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Afghan soccer team wins hearts

By **KATIE JORDAN**
The Tattoo

To most teens, summer camp is nothing out of the ordinary.

But last week, eight girls from Afghanistan wrapped up the summer camp experience of a lifetime.

The girls, who are as young as 11 and as old as 16, came all the way from Kabul to attend a sports and leadership camp in Connecticut, sponsored by the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange, a non-profit organization.

Living at the Ethel Walker School in Simsbury, the girls learned valuable skills to use both on and off the soccer field.

For girls who had rarely played soccer before coming to America – because it is a male-dominated sport back home – they certainly seemed to be making up for lost time.

They were chosen for the team based on interviews they gave at the Afghan Center in Kabul, said Awista Ayub of Waterbury, the program's founder.

Roya Zaka, a 13-year-old Afghan-American from Virginia, practiced with the girls and acted as a translator. She said the girls adhered to a busy training schedule, playing soccer six hours a day.

And they loved it. Jasmin Ghulam Rasoul, 14, who played midfield, said she likes to play soccer and hopes to continue playing when she returns to Afghanistan. She also said she wants to teach others to play.

Shamila Abdul Wakil, the team's 16-year-old forward, also enjoys playing soccer. She said she was excited about competing in the International Children's Games in Cleveland, Ohio in late July and early August.

This year is the first time that a team from Afghanistan has played in the International Children's Games, which began in Yugoslavia in 1968.

To prepare for this competition, the girls got help from the Simsbury Soccer Club, which organized the coaching in town.

"There's a lot of folks involved," Alan Blanchard, one of the many guest coaches who helped the girls learn to play soccer.

The Simsbury Soccer Club donated equipment, American Airlines donated the girls' flights and the boarding school donated the dorms, said Ayub. The Afghan Communicators and Afghan Center also helped, she said.

Everyone involved is helping these girls do a lot more than just learn how to play soccer.

The goal of the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange is to help the girls learn not just the game of soccer, but also some leadership skills they can take home with them. Ayub said she hopes they can better Afghanistan's schools by starting sports programs.

Ayub said the girls will be able to use sports as a "springboard to become more involved in community."

Ayub was born in Afghanistan, but has lived in the United States since she was two.

After the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, she said, she wanted to do something to give back to the Afghan community.

"I knew I wanted to help out, but I didn't want to just jump on the bandwagon," said Ayub.

She said she turned to the idea of using sports as a unique way to help because athletics is close to her heart. "This program is an extension of myself," Ayub said.

Oddly enough, soccer was the one sport that Ayub never played.

But soccer proved the most practical sport to work with because it only requires a field and a ball. In Afghanistan, more specialized equipment is hard to obtain.

Sports is also a perfect way for people from two different worlds to come



Katie Jordan / The Tattoo

Afghan-Americans Roya Zaka, 13, of Reston, Virginia, (left) and founder of Afghan Youth Sports Exchange Awista Ayub (center) of Waterbury with Aarizo Raz Mohammed, 14, of Afghanistan, take a break at the Ethel Walker School in Simsbury.

together, Ayub said.

"Athletics can transcend many boundaries," she said.

Despite all the planning, Ayub described her first meeting with the girls as "overwhelming."

"It was an idea on paper so long," she said. "I had to pinch myself to make sure it was true."

But soon reality kicked in, and the recognition that she had to take care of the girls helped her over her shock, said Ayub.

"They made me feel welcome from day one," she said.

Since that first meeting in early summer, both Ayub and her team have had an experience they will never forget.

In addition to making friends and playing soccer, the girls have spent some of their time seeing sights and learning about a country that is very different from their own.

Twelve-year-old Hanifa Fazal Mohammad said that there's nothing about America that she doesn't like, but that the best part was Busch Gardens, a large amusement park in Virginia.

Ghulam Rasoul agreed. "I like Busch Garden," she said.

Ghulam Rasoul, who learned English in a school in Afghanistan, said living in America for the summer has improved her English, although it's still hard communicating with people.

Riding bikes, playing basketball, eating ice cream, and using a computer are all opportunities Ghulam Rasoul and her teammates got to enjoy during their visit.

"I like the people of America. They are so good," Abdul Wakil said.

She said they visited Maryland, Washington, D.C. and New York, as well as Lake Compounce in Bristol – and, of course, Busch Gardens.

The girls were also impressed with all the grass in America.

"Afghanistan is mountain country," Abdul Wakil said. "A little trees, a lot

of shrubs."

Zaka recalled a visit to the beach, when the Afghan girls asked her if wearing skimpy bikinis was against the law. She told them, "It's America, honey!"

The Afghan girls have not been the only ones who have had their eyes opened by this experience.

Zaka said, "When they come here, I can see a little bit of Afghanistan, which I've never gotten to see before."

The girls told Zaka about the beauty of their own country, about their pride in being first or second place in their class, and about their wish for better schools, she said.

She also said that many Americans think Afghan girls are quiet and innocent.

"They're not innocent," Zaka said. "They're just like us."

It will be hard to say goodbye to her eight new friends, said Zaka, but she will keep in touch through email.

"Someday I'll go there," she added.

Ayub said of her team, "They're different girls today than the day I met them."

She said she admires how much they've grown and their maturity in handling things they've never had to deal with before.

For herself, Ayub said, the experience has been equally rewarding.

"It's been like a parent watching their own kids," said Ayub.

The girls played in the International Children's Games the last weekend of July and even came to the attention of President George Bush, who gave a speech welcoming the young athletes.

"We're glad every country is represented," Bush said. "I think it's especially interesting and an especially poignant and uplifting moment that young girls are here from the country of Afghanistan. Because your country is free, you are here. Because your country is free, many of you can go to school for the first time."

Abdul Wakil said of meeting

President Bush, "He's talking about Afghanistan. He shook my hand."

Fazal Mohammad, who played defense, said the president told the girls that they were a very good team.

Fazal Mohammad said that when she tells people back home about her visit to this country, she will say that she saw the president and liked it a lot, played soccer and liked it a lot, and saw many people and Afghans who lived in America.

The girls also enjoyed meeting people from countries around the world – including Mexico, Iceland, Pakistan, India, Australia, and Greece – at the International Children's Games, she said. As for competing in the games in Cleveland, Fazal Mohammad said it made her feel "very happy and proud" for her country.

The future of the program for Afghanistan's girls seems bright.

When they get home, the girls will have guidance to accomplish their goal of starting sports programs in their schools, Ayub said, because the Afghan Center will be there to help them.

"Follow up is very important," said Ayub. "I'm very confident they're going to utilize these skills in a positive manner."

The girls all have email accounts and will be able to keep in touch with the new friends they've made, said Ayub.

And as for the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange itself, Ayub said this is just its first year, and she plans to continue its work in the future.

The non-profit organization will need more donations to keep running, however.

Those interested in helping out can contact Awista Ayub at Awista@Afghansports.org, or on her cell phone at (843)-906-3400.

More information can be found online at the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange Internet web site at www.Afghansports.org.



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Practicing their soccer skills at the Ethel Walker School in Simsbury recently are left to right: Shamila Abdul Wakil, 16, Khatera Mohammad-Zahir, 13, Roia Noor Ahmad, 14, all of Afghanistan. Joining in the fun on the right is Pamela Newell, whose father coached the Afghan team.

A whole new outlook on sports and America

By **KATIE JORDAN**
The Tattoo

I'm not sure what I was expecting when I went to Simsbury to meet eight girls from Afghanistan, but somehow I wasn't expecting them to be sitting around a table playing the card game "Uno."

All I knew about the girls before I entered the Ethel Walker School building to interview them for a newspaper story was that they had come from Kabul and were attending a soccer and leadership camp sponsored by the Afghan Youth Sports Exchange.

I also knew that only a few of them spoke any English at all.

Needless to say, I was a little nervous about meeting them – I feel weird enough talking with strangers without needing a translator. I felt like I would be an outsider there, spending a

day with a whole group of people and knowing I was the only one who spoke only English.

But from the moment I stepped in the room and was greeted with a smile and a friendly "Salaam!" from each of the girls, I knew I wasn't an outsider.

Not only were they playing a card game I'd played before with my friends at school, they offered me a place at the table and a chance to join in the fun.

I appreciated the offer, but decided I'd better get started with my interviews.

The interviewing process was a bit more complicated because of the language barrier. But what will always stick in my memory about these girls was what I learned about them just by being around them.

After their card game, I followed the whole group outside, and I sat on the field and watched as they practiced.

I could definitely see a difference between their playing soccer and the sort of thing I'm used to seeing here in the states. They went at it with a kind of enthusiasm and joy that made a real impression on me, especially because I've always hated sports. My experiences in gym class have rarely been pleasant.

I was impressed with what good sportsmanship I witnessed. There was no bickering and finger-pointing while they practiced. Even when one girl was apparently knocked down by another, I heard one of the other girls say of her fallen teammate, "She said,

"I know she didn't do it on purpose."

I was also struck by the contrast between them and myself:

They were running and playing all afternoon in sweltering heat without a single complaint and only a couple of breaks. I almost passed out from standing in the hot sun for too long.

I actually flinched once because the coach shouted and pointed, and I felt suddenly like I was in gym class. For them, playing sports was pure fun, and soccer was heaven. They were always smiling and laughing. It was a joy to watch them having such a good time.

Though most of them don't speak English, they all seemed to have learned one phrase perfectly. When the coaches tried to call an end to the practice kicking they were doing late in the afternoon, all the girls begged, "One more, please!"

I've never liked sports, never in my life. But watching these girls play was something I will never forget. They embodied everything good I've heard about sports but have always had a hard time believing: They were good sports. They were a team. They were in it to have fun. And they played their best even though it was unlikely they'd win their big game.

It was also really cool to see what America had meant to them.

They talked about how good the people here are, and at first I thought it



Katie Jordan / The Tattoo

Injured and out of commission one day, Aarizo Raz Mohammed, 14, of Afghanistan makes her own fun with some practice cones.



Katie Jordan / The Tattoo

Goalee Khatera Mohammad-Zahir, 13, of Afghanistan, hangs on to the soccer ball while 12-year-old Hanifa Fazal Mohammad, also of Afghanistan, plays left defense.

was kind of strange. To me, Americans don't seem especially good. But I realized, the America they knew was one that had created a sports exchange program to help people like them, and one that had welcomed them openly and treated them kindly since they arrived.

I guess meeting these girls helped me to see things in a new light: I spent the day feeling like I was witnessing the world at its best.

I saw a lot of human kindness and decency – the sort that makes a person from one country try to help children from another; the sort that makes one girl work her hardest so that all the girls together can achieve a goal; the sort that makes a bunch of girls invite a stranger to play cards with them, even though she doesn't even speak their language.

At the beginning, I had been nervous about being an outsider. But, seeing the things the way I saw them that day, I felt like there could never be such a thing in this world – not when there are so many so willing to reach out a hand.

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