

EQUAL FOOTING



New Start: Defence Forces female GAA team line out against Australia. Interest in sport for women in the Defence Forces has soared.

With admirable commitment and verve, female members are making inroads into what has always been a male preserve. Some female officers within the Defence Forces talk to Dara Fox about the challenges and rewards of helping to establish a female sporting culture in the Defence Forces.

Capt Sue Ramsbottom, Lt Deirdre O'Rourke, both of 2nd Eastern Brigade, trooped off the Defence Forces pitch in the Phoenix Park last Autumn after a grueling encounter with the Australian Ladies Gaelic Football team. The Defence Forces Ladies Football team, started just two years ago, had given a good account of themselves, but were obviously disappointed as they had gone down by six points having led by eight at one point.

Great Support from the Army

Capt Ramsbottom an extremely accomplished athlete, with All-Ireland club medals with Laois, and three international rugby caps under her belt, is one of the driving forces behind the football team. "I've always played football, both at school and club level, and I wanted to see if we could start an army team," she says. With encouragement and support from Lt Col Pat Herbert from the PR section, Capt Theresa O'Keefe at the DFAA and Col Senan Downes, who is the army's Director of Training, there's been continuous

assistance from the chain of command, she says, which is just as well because she hadn't realised how hard it would be to start something from scratch, what with so many commitments, duties, work, and her social and sporting life outside of the army. "The support from the DFAA has been great. We've only had to ask, and the army has provided everything we've needed, and more, whether it's a full set of jerseys, extra footballs, phones, water bottles, and so on."

Starting from Scratch

Equally important has been the attitude of the players. "It's extremely competitive playing at club level, but while the army team is also competitive, it's also really enjoyable. The girls have shown great enthusiasm," says Sue. She takes great pride in the squad's achievements. "We have regular games with Bank of Ireland and Allied Irish Bank, and we're going from strength to strength. We recently beat the Garda team for example. We started from nothing but now there's a strong, committed panel." Given that there are only 300-400 women in the army in total, this is a great achievement. "When the



Lt Denise McDonagh in action against the Australian Ladies GAA team.

The support from the DFAA has been great. We've only had to ask, and the army has provided everything we've needed.

team was being established we needed to get the basics right, and we didn't know if people would still be committed down the road," she says.

But with the enthusiasm and spirit of the girls, any teething problems are firmly in the past, according to Deirdre, and both women are ambitious to develop the Defence Forces Football and Basketball teams further, perhaps by playing further afield. "It would be nice to get a return match in Australia," says Lt Niamh O'Mahony, who also partici-

pated in the bruising encounter, "but we'll certainly be looking to play in England soon, like the men's team, who have travelled to London to play games."

Reinventing an Army Tradition

While army support has been invaluable, it requires someone to take responsibility and to spearhead a venture to make it a success, says Sharon McManus, 1st southern brigade. She should know, as she has recently gone

down the same route as Sue in relation to her first sporting love, basketball, at which she has played at various levels and won All-Ireland club championships. She started playing with the football team in the Curragh this summer, but only because there was no basketball club in the area she says. While the football team has a core group of really good players, she doesn't number herself among them, and having seen how much the football team added to the options for women in the defence forces, along with Lt Jayne Lawlor she thought it was time to establish basketball on a similar footing. "Basketball actually started in Ireland through the army, so there's a huge tradition, but there have only been male interbrigade basketball teams, and until two or three years ago women could only play on the men's team," she says.

Giving it a Lash

Last year Sharon set up a basketball team in the Southern Brigade, while Jayne Lawlor did the same in the Curragh. "We also asked the Navy if they would set up a team, and they were fantastic, because they have fewer women and are away at sea a lot." The three teams started playing challenge matches with one another, but Sharon and Jayne decided an inter-brigade competition was needed, and last July in Cork a lot of hard work bore fruit when teams from the Southern, Eastern and Western Brigades, as well as a team from the Defence Forces Training Centre (DFTC) and two from the Navy took part in a tournament.

"It was a huge success, with full teams from all four brigades and from the Navy," says Sharon. "A lot of the girls were total beginners, but we all got together and gave it a lash." The enthusiasm and skill of all involved was more than she could have hoped for, she says, and while the South, as expected, won the competition helped by their well-established players, it was a great showing by all concerned. As a bonus, the competition has meant the start-up and regular training of basketball teams in every brigade.

"The next step is to go forward in the same vein as the football team, by setting up an all-army team." A Defence Forces Ladies Basketball Committee has been established, once again with invaluable support and advice from Col Downes and a lot of help from Capt O'Keefe. "Once all the organisation and logistics have been sorted out, we hope to be playing the Gardaí, banks and colleges in the future," says Sharon.



Lt Jayne Lawlor.



Lt Deirdre O'Rourke.

Attitude and Organisation

"The most encouraging thing for anyone wanting to become involved with sporting activities in the Defence Forces is the level of support within the organisation." That's the view of Lt Jane Lawlor, PE instructor in the Curragh. "There has been a huge leap forward in terms of how sport for women is organised and played, and the main reason for this is that people are now willing to take responsibility for organising sport."

For many years, women within the Defence Forces watched from the sidelines as their male counterparts enjoyed frequent sporting occasions. "It was hard to watch the men have so much access to team sports, which is an important social outlet within the Defence Forces, and we felt that it was time to get similar access for women," adds Lt Lawlor.

According to Lt Deirdre O'Rourke, the very fact that they were able to organise that match is a massive leap forward. "It has always been a struggle to even get a team together with work commitments but it seems that now we have got over that hurdle. We have established a fairly definite team structure for football and camogie. As I said before, what's really made the difference is the determination of some people to ensure that things actually happen. Once you set up a proper organizational structure, the Defence Forces is very supportive of sporting activity. It's a relatively simple but vitally

important thing to do, especially in a military organisation. That means that if a senior officer needs to contact someone in relation to sport there is an established point of contact," adds Lt Lawlor.

Once sport is organised properly, both Lt O'Rourke and Lt Lawlor agree that the Defence Forces is an excellent environment for sport. "We have access to the facilities and the logistics for getting teams around the country," says Lt Lawlor. "For instance if

In July there will be an inter-brigade football tournament, which will be a major milestone for female sports within the Defence Forces. "We've sorted out any major problems now," says Lt Lawlor, "we're always looking to expand what sports we can offer though, so we're always receptive to any suggestions."

Interest in sport for women within the Defence Forces has soared, and the sky's the limit in terms of what can be achieved

It's been a long time coming and we want to ensure that what we have started continues and goes from strength to strength.

you want to use the gym here in the Curragh, we can organise teams to meet there."

"We would always like to see more people involved. Those that do get involved were generally involved in team sports before they joined the Defence Forces, and it's great that they can maintain and continue that interest. Traditionally the army has always been the strongest in terms of providing players, but there is also a growing level of interest from the Air Corps and Naval service," adds Lt O'Rourke.

according to Lt Louise Conlon and Denise McDonagh, who have been at the forefront of the redevelopment of female sports.

"There's a far greater cohesion now in terms of what we want to achieve," says Lt Conlon who also echoes the important social aspect that sport brings to the Defence Forces. "Like anyone else, it's important that we get these sporting opportunities," says Lt McDonagh. "It's been a long time coming and we want to ensure that what we have started continues and goes from strength to strength."