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Nations United

Kids from many countries build one strong team.

By Katherine Jones

This is a story of refugee kids empowered through soccer, creating their own story of their lives. Playing in Idaho Rush's U-16 coed league, Nations United's first game, as well as their season finale, was against a recreational team from Boise High School, a team that became their nemesis. The journey up to and between those two games is life in a nutshell. It's a story of refugees making their place in a new home; it's a story of kids growing into themselves. It's a story that embraces wins and losses, that cements the correlation between hard work and the payoff. It's the story of a bunch of kids from countries strewn around the world forged into one team – nations, united.

Beginnings

The scene – and it is just that, a scene – at Simplot Fields in southeast Boise is a pretty familiar one for soccer players across the Treasure Valley. On any given Saturday, thousands of uniformed players are scattered across nearly two dozen fields of play. Proud parents take their places along the sidelines; the sounds of laughter and cheers, whistles and shouts waft on the wind. It's a ubiquitous weekend for families. Soccer is a gateway sport, and some of these kids have played since they were 4 years old.

At Field 20 for the first game of the fall 2016 season, however, there was no such feeling of comfort and familiarity. Most of the players from team Nations United had never been to Simplot Fields before. The team is comprised of mostly refugees – from Iraq, Congo, Thailand, Somalia. While some of them had played soccer before, this was their debut as a team and as soccer players American style. For most, this would be their first game – ever – played on a field with grass, stripes, uniforms, referees, and against a team of strangers. Forward Sajjad Al Swaiedi said, “My first real game.”

When the referee blew the whistle to start the match, that sound also delineated the moment between “before” and “after.” Before, Nations United was just an idea that didn't exist. Before, the notion of a team was merely a pie-in-the-sky dream by some soccer-obsessed kids and a good-hearted teacher. And before, the kids merely chased the ball



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around and called it soccer. Sajjad declared, “Now we know how to play like professional. We’re like real soccer players.”

At South Junior High, the whole school reads every day, anything they want, for 15 minutes, and that’s where it all began. Sajjad and classmate Yousif Fartoos, then both eighth-



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Sajjad Al Swaiedi, right, and Coach Fawad Saheb-Khan. “We had skills, but we didn’t know how to use [them],” says Sajjad. “Then [Coach] showed us the right way. He’s a great man. He helps us a lot.”

Previous page: Patience Ishimwe cheers for everyone — teammates as well as their competition, the Boise High players — as medals are awarded after the championship game.

graders, lived and breathed soccer. They would pester librarian Mary Karol Taylor for books about anything soccer. Did she have books on certain international players? Like Lionel Messi for Sajjad. Or this team and that team? It’s the one sport she can talk about a little because her son has played since he was old enough. He, too, was a Barcelona fan, and through him, she knew some of the players. That was enough to keep the conversation rolling.

She also talked to the boys’ teachers about their preoccupation: “[Their teachers] said, ‘Oh, every assignment they just try to twist the assignment to be in some way about soccer.’” Every essay, they built it into something about soccer. Poems – how many poems can you write about soccer? Apparently a lot.

When spring rolled around, Taylor's son was excited about the season, so she asked the boys if they were excited to start practice, too. "As it came out of my mouth, I was wishing I could take it back. ... Their response was, 'Yeah, no. We're not on a team.'" At the time, South offered a once-a-week, after-school soccer club, but that's not what Taylor had in mind. These kids were obsessed with soccer, and they weren't on a team.

"I started saying to some of their teachers, 'Let's get them on a team.' When they said, 'Yes, we'll help,' I knew we could do this." It wasn't just Sajjad and Yousif; there was a whole group of refugee kids looking for soccer books. "I said something about: 'Do you wish you could be on a team? Do you want to be on a team?'" They said: 'We would love to be on a team – like a real team? We would love to be on a real team.' So I said, 'I'm going to make this happen.' Like, how hard could it be?"

Sajjad

Sajjad grew up in Baghdad, the capital city of Iraq. "There is a lot fighting; it's still going on right now. Sometimes I hear – it's an everyday thing, we hear bad news. People get killed; bombs blow up." He said he got used to it. In 2013, when his family left Iraq because his father worked with Americans, he was 12 years old. "For our safety, he wanted a better education for us. The opportunities back there, not very strong for education. I was excited to come [to the U.S.], but still, I know I will miss my family, my grandma, all the people there, my friends, everyone."

In Iraq, Sajjad played soccer in the dirt field behind the mosque. "We had a ball; it was always flat. The goals were like big rocks on two sides. We just played." When it rained, it was mud. Sajjad's mother scolded him for getting dirty. "That was the fun of it. We still went to play. ... [My mom would say,] 'You're going to get sick; it's cold.' I just ignore it."

Arriving in Boise, Sajjad knew a little English: cat, dog, car. Immersion into American life was difficult. "I didn't really go out for one year. For one year, I didn't speak English that much so I just stayed at home." He met Yousif and Justin Karangwa in seventh grade at the Hillside Language Academy. "I didn't have to speak with them English that well; they just play with me;



South Junior High School librarian and team founder, Mary Karol Taylor, celebrates the championship win with Su Reh.

they understand. Yousif speaks my language, Justin doesn't; but they know me as a friend."

Sajjad's second year in Boise was different. "I spoke English, I came to South, and I had teachers who know about soccer, like Mrs. Taylor." The idea of a team started getting bigger. Taylor told Sajjad his job was to get players. He wanted Yousif on the team. "I said, 'Yousif, help me.' 'Listen,' he said, 'this team is not going to happen.' I just looked at him: 'Don't be negative.' He said, 'Just trust me, it's not going to happen.' I said, 'One day, I'll just remind you of what you say.'"

Organizing

So it was harder than it looked. Organizing a team is a big deal, requiring a great deal of parental involvement, time, money, and commitment – and usually a volunteer parent as coach. A team of refugee students would have none of that support. Their families have no extra money for fees; working (frequently nights) was a priority for parents. Often the family would have only one car, and it wasn't going to be used for schlepping kids to and from practice and games. Language was a barrier, and the culture of parents-on-the-sidelines was neither a priority nor on the radar. It couldn't be by definition.

Taylor explained, "I guess I got really motivated because these kids love soccer so much. I have seen how my son has benefited since he was 5 years old, being part of the soccer community: friendships that he's built, the character he's built by being on team sports. He's just gotten so much out of soccer. I just thought it was sad for [these kids] not to have that kind of experience."

What all of the refugee kids played was street soccer. Survival of the fittest, getting and keeping the ball, scoring as many goals as you can. When Sajjad tried out for the Borah soccer team, for instance (prior to the season with Nations United), he didn't make it – not because he wasn't skilled, but because he didn't know how to play a position and play with a team. These are all things that American youth club soccer players learn from day one.

It wasn't so much that South didn't have an organized team, but if these students didn't learn about positions and



UNICEF

Displaced youth play on a make-shift soccer field, Nyamukwara, Zimbabwe, 2006.



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teamwork, they would never be able to play on high school teams either. This idea of Taylor's was far-reaching. She approached Idaho Rush Soccer Club, which has a long history of helping refugee kids (including 10 years of hosting their One World soccer camp for new refugee kids).

"I said: 'I don't know how; I'm going to try to come up with the money. We won't get a volunteer coach – how much would it cost to get a coach?' ... Once I had that, I knew what I needed to work for. They loved the idea." Rush helped with scholarships for the entire team, but Taylor still had to raise \$4,600. A grant from Dick's Sporting Goods cut that in half, and through crowdfunding on a teacher site – with solicits to everyone on Taylor's email list, friends in the soccer community, teachers, a Facebook posting – the team was funded. In less than 24 hours, uniforms, registration fees, and a coach were all paid.

Kyaw Soe, from Thailand, played with Borah Junior Varsity during the season but was invited to play with Nations United after the season ended. "They are my friends," he says. "People from all the cultures, we all meet together on the team."



With the score 1-0 in the championship game, the team listens intently as Coach Fawad Saheb-Khan explains the strategy to keep the lead.

The Coach

Coach Fawad Saheb-Khan is himself a refugee, born in Kunduz, Afghanistan. His father moved the family to Pakistan, trying to get to Russia for a better life, but it didn't work out. His father was killed when he went back to Afghanistan to visit – Fawad was very young – and his mother qualified as a refugee. “Going to America, that was all that mattered for us. Nothing mattered about where we were going to go, what part of America we were going to to. That’s all we knew, we were coming to America. We didn’t know anything about Boise, Idaho; never heard of it before until we actually arrived here.”

The first year in Boise was as lonely as Sajjad’s. “I was scared the first couple of months. The rumors you hear when you come to a new country – you want to play it safe. There was not a lot of communication because I could not speak the language. I was with a bunch of people who spoke English; I

was only a kid just recently moved to America. I started at old East Junior High School.

“When I first started, everybody thought I was Hispanic because of my color of skin and everything. A lot of people who passed me by would say ‘Hola,’ or another Spanish word, but I didn’t understand; I thought it was English, too. Later on, I made some Spanish friends and they were like, ‘Oh, we thought you were Spanish; every time we would pass you by, in seventh grade hall, that’s why we would say, “Hola.” You didn’t respond, like, what is wrong with this guy?’

“So I made some friends in junior high, but until my freshman year, I kind of studied and learned the language, worked on my homework. Never got out on my break or recess, never went out to interact. I was focused on learning the language.”

Again like Sajjad, Saheb-Khan had always played soccer. “I grew up playing on the streets, barefoot, one soccer ball, 20 people running, no positioning for it – just going after the ball, trying to score. ... We would mark the goals with shoes. No experience as far as playing with team, but I kind of developed my skills playing on the streets with friends.” A tutor, helping Saheb-Khan with homework, introduced him to American soccer. He started in Rush’s select level but had the skills to move up to a traveling competitive team through Rush’s scholarship program. All that helped him both socially and linguistically.

“Making more friends, getting to know more people. That was the cool thing. Just learning the language a little faster. Getting out, speaking with people, even if you don’t speak [English well]. That kind of helped. My team was super nice; each and every one of them were very nice to me when I played soccer. They would give me a ride if I needed a ride. ... At that time, when we first came, there was only one car. I rode my bike most of the time to get from point A to point B.” In wintertime, teammates would offer him rides. “They made the transition easier to kind of blend in with them. It wasn’t like ‘Oh, I’m different.’ They were super nice to me actually.”

Saheb-Khan made the Timberline soccer team, so he played for both Rush and his school. Word got around. “People

knew me: ‘Fawad, he’s on the soccer team, the varsity team.’ I made a bunch of friends just knowing I was on the soccer team. ... [But] when you play a little bit of soccer with other teams that you face and they go to the same school, they go, ‘Oh, I remember this guy. Hey, this guy is really good.’ They talk about you to other friends – so I made friends like that, also.”

After graduation, Saheb-Khan went to College of Western Idaho for a year, continued playing soccer, and got his license to coach in Idaho. He was an assistant coach with a U-13 boys team when the CEO of Idaho Rush Soccer Club, Lee Riley, told him about this fledgling team being started and asked if he’d like to be the head coach. “That kind of opened up the door for me ... make my own decisions, come up with the plans, coach a team the way I wanted to. So, ‘Yes, I want to do it.’ That’s where it started.”

Practice

The team, that is, anybody who hoped to be on the team, practiced all summer long. At one point, there were 30 kids on the list. Taylor said, “I wanted to see who was really going to come – who was going to show up and be committed. The team looks really different now than it looked in the beginning. ... When it came down to actually truly practicing and having to come when maybe they didn’t want to come, or there was something better to do, some of them just stopped coming and they lost their spot.”

By August she said, “It came down to: This is our team. These are our committed kids. Kids who got the spots on the team are kids who came all the time. If they weren’t going to come, they let us know; they communicated with us. One of the things I’ve seen is just understanding the responsibility of what it means to be on a team and not letting your team down. And our coach is expecting you to show up. You can’t just not come. That’s one huge thing.”

Coach Fawad worked the kids hard, and it must be noted, he wasn’t paid for summer coaching. He held a weeklong conditioning camp, had them run a mile in the hot sun, do drill after drill after drill. He coached during Ramadan, the

Muslim holy month that includes fasting from dawn till sunset. Sajjad said, “I was fasting one of the months, but I still showed up. Coach was fasting, and he still showed up and did OK. If he shows up, why can’t I? ... The love of the game kept me going.”

There were other challenges as well. Taylor said, “At one point, I was going to figure out how to get them cleats and shin guards. ... I ended up deciding that was something they had to do. They had to figure that out. They had to talk to their families. They needed to invest in something. ... So they somehow borrowed them, found them.” The kids had to learn it wasn’t good enough just to show up to practice. They had to show up in cleats, in shin guards, wearing a white shirt, and with a ball. “We’re still struggling with the balls. They pop, they lose them, some kids never did get a ball. I just said, ‘It’s the rules.’”



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But the most momentous lesson that summer, far and away what made the most lasting impression on the kids, was playing positions. Sajjad said: “How to play position and how to move on the field. I didn’t know that in the beginning. I just

Nations United’s very first game ended in a tie, which the team — including Pit Poe, left, and Ehpaw Ku — considered as good as a win.

had skills, nothing more than that. It's a big field, 11 players. Each player has to play a certain spot and move in a certain way. I learned about that. That was the biggest thing about the summer."

Coach Fawad said: "When I first picked them up for their first practice, there were 20, 30 people running for one ball. When I picture it, that was myself. The same thing I did with a bunch of my friends."



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Prisca Hermene, left, from Congo; Sajjad Al Swaiedi from Iraq; and Claude Chimemana from Congo, center, gather for the team cheer: "Nations United!"

Sajjad said: "It was big for our team's defenders, too. They have really big parts to do. They're defenders, they have lots of pressure on them. It is one of the things they had to learn. The whole team learned something during the summer. They learned many things, not just something. We became more of a team instead of individuals. That's how we work."

Playing positions was like a key that unlocked a treasure. And so, one Saturday in September, the kids piled into a van – another arrangement Taylor made, this time with Boise

City Parks and Recreation – and headed out to Simplot Fields to put it to the test.

First Game

The teams couldn't have been much different. The Boise High team was experienced, confident, and, by all accounts, really good. Nations United was nervous, tentatively confident, and unknown. But when both teams took the field, there was only one language: soccer.

Nancy Henderson is a critical reading and writing teacher at South. She and other teachers filled out the sidelines in place of parents who couldn't be there. Henderson said: “[Nearly] every team they played the first time they [beat], and they won handily, because nobody thought they were going to be good because of who they were. Once they understood these kids knew how to play soccer – they may not know all the rules, they've never played on a club, they've never played with refs, they've never played with nets. But they know how to play and they don't give up.

“The second time they played them it's like, ‘Whoa, we've got to take these guys seriously.’”

Sajjad also remembered his promise. “I just gave it to him: ‘Yousif, remember those three months ago? Remember what you said?’ He said, ‘Ah, yeah.’ ‘Like, it happened. I told you it was going to happen and it happened. ... Just being positive makes it easy.’”

Their first game ended in a hard-fought tie, 1-1. For Nations United, it was as good as a win. Sajjad beamed, “Now we know how to play like professional. We're like real soccer players. [Coach said] we look like a real team. We all know our positions.” Sajjad had always said his biggest dream was to play a game with referees. “And that came true. I played many, like eight games, with refs and stuff. It felt like a real game – there's grass, goalkeepers, possession; we got the real hard ball, like size 5, and like 11 people [on the team], a bench, coaches – it's real. Grass to play on, not mud. It's real. Everything was real.”

Sajjad reflected, “My first real game. It was better than I expected.”



Prisca Hermene hugs teammate and friend Ehpaw Ku before a practice.

A Loss

The season progressed. After the tie with Boise, Nations United beat Arsenal and Timberline, and played Boise High again, losing by one point. Then, on one double-header Saturday, missing three key players and some girls (which limited the possibilities for substitutions), Nations United lost 0-4 to Boise High. It was a bitter loss.

Between games, they went to Whitney Community Center for lunch. Taylor said, “Ehpaw wouldn’t get out of the van. She played defender. She was so upset and crying, felt so awful and that she had let the team down. Eh Doh (the goalie) – the same thing. He just sat down ... in my car. ... He just pulled his jersey over his face and just sobbed. Just had to let it out.”

After a miserable lunch, Sajjad gathered the players together. He recounts the moment: “Our goalkeeper got humiliated the most because they score on him. He feels really bad, started crying. I had to do my best to get him back up. Not just me – the whole team was trying their best to get him back up. Like it’s not your fault, we should have helped you.

“I say to them, ‘It’s not your fault we lost. We are a team. We lose as a team and win as a team. It’s not one individual problem.’ They keep blaming themselves. It wouldn’t help because we already lost that game. ‘Let’s talk forward to the next one. ... We got another game. [To the goalie], it’s not your fault. I should have helped you, the defenders should have helped you. It’s not all about you. Leave it, look to the next game.’ I said, ‘I promise you I’ll do my best not to let them close to you.’ He just stopped [crying] and we were talking and everything was good. Better. He start believing in himself.”

They gathered around the pool table and everybody put their hands in for Nations United. They got on the bus and went back to the field. “The next game, [the goalie] saved really hard shots. The defenders were really protecting him, trying their best not to get any score on it. We tied that game and Coach said, ‘See? That’s the way we should have played in the beginning.’”

Lessons of Soccer

If you ask the kids what they learned over the course of Nations United's season, there is a consistent refrain: "I learned to play position." But with an adult-size perspective, clearly they've learned more. Much more. Henderson pointed out: "I think what I've noticed most is they've developed a real camaraderie with everybody. They're friends now, where they hadn't really known each other before. They all take pride in what they're doing, but they take pride in other people as well. And to see them at school, you just see the confidence. You see them take ownership of their learning; you see them know that they're as good as any of the kids there."

Taylor, in particular, has looked for the correlation between soccer and scholarship; it helps build a case should she want to tackle funding for year two of Nations United. "The [English Language Learner] teacher said the teamwork that they've built on the soccer team has transferred over into the classroom. They had some group project and their group was the first one done; it was all done correctly. ... The other thing, [a couple of the kids] said that all these teachers are telling them, 'Congratulations,' and 'Good job.'"

Taylor added: "I just can't see how it doesn't help in their school. I think they feel so much more confident and connected, with not only just each other but staff. It was on the school announcements that they won the championship, and they felt so proud."

Sajjad says that when he has good games and good practices, his mind feels open. Taylor said: "I just believe so strongly that when kids feel connected to something, they do better in school. Hopefully, too, there's some transference: When they work hard, it pays off. And when there's a failure, you don't just quit, you keep working. ... Try harder, do better, have more grit, stick with things."

One day not long after their first game, Sajjad and Yousif wandered into Amber Strickler's classroom where they had written all their poems about soccer. It took a while for them to come to the point, but what they were shyly hoping was that they could get copies of the photos she had taken at the game.



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Yousif Fartoos was one of the soccer-obsessed students who motivated South Junior High School librarian Mary Karol Taylor to found Nations United. "When I came to the team," he says, "I found new friends. We have fun. We get better at soccer."

Taylor explained: “Well, come to find out – now that my son has connected with them on social media – they all have pictures of them in their Rush jerseys on their profile pictures. It’s giving them an identity. An identity and something to belong to. We all want to belong to something. ... Rush Soccer Club is huge. You’ve been out there, seen all the kids wearing Rush jerseys. And now they are, too.”

Team and Community

When refugees finally, finally get to come to America, the challenges don’t magically disappear. Taylor said: “It’s not easy. It’s a hard thing for them when they come here and they realize they’re working nights, they don’t get to see their family; families are all over the place because everyone’s just trying to make ends meet. They don’t have the larger support of a community; they don’t have all the aunts and uncles and cousins they maybe had back in their home country. It’s hard.

“It’s great for the Boise community to step up. And so many people step up in so many ways. To not only get them set up, but to [help them] feel really connected and fit in, to find a place and belong.” Taylor is not the only one giving her time and energy to Nations United way beyond the scope of librarian. “There’s a lot of awesome, generous people who want to help refugees fit into our community. If we are not embracing them in our community, it’s our loss.”

Besides the support of Rush, other folks have pitched in. For the time between double-header games, teachers at South passed around a sign-up sheet and provided lunch. When Henderson wrote to her son – a goalie on an adult team in the Bay Area – that Nations United’s goalie didn’t have any gloves, he sent a pair, and then he sent a pair of pants and a goalie jersey as well. “That’s kind of what you’re supposed to do,” she said.

Henderson added: “What it’s going to do for a lot of them is [give them] the sense that they can accomplish things, that America really is the land to be in, that there is a future, that there are possibilities here, and that they can be treated as an equal. I think that’s really important for these kids to

understand: That they really are going to become ... a part of American culture.”

Forward Hamsa Jama said: “I am feeling American. Before, a refugee still. Now we’re not.”

Taylor said: “So the first team picture we took – for a lot of them, it’s on their Facebook page. It’s like: Here’s what I’m part of. Their main Facebook photo is of the team. They belong.”



KATHERINE JONES/IDAHO STATESMAN

Final Game of the Season

Nations United ended their season 5-3 with their share of victories and losses. The championship tournament was over the course of three days. They won one game, tied one game, and on Friday night, they lost to rival Boise High 0-4. However, they still had the second-best U-16 coed record, so Saturday’s game was a rematch: No. 1, Boise High vs. No. 2, Nations United. Sajjad said: “Coach just like, ‘Believe in me, believe. Believe in yourself. We got this again.’”

For a tense first half, no one scored, although there were plenty of attempts. Both teams were determined, skilled, and disciplined. Nations United had several shots on goal, but they were too far out. And then midway into the second half,

Justin Karangwa, center, and the United Nations bench cheer from the sidelines during the U-16 coed end-of-season tournament.



Sandrine Niyonsenga, right, gives in to emotional tears after the championship game. She is hugged by Patience Ishimwe, center, and Prisca Hermene.

Hamsa Jama did exactly what his coach told him to do: He got closer to the goal – and scored. The final minutes were agonizing with Coach Fawad orchestrating defensive strategies that players executed on the field. That positions thing.

Coach Fawad said: “It helps you to know what is your purpose. What is your goal, what do you want to accomplish in this position? Before, [when I was a kid], I thought my purpose was to help my team everywhere I could go. But they have their part that they have to do; your job is to do this part and make sure that part is done correctly for you. Everything else would come. Trusting.”

When the whistle blew to end the game, it marked another “before” and “after:” Team Nations United were champions. Players on the field ran to the bench, and the bench stormed the field, cheering worthy of a World Cup victory. Sajjad proclaimed, “This is more important to me than the World Cup.” Everyone hugged, and jumped, and screamed. Sajjad ripped off his shirt. Tears were shed.

Coach Fawad said: “The team has come a long way for being first time, playing in any team. I didn’t win a



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championship on my first-ever team playing.” He laughs now, but he struggled to hold back tears then. “I was emotional actually. I’m kind of tough, trying to tough it up, not to show it. [But] the reason I was emotional was because everything that they win, through each and every game, I was there to see them.”

Prisca Hermene joined the team a little late. Taylor found her during one game cheering on the sidelines for her friends on the field, and the team was desperate for girls. Prisca said: “There’s a reason for every single opportunity that comes up in your life and you should definitely – whatever chance you have – take it. Take it because you never know what could happen.

“That’s the same thing with the world. Even if it’s scary. I was scared [watching that first game]. They looked so good ... and I was like, I don’t think I can, I don’t think I’m as good. And at the end of it, having a medal that says you’re a champion. And you did it. You helped the team win, and you were a part of it. That’s so amazing.”

Team Nations United surrounds Coach Farad Saheb-Khan for a team cheer after the championship medals are passed out.

Future Dreams

Basketball starts soon and then track in the spring. According to Henderson: “A lot of them want to play basketball. I think a lot of them, especially the really fast boys, are going to try out for track, which is going to make our track team incredible. [They learned] the confidence to be in an American sport ... and then to be able to go on to play the other sports that they want to. ... It’s also going to teach them to work in groups of people that they don’t already know.



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Forward Hamsa Jama is honored with the golden shoe and “the most incredible goal” award by Coach Fawad Saheb-Khan, left, and Mary Karol Taylor. Hamsa scored the only — and winning — goal in the championship game.

It’s going to give them a sense of what a team is and how American sports are: They’re not for just insiders, they’re for everybody.

“And just because you can’t go to the [sports] camps and you didn’t go to the camps when you were 4 or 5 years old, or you haven’t played it all your life, you can still pick it up. You can still go; you can still try.”

Spring soccer starts, too. And then there’s the fall season when many of the older kids will try out for the high school

soccer teams. It will be bittersweet to leave Nations United if there is a second year, but there's also a sense of urgency.

Sajjad pointed out: "To be able to get a college scholarship or professional team scholarship, they come and see you at a high school game or practice and they see how good you do. That's how they take professional players. So I have to get on a high school team." It is clear to each of the members of Nations United: Sports is a way to college. Sports offers the opportunity for scholarships to pay for tuition that none of their families can afford.

Sajjad said: "I came here to really get a better education. A better life and an education. In order to become a better person, you got to get to the college." And for those who dream really, really big, playing sports in college is a way to be discovered for professional teams. Defender Claude Chimemana said: "What I think in my life in the future, if I keep playing soccer, I will be a good guy like this. ... I think I am going to help a lot of people when I am rich because of the sports I play. I am going to help my country. Like the refugees who live in Africa, I can go back and help them."

When Taylor set out to find Sajjad and Yousif a soccer team to play on, it was simply because they loved soccer so much. "My son gets to do that. Just by luck of his birth, he gets to play soccer and have this huge, full life of team sports and these kids don't. Maybe they're not the best players to get everybody's attention, but they have passion for the game and they want to play – and they should be able to. That was a big thing that motivated me."

Through Nations United the door to opportunities might be opening. These kids have done more than play soccer, they've excelled. And possibly it's not just soccer that they've excelled at, or that they will excel at. Taylor said: "Maybe Sajjad won't become a pro soccer player, but hopefully ... he became empowered. He experienced that with perseverance you can make something happen in your life. Yeah, I raise money and drive them around and get other people in our community to notice them, but all that is just to give them a little boost. ... Coach Fawad and all these kids took this team on with

commitment. They are the ones who decided to all work together despite the fact that the boys weren't thrilled in the beginning to play with girls; despite the fact that they all were just learning English; and [despite the fact] that they didn't have parents who were figuring all this out for them.

“They decided to figure out how to get cleats, how to get a bike to get to practice. They decided they wanted to all become friends and support one another. They decide they wanted to respect and listen to their coach and support him – even if he made them run or do the bear crawl because they weren't listening to him. Maybe other kids would've just walked away, thinking he was too hard on them.”



KATHERINE JONES/IDAHO STATESMAN

At Whitney Community Center, Nations United team members hang decorations for a post-season awards ceremony and potluck dinner celebration.

The kids really didn't have much to lose by walking away from Taylor's rules or Coach Saheb-Khan's hard practices. They didn't pay to be on the team, and their parents most likely wouldn't have made them stay. “They really are writing their own story,” says Taylor. “Coach Fawad too – at 23, he is a kid himself – with his [life] all ahead of him still. ... We like to think that everyone in America can ‘write their own story.’ But we know some are more empowered than others.”

Only time will tell how a search for soccer books and a persistent librarian will have changed the course of individual

lives – and perhaps of the world. Sajjad imagines how this soccer season will look to him 20 years from now: “It’s going to play a big part. It’s going to become a story how I once came into the library, asked for books; that teacher, she tried her best. I’m really thankful to her. Right now, I’m really thankful she got me on a team. It’s going to become something big, a big part of my life. ... In 20 years, I don’t know where I’ll get; we’ll see. But it started here. It all started here.”



KATHERINE JONES/IDAHO STATESMAN

Sajjad Al Swaiedi thanks Coach Fawad Saheb-Khan at the awards ceremony, a fitting end to the fall season.



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