

Young Athletes Swarm the Field as Youth Soccer Season Opens

By Molly Hitchings

The world's game is soccer, but in this country we're still playing catch-up. David Beckham, an English star now playing for a Madrid team, is a god in most of the world; most Americans are only just now hearing about him. The U.S. women's team ran off with the world title a few years ago, after a well-publicized season which culminated in Brandi Chastain ripping off her shirt. Now those same stars can barely draw a crowd.

Still, on fields all over the country, soccer has taken hold as a game that people actually play, and play hard. In many places around the globe the game with no hands is a passion and a fever and a vice, but for millions of schoolchildren, it's what they do on the weekends to get some wind in their lungs.

Friends of Vineyard Soccer has launched a generation of lifelong soccer fans and made the game a Saturday tradition for countless families. It's a rare child on this Island who doesn't have at least one pair of long polyester socks stashed in his or her drawer.

"For people who have two or three kids in the program, it's an all-morning thing," said Jennifer Gardner, vice president of FVS. "They bring breakfast and just camp out there."

The first games of the season kicked off on Saturday at the West Tisbury School, on a vast field edged by woods. A great mass of children in brightly colored T-shirts, emblazoned with the name of their "country," fanned out across the grass. It was red for Spain, yellow for Brazil, and gray for the US. No matter their team name, the players looked lean, ready and slightly lost.

The mini-kickers had just cleared out, headed for home or for a seat on the margins. For the under-8s, each field was divided into six half-sized pitches to allow for small-sided games that give every child more time with the ball.

"With the mini-kickers, it's crowd control," said Ms. Gardner. "They're like a litter of puppies on the field. The under-8s are starting to grasp it."

The under-8s mostly have the basics down: kick the ball that way, don't let the other kid kick it this way. But there's a lot to take in: the sun on the endless field, the crowds of parents and friends on the sidelines, the feel of their new uniform shirts.

The countries printed on the backs of the T-shirts are a fairly recent development, and a popular one. "It's a big deal what team you're on," said Ms. Gardner. "My kids have drawers filled with different shirts from past seasons, and they always want the color they don't have yet. This way you're not just on the white team -

you're England."

Not much can be taken for granted at this level. Most kids haven't learned the intricacies of the game; some of them aren't sure where they ought to be standing; a few don't seem to care. There's a supreme casualness about the proceedings; mid-game, a crucial member of the Mexico offense ambled off the field for a slug of water. At half time, kids fit orange wedges into their mouths to look like chimpanzees. The goalie for England hung from the net until he brought down its lightweight frame on top of himself.

Already, though, there were standout players who have benefited from experience, scrimmages with older siblings, or perhaps just the specific hunger that makes some people really good at sports. These were the kids streaking after the ball, sending it swiftly ahead with the side of their cleats, pivoting with what looked sometimes like balletic grace, other times like sheer luck.

The coaches are volunteers, mostly parents, although last season Ms. Gardner recruited Tim Penicaud and Chris Fischer, a couple of younger men from the community.

"We're dying for coaches," she said. "Our policy has always been, if a kid signs up and shows up, they play. This year, we over-enrolled, and two days before the first practice I still needed one more coach."

During the weekday practices, the coaches direct small kids in drills like "Steal the bacon" and "Fishie, fishie, cross my river." Older players start on Coerver drills, the footwork which is the foundation of European soccer.

At a break in the England-US game, Karl Nelson summoned the offensive players on the England team. "You three are the attackers," he explained. "Your goal is to steal the ball from the other team."

The three small boys strode forward like warriors. There was not much leg showing between their tall socks and baggy shorts. Their heads were bent under the fantastic pressure of the contest.

"Who's winning?" a player called, some minutes into the second half.

"It doesn't matter who wins," the coach said breezily.

Skill level isn't as evident among the younger players as it is with their elders, but there is always an effort to match teams as fairly as possible. "We try not to make it an outcome-based game," says Ms. Gardner.

A coordinator for every age group assesses experience and distributes kids accordingly. Once Saturday's game was underway, coaches swapped players here and there, so nobody was ever quite sure who's winning.

The kids on the field were mostly boys, although toward the end of the hour an all-girl team in red gathered on the sidelines, awaiting its turn. The girls-only league is a new addition, says Ms. Gardner, who had noticed a severe drop-out rate among the girls on

the mixed under-10 teams.

"We were losing a lot of girls, because girls and boys play different kinds of soccer," she said.

The girls' league is a challenge to maintain: there are two teams, which means the playing schedule is consistent, and FVS has a hard time rounding up enough girls to fill the field. But players who might otherwise be intimidated out of the sport get the chance to hone their skills on the single-sex team for a couple of years, and come out stronger on the other side. In the under-12s, Ms. Gardner said proudly, "We've got 50/50 enrollment this year."

Some girls opt to play on the co-ed teams. Eight-year-old Ohana, who moved here from Brazil (the country) three years ago, was raised on soccer and now plays for Germany (the team). "It's different, because I'm on a boys' team and there are no girls around," she said. "It's fun, but the boys hog the ball."

The game was winding down, and parents stood together on the edge of the field, watching their children run doggedly in pursuit of the black-and-white ball. "It's amazing how much they're starting to get it," one father said.

And even David Beckham put in his years on a practice pitch. Play hard, and think of England.

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