

SOFTBALL PROJECT ACHIEVES AIMS IN GOZO

The implementation of the Erasmus+ Sports: Small Collaborative Partnerships project, *Inclusion & Gender Equality Through Softball*, commenced on Thursday, March 9, in Ghajnsielem, Gozo, home of the Redcoats, the project leader, with the arrival of eight club officials representing Softball Klub Princ Zagreb from Croatia and Olympia Haarlem from the Netherlands. They were joined by Tara Henry, a US softball coach and former UCLA college softball player who was invited to contribute with her experience and knowledge about the game.

A series of activities intended to exchange good practices in coaching softball were organised involving the youth teams of the Ghajnsielem Redcoats. In order to promote the game and increase the rate of participation of children, especially girls, in softball, one activity was held at the Gozo College Ghajnsielem Primary School. There were also two workshops for the officials of the three clubs in order to evaluate the performance of the partnership in implementing the project, as well as to plan ahead. A seminar for stakeholders and policymakers was also held to cover the topic of this first transnational meeting, *A Multisport Approach to Softball*.

The first practice session focused on slap hitting and pitching. Tara Henry assessed the youth players of the Ghajnsielem Redcoats to identify those who would be good candidates to learn the skills necessary to be able to slap hit. Petra Cizmic Pokrajac, pitching coach at Softball Klub Princ Zagreb, worked with the three pitchers of the local club.

On the morning of Friday, March 10, a softball practice session was held at the Gozo College Ghajnsielem Primary School. The eight coaches of Olympia and Princ along with Tara Henry had an hour with the boys and girls of Years 1, 2 and 3 of the school. Fundamental skills related to throwing, catching, fielding and batting were covered as the children moved from one station to the next. It was a very enjoyable session for the pupils at the school who were very motivated to learn and performed exceptionally well.

During the lunch break, Petra Cizmic Pokrajac presented the Head of School, Dame Marianne Zammit, with a softball starter pack donated to the school by the EUROPEAN SOFTBALL FEDERATION to help the development of the game on the island. The Head of School thanked the ESF for the generous donation and promised that it will be put to good use by the PE teachers as well as during the tee-ball sessions which the Redcoats conduct every week at the school. Mr Kevin Azzopardi, EO Physical Education, remarked that he was very pleased with the opportunity that was given to the students of the Ghajnsielem Primary School to experience a softball session conducted by international coaches in their own playground.

During the second session it was the turn of the students of Years 4, 5, and 6 to practice with the coaches of this Erasmus+ Sports project. Once again throwing and catching along with fielding and batting were the skills in focus, and as did their younger peers, the older students at the school impressed the foreign coaches. This turned out to be a glorious day for the school and one to remember for all the students.

A seminar was also held at the Grand Hotel in Ghajnsielem covering the topic of this 1st transnational meeting, *A Multisport Approach to Softball*. In the opening address Joseph Scicluna, President of the Ghajnsielem Redcoats, explained why his organisation opted to become a sports club promoting different disciplines. The main reason cited was that the club wants to encourage children and youths to play more than one sport. He also listed the objectives of IGETS and how the three partners were planning to achieve the stated aims. Lynn Spiteri of MEUSAC described the EU programmes which are relevant to sports organisations and how MEUSAC can assist in the application process. Tara Henry gave a very interesting account of her experience as a softball student-athlete, and how the support of her mother helped her to succeed. The keynote address was delivered by Mark Buttigieg who explained how critical it is for children to play more than one sport until they are about 14 years old. Along with the officials and coaches of the three clubs there were also representatives of the Gozo Sports Board, the Malta Baseball & Softball Association, the Mellieha Baseball & Softball Club and the Luxol Mustangs.

On Friday evening the IGETS team worked with the U11, U13 and U17 softball players of the Ghajnsielem Redcoats. It was a very productive session for the players who enjoyed it thoroughly. During this session capacity building for the three clubs continued as they shared knowledge about best practices in softball coaching. Fielding, slap hitting, batting and pitching were the fundamental skills covered during the two-hour long session. At the end of the session IGETS project coordinator, Joseph Scicluna presented a memento of the occasion to his counterparts at Olympia Haarlem, Mirjam Willemse, and Princ Zagreb, Petra Cizmic Pokrajac.

On Saturday afternoon the three partners conducted a full practice session for the softball players of the Redcoats. The 30 girls who make up the U11, U13 and U17 youth teams of the club attended this session which focused entirely on fielding. After the session, Ghajnsielem Mayor, Mr Franco Ciangura, met the coaches and congratulated the three clubs for the great initiative for such an important cause and promised to support the project where possible.

The last activity was a workshop to assess the progress of the project following the 1st transnational meeting. It was concluded that the activities which took place in Ghajnsielem were successful in achieving the objectives that were set out at the start.

The visiting club officials came to appreciate the importance of multilateralism and the necessity to encourage young participants to practice more than one sport for their long term athletic development. The process of exchanging good practices in coaching softball got underway and will continue when the partners next meet. The effort to promote the game with school children was very effective given the feedback from the children themselves, their teachers and parents, as well as the Head of School. The objective to raise awareness with policymakers and stakeholders is an on-going process. However, features on TV programmes which will air on Maltese national television over the coming days as well as meetings with key government officials before and after the activities that were held in Gozo are expected to achieve the desired results.

During the workshop plans were also laid out for the coming months with a series of activities which include the 2nd transnational meeting scheduled for May 10-14, 2017, in Haarlem, the Netherlands. Social inclusion, strengthening club administration, and capacity building will all be on the agenda in Haarlem.

On Sunday morning the visitors left for their respective countries satisfied with the achievements of their project IGETS and looking forward to the next transnational activity scheduled for May in Haarlem.

***Disclaimer:** This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the author, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.*

www.igets.eu

www.ghajnsielemredcoats.com