

# SSE AIRTRICITY LEAGUE FROM



EAGELSON... debut win

## Eagelson soars on big stage

By KEVIN BYRNE

DYLAN EAGELSON has landed on his feet on the big stage.

The 19-year-old shone on his senior international major debut yesterday, picking up an impressive win at the European Championships in Yerevan.

Another newcomer, Dublin light-middleweight Luke Maguire, was also victorious on his bow.

But St Michael's Athy fight-welterweight Brandon McCarthy exited after an opening-round defeat.

Eagelson had picked up a bronze medal at the European Under-22s in March. And he showed he is well capable of mixing it with the big boys as he powered past Turkey's Muhammet Acli yesterday.

The rangy southpaw scored a unanimous win and was even tipped for the top by bantamweight predecessor and two-time Olympian Michael Conlan.

Being the St Paul's of Belfast prospect, ex-champ Conlan said: "This kid's a future star."

The teenager will secure bronze at least if he beats No.2 seed Gabriel Mascunano Escobar of Spain in Sunday's quarter-final.

Team-mates Sean Mari and captain Adam Hession will be in action today.

AS A child, James Abankwah moved around Ireland to wherever his father's work took him.

For four years, the Reverend Isaac Abankwah, from The Church of Pentecost, was based in Barcelona while the rest of his family remained here.

And, as a 12-year-old, the middle child of five to Ghanaian parents was getting the bus to and from Longford to Cherry Orchard's training.

So maybe the prospect of moving to Italy on his own at the age of 18 is not as daunting as it might be for other people.

When the centre-half broke into the St Pat's first team last season it was immediately apparent that the Inchicore club had a gem on their hands.

Serie A outfit Udinese were similarly impressed, paying €500,000 up front for the teenager to secure his signature in January, before loaning him back to the Inchicore club until the summer to allow him complete his Leaving Cert.

He will have little more than a week between his last exam and his big move to Udine, where he will be joined by fellow Ireland underage international Festo Eboesele, who is joining from Derby County.

It is quite the move for the player born in Waterford and who has lived in Donegal, Calbridge and Lucan

although Longford - where he spent the most amount of time - is regarded as home.

It was there that his talent shone through at Melview, who did their best to challenge the promising defender.

Abankwah recalled: "They did try and make it

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tougher for me by making me play two years above my age but even that, I did find it comfortable, I had to come up to Dublin."

His elder brother Isaac contacted Cherry Orchard about himself and then dropped in his younger sibling's name.

And between him, his mother Comfort and club coaches, they did their best to ensure that he could make training.

He said: "There were four of us at the time. It was very tough for her. Me and my brother Isaac, she'd bring us to training, leave the younger two at home, with babysitters. It was all hectic but it paid off."

"I give a lot of credit to her. Without her, and my dad, as well. God knows where I'd be."

"John Shaw at Melview would have been a great influence on me."

"And when I came up to Dublin, Richard Shannon over at Cherry Orchard he took me under his wing

with Paul Clegg and all the staff. I remember when sometimes my mam wouldn't be able to drop me to training I'd have to get the bus up myself at about 12 or 13 and they would pick me up at the bus stop, bring me to training, drop me back at the bus stop and get the bus back.

"The first few times I did it with my brother but our training times could be different and he had to leave earlier and I had to leave later but then I did get used to it."

"It's been a tough journey for me but I'd like to thank everyone involved."

It was not all sweetness and light. Abankwah was speaking to promote Sport Against Racism Ireland's Football For Unity festival launch.

And he has experienced at first hand when the parent of an opposing player made an offensive remark to him when he was around 10 years of age.

He said: "I was thrown by it, I didn't think football could be like that, with parents. My dad was at the game, he went over to have a word with him."

"It is tough, I have gone down to enjoy football, play with my mates, and to hear that on the sideline is not great at all."

And he had to put up with jibes about whether he was an over-age player.

The defender said: "I was playing two years above my age but my dad had to bring down my passport."

He laughed as he recounted the story but added: "It was a serious matter. It's something that especially happens with black players."

Abankwah does, however, highlight they were isolated incidents and hopes that the changing face of Ireland international teams might make others think twice about their ignorant views.

He said: "Black or white, we still bleed the same. But that's great having that mixture in the team and it helps the team as well."

There has never been an approach to play for Ghana. That might change if he breaks through at Udinese.

But the Adamstown Community College student has set his sights on eventually progressing to the Ireland senior team.

Abankwah has not featured for

St Pat's since coming off at half-time against Finn Harps a month ago but hopes to play for them again before his departure.

He pinpointed Lee Desmond - now playing with Sacramento Republic - as someone who had really helped him at the Inchicore outfit.

The Italy-bound ace said: "When I first came in Lee Desmond took me under his wing quite well. He'd come to me each morning, talk to me, see how I'm getting on and I really appreciated him doing that."

"I found the speed of play quite different compared to academy football. Things were done at a much quicker pace and that was something I needed to get used to."

"The physical side of it I felt I was OK. It was just the speed of play."

It will be a far bigger step-up to try and make it at the Serie A club. Despite his football and school commitments, he is already taking Italian lessons twice a week.

He said: "It's something I wanted to do myself."

"It would be nice to be able to speak another language, it would be very helpful and when the manager is speaking I'll be able to interact and have a few words with him and my team-mates."

"It's a lot on me right now but I'm trying to put the head down and keep working."

"I know it's going to be a challenge, going into a different culture, language and playing style."

"They said I'll be going into the first-team environment for pre-season and if I do well, I'll stay up. If they feel I need a bit of time with the 19s, I can drop back down."

Although he has not yet been introduced to Eboesele, he is hoping the pair can make life easier for one another.

Abankwah will have his own apartment but, having admitted that he cannot cook, having a club chef on hand will help.

He said: "My mam was going to come over for the first month but I told her I'd be OK."

FOOTBALL FOR UNITY 2022 festival, hosted by Sport Against Racism Ireland and the London North East London City initiative, takes place from June 6 to July 15. For further information, or to register a team, log on to www.footballforunity.ie



ABANKWAH WITHDRAWAL... James Abankwah savours St Pat's FAI Cup win last year and (inset) helping launch Football for Unity festival



NO STRENGTH WITHOUT UNITY

RACISM

KICK IT OUT... Serie A-bound defender admits he has suffered racist abuse on football pitches in Ireland

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