



The 2019 Welsh under 16 Women's basketball program has come to a close, concluding with their 5th place finish at the FIBA Division C Tournament in Moldova. Looking back at the season, the U16's program have had a very successful year. I would like to take this opportunity to reflect on the journey.

Upon being appointed the head coach of the team, I started working with the team manager, Jon Bunyan, to ensure we were putting things in place to prepare us for our end of season tournament. During the course of our training sessions we ensured that we had at least 1 game to play at each session so we could put our game plans into practice in game situations. At times it was a struggle to find a team to play, and even more so to find higher quality teams to play, however this still allowed us to run our offense and defense at game speed. We faced off against many different teams along the way, an U16 Archer men's team, teams from the adult local league, other National League programs such as the Bristol Flyers and so on. The culmination in these friendlies occurred on Easter Sunday, where we played the Irish U16 National Women's team.



The game versus Ireland was a great litmus test for our side. Ireland are known for their tenacity and for their talent. They are a very strong squad who play in the B division of FIBA. This friendly was a part of our selection process, so the game wasn't run in line with a tournament or official competition. It was used with 15 players who all were still looking to make final selection. Wales started very strongly finishing the 1st quarter only 3 points down 17-14. With a higher than normal rotation, and with a longer bench, Ireland kicked it up a gear in the 2nd quarter and won that quarter 38-6 putting them firmly ahead in the game. The Welsh girls however held their heads up high and showed their pride and heart, winning the first half of the 3rd quarter, before ultimately losing the quarter 19-15. The 4th quarter Ireland kept up the pressure and Wales handled it well, losing the quarter by 1 point 12-11. Across 3 quarters Ireland only won by 8 points. This showed how strong the Welsh team could be when they played with intensity and focus. It was also at this point Wales lost one of their potential team leaders, as she had been shortlisted for the Team GB U16's, which was a great honour for her, as well as the Welsh program.

From this point we prepared for the Copenhagen Invitational Tournament. This was to be our last part of our selection process, although we had a shortlist of how we saw the team at this point. In Copenhagen, due to late hours flying and non-ideal sleeping arrangements, Wales came out the first day a bit flat, losing to a very strong Sweden side, and to the Norway national side. After some much needed rest and recovery, Wales got back into their winning ways, putting to rest the England U14's setting up a rematch versus Norway. Wales came out fighting. Wales ran Norway off the court in the 1st quarter winning it 17-2 (with it being 17-0 with 1 second to go in the period!). Norway was unable to match the intensity and effort of Wales, not to mention the outstanding team support on the bench. Wales continued the fight through the game winning by 10 points a day after losing to the same exact team. This set up the 5th place placement game versus a strong Berlin side. Wales was up to the task however and completed this game, winning 3 on the trot finishing 5th place in the tournament with a 3 wins and 2 loss record.



Final selections for the FIBA squad were made, with the last non selected player being sent to the Slovenia FIBA camp, to help her develop for the following year's team.



Heading into FIBA the staff felt confident of the Welsh team's ability to play, and felt that the chances of medalling was quite high. Coming into game 1 Wales faced Malta. Malta had a scrappy team lead by 2 very strong players however, Wales had a much stronger defense and a stronger overall team. The young Welsh women pushed the team up to a 21 point lead, which allowed for strong rotations and lots of opportunity to play deep down the bench. These young dragons were too much for Malta, and started the competition with a strong victory.

This lead into what would be a must win game for both teams, as Wales with a victory would have been guaranteed semi-final game, and a loss would eliminate Scotland from any chance of reaching a medal game. Scotland had lost to Cyprus the day before by 19 points, after a very poor shooting performance, hitting 0 of 17 three point shots. Scotland corrected this and came out fighting. Wales

had a lot of early opportunities to take a large lead, with their pressure defense creating a multitude of Scottish turnovers, however after these steals, Wales was unable to capitalize with points allowing Scotland to stay in the game only being 2 points down at the end of the 1st quarter, Wales 10, Scotland 8. Scotland then picked up their pressure defense in the 2nd quarter, which the Welsh team struggled to adapt to, forcing turnovers and bad shot selection Scotland won the 2nd quarter 17-8, to take a 7 point lead into halftime. The Welsh squad was not going to give up and after some half time adjustments started picking up the pressure, and dealing with the Scottish defense to win the 3rd quarter 19-15, making it a 3 point game to start the 4th quarter. Wales continued over the first 4 minutes of the final quarter, overcoming the 3 point deficit on their way to a 4 point lead with just over 5 minutes to play. It was at this point Scotland mixed in a little bit of luck with their extremely talented team. Being down 4 points, Scotland clawed their way back to even at 46, and wouldn't make another 2 point shot the rest of the game. A day after Scotland hit 0-17 3 point shots versus Cyprus, Scotland then banked a 3 from the top of the key to make it 46-49. Several possessions both ways saw neither team able to score until another fortunate bounce saw a 3 hit the back iron, bounce high above the rim, and drop straight back in to go up 46-52. With under 3 minutes to go and now down 6 to a very strong defensive side, Wales had to gamble in order to create turnovers to get the ball back. Earlier in the game the Scots had made several turnovers under pressure, but in the 4th quarter, their calmness prevailed as they continued to hit 3 more 3 point shots to win the game by 11, 50-61.



The final game in the group came against the would be Gold Medallists, Cyprus. Cyprus, who last played in Division B before taking a year out had shown their quality throughout the tournament. An unknown as they did not participate in FIBA 2018, they came out firing on the first day beating

Scotland by 19 64-45. Their firepower continued the 2nd day versus Malta winning 65-40. This meant that a Welsh 4 point victory would still see Wales through to the Semi-Finals and a guaranteed medal game. The atmosphere in Moldova was that Cyprus probably was going to easily win this game. They had just handled the 2 previous teams including a large victory over Scotland. Wales came into game with their destiny in their own hands. The first quarter was very scrappy with neither team able to get a flow going into the game, but the quickness and strength of the Cyprus defense saw them on top after 1, 15-9. Wales however had been in this position before, and remained poised. The Welsh side picked up their intensity and mounted a run of their own, finding their offensive prowess winning the 2nd quarter 20-16, going into halftime only down by 2 points. Quarter 3 was deadlocked at 10 points apiece leaving the Welsh squad needing to win the 4th quarter by 6 points to advance to the semi-finals. Wales came out strong again and pushed to tie the game at 44 each with 5:30 left to go in the game. Cyprus would push to a 5 point lead 51-46 when a 3 point Welsh jump shot brought the game back to 2 points for Cyprus. Wales had several possessions to tie the game or take the lead, but was unable to score before fouling allowing Cyprus to go up 52-49 with 1:27 to go. Wales had 3 opportunities to bring the game back closer, but 2 turnovers and a missed shot left Cyprus with the ball, up 3 and 20 seconds on the clock. Wales pushed up to try and create a turnover, but a long pass to a streaking Cypriot saw Cyprus under their own basket with the clock winding down. 3 Welsh players surrounded the Cyprus player, tying up the ball creating a jump ball, with Wales holding the possession. With 7 seconds on the clock, Wales would get an opportunity to tie the game. The Welsh team inbounded the ball and swung it around, but the last shot was taken just inside the three point line, meaning Cyprus won 52-51. This was probably one of the hardest fought games the Welsh side had faced all year, and they absolutely put themselves in a position to win not only this game, but every game at this tournament. This Cyprus team would continue to win gold, beating Moldova by 43 (80-37), and the finals versus Georgia by 37 (75-38). This makes finishing outside of the top 3 a tough pill to swallow considering Wales was the only team that pushed Cyprus to the brink, as Cyprus's average win outside of the Wales game is 25 points per game.

Wales would then face Gibraltar as part of the placement group. Gibraltar had quite a tough tournament, but Wales knew they couldn't look past this team, after losing to Gibraltar by 3 points in the 2018 tournament. Wales was looking for a little vengeance for the previous tournament, and some restitution for the losses in 2019. The Welsh side showed their class against a smaller Gibraltar side, winning the game by 29, 58-29 to finish 5th in the tournament. This also allowed for another game of deep rotation, allowing plenty of court time for everyone on the squad to get involved.



Overall, the tournament was disappointing with the final placement, as we all feel we were at least the 2nd best team there, but a bit of misfortunate in the draw saw 3 of the strongest sides in the same bracket, and some outstanding shooting by the Scots kept Wales out of a medal position.



However, even dealing with the disappointment, I truly believe that it was a very successful tournament. The girls were in a position to win every game, they fought hard and never quit. They had an amazing experience on the court, coupled with an even better experience off the court. The parents were extremely supportive as well, talking about how close the losses were, and how hard the girls fought. I was even approached on multiple occasions by coaching staff from other countries to compliment me on the quality of this team, the heart of this team, and the way in which they play basketball as compared to previous teams in previous years. Not only was the tournament a great experience for the girls, it was also a great opportunity to learn and develop within basketball. This learning and development isn't limited to the players. As a coach, I feel I have learned a great deal and will be better prepared in the future should I be given this opportunity again. I've learned things like looking at the bigger picture in games, such as not chasing points in the Scotland game so that points difference wouldn't matter in the Cyprus game (meaning just a win would of seen us through instead of a 4 point victory). I also have a better understanding of how other teams play and the level of play in the tournament, which will better help me prepare in the future. I also have ideas how this can be implemented at the club level to ensure overall success for Basketball Wales. It breaks my heart for these young women to finish how we did, but I am overwhelmed with pride when I look at how they handled themselves on and off the court, with the intensity in which they played, and the heart they have. We might not walk away with a medal, but we are definitely winners, and this was an outstanding season.

