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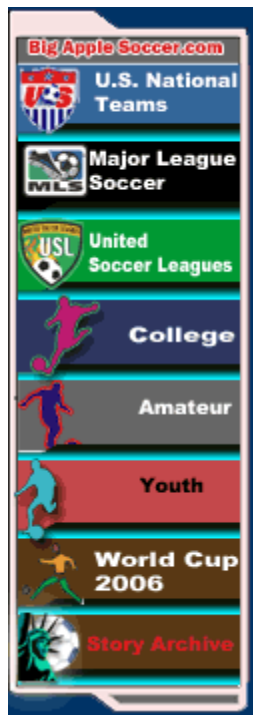
**GIVING PEACE A CHANCE**  
*Soccer For Peace's twist: It brings together Jewish, Arab children in Israel*



By Michael Lewis  
 BigAppleSoccer.com  
 Editor

New York, N.Y. -- Ori Winitzer, chairman and founder of Soccer For Peace, likes to relate a story that appeared recently in a major Israeli newspaper.

It was about a Nadov, a Jewish boy, and Mohammed, an Arab boy, who live in an Israeli village and are involved in the



Chairman Ori Winitzer (left) the Soccer For Peace bringing Arab and Jewish children together: "You have to maintain that over years and years," he said. "It's a long answer, because there is no short answer."

Soccer For Peace program.

They became teammates and friends. N'Nadov invited Mohammed to his house to play and Mohammed eventually to stay for the Sabbath.

"You think it's normal, but it's actually unheard of," Winitzer said.

Nadov's parents drove Mohammed back to his village and they had tea with his parents. N'Nadov spent a night at Mohammed's home.

For Nadov's Bar Mitzvah, he invited some of Mohammed's friends. "It was an inter-cultural exchange in a sense," Winitzer said.

"It just shows you that it's not impossible. It's not. It's just very difficult."

It's one of the success stories of Soccer For Peace, which brings together 10-year-old Arabs and Jewish 10-year-olds together in Israel in a camp setting playing the world's most popular sport and learning about the other side.

While peace treaties and cease fires get top stories on TV and major headlines in the media, Soccer For Peace, a non-profit organization, essentially does its work behind the scenes at the grassroots level. The results of it's efforts won't be known for years, although Winitzer is optimistic that change will be made on a new generation.

"It's a long process," said Asaf Toledano, executive director of the Maccabim Association in Israel who supports Soccer For Peace.

"That is the right way to do, to educate when they are nine, 10 years old," he added. "You don't need to talk about that much. You need to put two kids -- one Arab, one Jewish on the same team, which is a competitive team, and they need to win and fight on the field against other teams.

"It also affects the community and the parents. You can find Arab parents and Jewish parents supporting the same team. It's just not the kids. They bring it back home to their parents and their friends. We hope one day, when we are big enough, when there will be 16-, 17-, 18-years-old, and they will continue the soccer for peach program and they will be the new

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ambassadors of co-existence. they will be the new leadership, the new young leaders of Israel."

Soccer For Peace last Saturday held its first tournament at Chelsea Piers and nearby Waterside Park. Some 32 teams -- with men and women -- played a pair of robin-round tournaments and helped raise in the neighborhood of \$100,000 for the cause, according to officials. That will allow Soccer For Peace to fund its programs for another year. The organization is in its fourth year of bringing Arab and Israeli youths together at a special camp' the next camp -- called Camp Coexistence -- begins July 13.

"The outpouring of support is just heart-warming," Winitzer said on a warm, sunny day at Waterside Park while two games were being played. "You can invite people to a cocktail party every year. But ultimately, people don't want to drink for soccer, they want to play soccer. My guess is that everyone here is supportive of the cause but for what they're really here for a really solid day of playing and i am very happy to provide that."

The Israeli-born Winitzer's idea for the program came in the wake of Sept. 11, 2001, which he called "a horribly bleak moment."

"It was so unfulfilling and ineffective to go to rallies and write op-edit pieces that never get read or published," said Winitzer, who is an investment banker. "You know what? I was going to do something myself. I'm going to be an activist. I'm going to do something that is hopelessly positive, unapologetically positive in an otherwise black moment."

"I sat and thought to myself, 'If I'm really going to create peace, not a photo op and not a peace treaty, a real and lasting peace between people, how are you going to do it? And I realize there's only one way and that's to actually make people want to have peace. It has to be a change that occurs within on an individual level. And then you broadcast it out. Then you scale it up."

It was only natural that sports would be the vehicle to get children together, soccer in particular.

"Where have I seen social harmony in the most real way? It was always in the locker room or on an athletic team," Winitzer said. "Soccer is a world game. It isn't an Israeli-Arab thing, It's a world thing. You will see it in



Africa. You will see it in the Balkans. You will see it wherever. Where conflicts exist and where soccer is played, there is an opportunity to bring people together."



So, the program tries to educate one child and one family at a time. It might take years, perhaps even decades to get its message across a huge part of the population.



"I don't know if its an American thing, a Western thing, a business thing but we're conditioned to want a quick fix," Winitzer said. "Even if it's expensive they want a quick fix. You can't do that. There is no weight loss pill. If you want to lose weight, get your ass in the gym, work really hard and lose weight. You want to solve, in my opinion, the most profound problem in the world, it's not going to because politicians sit around a conference table and hammer out a treaty, even if that treaty is the most difficult compromise to make.

"If you want peace to prevent me from hating you and you from hating me, the way you do that is for me to understand your hopes and fears and you understand my hopes and fears. And the only way to do that is to have interaction with one another."

That would be a mutually loved activity -- soccer. Everything Soccer For Peace does is mixed between Jews and Arabs

"So, all of a sudden, you have an Arab playing attack and a Jew playing midfield," Winitzer said. "One feeds the ball to the other and they score a goal. you don't think they're not going to high five each other? They're 11. All of a sudden, it's the thrill of victory."

Soccer For Peace takes it one step further, Winitzer said, by hiring trained educators to help discuss the Jewish-Arab situation. "You have to maintain that over years and years," he said. "It's a long answer, because there is no short answer."

To show that Arabs and Israelis can work across older generations and just only children, a member of the organization's board of directors is a Palestinian -- Forsan Hussein. Hussein, born in the village of Sha'ab in the Galilee where his family has lived for 13 generations, has an MBA from Harvard Business School.

Hussein and Winitzer have been friends for years.

"It sends a message here," Hussein said. "The fact that two people are standing side-by-side is extremely important. It is a message of equality of duality of partnership. This is what's missing in the Middle East. Part of the problem in the region is that peace seems to be imposed by one onto the other."

Hussein felt one big problem in Israel is that any peace treaty that is negotiated is between governments, not people.

"Any peace treaty that is going to happen is a peace treaty between leaders," he said "The people on the ground were not attuned to the process. They were not really involved in peace making. I think this is an opportunity, whether it is between Palestinians from Palestine or Israeli Jews.

"This is our opportunity to say that people have a role to play. More than anything else, children are not to be forgotten in this because the young generation are the leaders of tomorrow. If we neglect them, then the many of them will [become] Hamas members and extremists from both sides. That is something we cannot afford. That is why we are investing in children."

Last year 50 10-year-olds entered the program.

This year, those 50 children will continue, but another group of 50 10-years-old will join the process. Next year another 50 children will come in and will go through the process until they are 16.

"You force the kids to get together," said Toledano, who added that other organizations might have children get together once every two or three weeks. "Here' its' really intense. The kids are meeting three times a week -- two soccer sessions and one dialogue and also a game on Saturday. That's four times a week. It's so intense and it comes naturally."

Winitzer has plans of expanding his program beyond Israel.

"I want this to be a proper eight week summer camp like the one I went to," he said. "I'd like to have more kids involved and I would like to do it in more regions -- in the Middle East and beyond. I'd like to do it in

Nigeria, Sudan and Rwanda in South Africa. I would like to do the Balkans. Anywhere violence exists and soccer is played, that's where I want to be. Yes, money is a constraint. The appeal of the organization is limitless."

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