

Leinster are the U18 ICT Champions

Liza O'Rourke



Team: Craig Senior, Senan O'Rourke, Pranav Erukkatil, Praneel Reddy Vallapureddy, Fionn Dowling, Aman Kothiyal, Amanda Dunlop, Jean Kelly, Siofra Flynn, Nicole Joy, Chloe McGrane, Orlaith Evans, Michelle Shochan, David Walsh.

Leinster has been privileged to be invited to compete in the English Intercounty Tournament for more than four decades and won the competition for the first and only time in 1994. In 2019, Leinster came 5th and in 2022, Leinster came 3rd.

As far back as 2019, a small group of Youth Activities Committee members was upstairs in the Terenure Badminton Centre running one of their many juvenile tournaments. And a prediction was made that in 2023, the Leinster team, largely made up of 2007 players would win "Notts". Phrases such as "Once in a Generation", "Golden Era" are bandied about at various times, however, it is difficult to talk about this group of talented players without reverting to these cliches.

The team arrived in Nottingham on Sunday 2nd April. The management team consisted of Manager, Amanda Dunlop, Coach, David Walsh, Chairperson of Youth Activities, Jean Kelly, and Craig Senior.

The team was seeded 5/7 and in Group G with Avon, Surrey and Lincolnshire and the format of each match was 2 mixed doubles, 2 boys singles, 2 girls singles, 2 boys doubles and 2 girls doubles. All 10 players were played in each match and contributed to the team wins, beating Lincolnshire 10-0, Avon 8-2 and Surrey 7-3, and Chloe McGrane, as Captain, led from the front.

After topping Group G, Leinster moved to Group H, which Amanda referred to as the Group of Death! The group included Sussex, Staffordshire and top seeds Yorkshire, the hot favourites for the

competition. Leinster beat both Sussex and Staffordshire 10-0 before meeting Yorkshire. Similarly, Yorkshire had also put up two 10-0 wins against the other two teams. Whichever team won the last Group H fixture, would move into the final group to decide position 1-4, and whoever lost would be fighting for place 5-8. Although, the final score was 7-3 in favour of Leinster, this doesn't do justice to the quality of the match itself. There were 4 tight three-setters, 3 of which were won by Leinster. The management and players went into the match with confidence and simply believed that our team was going to win.

One of the hardest challenges any team can face is to come down from the adrenalin of a major win, reset and refocus for the next tough opposition within a matter of hours. This team demonstrated experience and maturity well beyond its years. And much credit goes to Amanda and David for such an incredible job of encouraging their players to celebrate their momentous win over Yorkshire, but then quickly refocused and prepared the team for its next tough match against Nottinghamshire a mere couple of hours later.

The final group consisted of Nottinghamshire, Middlesex, Hertfordshire, and Leinster. Once again Leinster was top of the table on Wednesday evening with wins of 7-3 against both Nottinghamshire and Middlesex. Wednesday was a massively demanding day both physically and mentally for the entire team. It's at times like this that the other members of the management team play such a crucial role. Both Jean and Craig kept the team fed and watered throughout the 4-day competition, and Jean made sure that each morning the players' gear was freshly laundered. Both were also constantly there to provide the emotional, as well as practical, support that gives the extra 5% that gets a team over the line.

The final match of the day was scheduled for 1pm on Thursday, although it was closer to 1:30pm by the time the final match began. As with every single match played over the course of the 4 days, Leinster made its intention clear from the very beginning. Each player went out to put a point on the board for the rest of their teammates and management team. And Leinster beat Hertfordshire 8-2.

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It is impossible to do justice to this team by trying to point to any individual standout moments, or to any individual standout players. This was a team event, and was won by the team! It goes without saying, that Leinster is extremely fortunate to have such a talented crop of players at this age. In fact, 9 of the current team will be eligible for selection next year, and the 10th player is eligible for two more years. But this does not simply happen in a vacuum, and our players are fortunate to have talented players ahead of them who are constantly challenging them and bringing them on. Dylan Noble was selected for the team, but unfortunately, due to injury had to withdraw. The team wishes Dylan a speedy recovery.

Two Leinster teams have made headlines in English Badminton in the last two weeks. First, the Leinster Senior team won promotion to the Premiership without losing a single match, and now our U18 team has won the U18 ICT. This is nothing short of remarkable. And the messages and genuine emotion that has been pouring into Leinster Badminton make it clear that these are very special times that should be valued and not taken for granted.

In addition to the quality of players that Leinster has, the quality of our volunteers is second to none. The highly regarded Youth Activities Committee is responsible for the Leinster squads and juvenile team events. The Chairperson, Jean Kelly, is an absolute favourite with the kids and parents alike and

has her sleeves always rolled up. Amanda Dunlop, as manager of the team, brought her years of experience of managing “Notts” teams to the fore. David Walsh, as Coach, made it abundantly clear why he was awarded National Coach of the Year in December. Also, as a player on the Senior Leinster Team that won promotion to the Premiership less than a fortnight ago, he came equipped with all the skills needed to get this team over the line. Last, but not least, Craig Senior - a firm favourite with the players who along with Jean, kept the team fed and was always providing support in the background.

The Youth Activities Committee and the team appreciates all the ongoing support provided by the Leinster Executive Committee. We would also like to thank our sponsor, Yonex for kitting out the team. Finally, a special word of thanks to the parents whose dedication and sacrifice has produced such talented players, but more importantly, such amazing young people.

Some say that timing is everything. In 1994, a very special group of Leinster players made history by winning “Notts” for the first and only time – until now. It has been an emotional week for many in Leinster badminton with the sad passing of David Gannon, who was a highly valued member of that famous Leinster team in 1994. And now, within days of our closeknit community losing David, a second Leinster team has won the U18 ICT. The Youth Activities Committee dedicates our win to David Gannon.

