

More than just a game

The World Cup is one for the record books, but a different kind of soccer tournament continues to score big for the men and women who battle poverty and homelessness to take the pitch

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Under the soft sun of a Seattle spring day, a group of roughly two dozen people kicked soccer balls about on a sufficiently level stretch of grass in Gasworks Park, squarely between the skeleton of the Seattle Gas Light Company gasification plant and a hill where a couple in brightly colored flowing pants took turns stretching their arms outward, completing a sundial with their bodies.

At 10 a.m. on a Saturday when brunch-scene Seattleites are gearing up to stake out patio spots, the park is already alive with the unusual: A trio in striking blue coattails and fanciful dresses held a photo shoot ahead of Sakura-Con, the annual cosplay prom, and a stilt-walking class used the tall concrete arches to steady themselves as they listed forward.

Nearby a group large enough to form two standard teams playing the most popular sport in the world gathered for a pickup game, taking advantage of a rare day of sunshine in a city known for rain.

Some wore shirts that read: "Home has 32 panels." A participant shouted the group's slogan: "If you're playing, you're winning."

The group formed the Cascadia wing of street soccer, an institution that brings homeless, formerly homeless and marginalized people together for companionship and competition in the self-styled "most beautiful sport."

The scene at Gasworks Park was the opening act in a weekend of activity, with players from hosting team Street Soccer Seattle, Street Soccer Portland and Maple Pool United, a group out of Vancouver Island. From there they would grab bahn mi in the

park, visit the Fremont Troll and, of course, play a bit of soccer.

But first they had to get to know one another.

Players were instructed to find a partner and take three minutes to get to know them before reporting back to the group on their name, where they came from, a fun fact and where in the world they would like to travel.

Quickly the players split into pairs, eliciting a quiet hum of discussion before once again forming a circle on the grass to introduce their newfound partners.

Omar was from Ethiopia and spoke five languages. He wanted to go to Amsterdam. Sergei, born in Russia, dreamed of taking his street soccer skills pro and going to Iceland. Sebastian, of France, wore the jersey of French soccer star Zinedine Zidane. Sebastian and his son had met Zidane once.

The diversity and internationality of the teams reflect the near universal appeal of the sport that they play. Soccer is beloved by an estimated 4 billion people the world over. The second most popular sport, cricket, falls short by 1.5 billion.

The dominance of the sport is such that when the Economist newspaper ran the figures in a 2011 article, it barely bothered discussing soccer at all.

"Which sport is the world's favourite? The answer, football, feels so self-evident that it is barely worth a post. But what about the world's second favourite?" the author wrote.

That's at least in part because of the ease of play. It's often said that to play soccer, all you need is a ball. Marking off the goals and other boundaries is as easy as agreeing on a few landmarks, and the basic rules of the game, if not strategy, can be picked up quite quickly.

Except for offsides. That rule requires diagrams.

In the United States, where the professional side of the domestic game has only gone mainstream in the past decade or so, children's soccer has still long been the Saturday activity complete with orange-slice smiles and participation trophies.

Soccer is a sort of physical lingua franca.

So is charades, a fact that program director Chris Burfeind and Stevens used to their full advantage. Splitting the players into three groups, the coaches assigned them tasks to perform without words to the delight of the group. One team stood in a circle, hands outstretched at an inward angle toward the sky, as another shot soccer balls through the gap between their steepled arms – "Volcano!" – while another spread out, each player running up and handing an invisible object to the person in front of them – "Relay!"

The stumper turned out to be "used car lot."

With introductions made and ice broken, players grabbed bahn mi sandwiches and chips and ate lunch looking out over Lake Union.

Joanie Mathias and Courtney, of Vancouver Island, took in the view and the sun. They and their teammates arrived in Seattle the day before by ferry. They'd been traveling for almost 10 hours before they landed at a hostel in Belltown and crashed for the night.

Maple Pool United is named for a remote trailer park that caters to homeless and low-income people but was under threat from a nearby city that tried to evict the residents over zoning and flooding concerns. It took six years of prolonged effort to save Maple Pool Campground, and in 2015 the residents won the right to stay.

Now the campground serves as the practice area for Maple Pool United, and the players find it through a local homeless services agency, Dawn to



Below, street soccer teams from Portland, Vancouver and Seattle met at an indoor arena to play lightning rounds of soccer in late March. At left, two players grab some time to talk.



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Dawn, that participated in the fight to preserve the facility.

Mathias has played with the team for nearly seven years and won a spot to play at the Homeless World Cup in the historic Zócalo Square in Mexico City when Canada still fielded a team for the event.

She was one of two women at the Saturday gathering and said that street soccer, like so many other things, was largely a men's sport.

"Girls have to try harder to prove themselves," Mathias said.

She loves the sport – even if she is "more of a baseball person" – and the role that street soccer plays in bringing strangers together and providing people who have been beaten down a sense of community and self-worth. It's also an important tool for education, Mathias said.

"It brings awareness about homelessness to all the world," she said.

After lunch, the group piled into two vans, heading for an indoor soccer arena after a quick stop to scale the Fremont Troll.

The players warmed up, lunging crosswise across the fake turf before returning in an exaggerated jog, their knees making 90-degree angles in the air before them. The coaches then broke them into three lines by their city of origin to run "triangles," a coordinated exercise in which three people took

off toward the goal, passing the ball between them before taking the shot.

It was here that the differences between the teams became more apparent.

Maple Pool coach Grant Shilling said that some of his players struggle with cognitive issues that could impede them from playing at the level of Seattle, which holds practices and games every week, and

Portland, which has invested in the team through professional paid staff.

"The sense of levels are different," Shilling said. "I'm worried my guys will get discouraged."

The players from the urban teams, Seattle and Portland, were visibly dominant in their control of the ball and the accuracy and power of the shots on goal. Maple Pool United had fewer standout players, although all equally game. The mood was positive – there were no wrong moves, only encouraging words and camaraderie.

When play began, it was arranged in round-robin fashion to accommodate the odd number

of teams.

Maple Pool United, in powder blue jerseys, faced off against Portland in the first round. The play was fast – each half of the game lasted six minutes with a minute break between the halves, and teams were allowed only one substitute.

There was more pressure on the Canadian team, which ultimately fell 4-0 before Seattle cycled in to

take on their southern neighbors.

The Seattle and Portland teams meet up often enough to have a bit of a rivalry; Portland has taken home the Street Soccer Cascadia Cup the past two years. This game was more aggressive than the bout against the Canadian team, and at one point a Portland player snapped, pushing a Seattle player.

Adam Lewis, the Portland coach, called him off the field. The player explained that he'd been kicked first, leading him to lash out. No one else saw the offense, Lewis said.

"When you push him, you lose control of the situation," Lewis told him, giving him space to cool off.

Team sports are a social testing ground, full of opportunities to excel, to fail, to offend and to react. Street soccer is no different, but it is filled with people already pushed to their limits by social and economic circumstances over which they have little control. It's not always easy to take the space and move on after a flare up, as the coaches acknowledged to their players after the matches finished.

That's part of the beauty of the project: giving the players not just the space to enjoy themselves, but to test out social skills that they'll need to move on into the world when their name finally reaches the top of the housing waiting list or the break they need finally comes through. It's reinforced in practices, where volunteer mentors provide support to help the players through harsh circumstances in other areas of their lives.

The beautiful sport provides a beautiful metaphor: Players are making goals, on and off the field.

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