



## An international field

*The Portland World Cup brings together immigrants for high stakes community and competition*

PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

A player practices in advance of the Portland World Cup, Sept. 8, 9 and 16.

**BY ALEX ZIELINSKI**  
STAFF WRITER

It's early evening at Northeast Portland's Fernhill Park and the manicured soccer fields are swarming with cleat-clad players. As the hot summer sun lowers to a tolerable temperature, young boys, assembled as a team, lace up their matching Nike cleats, watching a nearby group of teenage girls juggle a soccer ball while checking their smart phones.

In the middle of the hoard of minivan-escorted athletes, squeezed onto half a field, one group stands out from the rest. With an average age of 25 to 30, these older players may appear less equipped for the game: Some wear beat-up sneakers without shin guards; others are dragged onto the field to scrimmage wearing jeans. But their enthusiasm is infectious.

"Buenos días!" the players shout at other teammates as they arrive, somehow bursting with energy after long days of physical work or waiting in long lines for unattained work. Neighborhood friends bring their families to watch, carting water coolers and lawn chairs, cheering and joking with the group. On the field, some players dribble the

ball easily around the defense, while others stumble with their footwork. Regardless of talent, these guys are clearly having the most fun of any team at the park.

This loosely formed team of Mexican and South American immigrants is just one of the estimated 16 teams preparing to play in Portland's newest, least-known, but most diverse soccer tournament: The Portland World Cup.

Started by the VOZ Workers' Rights Education Project, a local organization with a focus on empowering immigrants and day laborers, the PWC draws immigrants from across the region — with home countries spanning from Ethiopia to Honduras — together to play in a yearly competition and multicultural festival.

With a booming first year, backed by generous grants and sponsorships, the PWC quickly gained popularity in a community of stress-ridden day laborers searching for work in a new part of the world. But the event's structure and financial support has recently become uncertain. Now, approaching its third year, the volunteer-fueled event has supporters crossing their fingers for the stamina to make it big in a soccer-crazed city.

Despite its obvious façade, the PWC is not just about soccer. VOZ has found the game a comfortable, common platform for immigrants who wouldn't usually attend the organization's meetings to talk about issues in the community.

"It's an incredible tool for organizing," says Paul Reik, the VOZ staff member tasked with PWC outreach. "Folks aren't tense here, they're enjoying themselves and relaxing. It's a perfect environment to have a casual discussion."

Reik — who had never played soccer before becoming involved in the PWC — recalls airing the World Cup on the TV at VOZ's worker's center downtown. One day laborer in particular was glued to the set, quietly following the match from the corner of the room.

"He was never interested in our advocacy work. But I could tell he loved soccer, so I told him about the cup," says Reik. "Now he's one of our anchor goalies."

Fernando Ramos, a Guatemalan immigrant who moved to Portland first for work, now for school, echoes Reik's sentiments.

**The Portland World Cup tournament is free and open to the public**

**Qualifying games:**

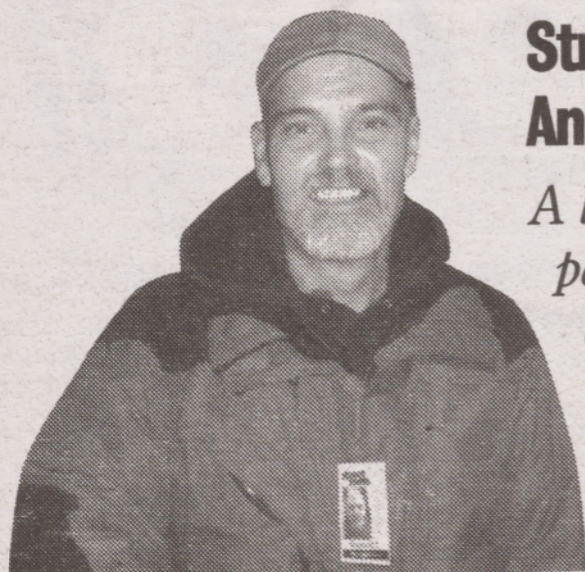
Sept. 8, 9 a.m.  
Sept. 9, 10 a.m.  
Fernhill Park  
NE 37th Ave &  
Ainsworth St

**Finals:**

Sept. 16, 1 p.m.  
Hiken Community  
Field, Concordia  
University  
NE 29th Ave. and  
Liberty St.

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