

## **Kiwanis Soccer Program Celebrates 50 Years**

The week after Easter this year several hundred boys and girls from Grandview Heights, Marble Cliff, and Upper Arlington will fill area parks for the 50th year with one goal in mind (pardon the pun) – play soccer. A half century ago members of the Kiwanis Club of Northwest Columbus determined that not all the athletic needs of area children were being met. The existing programs focused on “traditional American” sports with too little emphasis on just playing for fun.

In the spring of 1974 more than 120 boys and girls in grades K through 8 took part in the first season of “Northwest Kiwanis Soccer”. The focus was on learning the sport, getting exercise, and having fun.

Since 1974 the number of participants in our program has risen and fallen. After only a few years area middle schools began organizing teams for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders and the club realized there was no longer the need to organize leagues for them. Around the same time we transitioned from a co-ed program to having separate leagues for boys and girls. The program has also transitioned from a spring only sport to a fall and spring program.

Along the way we’ve added new opportunities to play and learn. In 1984 we created the Kindergarten Instructional & Developmental Soccer program, which serves as an introduction to soccer for Kindergarteners. The kids are coached by high school and middle school students with an emphasis on learning basic soccer skills – dribbling and passing.

Five years ago we created the “Soccer Buddies” program for children with special needs. Boys and girls grades K through 6 are paired with a soccer buddy – a high school mentor - to enjoy the game at their own pace.

And we continue to organize teams for boys and girls based on grade level coached by parent volunteers, with games refereed by area middle and high school students.

Even though the core program is organized into teams and leagues, we don’t keep track of the scores (although the kids do) or standings, and don’t determine a champion. After the game we don’t ask who won, but “Did you have fun?”. Along the way our participants learn that winning is nice, but it’s not all there is to soccer.

Club members give over 1,000 hours of their time each year to organize teams, recruit coaches, meet with coaches, create schedules, and complete the many other tasks needed to make the program run as smoothly as possible. Although the program could be a major fundraiser for the club, the decision was made to run the program at cost to make sure the programs are available to everyone.

Many of the boys and girls that play on our communities’ high school soccer teams started out in our program, with some going on to play college soccer, and even professionally. But as one former participant who went on to win an NCAA Soccer Championship told us several years ago, she learned all she really needed to learn about soccer in our program – how to be patient with others, the value of teamwork, and the importance of friendship.