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## the restorer of lost dreams

BY: RIK TOD JOHNSON

Sandy Castillo understands the lost dreams of parents.

She will relate to you how, far ahead of its birth, expecting parents will imagine the perfect life for their child. These dreams percolate and grow over nine long months, and they envision that child in the perfect career, or excelling at a sport that that parent admires, to become perhaps a doctor or lawyer, or to grow into a professional soccer player. She will tell you that once their child is born and begins its journey to adulthood, parents often learn to adapt their dreams to those that the child has for itself. As she puts it, "Their dreams become your dreams."

But, what happens when the child is born and those parents are informed that their child is "different", and that their child is never going to have what is considered a "normal" existence? Whether the child has cerebral palsy, Down's syndrome, autism, blindness or any number of other conditions, the dreams that their parents envisioned for them, in most cases, have been lost. That career in medicine is never going to happen; running the pitch with the National Team in the World Cup becomes a faded strand of memory. These parents are left with a child who has a disability, and they now have to fit their dreams to the child as he exists in the real world.

As the chairperson of Cal South's TOPSoccer program, Sandy Castillo is no stranger herself to a parent's loss of dreams. A tragic accident took the life of a beloved daughter who had been an equally involved partner in the TOPSoccer program. Motivated by this loss, Castillo turned her focus fully onto a program that provides an excellent outlet for children with disabilities to achieve their own successes. Castillo's boundless energy and sense of urgency have helped make Cal South's TOPSoccer program one of the most successful in the country.

TOPSoccer stands for The Outreach Program for Soccer; a program adopted by US Youth Soccer in 1991, which provides children with special needs with the opportunity to participate in the sport of soccer. The emphasis is on letting the children develop in a setting suited to their needs and abilities, and modifications to the rules allow children with differing needs their chance for success. Cal South instituted its own TOPSoccer program in 1992, with its first league established by the Junior United Soccer Association (JUSA).



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It’s OK if your child has a meltdown. You’re accepted here.”

Castillo was first awakened to the need for such a program around 1989 when she drafted a young girl with Down’s syndrome onto her team named Leslie Ellingson. Leslie swiftly won the hearts of her teammates and Castillo, and they devised ways to let Leslie get maximum enjoyment out of each game. When the team would go up by several goals, they would impose a team rule in which Leslie was the only one allowed to score, kicking the ball near her so she could put it in the goal herself.

A time came, though, when Leslie’s size and ability were far surpassed by her team, and Leslie’s mother, who had become friends with Castillo, was interested in coaching her daughter in Cal South’s recently established TOPSoccer program. From an initial program with eight kids and Castillo and Ellingson as coaches, the JUSA program grew bit by bit over the next few years. But in its second year, even with her experience coaching Leslie, Castillo still did not feel comfortable in the role.

Castillo admits she “was looking at the kids not as kids, but as the disability first, and then the child.” Her breakthrough came when she was confronted with a boy who “knew how to push my buttons faster than anyone else.” One day, still reluctant to discipline him as she would her recreational team, he “got on my last nerve, and I said, “That’s it! You’re getting a timeout!” Marching him to his mother, Castillo told her he could not return until he could behave. A casual “OK” from the mother was all it took. “At that point, it was

‘I can deal with this’”, she says. “I was looking at them as disabled athletes, instead of athletes that had a few more challenges.” Once she was able to separate the disability from the child, TOPSoccer became for her what it was intended to be for all: fun.

What solidified her relationship with the program was the involvement of her daughter Julie, who had been a teammate of Leslie’s. From age 12, Julie started attending TOPSoccer practices and became possibly its most dedicated volunteer. “She was always very comfortable with children with disabilities. She never looked at anyone as different.” Soon, Julie started recruiting her friends from school as volunteers. Castillo continued to coach Julie’s team, but TOPSoccer remained their combined passion. “If there was a conflict with my daughter’s game... they would have to change her game, because TOPSoccer was always first.”

In 2000, Julie spent months trying to get more exposure for the program by obsessively contacting newspapers to do a story about TOPSoccer. The Castillos finally received word that the Register wanted to go to a camp to do a feature article on the program. Just before the camp, however, tragedy struck: unable to locate her daughter, Castillo finally received a call telling her that Julie had been involved in a devastating automobile accident. She spent the next two months in the hospital fighting for her life.

When the Register article came out, a friend had it framed and presented to Julie, who had worked so hard to get the program more recognition. When Julie finally passed away, Castillo found herself at odds with people she had considered friends. "Unless you've lost a child, it's difficult when you see someone [who] has gone through such a tremendous loss. You'd say 'Hi', and they'd make a U-turn and go the other way."

**There may already be a TOPSOCCER program in your area. Check below for locations and contact information!**

**DISTRICT 1**

**RAMONA** - Stacy Devalian // duvs@cox.net  
**HOTSPURS** - Rochelle Ninteman // rhymingchild@hotmail.com  
**LA JOLLA** - Rick Flores // cysacoach@aol.com

**DISTRICT 2**

**Carlsbad** - Diane Openshaw // bsydi@hotmail.com

**DISTRICT 3**

**JUSA** - Sandy Castillo // sandjules@cs.com  
**OJSC** - Linda Escadero // lescudero@socal.rr.com  
**SOUTHERN CA STORM** - Colin Bouette // cbouette@cstorm.com

**DISTRICT 4**

**LONG BEACH VS** - Katie Hawkins // kitkaboom@aol.com

**DISTRICT 5**

**TEMECULA VALLEY SA** - Dawn Zavala // ddzavala@yahoo.com  
**RIALTO SOCCER CLUB** - Ernie Ramirez // thefourfushagers@aol.com  
**VICTORVILLE YOUTH SOCCER** - John/Cindy Quan //  
soccernutz@verizon.net  
**YU CAIPA VALLEY YSO** - Josie Pedrosa // pedrozacorp@aol.com

**DISTRICT 6**

**BAKERSFIELD BRIGADE** - Joe Montoya // jmontoya@yahoo.com

**DISTRICT 7**

**ORCUTT** - Rick Velasco // rvelasco-ousl@verizon.net

Castillo found her safe haven by returning to the accepting parents of TOPSoccer. "These people understand more than most people do, because they've had their dreams shattered." At her home field at Wagner Elementary School in Placentia, a memorial plaque commemorating Julie was installed, with an inscription reflecting her spirit: "Julie's Place - Where Love of the Game and Laughter Live."

Castillo threw herself into her TOPSoccer duties full-force, attending national meetings to pick up new ideas, and pushing harder than ever to bring recognition to the program. The result? TOPSoccer programs set up in leagues within six of Cal South's seven districts, with hopes to have the seventh included by the end of 2006.

Her trips east inspired her to start an annual TOPSoccer Fest, which just completed its fourth increasingly successful year, and which allows interested parents to try out TOPSoccer and see if it might fit their children's needs.

But, with an estimated 600,000 children in California qualifying as disabled, the need to serve more children seems virtually limitless. Castillo mentions the chief hurdle her program faces: trust. As an example, she points out parents who have children with autism, who are often plunged into programs unprepared for dealing with these children, if the program will even accept them in the first place. Rejected before, these parents are notoriously shy in subjecting their children to another possible disappointment.

Castillo recalls a child who screamed all through practice, causing his mother to act ashamed over his behavior. "One of our parents simply said, 'It's OK.' Coming from us, she thought we were being patronizing, but this parent said, 'It's not a problem. Do you see anybody looking at you funny? It's OK if your child has a meltdown. You're accepted here.'"

The other hurdle towards success is equipment. In spite of occasional small grants, because TOPSoccer is so expansive in its children's needs, requiring specialized equipment for many different types of conditions, such grants are only a drop in the bucket. Basic soccer equipment is always needed, but when special and more expensive balls or goals are required, for example, for blind children, often the money can only go so far. Castillo has found that improvisation is the most important element in this area, as oftentimes, the solution comes from "flying by the seat of your pants. And we've worn out a lot of pants."

For Castillo, the answer to these problems lies in getting the program to grow. Citing word-of-mouth as the most effective means to deliver her message, she states the need in "getting every community to realize that there is a need for this in their community." Faced with a society that often acts shocked that people with disabilities can do anything, she knows full well the uphill battle in which she is engaged. "They think our kids are unable to play soccer or learn the concept of the game."

But, as a restorer of lost dreams, she remains ever optimistic: "Our goal is to find the best fit for these kids; to find what is going to benefit them the most. To allow them to become the best soccer players they can become, regardless of ability. We want them to succeed, at whatever level they gain that success. That's what we are hoping to achieve." It's the "beautiful game" for some very beautiful people, and if Sandy has her way, a lot more of them will be playing it very soon.

Interested in volunteering or looking for more information? Log onto [www.CalSouth.com](http://www.CalSouth.com) or contact Sandy Castillo, TOPSOCCER Chairperson by phone at (714) 524-3354 or by email at [sandjules@cs.com](mailto:sandjules@cs.com)