

Timbers, others, take part in Social Change Cup tournament

By Anne M. Peterson | AP

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In this photo provided by Street Soccer USA-Portland, Portland Timbers defender Zarek Valentin, center, offers advice to a group of participants in the Street Soccer USA-Portland Social Change Cup on Sunday, June 3, 2018, in Portland, Ore. (John Benitez/Street Soccer USA-Portland via AP)

PORTLAND, Ore. — Fresh off a tense draw against the LA Galaxy, Portland Timbers defender Zarek Valentin took part in an altogether different kind of competition on Sunday.

Valentin and other representatives from the Major League Soccer club and the NWSL's Portland Thorns joined in on the first Social Change Cup futsal tournament benefiting the city's homeless and refugee populations.

The event was put on by the local chapter of Street Soccer USA, a national nonprofit that seeks to look at community-level ways to address poverty through soccer. The program has spread to 15 cities and has helped some 15,000 kids and adults.

“I’ve played this game against people I don’t speak the same language as, people from all different backgrounds and economic classes, and regardless, it brings people together,” Valentin said. “And if we can share our love of the sport and accomplish some good things while doing so, there’s nothing better than that.”

Since Adam Lewis took over the Portland-based group in January 2017, it has helped some 200 people of all ages at five different sites, guiding the city’s vulnerable populations to social services and aid agencies.

One aspect of the work is a young adult program, which is a group of some 30 homeless or formerly homeless players who look to compete in the Homeless World Cup, an annual international event started in 2001. The event was subject of a 2008 documentary “Kicking It” about the 2006 Homeless World Cup in Cape Town, South Africa.

This year’s tournament will take place in November in Mexico City.

Lewis was a midfielder at Willamette University and worked in the tech industry before taking over Street Soccer USA-Portland. He believes that because the city has embraced soccer, it’s an ideal conduit to help people.

In addition to the young adult program, Street Soccer USA-Portland also runs a community club program for kids and refugees. A women’s program is being developed.

“Everyone that comes into our programs whether they’re kids or adults, are gaining access to a wide range of city services, whether that’s rehabilitation programs, housing, job placement, English as a Second Language programs, legal advice, whatever it is that we can help provide,” Lewis said.

The Social Change Cup featured a “Unity Match” between the young adults in the program and people from the community, including a local circuit court judge. The idea was to bridge the city’s different communities through competition. Teams from Portland State University and the Port of Portland also took part in the tournament.

In addition to Valentin, former Timbers midfielder Jack Jewsbury, now an executive with the team, mascot Timber Joey and Thorns’ defender Meghan Klingenberg lent a hand in the event. Valentin served as a coach rather than player since the Timbers had played to a 1-1 draw with the Galaxy the day before.

Sergei Smirnov, 24, is among the Portland players hoping to go to Mexico City. Smirnov, who is from Russia, came to Portland three years ago looking for work and ended up homeless. But since he’s been playing with Street Soccer, he’s found a home and a job — and he’s been able to travel the world playing soccer.

“They’re like my family now,” he said, gesturing to his teammates.

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