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Good Works

Having a Ball

No pressure for young players in this soccer club

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TOPSoccer participants and volunteers push a giant ball during a session.

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At the end of soccer practice, 4-year-old Alex Costonde of Portage was worn out. He lay down on the indoor field at SoccerZone Oshtemo and relaxed for a moment.

“When we got here, he didn’t want to start,” says Alex’s mother, Tiffany Costonde. “Now all he wants is to stay.”

Alex is one of the 11 new players in Kalamazoo’s TOPSoccer club, a program for children with mental and physical disabilities organized by the Kalamazoo Soccer Club. Alex has trouble staying focused on tasks, Tiffany says, and being part of the club helps him pay attention to his surroundings. Other players have anxiety or need wheelchairs to move around, but everyone has a chance to kick the ball at TOPSoccer.

“A (traditional) soccer team is too much pressure,” says Holly Evans of Parchment, who brought her son, 6-year-old Bryce, to join his sister, 9-year-old Abby, in TOPSoccer this year. “Following the instructions, he couldn’t keep up there (on the traditional team). Here, he runs up and down and kicks the ball everywhere. He loves it.”

TOPSoccer (The Outreach Program for Soccer) is designed to encourage any child with a mental or physical disability to enjoy soccer, even though they can't play an official game.

"They have autism, they're in wheelchairs, they have Down syndrome," says Eieri Salivia, executive director of the Kalamazoo Soccer Club and organizer of its TOPSoccer program. The program allows the players to learn various soccer skills and participate in soccer drills.

"You have to be creative," says Salivia. "Some players will need support to stay standing up. They can only move with the range of movement in their legs."

At one practice, players each spent most of the 45-minute session with their own ball, kicking it as far as they could, then running up to kick it again. Salivia gathered the players in the middle of the field for a "battle," where players would try to kick all the balls to the opposite side of the field. Some participated. Others just kept kicking their own ball. One or two needed assistance pulling a soccer jersey over their heads, to designate the team they were on.

Being a buddy

TOPSoccer is offered twice a year for six-week sessions, once in the spring and once in the fall, when the players meet on Wednesdays. There is no cost for players to be a part of the team because everything from field time to coaching has been donated by SoccerZone, the Kalamazoo Soccer Club and other supporters.

In 2017, when the program started, about five players participated. Twice as many had joined by spring 2018, and the third session, last fall, brought the roster to 18. Organizers expect that when TOPSoccer starts up again in April, about 20 players will fill the roster.

The young players, both boys and girls, are between 5 and 15 years old. The age range and the wide variety of physical capabilities in the young players mean they don't play a traditional soccer "match" when they meet.

Instead, for the various soccer activities, the players team up with buddies: teen players in other Kalamazoo soccer leagues who volunteer their time to teach the sport. The bigger part of these volunteers' efforts is encouraging the young players to enjoy their time on the field.

Fourteen-year-old Will Lewis of Kalamazoo was a buddy for the spring 2018 TOPSoccer group, volunteering after a friend suggested it. He first worked one-on-one with players and then worked with the entire group to teach team skills like passing and shooting at the goal.

"The student I worked with seemed to have more energy to play and always had a smile on his face," Lewis says. "I would definitely do it again. I learned that even people with disabilities can improve in physical activities."

Salivia started TOPSoccer at the Kalamazoo Soccer Club, prompted by his own educational background: He has a degree in teaching children with disabilities. TOPSoccer is a national program created by U.S. Youth Soccer, with more than a dozen TOPSoccer groups in Michigan. Dianna Dykstra, chair of Michigan's TOPSoccer program, says the state program has about 450 players of all ages. Most are school age, but a 54-year-old man plays on one of the suburban Detroit teams.

Salivia says TOPSoccer complements the Kalamazoo Soccer Club's other efforts to encourage the spread of soccer in Kalamazoo, such as traditional travel soccer teams for players age 6 to 19. Soccer players on other teams are told about TOPSoccer, and many say they volunteer as buddies just because they want to help others.

"We're helping them understand directions," says Ely Post, 16, of Portage, who volunteers as a buddy along with his 14-year-old brother, Logan.

"Kids aren't always responsive to adults, but they are responsive to a buddy," Salivia says, adding that in just a six-week session the buddies are able to develop their leadership skills by working with coaches to teach the young players. In the fall, Kalamazoo's team had 23 buddies. Dykstra says other TOPSoccer teams often struggle to find enough volunteers, but Kalamazoo has enough that players can be paired one-on-one with a buddy.

'Not judged'

Actually playing soccer is secondary to the young athletes getting out for some physical activity in a welcoming environment, parents say.

Cheryl Benko of Kalamazoo brought her 6-year-old son, Stephen, to the program after spotting a flier for the TOPSoccer program. (It's been promoted via Kalamazoo County schools and at stores and other locations.) Stephen has severe cerebral palsy and doesn't communicate well, but soccer is something he's had fun with, Benko says.

"(The flier) said it was available for kids of all disabilities," she says. "It was a nice way of getting out of the house. It was great to see such a variety of kids participating."

Evans, who brought her children Abby and Bryce to TOPSoccer, told her friend Ashley Vandenberg of Kalamazoo about the club. Last fall 6-year-old Ryder Vandenberg joined the program too. Ryder has autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Ashley says, and he needs a lot of attention.

"I was prepared to go on the field with him," she says, but, thanks to the slow pace of TOPSoccer and the assistance of the buddies, there was no need.

"It's nice to not go out there," Vandenberg says. "It's nice to be with other parents and not feel judged."

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