

SHARING SOCCER WITH SOCIETY'S STIGMATIZED

Volunteer players share the field with inmates at Oregon State Penitentiary

Don't get me wrong: I absolutely love my usual leisurely pick-up soccer on late Saturday mornings, just a five-minute bike ride from my house in Eugene. But there's something special, something exciting and edifying, about getting up early on a Saturday to play soccer with inmates at Oregon's maximum security prison in Salem.

Rightly or wrongly convicted? Viciously or virtuously prosecuted? Powerfully or poorly defended? Malice or misfortune or some murky mixture of misconduct and misunderstanding? Many questions could — and in appropriate circumstances should — be asked of my friendly opponents.

However, during limited days of leisure, I prefer to play and to let them play, to make them happy and to make me hopeful that humanity might be a hair more humane when we treat prisoners as humans, who have rights regardless of wrongdoings, feelings as well as fallibilities.

Maybe the inmates who one day embark upon the challenging journey of reintegrating into a society that stigmatizes them will be encouraged by the warmth of strangers who spend Saturdays sharing soccer and breaking bread behind concrete prison walls.

After playing in a couple soccer tournaments at the Oregon State Penitentiary (OSP) two years ago (tournaments were canceled last year for disciplinary reasons), I interviewed some of the inmates and wrote about the value of these visitor-inmate soccer sprees, which generally consist of about three hours of competitive but cordial play per day (see "A Mental Escape" 11/12/2015).

This year I thought it might be interesting to interview some of the non-inmates who volunteer to wake up before dawn, travel to Salem and dedicate most of their Saturday to playing with strangers marginalized by our society.

Derek French (along with John Crowder of Oregon Prison Ministries) is largely responsible for facilitating these soccer tournaments between outsiders and inmates. He recalls his first prison soccer experience: "The first time I entered the 'yard' to play soccer, dozens of inmates were talking on payphones, running laps, lifting weights or getting ready to play soccer. I started the day nervous and left with newfound relationships."

French says that since that day three years ago, he's run a half marathon in prison, sung with inmates, played chess and helped bring guest speakers to their monthly Athletic Club meeting.

"I go to listen, share life stories, talk about sports and be reminded of the real lives that hopefully we can make better," he says, adding that he's thankful he's been able to share these experiences with his two sons.

His son, Daniel French, says that in addition to the great experience of meeting the inmates and seeing what

daily life is like for them, "they're also some of the best soccer players I've played against."

Andy Zuñiga, who has played at OSP several times and used to play professionally in Costa Rica, shares his motives for coming to play soccer at OSP: "I like to see the happiness on the inmates' faces. I want them to have good feelings toward unknown outsiders, and I hope the ones who get out will want to help strangers too when they are out."

Zuñiga likes to invite different guys to play in the prison because he hopes the experience might provide them some insight to share with children and others who may be at risk of such a horrific fate.

Bernie Donner, a father of three in Cottage Grove, travels the furthest to meet the rest of us in Eugene before we all depart at 6 am from Gateway in Springfield. "I'm so thankful because I know I could be in there. Lots of people make bad choices, but some have worse luck than others," he says. "Everyone should experience prison to get some perspective."

known about as a statistic or a sound bite in the news, or maybe a footnote in a casebook. My interactions with the prisoners left me wondering: Where did it go wrong? What could have happened? Are there any mistakes in the system?"

These prison soccer experiences also convinced Akenji that soccer can produce joy even in the most adverse circumstances: "The effort shown by the players, the smiles on their faces and their excitement for the next tournament illustrate this amazing quality of the world's game."

"Last but not least," Akenji adds, "the inmates can ball!"

Abraham Rincon, a competitive player from Mexico and a technology support specialist with the Eugene School District, says, "I was a troubled youth during my early teens and I could have ended up like one of those players in prison. The inmates were all very thankful for our visit and taking the time to travel to Salem just to play soccer with them."

'Albeit in a limited manner, these experiences provided me with an opportunity to put a face to people I've only known about as a statistic or a sound bite in the news, or maybe a footnote in a casebook. My interactions with the prisoners left me wondering: Where did it go wrong? What could have happened? Are there any mistakes in the system?'

— Fon Akenji, law student

For Javier Sota, who recently came to Eugene from Spain to teach at the Buena Vista Spanish Immersion Elementary School, the experience was something he'd never imagined. He was surprised when Zuñiga asked him to go, but he accepted for two reasons: "First, I knew it would be a totally new experience for me, without many expectations, and I knew Andy had gone many times so I figured it would be safe. Second, because I wanted to help the prisoners. Imagining myself in their shoes — I would appreciate people coming to play and spend time with me."

Sota then added, chuckling: "I guess there's a third reason: I love soccer, even though I'm not that good."

He concluded, more seriously, that while the prisoners were obviously very grateful, he feels like he received more than he gave, and says it was definitely worth the effort to wake up at 5 am to get there.

Fon Akenji, a UO law student and crafty soccer player from Cameroon says, "These experiences provided me with an opportunity to put a face to people I've only

Rincon says, "I would challenge any good local players to come with us to play in prison. It's difficult to describe; you really have to go and experience it."

As most of my teammates remark, seeing the smiles on the inmates' faces makes it clear how much it means to them to play with outsiders.

This reminds me of a scene from the 1994 film *The Shawshank Redemption*, when the prisoners get to enjoy some cold beers after tarring a roof in exchange for the protagonist Andy's (Tim Robbins) offer to help one of the guards with tax evasion. As Red (Morgan Freeman) described it, the prisoners "sat and drank with the sun on [their] shoulders and felt like free men — hell, [they] could have been tarring the roof of one of [their] own houses."

Hell, the inmates seem so happy playing with us outsiders, perhaps for a short while they too feel like free men who could have been running around and kicking a ball in a public park.

If you're interested in playing soccer with inmates at OSP, contact Derek French at dfrench@pacinfo.com.

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