainly. With the game sitting at 2-1, I saw an opportunity to maybe get into the box at the back post.

"Our centre forward Paul Gallacher had a shot parried, and I thought to myself 'I can make this!' I concentrated on making clean contact, and I did – we were 3-1 up and I'd scored. I don't get many goals so I didn't know how to celebrate. I just turned round and jumped at the nearest blue shirt. I probably would have kept on running if nobody stopped me."



Pride of Scotland – left to right – Davie Taylor, Mark Cameron and Colin Leslie

When captain Rae gathered his exhausted team-mates together in a huddle at the end of the game, we were told we had achieved something very special. Not only had we earned a place in the prestigious final, but we had kept our composure to finally record a win over England at a Seniors or Masters tournament – the first time we had done so, since the national Seniors team was established in 2011.

Since then, Scotland had been regulars at the Over-38s World Cup on mainland Thailand, but this was their first trip to the Far East in four years, following a hiatus enforced by the Covid pandemic. With the group getting collectively older, rather than compete in the June tournament it was decided to aim instead for the spin-off tournament in Samui and it proved to be an unforgettable experience for all involved.

Rae said: "It has been my honour to represent Scotland at seven tournaments over the years and becoming captain of our country in the last two tournaments has been an absolute privilege.

“Being the captain of the group is so much more than wearing an armband and leading the team out. Helping players on and off the pitch, giving advice and keeping the group together and happy is just as big a part of the role and one I enjoy doing very much.

“At this tournament, we did what we have never done before and that was beating England. They have beaten us in the final twice and semi-final once, so this was a first for our group and something we should all be proud of, as the resources they have are far greater than ours.



Captain Jim Rae ready to lead Scotland out with goalkeeper Bryan Thomson

“Although we were beaten by an excellent Iran team in the

final, we ran them very close and can be very satisfied with our achievements. The players who participated for the first time, were all outstanding and as a group, this was the best I have played with in terms of working for each other and our commitment to looking after each other.”

On a personal level, the spine-tingling feeling of walking out behind the Scotland flag, then lining up first for the National Anthem alongside my countrymen, and then on the pitch against England, will live with me forever. To emerge victorious was the icing on the cake.

It wasn't all about the England game of course! Scotland started the tournament by coming within five minutes of beating Iran, unluckily conceding a late goal to draw 1-1. Victories against the local Samui side (2-0) and Thailand (5-1) then sent our confidence soaring ahead of the all-UK clash.

The final – just 20 hours after the win over England – was an epic encounter. Iran, who fielded a side full of top professionals, some of whom had played in the *actual* World Cup, raced into a two-goal lead, only for Scotland to bravely roar back and lay siege to their opponents' goal.

Meikle scored his fourth goal of the tournament to reduce the deficit, but Iran managed to hold on and claim the trophy. A sporting closing ceremony saw both teams warmly applaud each other's outstanding contribution to the tournament.

Physically and mentally, we had pushed ourselves hard, and it was no mean feat for guys of our age to play five 80-minute matches in quick succession in temperatures up to 35c. Playing in that kind of heat was an eye opener for me, one of six new recruits to the 2023 squad, and it was clear that rehydration, ice-packs and taking full advantage of water breaks, was the key to acclimatising to the decidedly un-Scottish-like conditions.



A humbling experience for Colin Leslie and his Scotland team mates

Off the pitch, the squad was based in the Chaweng Beach resort, and settled into a day-to-day routine of pool sessions and relaxation to ease aching limbs, before the nightly journey to Maraleina Sports Complex, which hosted the event. While there was an air of professionalism and steely focus for the matches, there was excellent spirit and camaraderie within the group throughout, and the locals certainly seemed to take us Scots to their hearts.

Another highlight of the trip was using some rare downtime to visit a local primary school, which the Scotland squad attended en masse to deliver a coaching session and donate footballs and kit to the local children. This was something of a busman's holiday for striker Sean Barr, who has spent 15 years as a coach with Edinburgh South Community football club, where he oversees the development of young players from 5 to 18.

"The opportunity to coach kids in Thailand was incredible,"

said Sean. “Despite the language barrier, actions, expressions and positivity are the same the world over. The kids from Chaweng did not have new kits or boots, but they had something better than that – a happy, positive attitude. What a morning it was. All the squad left the school well and truly humbled.”

To be part of such a special trip was humbling for us all. After a near 30-hour long journey back across the world, the Scotland Seniors squad returned home brimming with pride, and with bold ambitions to go one better in 2024.



Scotland in action against Iran – Brian Anderson (22) and Craig Meikle (8) pictured