Grassroots gold goes to Northern Irish club

The gold standard in the best club category of the 2017 UEFA Grassroots Awards was given to St Oliver Plunkett in Northern Ireland.

St Oliver Plunkett, a youth-focused club that uses football as a medium to develop young people from a disadvantaged community in Northern Ireland, has won the gold award for Best Club in the 2017 UEFA Grassroots Awards.

Based in the Lenadoon area of Belfast, the club has given over 500 boys and girls from different backgrounds from the age of four upwards the opportunity to play football together, promoting key values such as respect and fair play.

"As far as we're concerned, everybody's welcome through that door. We just want to get our message out that it doesn’t matter what ability you have, it doesn't matter what box somebody wants to put you in, you’re more than welcome at our club," explained club secretary Neil McKee.

"The young people take great pride in the jersey and they're proud putting it on every single week. It’s not just about the football. There’s that sense of belonging, the pride in the jersey, the camaraderie, the teamwork. Everything comes together and strengthens those bonds. I’ve known a lot of the coaches at the club since primary school; we’ve been friends for life. And it's vitally important that we offer those opportunities for the young people of today."

One of those young players, Emel Melville, told UEFA.com how the club has benefitted him since he started playing there: "The coaches, they all teach you loads of lessons that you’ll carry throughout your life, they taught me respect. Although I have learned respect in my home they taught me how to respect, it's just a different kind of respect. Respect for your coaches and teammates, and they’ve also taught me how to work as a unit, and they give you some self-discipline."

Director of Football Development at the Irish Football Association (IFA), Michael Boyd, added: "We're trying to grow our participation rates to 100,000 young people involved in football, and the best way to do that is to have big, strong, inclusive clubs that are at the heart of the community. So we're very focused on trying to support clubs in the mould of St Oliver Plunkett. It's a great, community focused club. It just shines through in everybody you speak to here."

In reaction to the recognition the club has received from UEFA, he said: "I think it's fantastic because people look to clubs like St Oliver Plunkett and see them as a club that they would like to aspire to be at the grassroots level, so to see that international recognition from UEFA is just inspiring to all the clubs around them, so it has a knock-on impact for the other clubs, making them want to reach that sort of level."

**Why is grassroots football** **important?**
[Football is based on the grassroots](http://www.uefa.com/insideuefa/football-development/technical/grassroots/index.html), played everywhere by men and women, boys and girls. Football brings wider benefits to society as a whole, as it is not only about football skills, but also about values such as team-work, social development, health, fitness and personal fulfilment. Grassroots football is a vehicle for educational, social and sporting development, and as such, everybody should have the opportunity to get involved in the game. Grassroots football gives everybody that opportunity, no matter what their age, ability, ethnicity, race, religion or sexual identity.

**How is UEFA investing in grassroots football?**
UEFA organises grassroots week in conjunction with the national football associations and the European Union, and supports grassroots projects financially throughout Europe. Through its Grassroots Charter, UEFA is encouraging all national associations to improve and develop their grassroots activities, in order to continually upgrade the standard of grassroots activities. Each national association receives earmarked funding of €150,000 a year to continually develop and improve their grassroots activities.