

Thomas Telford School passes a record 50 National Football Finals

It began, like all other football matches do, with the blow of a whistle. It echoed around the Manchester Academy Stadium, at 3:30pm on Wednesday 8 May, but this was not any other football match. It was the fiftieth time that players and coaches representing Thomas Telford School had made their way from a modest-sized town in Shropshire to compete in a Football National Cup Final. Those who were old enough to remember could hark back to the first final that was played 17 years earlier at the indoor PowerLeague in Wigan, a tournament in which the school was victorious under the leadership of Iain Sweeney, and for which the school won a Wagon Wheels minibus. While that bus is now no longer in use, and such prizes are no longer given for these successes, photographs serve as a telling reminder of the victory that sparked it all off.



It is to ESFA's credit that these competitions have developed in to such fantastic competitions. The organisation, implementation and presentation of these competitions are second to none. Esfa have given a platform for students across the country to play in world class stadiums, against fierce competition along the way.

The figures make for staggering reading. 56 finals and 37 victories (Girls' Teams contesting 20 and winning nine, and their male counterparts playing 36 and taking the prize 28 times), including a stunning 13 finals in 2016, of which nine resulted in taking the silverware. Such dominance is unrivalled and unprecedented in schools National Cup Football.



Finals have been played up and down the land: in front of Anfield's iconic Kop, at the Hawthorns in the Midlands, and most notably at Wembley in the capital, to name but a few. Some National Cup winners have gone on to make highly successful careers in the game, including Sam Morsy, Thomas Telford's first FIFA World Cup competitor, and Under 17 World Cup winner Morgan Gibbs-White.

While highlights are difficult to illuminate in such a distinguished recent past, those from Thomas Telford School perhaps most fondly remember winning the Boys' ESFA Under 14 Schools Cup at Molineux in 2006, when the entire school was packed onto coaches and sent down to M54; some

recall winning the same competition at Craven Cottage in 2010, “the best ground we’ve played at” according to one former staff member. One thing is for certain: the Head teacher, Sir Kevin Satchwell, who was knighted in 2001, fondly recalls them all. They are well documented in a display to visitors who come to the school, and are an achievement that will go down in the history of the school, serving as inspiration while the next generation of stars lace up their boots.

Although a school of significant local and regional success until the first National Cup victory, the turning point came with the appointment of dedicated Director of Football Kenny Swain, who held the post from 2002 to 2004. He was then succeeded by Steve Wilderspin, who took the helm until 2015, at which point ex-Premier League professional Des Lyttle assumed the role. This increased focus and refinement of “The Thomas Telford Way” was pivotal in the development of football within the school. The footballing philosophy is straight forward: keep it on the ground and make intelligent passes, and is the hallmark of all age groups, from Year 7 PE students up to Sixth Form national league players.

While the school have contested at least one national final per year since 2012 (and winning in all but one of those years), the crowning glory came in 2016. In this golden year, every year group in the school won at least one national cup, with Wolverhampton Wanderers star Morgan Gibbs-White winning three in two different age groups, and Sophie Bramford, a future England youth international taking home two winner medals. This particular vintage lives long in the memory of Thomas Telford players, staff and supporters alike, although teams have remained prolific since, winning five, four and six cups in subsequent years respectively. What is most memorable is the energy that was around the place, the buzz as students prepared to support at numerous venues. T

his spirit of sharing success is a common hallmark of the school, with flexibility afforded to the buccaneering players who move through the rounds to reach their finals, supported by their teachers and friends alike. This is also remarkable considering the exceptional academic successes of the school during the period. It is perhaps at the intersection between the classroom and the football pitch where Thomas Telford’s School simple motto is most apparent: ‘Quality Through Co-operation’.