

GMC girls soccer teams devote a day to charity



It was at a Greater Middlesex Conference girls soccer coaches meeting a few years ago when Metuchen coach Mike Knoth and few of his colleagues brainstormed an idea.

There were a couple of showcase events for boys soccer teams within the GMC, but nothing for the girls. Not only did they decide to create one, they wanted to take it beyond soccer - making charity, community service and sportsmanship part of the day.

“We were chatting, and we kept hearing how the boys had these showcases,” Knoth said. “So we thought about how we could showcase our girls. The discussion went from showcasing to why don’t we add other components to it and include community service. We’re also big on the sportsmanship and collaborating with the other teams. They compete on the field, but off of it, why can’t they be friends? We also wanted referee treatment to change, so there’s been an emphasis on that with the players and with the coaches.”

From that, the Soccer For A Cause Charity Festival was born. The first day took place in 2021, with seven games generating nearly \$17,000 for two local charities - The Marisa Tufaro Foundation and Go4theGoal - and 1,500 pounds of food donated for REPLENISH, which is a regional food bank that serves Middlesex County residents.

Knoth is assisted by a group of coaches that includes Megan Carroll of North Brunswick, Steve Carew of Colonia, Theresa Rossi of Carteret and Tim Morris of Middlesex.

“Our main goal is to expose kids to paying things back and community service, and they’ve done a great job,” Knoth said. “Soccer is what they are playing, but this is about the life lessons. I really feel like we are on to something.”

The 2022 version of Soccer For A Cause took place on September 24 at Metuchen High. There were 10 games, all involving GMC schools, with as many as four games taking place at once on fields spread



throughout the school grounds.

In addition to the host school, the participating teams were JFK Iselin, J.P. Stevens, Carteret, St. Thomas Aquinas, Middlesex, New Brunswick, Piscataway, Colonia, South Brunswick, Spotswood, North Brunswick, Sayreville, Edison, South Plainfield, Wardlaw-Hartridge, Old Bridge, Monroe, Woodbridge and East Brunswick.

True to the founding mission, the day involved much more than soccer.

Once again, the festival benefitted the Marisa Tufaro Foundation and Go4theGoal, along with REPLENISH. There were also tables set up for several other local-based organizations, and as part of a ceremony that took place early in the day, Metuchen player Leah Wentnick, who is head of her school's chapter of Bring Change to Mind, spoke about the importance of mental health. Once the final proceeds are added up, the organizers hope to collect approximately \$20,000, along with the food donations, for the charities.

To do that, 10 teams raised funds for the Marisa Tufaro Foundation, and the other 10 fundraised for Go4theGoal. The teams raising the most for each have their names go on a plaque which was donated last year by one of the GMC's greatest friends, Ron Mazzola of Old Bridge, who passed away earlier this year and was also recognized on Saturday. Old Bridge raised the most money for the Marisa Tufaro Foundation, while Colonia was the top fundraiser for Go4theGoal.



There is no greater and personal cause for Middlesex County schools than the Marisa Tufaro Foundation, created by Greg and Cyndi Tufaro after the death of their daughter, Marisa, at age 13 in 2017. Marisa battled a heart defect since birth, underwent six open-heart surgeries and died of a rare form of cancer following a heart transplant. Marisa inspired with her tremendous attitude and spirit throughout her fight, and the Tufaro's are well known around the GMC community, since Greg was a long-time sports writer for the Home News-Tribune and Cyndi is a school principal in Edison.

The foundation has had a close relationship with the GMC from the moment it was established.

"Marisa's foundation has received overwhelming support from countless individuals, but the entire GMC has been the driving force that enables the nonprofit to thrive," Greg Tufaro said. "The foundation has been blessed to donate more than a quarter of a million dollars to fulfill its mission. The bulk of those contributions can be attributed to the GMC community, which takes ownership through abundant fundraising events such as Saturday's outstanding Soccer For A Cause Charity Festival."



Go4theGoal's mission is to improve the lives of children battling cancer by providing financial support, developing and implementing unique hospital programs, funding research and granting personal wishes.

The timing of the event was fitting, since September is National Childhood Cancer Awareness Month, as well as National Hunger Awareness Month.

The organizers tried to create game matchups that were as even as possible. As a result, six of the games were decided by a single goal, including two in overtime, while two contests generated 2-0 results. There was also a feeling of goodwill and sportsmanship throughout the day. The teams and their fans all seemed to recognize what brought them to Metuchen, and it showed even with the tightness of the games.

"The event epitomizes the giving spirit of the GMC, a conference with student-athletes who pride themselves on performing in the classroom, on the field, and in the community," Greg Tufaro said. "The Soccer For A Cause Charity Festival encompasses all that makes scholastic sports great. The event emphasizes teamwork, sportsmanship, and collaboration for a greater good. Those remarkable student-athletes and their coaches made a profound impact. They collected donations for pediatric cancer patients, children in need and food insecure families. All involved should be immensely proud of their ability to work as one for the common goal of making a difference in the lives of others."

The athletes and coaches were certainly on board.

"Old Bridge High School always rallies behind causes," said coach Kim Hopping. "Any time we have an opportunity to put ourselves in that position, to collaborate with other teams, play competitive matchups and get involved in the community, we are all for it all the time."

"I think it's beautiful what Mike has set up, to kind of light the spark to allow all of these teams to see it," said Monroe coach Christian Jessop, whose team was participating for the first time. "The more they see it, the more they'll carry that later in life. What he's done is provide a platform, and all of these teams

have attracted to that platform. It's really nice. I hope the girls are looking at it as being bigger than just a game."

The players definitely did.

"I'm happy to be a part of something that's helping so many kids, and our whole team is feeling the same way," said Monroe captain Paige Aikens, whose team raised money and also donated canned goods. "We were very excited to donate. We got friends and family involved to help with the cause, and we're also excited to play."

"This is really fun getting to spend time with the team and to be here for a good cause," added Allison Altman, a senior from Old Bridge. "It means a lot being able to have the team come together and support something amazing and close."

"This was a lot more than soccer," Metuchen's Wentnick said, who was also glad for the opportunity to address the players and spectators about her group's attention to mental health. "It's very important. The amount of support and appreciation that we received here is great."

"Seeing how all of these athletes who compete



against each other are coming together to share a common experience is so powerful,” noted East Brunswick coach Kevin Brady. “I’m thrilled to be a part of it.”

It was day where each team, in one way or another, won.

“Coaches sometimes lose sight of the life lessons that kids need to learn,” Knoth said. “All of the people who participated in this, they get it. I’m so impressed with the coaches around Middlesex County who participated. We had 20 schools here, and aside from everything else, they also had fun.”

