



DOWNSEND SCHOOL

Inspiring Young Minds

ISFA U11 SEVENS – NATIONAL FINALS

Travelling from all over England, 24 champions and runner ups from 14 different regional tournaments all met in the Midlands at St Georges Park, home of the England national football team. To compete for the opportunity to be called the 2021 / 2022 Independent Schools Football Association National Champions.

Arriving at St Georges Park hotel the day before the tournament, the Downsend school U11A football, team accompanied by their families and teachers, quickly settled in and spent the day soaking up the atmosphere, gaining inspiration and hoping that they would be able to push one step further than the England Euro 2020 squad who shared the same building only a few months before by lifting the trophy at the tournament the following day.

Following a restful night, the Downsend U11A footballers woke up full of energy and despite feeling slightly nervous, were excited for the challenge of competing against the best independent schools in the country. Meeting for a team breakfast, the boys took the opportunity to discuss the photos plastered all over the walls of the hotel of the great footballers to have worn an England shirt with the likes of Sir Bobby Charlton, David Beckham and Ricky Lambert telling the story of English football. Hoping that one day, their photos maybe placed on the same walls. An hour before kick-off the whole team and teachers went for one last walk around the site, to reflect on their journey to this point and to discuss what traits all Downsend football players share and how, as a team, they would ensure that they represented this to the best of their best ability win, lose or draw.

Arriving at the tournament pitches, the atmosphere was electric as teams identified where they would be playing their group matches, collected tournament information and began warming up. Downsend school were placed in a tough “group A” alongside Brentwood Prep, Wetherby Prep, Aldwickbury, Repton Prep and Bury Grammar and knew that they would have to be at their best to make it out. With the games being relatively short and only the top two progressing a fast start would be important and after missing a few early chances Downsend were able to score two in quick succession giving them a 2 – 0 win over a hardworking Bury Grammar team. After listening to the coaches regarding the importance of being clinical when finishing, particularly in tournament football, Downsend responded well in the next game by winning 3 - 0 against Aldwickbury, getting off to the positive start that they trained for in the lead up to the finals. The following two games resulted in a 1 – 1 draw against future semi-finalists Brentwood Prep and a 0 – 0 draw against Whetherby Prep which left us knowing that a win would more than likely see us top the group and progress to the quarterfinals. The boys rose to this challenge and managed to win 5 – 0 against a solid Repton Prep team that kept pushing right until the end. After 3 wins and 2 draws, whilst only conceding 1 goal, Downsend topped the group and were excited to find out who we would be playing in the knockout stages.

After lunch, preparations began for the knockout stages with the side gathering for a team talk and a quick practice, looking at possession and finishing. The quarter final saw Downsend school drawn against Kent & Sussex regional champions, Lingfield College, who marginally beat Fairfield Prep in their final group match to qualify, this promised to be a tightly contested game. Following some great passages of play Downsend were able to get an early 2 – 0 lead before Lingfield managed to pull one back right on the stroke of half-time. The second half was an extremely tight affair with some last ditch tackling and goal line clearances from Downsend allowing them to keep their lead. As the game went on Lingfield were forced into pushing players forward which allowed Downsend to catch them on the break in the dying seconds creating an overload and scoring our third goal of the game. There was no time left for Lingfield to attempt a comeback and the game ended 3 -1.

Within a blink of an eye the players were back out on the pitch waiting for the referee to blow his whistle to begin the semi-final against the North-West regional champions Manchester Grammar school. Despite managing to score another three goals and progress through to the final, the team really had to dig deep and battle for every opportunity against a technically and tactically strong Manchester Grammar side who gave their all right until the very end. At the full time whistle all pre-tournament nerves had disappeared and there was an air of confidence around the Downsend squad demonstrated in their free-flowing style of football that was appreciated by many coaches, players, and parents.

The stage was now set for what was guaranteed to be an amazing final between the two unbeaten sides of the tournament Downsend school in Surrey and Highgate school in North London. As expected, the game got off to an electrifying start with Highgate scoring the goal of the tournament, a half volley that flew as straight as an arrow into the top left corner leading to an applause from both sets of fans. Despite being the first time they had been in a losing position all tournament, Downsend shown their ability to fight through adversity and scored a goal of their own almost immediately after. The next 5 minutes were back-and-forth with both teams attacking in numbers and creating opportunities to score, however it was Highgate who once again managed to put the ball into the Downsend goal giving them a 2 -1 lead at the end of the half. Unsurprisingly the mood during the Downsend half time team talk was not one of panic, but one of belief in each other's ability and a willingness to give everything during the second half. The message from the coaches was simply to just enjoy the moment, play with a smile, work hard off the ball and the chances will come. As the second half progressed, Downsend began applying more pressure and spending more time in the oppositions half but still couldn't manage to break down a well organised Highgate defence. Halfway through the second half Downsend made their final substitutions as our squad depth and ability for all players to seamlessly fit into the team was one of our main strengths during the tournament. With the parents bringing the noise and encouraging the players from the side-lines, the Downsend pressure would eventually pay off when in the last minute a perfectly placed volley into the bottom corner was scored from a cross giving Downsend the goal that they needed to send the game into extra time and eventually to penalties.

The self-confidence shown throughout the tournament was highlighted on the players faces when volunteering to take the penalties and the teachers chose three from the 10 hands raised. Downsend managed to score all 3 penalties whilst a brilliant save meant that Highgate missed their first penalty resulting in a 3 – 1 victory for Downsend school and subsequently being crowned 2021 / 2022 U11 ISFA National Champions for the first time in the school's history. Songs of the Black and White army were sung late into the evening as the boys celebrated a great achievement.

Downsend School U11A Football Team

Players:

Jake D (C)

Kobi J

Brady J

Rory S

Billy M

Dylan W

Stanley D

Rafael F

Miles M

Kenzo C

Coaches:

Mr Bell

Josh Evans

Mr Lawrence