

Ben Burnett – Soccer Without Borders
Report #1 – September 1, 2014

Introduction

My first two months in Granada, Nicaragua have been both challenging and rewarding. July was all about learning and acclimation: meeting my Nicaraguan coworkers and the girls, getting to know the city of Granada, learning the structure of our organization, and practicing my rusty and at times inadequate Spanish. The second month was much more indicative how I will spend the majority of my time here; I was planning activities for my team, visiting schools, writing curricula, and brainstorming ideas for program expansion. The biggest challenges of these first two months have been the language and managing my role and responsibilities as a Team Leader, while the most rewarding aspects have been improving my ability to communicate with the girls and my coworkers and effectively implementing practices and school visits. Overall, after two months I feel much more prepared and capable for the tasks that lie ahead in the next ten months.

Projects and Responsibilities

My responsibilities as a Team Leader are diverse. Below, I have devoted a brief section to each of the following areas: FSF (Fútbol Sin Fronteras) Programming, and Special Events, and School Visits & Expansion.

FSF Programming

I have been assigned to work with the Mariposa Juniors, the organization's second youngest team, comprised of girls ages 9-12. I co-coach the team with a Nicaraguan staff member, Hassell, and together we are responsible for planning the weekly activities and soccer practices for our team. Generally, we have two evening activities in the office during the week and one practice out on the field on Saturday mornings. Almost all of our girls attend school in the afternoon, so it is not possible to hold afternoon soccer practice during the week. However, we have recently been experimenting with Friday morning practices, before the girls go to school, and thus far the girls have shown enthusiasm and good attendance. Each soccer practice has a general theme (dribbling, shooting, passing, etc.), beginning with basics and eventually building up to game play, and lasts an hour and a half.

The activities during the week vary in theme. We base our activities on issues that are relevant to the girls, and mix educational aspects with fun, active games, projects, and exercises. Positive self-identity and self-confidence are very important themes for our girls, as well as self-expression and creativity. Going forward, one of the main challenges with this group is creating a unifying team identity. There are very few girls' soccer teams here that are the same age as the Mariposa Juniors, so it has been difficult to find teams for our girls to play against. Without games and scrimmages to constantly reinforce the team identity, we have been working to form this identity through team-building exercises in our office activities during the week.

In addition to my specific team duties, I, along with the two other American Team Leaders, am in charge of a skills clinic every Thursday afternoon and occasionally goalie practice on Wednesdays. We treat each of these activities as we would any other practice, and generally spend 1-2 hours brainstorming and writing up our specific plans for each practice. The skills clinic is a great way for girls that are new to soccer and new to the program to improve their soccer abilities and get to know their coaches outside of the normal practice schedule.

Special Events

Throughout the year, we host many special events, and these first two months have been no exception. At the beginning of July, during the World Cup, the program hosted a weeklong tournament for girls while they were on vacation from school. In the morning we played games out on the field and in the afternoon we watched the World Cup semifinals in the office. The following week, twelve high school students came from the United States for a weeklong camp to learn about our program and spend time volunteering in the community and with the girls. This camp helps fulfill our goal of cultural exchange, as the girls get to know the American campers and the campers get to know the Nicaraguan girls. Finally, in less than three weeks, Fútbol Sin Fronteras will host the annual Copa de la Paz (Peace Cup) on September 20. The Copa de la Paz is a girls' soccer tournament held every year in conjunction with the International Day of Peace. Teams come from all over Nicaragua to participate. More than a tournament, the event is a celebration of peace and the role that we can all play to ensure peace in our own communities. With all of these special events, the other Team Leaders and I are charged with planning and preparing meals, transportation, activities and finding for sponsors and volunteers in the community to assist with these events.

School Visits & Expansion

With almost all of our practices and activities in the afternoon, mornings are reserved for school visits. School visits are an important part of our program; they help us forge new relationships and connections with teachers and directors and are useful for recruiting new girls into our teams. We typically spend two days a week for four weeks at a school, delivering a specific eight-practice curriculum to one class of girls during their physical education hour. At the end of the four weeks, we donate five soccer balls to the school and pass out information about our program to the girls. Thus far, girls have been very excited about joining the program.

Unfortunately, some girls in Granada live too far away to take advantage of our programming. To address this issue, I have also been tasked with exploring the possibility of expanding the program into a new neighborhood, *La Villa*. Our first school visits this year have been to two schools in *La Villa*, and, as previously mentioned, the girls there have shown a lot of interest in joining Fútbol Sin Fronteras. Since our office and the field are not within reasonable waking distance for the girls, we are currently investigating the possibility of hosting practices and clinics in this new neighborhood. My responsibilities for this expansion project are finding a safe, usable space for practices, connecting with local leaders, building interest among girls, and identifying potential coaches. With these first few school visits, we are still in the investigative phase of this expansion project. Nonetheless, the interest from the girls and the local PE teachers in the schools has been promising, and leads me to believe expansion could be beneficial for the girls in *La Villa* and our organization.

Conclusion

With two months under my belt working for Fútbol Sin Fronteras and living in Granada, I have learned a great deal about the program, the city, and the language. With this foundation, I feel confident and capable for the tasks that lie ahead. In the months to come before the December break, I am looking forward to building a stronger relationship with my team, initiating the new program in *La Villa*, and continuing to learn about and forge relationships with the community.