

THE UNITED NATIONS OF SPORTS

Organic association soccer brings casual international play to Eugene
STORY BY KILLIAN DOHERTY • PHOTOS BY TRASK BEDORTHA

Like many children, Tunde Jowosimi grew up playing soccer, and he continued playing when he moved from Nigeria to England.

But then Jowosimi moved to Eugene, where he struggled for a few months, unable to socialize through a soccer ball as he was accustomed. He'd drive around desperately looking for a game, but everything he encountered was too organized for him to be allowed to play.

At last Jowosimi discovered a group, an informal "organic" association (an appropriate word for these casual games, considering the generally accepted etymology of *soccer*, a word derived from the second syllable of *association football*). When Jowosimi happened upon this organic association of young and not-so-young men chasing a ball like kids, they were almost finished with their game, so he was unable to play.

But Jowosimi came back the next week, and he has continued to do so for the past 15 years.

"This has become a ritual for us," Jowosimi says. "Soccer allows us to come together and have fun and exchange ideas."

My own discovery of this organic soccer association was more serendipitous than Jowosimi's, but similarly satisfying. One night during a dancehall reggae party at The Granary, a young man approached me and, noticing my Barcelona soccer jersey, asked if I liked the Barcelona club or just Neymar — the Brazilian soccer magician whose name is on the back of the jersey.

"Well, Neymar isn't my favorite player, but I like both," I replied.

The young man responded by proclaiming, with palpable pride, his support for Barcelona. We agreed that Barcelona is a great club and that their play in recent years has been absolutely wonderful to watch. Then we began talking about playing, and the young man (Ben from Ghana) invited me to a pick-up game at 9:30 the following morn-

ing. I accepted the kind invitation and broke fast the next morning by discovering this delightful organic soccer association.

The recently deceased Uruguayan intellectual Eduardo Galeano would be pleased to see such organic soccer, untainted by the profit motive. "Like carnival, soccer has become a mass spectator sport," Galeano once said. "But just like carnival spectators who start dancing in the street, in soccer there are always a few admiring fans who kick the ball every so often out of sheer joy."

TUNDE JOWOSIMI



"We're the United Nations here," says Alex Zuñiga from Costa Rica. True, this association includes players from all over the planet, including such far-flung countries as Russia, Ghana, Iceland, Iran, Costa Rica, Kuwait, Mexico, Nigeria, Afghanistan and the U.S., to name a few.

But the United Nations is not nearly as democratic as this association. Here there is no Security Council and there are no veto-wielding bullies. Here there is no referee and no coaches; players arbitrate their associated activities and make decisions collectively, horizontally and organically.

Occasionally, someone will keep score, but most guys seem too focused on playing to pay attention to such trivial details. Nobody dares blow a whistle and pick up the ball in the middle of play. The game ends when everybody decides the game ends. If some guys leave and others remain with desire to play, the game adapts and continues.

Not surprisingly, many consider soccer the most democratic of sports. It costs little to nothing to play. All you need is a ball or something like a ball — and rocks or sandals or whatever if you want to make goals. Almost anyone can play, just about anywhere. Soccer does not require extraordinary height, strength or speed to play, and it doesn't require much space. Some may prefer playing on a big open field, and others prefer cement, sand or mud (YouTube *futelama*) but one can play on just about any surface.

Today we play on grass, with small nets for goals. After the game, some of the guys share stories about the makeshift conditions where they grew up playing. And yet, upon whatever surface organic soccer sprouts, the area above immediately transforms itself into one of the few public spaces where ludic play defies lucrative values, where others become brothers and where it's no big deal to lose.

Zuñiga made a Facebook page for the group, though apparently nobody uses it. He has, however, been successful in getting some guys to play friendly matches with inmates at a prison near Salem. Zuñiga has been playing with this group for about 25 years, and his brother Andy Zuñiga for the past 17 years. Iván has been playing since he moved