

Bear Creek Park hosts international soccer games

Northwest Houston church fosters ties with British youths

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The boys in the yellow soccer jerseys and black shorts gave new meaning to the label "visitors."

The soccer team of 16 to 18 year-olds from King's Academy School in Middleborough, Northeast England, were visiting America for 11 days of soccer and culture.



Tony Bullard For the Chronicle

CLOSE MATCH: John Myers, left, with King's Academy challenges Alonso Maldonado with Texas United Houston Pumas in their game at Bear Creek Park on April 14. The Pumas defeated King's Academy 2-1.

"This is why most people join the team," said goalkeeper **James Byrne**, 16. All year, the players have been buzzing about going to the United States during their Easter break, said winger **Andrew Squires**, 16.

The team has a partnership with Champion Forest Baptist Church, 15555 Stuebner-Airline Road, and has been coming across the pond every other year for eight years. Players and coaches stay with church members, and they practice and play games against teams at Bear Creek Park before going to Dallas. King's Academy won its county championship, and this is a great way to end the season, said Coach Rhodes. "This is great for these kids. They get to travel a long distance, go far away from home and experience a different environment. Soccer is the thing that draws these teens together, but they have so much more in common even though they're from different places."

Soccer is secondary

"It's interesting to meet someone from an entirely different environment who has an entirely different way of life," said **Philip Leyerle**, a junior at Klein High School.

In 2003, **John Wills**, then youth minister at Champion Forest Baptist, organized the first King's Academy visit. **Jim Spence** of Sports Quest Inc., who grew up in Bradford, Yorkshire, in northern England and came to the United States in 1992, hosted the team. Church members took over hosting four years ago.

"It's a great opportunity for players here to see real live soccer played at a high level by players who were brought up on soccer," said Spence, who trains seven teams within Texas United Futbol Club (TUFC), which plays and practices at Bear Creek. "It's a big event, and I get excited by how excited these kids get."

The English teams are more physical and have better communication between players than the U.S. teams, said **Deepak Lumba**, who coached the TUFC U16 team that lost to King's Academy in a 4-3 shootout. This game lets his players train against a different style and realize they can compete against challenging, older boys.

The matches are always close, Spence said. And, although they don't count in any standings, they are hotly contested. The TUFC Pumas, composed of 15- and 16-year-olds, beat King's Academy 2-1.

But the trip is probably more about experiencing the culture than playing the game, Rhodes said.

Vincent Sacco, a senior at Klein High School, has been hosted by families during international trips. During spring break, he and other members of the church went to England.

"It was interesting to see what England is like from the English viewpoint, to eat what they eat and experience what they experience," he said.

He wanted to do the same thing for his guests, introducing them to barbecue and other Texas-centric experiences.

It was important to show these teens Christian youths living their faith at home and school, said **Tom Hope**, a student ministry volunteer who transported the team around the Greater Houston area.

King's Academy is a public school, Rhodes said. But it does have a Christian ethos. The nonprofit Sports Quest is a Christian ministry within a soccer-training program, Spence said.

Long-lasting friendships

Student pastor **Jeff Skipper** arranged this year's visit. The team got into Houston April 10 and left for Dallas April 15. In between, they went to Kemah and Galveston, toured Klein Collins High and went to class at Northland Christian High, shopped at Willowbrook Mall, shot skeet and hung out with teens at the church's student building.

Along the way, they made strong friendships.

"The friendships that are developed and maintained through Facebook and email are long-lasting," Hope said.

Two years ago, Leyerle's family hosted two players. He still talks with them, and this year his family hosted two more.

The team flew home April 21, but they'll be back in the United States. Team members will attend the church's summer camp in Laguna Beach, Fla.