

Futbolito Pacoima

Youth program teaches kids they can still be tough, but to keep it on the field

By Connie Llanos, Staff Writer

Posted: 07/02/2010 09:45:15 PM PDT

Updated: 07/02/2010 09:56:24 PM PDT



Raphael Carlos balances a ball on his head during practice for Futbolito, a youth soccer program at David Gonzales Park in Pacoima. (Hans Gutknecht/Staff Photographer)

Growing up in Pacoima, 18-year-old Raphael Carlos got into his fair share of fights, earning a handful of school suspensions and the occasional black eye.

"Out here people want to earn their respect by fighting," Carlos said.

But Carlos knows he's lucky. Plenty of his classmates and friends have landed in jail or dead. Talking about it is enough to make his eyes mist.

Carlos, though, managed to steer clear of a similar fate, thanks in part to a program he was introduced to in middle school, Futbolito Pacoima, that was signing kids up to play soccer for free at a local park.

Four years later, the teen is still at it, now training a new generation of soccer players to stay tough but keep it on the field.

"On the field is a place where we can all co-exist ... it's not about who fights the best but about who plays the best."

Futbolito Pacoima was launched in 2005 to introduce at-risk youth to an organized sport that could keep them busy after school. It was also designed to match them up with positive adult role models in an area long plagued by gang violence.

It is organized by Youth Speak Collective, a nonprofit that runs programs for at-risk kids in the northeast San Fernando Valley.

Recruiting kids between ages 10 and 17, the program teaches a version of soccer called futsal, which requires only five-man teams and uses a smaller, heavier ball and smaller goalposts than the traditional game.



Originally the game was selected to ensure that a smaller number of players could play. The modified version of futbol also allowed kids to play on indoor basketball courts, which can be safer after dark and more available in an area where grassy fields are rare.

On a recent sunny afternoon, 11-year-old Alfredo Gonzales wiped the sweat from his forehead after playing a quick match with his Futbolito teammates at David Gonzales Recreation Center in Pacoima.

"This keeps me busy ... and tired," Alfredo said.

Like many kids from this neighborhood, Alfredo said that being on the field keeps him off the streets where "kids get shot for no reason."

Over the last seven months, according to Los Angeles Police Department statistics, there have been 10 homicides around the Pacoima area - almost a 50 percent increase from last year.

Rapes have nearly doubled from last year, and residents say there are other violent attacks that go unreported every day.

Mayra Esparza, youth coordinator for Youth Speak Collective, said one of her younger brothers was attacked by a group of teens near the public housing complex.

In the small four-person Youth Speak Collective office, she is one of two employees whose siblings have been attacked on the streets of Pacoima.

"Two out of four of us have had someone we know attacked for no reason ... these are kids that are not involved in any gang activity," Esparza said.

"It's like if you live here you've either lost someone, or know someone who has."

The anxiety can be tough on adults, but Cynthia Castillo, a Futbolito coach, said her young players often reveal their stress in other ways.

"They are dealing with so much outside," Castillo said.

"They come to the field and they are angry ... it is hard for them to filter what stays on and off the field."

The game becomes an escape.

"For 90 minutes, everything else stops and everyone is on the field united," said Lenny Marron, 19, a former Futbolito Pacoima player who now coaches as a volunteer.

Castillo and Marron said soccer can teach teamwork and patience, especially because games can often end with few or no goals even after 90 minutes of intense play.

"There are no easy payoffs in soccer," Castillo said.

Beyond the field, Guillermo Cespedes, director of the Los Angeles Gang Reduction Youth Development organization, said his group uses programs like Futbolito Pacoima to give at-risk kids and teens a way to interact with their peers in a positive way.

"Soccer becomes a pro-social activity ... where we can counteract negative peer influence with positive experiences," Cespedes said.

Alfredo Gonzales' mother Theresa was ecstatic when she was referred to the Futbolito Pacoima program.

A single mother of three, Gonzales struggles to keep tabs on her kids, but paying for after-school programs can be overwhelming.

"This is a great way for him to stay mentally and physically occupied on something positive," Gonzales said.

Bouncing the futsal ball on the tip of his foot, Alfredo Gonzales said playing has also taught him how to "open up."

Even in 90 degree weather, Alfredo said he'd take a day on the field over just about any other activity.

"I could be getting into trouble ... instead I'm here having fun."

