

HOLLAND NOT ALAND

Shetland Women's Football won't be sending a team to Aland but Karen MacKelvie is delighted to report that there's plenty of football-based banter to be had in Gramsbergen this time of year...



They said I flew. Lara caught sight of my hair disappearing onto the train. She made it sound like I performed a graceful leap. I'm sure it wasn't that dainty...I was lugging a mammoth green hold-all and a bag of balls at the time. But I made it. I dropped the balls and turned triumphantly, ready to help my team-mates aboard. The doors shut.

I wouldn't have cared so much but it took a great effort to gather up a team for this trip and now I'd left them stranded on a platform. I was a lone ambassador ,god knows where, north of Holland.

The trip was open to anyone over eighteen and was advertised widely but persuade as we might, a few weeks before we went, only seven players had confirmed. That's just not enough to play five games of 11-aside in the biggest women's football tournament in Europe. It was looking grim, until we expanded our catchment area and started asking contacts from previous football games south.

In the end we had two Orcadian's, a Dundonian and a Glaswegian bolstering the squad. Diversity indeed for a Shetland team and a far cry from the strict regime of training and selection that is necessary for the Island Games. Clearly this was going to be a different kind of opportunity for our women footballers; the emphasis not so much on skill, as on how much fun you could handle.

To cope with my sudden isolation on the train; I asked a couple of Dutch folk what they thought of Gramsbergen. "Gramsbergen?" they looked blankly back at me. It was clear they had never heard of the place. I hoped I was going the right way.

There were three people on the platform when I got off the train. All three of them were there to meet me. I tried to explain where my teammates were and convince them that they were going to need more cars if they were to help us with the super-sized luggage that was on it's way. "Some people can fit inside their own cases." I said. I'm not sure they understood.

They took me to tournament HQ where I was introduced to Cor Van Dalen (chairman of the organization committee and avid event organizer) who told me a bit about the history and set-up of the tournament. This is the 14th year of the Plus International Women's Football tournament.

"On Friday and Saturday approximately 1,000 players will play 120 matches on 5 pitches. The event is divided into an A tournament- for teams playing in the highest leagues of their country, and a B tournament for teams playing in the lower leagues." He handed me a large cake, a beer and a welcome pack "The program is in three languages" he said proudly.

The marquees wait quietly for something to happen...somewhere around the leafy village - 39 teams are already here, getting ready.

But there's another event a-brewing...Cor appears back and takes me through the pavilion to pitch number one where it's a hive of activity. Stewards are busy laying out balls in rows. A lot of balls. Cor laughs heartily and throws me one.

"You can do keepie-ups?"

"Eh, sorry..?" I spluttered through my beer "Em, sort of"

"Show me" he commanded

Was this a test?...was he trying to suss out what standard to expect from the Shetland team? Why me? Where was the comfort of my pack? I put my beer down and started on my knees. The ball spanged away at a right angle. I scrambled after it, acutely embarrassed.

But Cor had different intentions.

"You can help us with our world record attempt at "keepie uppy", yes?" they were obviously quite desperate.

When our team finally arrive. We have to get changed fast. We hash out flower of Scotland and don our silly hats. The record attempt is a disaster but we make the local paper and then we are straight into our first game....

THE GAMES

By John Ward

Friday 12th June

20:40

Sv Overbos 2 (0) v (1) Shetland

Shetland were in action two hours after arriving in Gramsbergen in their opening game against Dutch side sv Overbos 2. The game started at a high pace with Shetland competing well for every ball and playing some good attacking football. Shetland got the opener they deserved when a Hayley McEwan shot was blocked and Captain Sarah Grogan pounced on the rebound to put Shetland one up. Overbos tried their best to even things up but Lara Jamieson at left back, Lara Thomson at right back and Brenda Leask at centre back made sure that keeper Lynn Cursiter wasn't overly troubled and with Maggie Irvine bossing the midfield, Shetland ran out deserved winners.

Scorer for Shetland *S Grogan*

Saturday 13th June

09:30

Shetland (0) v (3) sv Spakenburg

The first game of the day saw Shetland face Dutch side sv Spakenburg on a 3rd generation Astroturf pitch. It was soon obvious that Spakenburg were a very good side and they had Shetland on the back foot right from kick-off. The unfamiliar surface was causing Shetland all kinds of problems and it was no surprise when Spakenburg opened the scoring when a bouncing ball caught out the defence, allowing

their pacy striker to shoot home their first. The second came from an almost comedy moment when Grogan went to make a clearance but the unfamiliar surface caught her out and the clearance spun high over the defence, landing on the goal line a few feet outside the post but the spin on the ball took it back into play and bouncing into the net, with all 22 players rooted to the spot wondering where it was going to go next! Despite the best efforts of the Shetland defence, Mairi Leask and Vicky McGregor both leaving the field minus some skin on the plastic surface, Spakenburg added a third late on in the game. The scoreline somewhat flattered Spakenburg as Shetland created some decent chances with Karen MacKelvie, Ruth Pottinger and McEwan all coming close to getting something back for Shetland.

11:10

Shetland (0) v (1) RKDES Dames

Shetland were back on a grass pitch for this game against Dutch side RKDES Dames. The game started well for Shetland with good probing runs from midfield by Irvine, supported well by Lauren Ward and Pottinger on the wings. Most of the game was being played in the RKDES half, with the trickery of McEwan causing some real problems; with Shetland pushing up to keep the pressure on there was always the chance that RKDES could catch them on the break. Which is what happened mid way through the game when RKDES managed to out pace the retreating Shetland back line to score. Shetland didn't let this set back get to them and they battered the defence constantly but there never seemed to be a clear sight of goal for a shot. Despite forcing numerous corners Shetland just couldn't find the back of the net and left the field at full time wondering how this one got away from them.

12:30

Shetland (0) v (0) Bruchterveld

The last game of the group stages saw Shetland face 'B' Tournament favourites, Dutch side Bruchterveld, in a game which both side wanted something from, a win for Bruchterveld would mean then finishing on maximum points, anything for Shetland would guarantee at least 4th spot in the group. It soon became clear why Bruchterveld were favourites as they were very good on the ball and quite a strong, physical side. Bruchterveld started attacking down the right flank but got no joy against Thomason and Leask, so switched to the left but were equally frustrated by Irvine and Jamieson. When they did get through the defence they found Cursiter in inspired form making a few top quality saves. The Shetland midfield fought hard for everything, doing their best to break down the Bruchterveld attack and get the ball forward to the strikers. Because Shetland were having to commit so many bodies to defensive duties to stop the fast and powerful Bruchterveld attack from over running them, there was little support up front for the strikers. The trickery of McEwan and the power of MacKelvie were causing Bruchterveld some problems and they certainly gave their all for the cause. So when the referee blew for full time it was all credit to Shetland for getting a draw against the eventual 'B' Tournament winners and being the only team that Bruchterveld couldn't score against!

13:40

Shetland (3) v (0) ssv Kofering 1926

With Shetland finishing 4th in Group G they were drawn against Group H 4th place team, German side ssv Kofering 1926, in a semi-final play off. The Germans were a very cheery and enthusiastic bunch, happily posing for photos before the game started. This was the game in which the Shetland team really gelled, playing some very entertaining football all over the park. Shetland took the lead after 6 minutes when MacKelvie got the ball inside the box, turned her defender and coolly finished past the keeper. The second came a few minutes later from a great solo effort by McEwan jinking past a couple of defenders and picking her spot to put Shetland two up. Kofering were getting into the Shetland half on occasion but the back three dealt with anything they had to offer, leaving Cursiter little to do. With four minutes to go Shetland put the game out of reach through a powerful header from McGregor to seal a very impressive performance from the Shetland team. The workrate in midfield was outstanding with both Pottinger and Ward covering every blade of grass, getting back to help their defence and forward to support the attack, which won Ward the Tournament organisers 'Player of the Match' award.

This result put Shetland through to the finals group to face host club sv Gramsbergen 2 on the dreaded Astroturf pitch with the strong sun at it's highest.

Scorers for Shetland *K MacKelvie, H McEwan, V McGregor*

15:05

Sv Gramsbergen 2 (4) v (0) Shetland

This was to prove a game too far for the Shetland team struggling with injuries, the impressive Mairi Leask already out with a twisted ankle and both Jamieson and McGregor playing through the pain barrier. Shetland started well and were trying to attack the ball more but the oppressive heat radiating off the Astroturf pitch was taking it out of the players causing concentration levels to drop. On the other hand the hosts, who were obviously well used to the conditions, pulled Shetland all over the park and managed to score three goals in quick succession. Shetland did have their moments in this game, a MacKelvie shot going narrowly past the post was about the best of them. Towards the end of the game Gramsbergen added a fourth as Shetland wilted under the sun. The heat radiating from the surface was such that it was very uncomfortable to walk barefoot on, something you don't often encounter in Whalsay!

Relieved to come away from the games with two wins and a draw; we celebrate by throwing each other into the water feature beside our chalet. By the time we've showered and changed, we are late for the prize-giving. Truth be told, we are not really expecting any prizes. But we arrive just in time to receive the FAIR PLAY trophy...a great accolade to the spirit of our team.

The next day is filled with fun football-based activities followed by a few beers. A big thanks to John (MM) Ward and Maggie Kay for all their effort organizing the trip. Thanks to our guest players Ruth Pottinger, Lyn Cursiter, Hayley McEwan, Vicky McGregor and Roxy.