

Ben Burnett – Soccer Without Borders
Report #3 – March 29, 2015

Introduction

After almost a month at home in the U.S., it was time to head back to Nicaragua for a new year and a new season. While I was excited land in Nicaragua both for the first time in June and for the second time in January, they were two distinct types of excitement. In June, the excitement was from the anticipation of experiencing the unknown; the country, the people, and the program were new to me. In January, my excitement had more to do with my goals and expectations for the new season, seeing my team and the coaches, and starting the year fresh with renewed enthusiasm and inspiration. Thus far, the first three months of 2015 have met and/or exceeded expectations, and this report outlines the highlights.

Projects and Responsibilities

As in the previous reports, there are three parts to my projects and responsibilities: FSF Programming, Special Events, and School Visits & Expansion.

FSF Programming

With our girls still on vacation from school during January and the beginning of February, the program took advantage of their open schedules to host more activities both in the office and on the field. After school started, we began with our normal weekly schedule: two activities in the office and two practices out at the field. During the week leading up to March 8th, we celebrated International Women's Day. Speakers from local organizations came in to give presentations on women's rights and gender roles, and some of the older girls in the program created a video highlighting important women in Granada. On the soccer front, we began this year with a renewed focus on improving the girls' fundamental skills, as we are now seeing concrete opportunities open up for girls to use soccer as a vehicle to success in other areas of their lives, for example, with athletic scholarships.

For my team, the Mariposa Jrs, the skill building is especially important, as a good technical foundation at a young age is crucial to future success. Off the field, the Mariposa Jrs have started the year with a focus on community involvement and service projects. In February, the team spent a morning collecting trashing and sweeping rocks off a nearby court. More recently, the Mariposa Jrs have been planning and practicing a series of skits to increase awareness about environmental issues. The girls will create their own costumes, scenery, and scripts and then present in front of the other teams to spread the positive message. Thus far in 2015, we have taken things up a notch both on and off the field with the Mariposa Jrs.

Special Events

- TEAM Camp 2015

Every year in January, a group of 15-20 college soccer players come to Nicaragua from the U.S. to experience our program and put on a week of unimaginable fun for our girls. We kicked it off this year with a big party, mixing all of our teams together with the new volunteers for a Saturday of pure fun. Then, throughout the week, the teams and college volunteers spent the mornings at the field playing soccer and the afternoons in the office for games and activities (the girls were still on vacation from school). The week culminated with a special event for both the college players and our girls: a game against the Nicaraguan Women's National Team in Managua.

On the day of the game, the college players, our coaches, and the girls and their families piled into three old school buses in front of the office to make the trip to the national stadium in Managua. Upon arrival, the girls headed to the stands and the college players to the locker room to prepare for the game. After an official walk-out and the national anthems, our U.S. college players fought to a tough 0-0 draw with the Nicaraguan Women's National Team. After the game, as the players returned to the buses, they were greeted like celebrities by the screams and cheers of the 60+ girls from the program that had come with us to Managua.

The TEAM Camp is an excellent experience for all involved. The college players from the U.S. get to come down experience a new culture, learn about our program, interact with our girls, and play a game against the national team. For our girls, they have a week of pure fun, meet and hang out with the new volunteers, and are exposed to a group of strong, athletic, female role models. As for the program, in addition to their excitement and energy, the college players each bring down a large bag of soccer donations and make a monetary contribution that helps support the program for the rest of the season.

- Scholarship Program

As mentioned in my previous report, the number of girls in the scholarship program has increased dramatically, from 12 girls during the program's first year to 29 in 2015. In January, the coaches leading the education program met with girls and their parents several times to go over expectations and distribute school materials for the year. In addition to paying matriculation fees, the program gave each girl a personalized *Fútbol Sin Fronteras* backpack filled with supplies and a full school uniform. Parents were required to attend all meetings before the start of the school year in an effort to involve them more in the scholarship program and their children's education.

With the start of school in mid-February, we are now a month-and-a-half into the school year. More girls with scholarships has resulted in higher attendance for our daily study hour and greater involvement from the coaches who serve as academic counselors. Those who come to study hour have access to computers and the Internet, tutors, and other materials they may not have at home. Furthermore, all scholarship recipients meet with their counselors once a week to touch base on their performance. Thus far, the growth of the education program has been a success, and we hope to keep this momentum going through June.

- New Directors

At the end of 2014, our former local director, Josh, returned to U.S. after leading the program in Granada for over a year. So in January, we celebrated the promotion to two of our Nicaraguan coaches, César and Veronica, to the positions of co-directors. Their promotion marks an important transition for *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*, as this is the first time the program has had local Nicaraguan directors. Between them, César and Veronica have over 8 years of experience with the program and have filled the director role well during their first three months in charge.

School Visits & Expansion

With school only recently starting, we have just begun our normal school visits to work with girls during their physical education classes. However, we are continuing to focus on schools on the new neighborhood, *La Villa*, to keep building the new program initiative there.

Expanding into *La Villa* has been a slow but steady process. In January, we gave the new program a kick-start by hosting TEAM Camp in two locations, at our normal field, the *Multiestadio*, and at a new field in *La Villa*. With the girls still out of school, it was difficult to spread the word, and only three girls showed up for our first day (over 70 showed up to the

multiestadio). Undeterred, we went to nearby neighborhoods inviting girls, and from Tuesday to Friday, 10-15 girls consistently showed up to play in the morning. Three girls from *La Villa* even travelled with the rest of the program to watch the game in Managua.

Building off of the momentum from camp, we began hosting practice in *La Villa* every Saturday morning, and the results have been encouraging. Attendance was volatile at first, 10 girls one Saturday and only 2 the next, but we now have a steady group of 8-10 girls at practice. Some come more frequently than others, and the number of different girls that have shown up is between 25 and 30. We are hoping that our upcoming school visits will help us recruit more girls for the new team.

Though the first three months have shown great promise for a program in *La Villa*, there are still many challenges. One key aspect to the program's sustainability that we currently lack is a Nicaraguan coach dedicated to the team in *La Villa*. With the promotions of César and Veronica, the program will soon need more coaches, and I am pushing for someone to be hired specifically for this team. Another challenge is building trust with parents. While the program is well known in other parts of Granada, not as many people have heard of *Fútbol Sin Fronteras* in *La Villa*. There are also significant challenges in terms of logistics: sharing field space, finding a time when all girls can come to practice, dealing with a wide range of ages (4 years old to 14 in some cases), and other issues. Nonetheless, the program in *La Villa* has made promising strides and we are now working to ensure that it becomes sustainable and continues to grow over the next three months.

Conclusion

The first three months of 2015 have flown by. Though the program, the Mariposa Jrs, and the team in *La Villa* have all come a long way since January, I am beginning to feel pressed for time to accomplish everything I set out to accomplish at the beginning of the year. With my time here coming to an end in June, I am now beginning to think about what the program will look like without me. What have I brought to the program that will last after I am gone? What will be my legacy here? With these questions in mind, I will be working for these last three months to leave my teams, responsibilities, and the program in the best possible shape for the next group of volunteers.