



## FOR THIS NEXT TRICK, WE NEED A VOLUNTEER...

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

There is an old joke, possibly passed down since before the days of vaudeville, in which a comedian engaged in painting proudly displays his latest picture to another comedian. The first comic unveils a completely blank canvas, and when asked by the second the name of his "masterpiece," the first comic replies, "It's a picture of a cow eating grass." Perplexed, the second comic asks, "Where's the grass?," to which he is told, "The cow ate it." He then asks, "Where's the cow?" The punchline: "Well, after she ate the grass, she went home! Why should she hang around?"

Imagine, instead, that blank canvas as a scene showing the pitch at any recreational youth soccer game in Cal South. Imagine a freshly mowed grass field, boxed in neatly by white chalk outlines and corner flags detailing the geometric parameters of the game, and an empty net set at either end eagerly awaiting an onslaught of kicks from the players who are soon to take this field. Bring to mind those two teams of children, running and puffing hard and trying their best, and then also picture on the sidelines of this perfect field, the coaches, assistant coaches, managers and parents who will guide these children both to this field of play and through the very match itself.

Now, take this pleasant scene, and imagine holding this recreational soccer match without the help of volunteers. The truth of the matter is... you can't. Without someone to schedule the game, there is no game. Without the board members who helped to form and run the league, there are no teams. Without the coaches and assistant coaches, the players merely become kids running about on a field. Without the team managers and parents, these kids might not even get to the pitch to play in the first place. And the pitch itself? Without the volunteers who often help to maintain these fields, put up those goal posts and lay down those lines, you would just have grass -- a big, soccer-empty field of grass, growing unkempt and wild. All you need now is a cow to volunteer to eat that grass. (And she's only sticking around until the grass is gone again.)

There are a few misconceptions that people run into when they think in a general way about youth soccer. So much attention gets paid to the hugely successful club teams that few people realize that over half of Cal South is actually made up of recreational teams and players. While even competitive leagues and clubs are staffed largely by volunteers, recreational leagues depend entirely upon such involvement, including all of the board positions. In essence, volunteerism is the very lifeblood of these organizations. "Some people think we are paid or we get special treatment by our league," says Richard Alvarez, winner of the L.A. Galaxy Volunteer of the Year award at Cal South's 2007 Nike Awards Banquet, "but it couldn't be farther from the truth."

Indeed, volunteerism in Cal South takes many forms, and all of these roles -- from high-profile board positions to coaching and managing, and even down to seemingly small, more physical jobs, such as repairing worn-down fields or even just setting up goalposts -- are equally crucial to allowing the children of Cal South to get maximum enjoyment and fulfillment out of soccer. One of the best ways to get involved is to start out small, such as Ed Bonkoski did when he volunteered as an assistant coach with JUSA back in 1985. Taking this one small step, initially made to remain close to his own boys, led to his becoming a scheduler for both JUSA and for District 3, in addition to his continued service as both a coach and referee. Now the director of Cal South's Signature League program, Bonkoski recognizes the importance of volunteers within Cal South. "Kids need support, guidance and direction. Not only does volunteering allow you to get a sense of helping others, but it will also allow you an activity where you can get more involved with your kids, and also with other families."

Richard Alvarez also initially started out as an assistant coach for the U8 and U6 recreational teams his daughters played on... and then the floodgates opened. While coaching in both the recreational and competitive divisions of Murrieta Youth Soccer League, Alvarez first became Murrieta's Director of Fields, jumped to become the Director of Girls' Coaching, and then became a commissioner for the league. Seemingly restless, Alvarez also continued to help with his daughters' progress as they continued on through club soccer. Rob Hawkes, president of MYSL, holds Alvarez up as the most positive type of role model: "His willingness to sacrifice his

time when his own children are not registered in our league has not wavered, and the longer I watch him, the greater my respect for him grows. Youth leagues depend upon the volunteer spirit he demonstrates.”

Juggling his personal life with this frenetic schedule has made Alvarez’ life “extremely busy,” but he wouldn’t have it any other way. “Sometimes projects around the house get pushed aside, but I look at volunteering... as a family event. My wife and daughters are usually with me when I am out at the fields, and they get involved too.” Alvarez is also quick to prioritize when asked to balance his volunteer time against the real world: “Of course, I could work more hours at my regular job, but coaching is far more fun!”

Alvarez suggests that those who are thinking about volunteering for soccer should start first by being supportive of their league, getting to know the other volunteers along the way. Becoming a team mom, for example, allows you to not only get involved with the team firsthand, but also gives you an inside look at what a team manager, assistant coach or even coach have to deal with day to day. Perhaps these roles would be well suited to your skill set, and perhaps you might consider a move into one of these roles at a future date. “Think of what your interests or talents are, and see where and how you can help,” says Alvarez. Sometimes, success in small areas may also get recognition from those who might suggest you are fully capable at taking on a larger role, whether you know it or not. “Once a volunteer is doing something – anything – and they are enjoying it,” Bonkoski



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adds, "then it becomes easier to approach them about doing something just a little bit bigger."

While the overwhelming majority of volunteers with Cal South recreational leagues tend to be parents, eager to get a chance to work with their own children, anyone willing to contribute some of their time unselfishly to help out is welcomed into the ranks. Many grandparents become involved, sometimes first as parents, and then spill over into the next generation of soccer players. Older siblings, often in high school already but helping out in a sport they perhaps inspired their younger brothers and sisters to play, also can be found in service. Bonkoski notes that he sees a lot of post-high school, college-age adults giving valuable time as well on the fields of Cal South.

Not everyone, though, is cut out for being a volunteer over the long haul. Hawkes has seen this scenario far too many times: "All too often I see people who volunteer and give it their all for the first few months... only to gradually change from an energetic volunteer to a pessimistic or disgruntled individual who is volunteering the same time, but has lost the spirit and goodwill of their decision." Those expecting rewards beyond a sense of well-being from doing something positive for their community will find themselves disappointed. Alvarez, though, says there are other things to be found, such as the opportunity to "continue to educate yourself. Even if you think that you know kids or soccer, there is always more to learn."

To those who would say that they are too busy to volunteer even a little time to their kid's sport, Alvarez is exquisitely blunt: "We all have busy lives, and we can all easily find excuses to not get involved. But, what could be more important than helping the youth in your community and getting involved in your own kids' lives? There is always a need for adults to help, whether it is in youth sports, scouts or school events. Just step up and help."

"Your kids grow up so fast," adds Bonkoski. "Why not spend time now, while they are young, in supporting their efforts? With just a little bit of time and energy, you can help make soccer fun for everyone."

Any volunteers?

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