

Ben Burnett – Soccer Without Borders
Report #4 – July 17, 2015

Introduction

My final three months in Nicaragua were filled with mixed emotions. At times I felt ready to return to the U.S., see my friends and family again, and enjoy the comforts I grew up accustomed to. Other times I couldn't believe I was actually leaving, saying goodbye to everyone I had just spent a year getting to know; our time together felt too short. Nonetheless, April, May, and June were some of my most productive months working at *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*. After spending 8-9 months in together, my team and I were cruising. During the last three months we accomplished a lot, and this report outlines the highlights.

Projects and Responsibilities

As in the previous reports, there are three parts to my projects and responsibilities: FSF Programming, Special Events, and School Visits & Expansion.

FSF Programming

Every season teams are required to complete a community service project. Since teams spend a lot of time planning and deciding what to do, the projects generally take place towards the end of the season. An important part of these projects is that they come directly from the girls. As coaches, we are normally the ones planning and directing the program's practices, activities, and workshops. However, with the service projects, we let the girls take the lead. They identify a problem or need in their community and come up with a plan to address it, taking into account the cost, necessary materials, and feasibility. Allowing the girls to participate in the planning and organizing process is empowering and really creates a sense of personal ownership of the project and its outcome.

This year, one of the older teams visited a center for children with disabilities and the city retirement home. The younger teams partnered with another sport-for-development organization, Sports For Impact, and participated in a beach clean-up of Lake Nicaragua. An official from the U.S. embassy was present as over 50 boys and girls scoured the beach picking up trash. The Mariposas Jrs and the Estrellas, one of the two older teams, focused their community outreach on the new program in *La Villa*. Both teams planned a special Saturday of fun and games for the girls there, fostering a greater sense of unity among the teams of *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*. Community service projects have been a part of the program for several years, but this season the teams and the coaches took them to another level, involving the players at all levels and coming up with some of the most creative, effective projects yet.

In addition to their project in *La Villa*, the Mariposas Jrs had a busy final three months of the season. In April, the girls played to a hard-fought tie in their first game of 2015 against a team from a local school. The game helped bring our girls closer, and we were pleasantly surprised to see several parents show up to cheer on their children. In May, the program was invited to send a group of girls to the national stadium in Managua for a special event hosted by the Nicaraguan Women's National Team. In honor of CONCACAF Women's Football Day, the national team put on a three-hour skills and games clinic, and ten girls from the Mariposa Jrs were selected to participate. The girls made the hour-long trip to Managua on Saturday and were featured in the national newspaper on Sunday. Events such as this one really show the growth of women's soccer in Nicaragua. Finally, we celebrated my final week with the team with a trip to

a nearby park and a team party in the office. It was an emotional week, but undoubtedly a ton of fun for both the Mariposa Jrs and me.

Special Events

- Career Night

On May 7th, we hosted a special career night event for the oldest three teams in *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*. Four professional women were invited to come speak to the girls about their lives and careers choices and answer questions: a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher, and a business owner. They spoke about their careers, what they enjoyed and what was difficult, but each woman also spoke about her personal path to success. A common theme amongst the women was children; of the four, three had had a child at an early age. While this may have been an obstacle, all three found a way to continue their education and achieve their professional goals.

At *Fútbol Sin Fronteras* we strive to impress the importance of education whenever we can; our scholarship program and study hour are examples of this. And while we have plenty of positive female role models on the staff, it is important to expose the girls to role models outside of soccer. As our girls get older, the number of obstacles they face on the journey to completing their education increases. At career night, the girls met four women who had encountered many of the same obstacles they will face in the coming years, and each served as proof that if you really want to achieve your dreams, those obstacles are can be overcome.

- Trip to FunLimón

From May 22-24 I travelled with two other coaches from *Fútbol Sin Fronteras* to the small community of Tola on the southwest coast of Nicaragua to run a weekend soccer camp with the non-profit FunLimón. The organization is funded by the Mark & Kathryn Ford Family Foundation and is run in conjunction with a nearby oceanfront resort, Rancho Santana. FunLimón serves as an important community center in a very rural area of Nicaragua. It offers kids a safe place to learn and participate in sports and it offers vocational classes for adults so they can qualify for high-paying jobs in Rancho Santana.

On Friday, the first day, we led an instructional course for local coaches, teaching them our methods and running through several examples of a typical *Fútbol Sin Fronteras* practice. Then on Saturday and Sunday we put on a total of four fun-filled soccer practices with nearly 100 local kids coming to play over the two days. FunLimón used the event to build up excitement for their inaugural youth soccer league, and interest in the area seems very high. The weekend was a success for all; the coaches learned a lot, the kids had a ton of fun, and we made a positive impact representing *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*.

School Visits & Expansion

Throughout April, May, and June we continued visiting schools in the *La Villa* neighborhood as part of our recruitment effort for the new program there. We spent four weeks at schools we had already visited the previous year, forming a stronger connection with the girls, administrators and gym teachers there. At the end of the four weeks we donated equipment to the schools and passed out fliers inviting the girls to join the new program in *La Villa*.

The school visits really helped boost attendance numbers on Saturdays for the new program. We now have a group of almost 20 girls arriving regularly every week. We try to bring 2-3 coaches and split the girls into two groups, younger and older girls. While there are certainly growing pains and a large amount of uncertainty regarding direction of this new program, it has been extremely rewarding to show up every Saturday morning and find a group of girls excited about playing soccer.

With so many girls showing up, *La Villa* is starting to become an important part of *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*. Co-directors Cesar and Veronica have taken steps to make the program there sustainable, hiring a new coach to work specifically in *La Villa* and providing a monthly budget for miscellaneous expenses. Furthermore, the other five teams in the main program are starting to pay attention to and work with the girls there. As previously mentioned, both the Mariposa Jrs and Estrellas have gone to work with the girls in *La Villa*. It is important for the girls new to soccer to see others that have played for while, and we try to bring girls from the main program to *La Villa* whenever we can.

When I began working for *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*, the program in *La Villa* was just an idea. I was charged with making that idea a reality, and now, every Saturday 20 girls show up to run around, goof off, and play a little bit of soccer. Though I was originally given the responsibility to create the program, its success is due to the hard work of everyone at *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*. I am very proud of what we were able to accomplish in *La Villa*, and hope to see the program continue to grow over the next year.

Conclusion

When applying for the position with *Fútbol Sin Fronteras*, I spoke about my belief in the power of sport to change lives for the better. Soccer had given me so much, and I wanted to give back. In Nicaragua, I helped girls play soccer that otherwise would not have had the opportunity. But what the girls take from our program is so much more than soccer. They make incredibly close friends, learn to work together, earn scholarships, travel around the country, make their parents proud, overcome adversity, meet people from all over the world, and, most importantly, discover their full potential. What I like most about *Fútbol Sin Fronteras* is this: in order to believe the work we are doing is beneficial, that it makes a difference, we only have to believe that soccer, that sport, is good in and of itself. Sure, it's just a 90-minute game, but its impact lasts a lifetime. After my year in Nicaragua, I still believe, now more than ever, the beautiful game has the power to change lives.