



## UNITED FOR COMPTON

### ONE CLUB'S UNIQUE VISION FOR THE INNER CITY

*By Rik Tod Johnson // Exclusive to Cal South Soccer Magazine*

A mere two exits down the freeway from the city of Compton lies the Home Depot Center. The home pitch for both the Los Angeles Galaxy and CD Chivas USA, the HDC hosts many of the top players in the world within its confines, in addition to serving as the training center for the U.S. Men's and Women's National Teams. Millionaires play here, a situation all the more noticeable with the Galaxy's recent signing of a certain little-known midfielder named Beckham. To say that soccer thrives here would be a severe understatement.

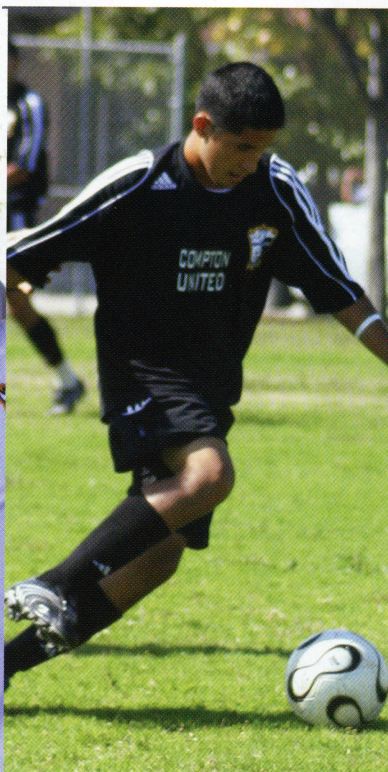
Reverse your direction, take that exit you just passed and enter Mike Herman's world. Compton is one of those cities that defines, unjustly or not, the tough inner city for much of media-saturated America. Whether through movies or hip-hop, news or television, the image of Compton as a drug-ravaged, high crime, gang-stricken war zone is hard to erase. And in this tough inner city, two exits away from the flourishing Home Depot Center, soccer does not thrive. Millionaires, whether involved in athletics or business, do not play here.

But there are those who would change that attitude, and Mike Herman, the president of the fledgling Compton United Soccer Club, is one of those people. The city council of Compton recently retired its old slogan as "The Hub City" for one that reflected a major shift in attitude for an entire community: "Rebirthing A New Compton," and Herman couldn't agree more. Long dreaming of raising his community up through sport, Herman finally decided to do something about it, forming his Compton United as a way to bridge the gap between quality soccer and the inner city. "I believe soccer is much more of a positive platform than it has been used here in the U.S. I see a time in the near future when Latino and African-American players are competing together for a new Compton, on the best fields in the country, and in the best programs in the country."

What makes his program unique is its approach to club membership. Conceived as a "very aggressive holistic afterschool program," Compton United players, known as the Crash (so named after a herd of rhinos, who can only see 30 feet in front of themselves), must sign an annual commitment form in which they pledge, amongst other items, to control their temper and not fight, attend all team homework sessions and practices, and keep their grade point average above a 2.0. Failure to do any of this can lead to their losing a spot on their team's roster and, in severe cases, their membership in the club. Another unique aspect of the club is its commitment to community service, which is a mandatory part of inclusion in the club. Because many kids in the community can't necessarily meet the fees for joining a club, even one such as this one where fees are already kept as low as possible, poorer players can meet their fees by performing extra community service.

Herman, who also serves as the city director for the Here's Life Inner City - LA urban ministry, began to lay down the foundations for the club in January of 2006 - along with Lalo Diaz, a special education teacher who is also the club's vice-president - but his concern for the future of youth soccer in Compton goes back much farther. Working with the S.A.Y. (Save America's Youth) Yes! Center for Youth Development introduced Herman to a young man named Ramiro Caldera who, though blessed





with good talent, ran out of opportunities once he hit college age. College coaches don't scout in Compton, and Caldera, while his grades were good enough to be accepted to University of California and Cal State schools, found himself without a way to move forward in the sport that he loves.

Such stories happen more often than not in Herman's city, and he became determined to find a way to provide the youth of his community with some way in which they might see a brighter future for themselves. He wants kids to find their way to success in both soccer and academics. But, just as important to him was finding a way to raise his community up as a whole – not to let the kids leave the city behind them, but rather to build Compton's character up from within, so eventually such opportunities would always be there for its children.

One of the other ideas for helping right the ship is to bring the African-American and Latino communities together on the soccer pitch, and to this end, Compton United plans to host an annual Unity Cup, a tournament with a focus on stopping racism in the community. There is also a hope to bring in players of mixed races from clubs like the Galaxy and Chivas, to help kids understand the importance of racial harmony, whether you are teammates or merely neighbors. "African-American involvement in Compton's youth soccer scene is something we wish to continue growing", said Herman, though he did add that younger teams in the area are already seeing a greater concentration of players, so progress seems to be underway.

The club has ties with both MLS teams in the area, as one of United's board members, Ray Caldwell, is the chaplain for both clubs. Through this connection, they were able to have Chivas' Tim Regan spend an afternoon with the teams, talking to them about hard work and perseverance, and the importance of academics in achieving one's goals. To carry such an event to the next level, Herman is developing the Crash Elite Mentoring Program, wherein the best leaders from his various teams will be selected to receive exclusive mentoring from pro players and college coaches.

Herman says the club is still pretty rough talent-wise, but their one competitive team in the fall season seemed to prove otherwise. The BU17 Cal U Barcelona Compton went 12-2-0 in their first season playing in the CSL circuit, winning their division handily. The club, composed of only boys to this point, recently took on a Director of Girls' Coaching, and Herman says the spring season should yield around 11 or 12 boys teams and 5 girls teams. But, there is still a lot to do, such as nurturing sponsorship relationships within Compton and developing connections with colleges so that his kids may envision a future for themselves beyond the city limits.

Access to quality fields is a top priority for Compton United, and they recently received approval on the club's request to the Cal South Field Development Foundation to develop soccer-only fields at three Compton high schools. "The [Foundation] has been invaluable to help launch our community development initiative. Paul Doty has been down here countless times to help us put together our "Three Field Program" to present to the Compton Unified School District." They still need to find the matching funds from outside sponsors for the project, though Herman does say they are "getting closer to finishing the deal," and that the schools are so excited about the plan, that the club's board are "being considered heroes around here."

Overall, Herman believes that there is no limit to what his community can achieve once it has gained its initial footing. Perhaps, one day, millionaires will play here. "When these kids get their fair shot at the ODP, the national camps, college scholarships... watch out! Great things can come out of Compton."

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*For more information about Compton United, check out their website at <http://www.comptonunited.org/>  
For more information about the Cal South Field Development Foundation, please go to [www.CalSouth.com](http://www.CalSouth.com) and click under Programs.*



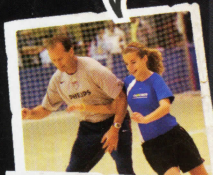
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