



Joseph Laird – Triumph over Adversity: From Homeless Addict to Representing Ireland

Sam McMurdock recently met Joseph Laird (37) from Clondalkin, Dublin who was a member of the Irish team that won the International Street Soccer 8 Nations Cup in Dundee, Scotland in September.

Joseph Laird is an affable, gentle-spoken guy. The eldest of three, he and his brother and sister were “born and bred” in Clondalkin, six miles south-west of Dublin city-centre. Despite his seemingly carefree demeanour, things have not been easy - from addiction, to homelessness to frequent jail terms, Joe tells me,

“I’m an open book, if my mess-ups can stop anyone else making them, I’m happy to tell my story.”

Joe went along to the Irish Homeless Street League (IHSL) whilst undergoing treatment at

Coolmine Therapeutic Community as,



“I’ve never been this long out of prison before...”

“some of the lads went there at the weekend and really enjoyed it, so I tagged along to see what was going on.”

Joe has now been going along to his local League for two-and-half years and laughs,

“I didn’t realise it was that long, time really does fly when you’re having fun.”

When Laird first started attending the Street League he was abusing drugs,

“....and just about everything else if I’m being completely honest with you.”

Joe is candid, and explains that his story “should not go to waste” and “if it helps anyone else, even one person, then I’ll be happy enough.”

Joe, like many people who turn up at the Street League has had his fair share of problems, not least spending over twenty years homeless and finding himself in and out of jail,

“It’s been hard,” he says, before exhaling,

“There’s no book to tell you how to live your life, that’s why I want people to know that drugs and other ways of escaping reality lead to nothing, in fact, they rob you off your life and anything good it has to offer.”

Joe goes on to tell me that he has struggled with commitment and doing things outside his comfort zone all his life,

“...The League has brought me out of my shell, it’s given me purpose and knowing I have a routine of meeting up with the lads and knowing they’re waiting on me has really helped. I enjoy the banter too of course. I love going and that surprises me still.”

Why?

“ I’ve never stuck to anything but then again, I’ve never experienced anything like it - there’s no judgement, just people who want the best for you. I’ve learned a lot about myself and what works for me.”

Some would say, ‘A Ball Can Change a Life’, I joke.

“There’s no doubt about that [laughs].”



Joe celebrating with fellow teammates

What it is about the IHSL that motivates positive change in so many?

“I think the belief they have in you is a big part. I’m goalkeeper and I’m very proud of that; we all have something in the League we are proud of and want to do well at. For me, having goals and working towards them

is a big thing... that’s something I’ve learned about myself. The exercise is very good. It’s hard.... very hard [laughs] but the benefits for your head [mental health] is great. I’m not the fittest, that’s why I’m the goalkeeper [laughs] but getting out of the house, moving around, it does make all the difference.... it’s made me realise the importance of being active because I’m a much more positive person with a better outlook on life when I’m keeping myself moving and busy.”

Being picked to represent my country I’m incredibly proud of that because I’ve never achieved anything in life.

Joe tells me that his life has been littered with episodes of “just giving up” but the League has shown him that,

“...hard work brings rewards. Being picked to represent my country and fly the flag.... I’m incredibly proud of that because I’ve never achieved anything in life I’ve never ever been this long out of prison before.... I haven’t been inside in three years, that’s something that’s really important to me and something I’m proud of ... that might not sound much to a lot of people but I don’t want my old life, I want better things for me now.... I didn’t think much of myself before.... but now ... now I believe I deserve more out of life... that’s a first for me and I’m even surprised to

hear myself say it.”

Joe tells me, that since coming back from Dundee with a win, at the 8 Nations Tournament he's been looking back at his life and examining why he didn't achieve things he'd have liked to,

“I now know why things never turned out for me beforeI never believed in myself, and nobody is to blame for that except me ... I can't pass the blame to anyone or anything anymore because it's very clear to me at this moment in time that I lacked commitment, I never gave my all and if I didn't achieve things right away, I'd say f**k that and just give up. That's no way to live or to get anywhere in life.”

I tell Joe that everyone at the Big Issue and IHSL is so proud of him winning at the 8 Nations Tournament.

“That's so kind. I've never ate so well in my life [laughs]. The food was amazing I love good food and being there with people I genuinely have a bond with and winning of course, it's just a feeling I'll never forget and something I want to last forever..... [pauses]... do you know, and this is really making me emotional but I need to say it.... my mam, I've never seen her this proud or at peace... she watched it [8 Nations Tournament] online... she just wouldn't miss a second of it....

“Before I left for Scotland, there was a documentary on the telly about the Street League and she said she was loving that I am a part of it. I got goose pimples all over my body when she said that. My breathing

went because for the first time ever, I could see genuine pride in mam's eyes and tears [goes quiet].... Sam, the tears were tears of happiness and pride. I

cried with mam, I didn't care, I just cried because I could feel her relief She can see I'm on a different path, I've walked away from my old life and she knows in her heart like mams do that she doesn't have to worry about the police coming to her door anymore, she doesn't have to worry that she'll get that news that Joe is dead.”

Any advice for your 16-year-old self?

“Don't follow the crowd. What seems cool and great at the time doesn't make for a good life. Turn

away. Walk away from friends if they're leading you down that path. It'll be hard but it'll be worth it. Say no to drugs at all costs, I promise you, they aren't worth it. Don't rely on drugs, alcohol or anything else for your confidence ... Try and get yourself involved in a sport, any sport, just don't take that destructive path.”

Joe has countless stories from Dundee,

“...an experience I'll always look back on to remind me to keep moving forward, doing my best” and as we conclude our chat he tells me,

“Going along to the League was such a great decision, winning that trophy, that was the icing on the cake I'm so proud of representing my country, coming back and my family, friends and girlfriend there.... they were smiling, delighted and they've been telling anyone who will listen, 'Our Joe was representing Ireland.' To this day, when I think back to the motivational talks in our circle, I believed then I could take on the world - and I still do.”



Joe with teammates