

OPINION | JULY 26, 2010

American Soccer Beyond the World Cup

The sport can improve fitness and instill important values.

By John Harkes

Soccer has always been more popular outside of the United States. We have seen pictures of diehard fans crowding Old Trafford in Manchester or waving scarves for their beloved team at Santiago Bernabeu in Madrid, their faces proudly painted.

True, Americans came out in droves to watch the World Cup in South Africa. They packed bars, held viewing parties, watched games during work hours, and poured over the kind of bracket pools usually reserved for March Madness. The millions who followed Landon Donovan, Tim Howard and their teammates speak volumes about the sport's continued growth here. But if the past is any indicator, the love will not last. The question remains, what do our friends abroad know that we do not?

Abroad, they know the game is about more than victors and losers. They know the sport has changed lives in the unlikeliest of places. The deep fandom that soccer inspires has superceded racial and ethnic conflict, economic hardship and political strife. We have seen its transformative potential play out in poor communities, bringing messages such as HIV awareness to Africa.

In the poorest of places throughout the world, the youngest of kids can be found kicking cans towards makeshift goals. In the process they acquire sportsmanship, leadership and commitment. Whether it is learning to pass the ball when you could as easily shoot a goal, or shaking hands at the end of a contentious match, soccer teaches life skills. Is this not something America needs, too?

As the U.S. team's loss to Ghana sunk in, we all read the articles calling for players with better skills. While I agree with the call for a wider pipeline of players, it makes me wonder if we are missing the most important point.

Though the fight against obesity has been waged nationally by powerful people such as the first lady, school districts everywhere are being forced to cut physical education. For children to have a chance at a healthy lifestyle, it's imperative that organized sports like soccer are recognized not just as recreational activities but as educational tools to promote physical health, academics and social skills.

I've seen this strategy in action as a board member of the national after-school program America SCORES, which has been using soccer successfully for more than a decade to empower students in the nation's most under-resourced school districts. The program uses soccer as a method to provide students, ages 8 to 13, 10 times more physical exercise than the national average for their age, improve literacy skills, increase school participation, and spark community engagement by encouraging kids to use teamwork learned on the field to support each other off of it.

Though this structured soccer development opportunity could increase our chances of cultivating an American David Villa, don't leadership, cooperation, public service and fitness matter more in the long term for our nation than one more World Cup win?

Soccer has power, and not just every four years. Programs like America SCORES should be rolled out in every tough town in the country. The social benefits I've witnessed could impact the entire nation.

So let's explore the real potential of soccer today. Introduce soccer to your children. Get out to your next local MLS game. Get an America SCORES program into your kid's school, or better yet, the one down the road that needs it even more.

Mr. Harkes, an ESPN broadcast analyst, is a member of the National Soccer Hall of Fame and on the board of America SCORES.