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Soccer tourney brings Arabs, Jews together

BY JULIE BIEN

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Despite the summer heat radiating off of the soccer field, dozens of former professional soccer players from all over the world — and of varying faiths — gathered to play a friendly "Soccer Peace Tournament" on June 2 at Calabasas High School.

As athletes sprinted and fans cheered, one voice could be heard above all else. It was the biting commentary of Zouheir Bahloul, who good-naturedly teased each player during the four matches of the day.

One of the most recognizable stars of the Israeli soccer community, Bahloul is a former player who now is famous for his colorful commentary and sports journalism. As an Israeli Palestinian, he is passionate about using soccer to promote peace and coexistence between Arabs, Israelis and Americans — a triumvirate that's had its fair share of conflict throughout the years.

So he was thrilled to be part of an event that matched up former members of the Israeli national soccer team with teams made up of local players — a U.S. team as well as teams made up of American Afghans and American Iranians (winners of the tournament). All of the participants once played professionally.

"I think there is a lot of value within this [Israeli] team and this tournament," Bahloul said. "Our team is a mix of Arabs and Jews playing together, coexisting together, cooperating together and living together. I think this is a very noble example of how we can solve our problems with sports, because sports are very pure."

The peace tournament was organized by Ben Drillings, a chiropractor who lives in Chatsworth, and sponsored by the Israeli American Council (IAC), formerly the Israeli Leadership Council.

"I was a soccer player on the Israeli national team and played with Rifaat Tourk, the first Arab and Muslim to play on the Israeli national team. ... We became friends but haven't seen each other in 31 years," Drillings said. "But we got in touch and we thought this tournament would be the beginning of



Israeli veteran player Diana Redman, the first female player on the Israeli national team, faces off with a player from the Los Angeles Maccabi team. Photo by Julie Bien

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years, Drillings said. But we got in touch, and we thought this tournament would be the beginning of another peace effort here."

Tourk, who lives in Jaffa and coached the Israeli team in the tournament, has spent his entire post-soccer career working on building relations between Arabs and Jews in Israel.

"I have a foundation for kids that has Arab kids working besides Jewish kids in order to make mixed life possible," Tourk said. "I try my best to move these kids forward, socially, to make them share life — each beside the other."

Dikla Kadosh, director of community events and volunteering for the IAC, said that is exactly the goal the group set out to accomplish.

"There's not much at stake, but we wanted to create an environment of peace by playing against local Iranian teams and Afghani teams," Kadosh said. "And the reason we wanted to be involved is because it's something different. The whole mission of the IAC is to create programming that connects people to one another, and to the culture in Israel, and soccer is part of the culture."

Qadir Latifi, one of the veteran Afghani players who participated in the tournament, was excited to take part in something with so many nationalities represented.

"Our team has played in tournaments before, but it was mostly just Afghans. We've never played in a tournament that's more international," Latifi said, "so I'm proud to know that we're going to be able to play for our country, and everyone else is playing for their countries."

Although the Israeli team was the only one in the tournament that had to travel — the other three teams are based in Los Angeles and play together in adult community leagues — it still meant a lot to everyone involved for these communities to be playing together under the banner of peace.

"I think it will help build better relationships within the communities out here," said Shaul Maimon, captain of the Israeli team. "Football [soccer] brings everyone together. Anyone can play, so it makes for good relationships between people, and maybe, I hope, for the countries."

This tournament also helped to break gender barriers. Diana Redman, the first female member of the Israeli national team, made an appearance as well.

"I saw something for the event in a magazine and e-mailed Ben [Drillings] and said, 'What's going on?' And he said, 'Come on and join us!' Redman said.

"It was really wonderful to be playing here as part of the event today," she continued. "It's the kind of thing I like to be involved in. I've been playing soccer my whole life, and I hope people are reminded that we have a women's team, and there are a lot of people out there who want to do these kinds of events."

Bahloul believes the stakes are high — much higher than a single soccer game.

"We are here," he said, "to prove to ourselves and others that we can make it together and set a good example for the new generation."

A version of this article appeared in print.

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