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Local

Soccer goal is helping the homeless

The sport makes a difference in people's lives and gives them hope, the players say.

By JAMES A. FUSSELL
The Kansas City Star

Kevin Polk, the goalie for the North Texas Stars soccer team, never played soccer growing up. But there is one thing that more than qualifies him for the position.

He's been homeless for the last two years.

The Stars don't play in a regular soccer league. Some of the players are in their 40s and 50s. Others have had their teeth knocked out in street fights. On Saturday, teams from across the country came together at Avila University for a very different "Street Soccer" tournament in which every one of the players is now — or was recently — homeless.

Homeless soccer?

Polk knows what you think.

Shiftless derelict. Drinker. Bum.

Think again.

Two years ago, the 41-year-old was living the American dream. He was engaged to be married and had a good job in Denton, Texas, with a company that built the interiors of Gulfstream and Learjet airplanes. He even went to Brazil to build one.



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The Street Soccer program brought together teams of homeless or formerly homeless people Saturday at Avila University. Among them was Lance Holmes of St. Louis, who hugged an opposing player after a match.

"I was very good at what I did," he said.

Then, one night while he was watching TV, his life changed in an instant. He felt a squeezing under his left armpit, and it felt like there was an elephant sit-

ting on his chest. He knew what that meant. His father had died of heart attack at 54.

Polk's heart attack landed him in the

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hospital for several weeks. By the time doctors placed five stents in his heart and put him on nine medications, he had lost his job, his fiancée and his apartment. With no relatives to stay with, he soon learned what it was like to be homeless.

"It's like camping out for a really long time," he said.

He slept in a tent in the woods and ate at churches and the Salvation Army. What had happened to his life? The negativity and despair of the streets began to rub off on him. Later, at a shelter, a worker invited him to play homeless street soccer.

The experience has given him friends, hope and a positive new direction. Now he's back in an apartment and trying to rebuild his life.

But on Saturday all he was thinking about was the game, played on an indoor basketball court with portable goals. Wearing a black jersey, red socks and a University of Texas ball cap turned backward on his head, he crouched low in front of the net.

Wham!

A savagely kicked ball banged hard off his brown-and-black goalie gloves and bounded away.

"Nice save!" a teammate yelled. He stroked his salt-and-pepper goatee as a knot of men scuttled in front of him, foot-fighting for the ball. In minutes, it was over. Polk's team won the game 3-2, advancing to the finals against a team from Minneapolis.

Jose Acuna is the Minneapolis coach. When he's not coaching soccer, Acuna is an outreach worker for a service agency called Youth Link that connects homeless youth with services.

He's seen the homeless street soccer program make differences in people's lives. The program helps homeless peo-



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Four teams from Missouri, Michigan, Minnesota and Texas competed in Saturday's Street Soccer tournament. Ryan Robbins (left) of Fort Worth and Tura Hassan of Minneapolis battled for the ball during a match. The team from Minneapolis won the event.

ON THE WEB

For more information about Street Soccer, visit StreetSoccerUSA.org.

ple think differently about themselves and their future.

"Now they belong to a different community," he said. "It's not the homeless community. It's the soccer community. They play for each other, they work hard, and it gives them energy. They're getting exercise, doing something positive, and then they take that into their personal lives, and see that they can achieve their goals."

Even, perhaps, become a doctor.

One of Acuna's star players is Hanad Abdi. The 20-year-old, born in Somalia, came to the U.S. with his family in 2006. A talented student, he earned a scholarship to St. Paul College,

where he became a premed major. But he found it impossible to study in his family's cramped apartment, which housed his mother, his father, and 10 brothers and sisters.

He had to get out on his own. But since his family couldn't afford to pay for a dorm, he soon found himself at a homeless shelter, where at least he had some space to study. When he was invited to play soccer, he jumped at the chance. Today, he's not only helping his teammates become better at the game but also encouraging them to be better in their lives.

"I give them the best wishes, and I say, 'You guys can do anything if you try,'" he said.

When he becomes a doctor, Abdi promised, he will not forget his soccer friends or the workers at the shelter. He pledged to come back and help the ones who have helped him.

But that would have to wait. He ran out onto the court for

the final game.

Polk crouched low as Abdi snaked through a crowd with the ball. As he maneuvered into the clear, he sent a blinding shot whizzing into the corner of the net.

Goal!

Abdi's team had won the game. But afterward as they shook hands, Kevin Polk — and all the other players — said they felt like winners, too. As for Polk, he will never think of the homeless the same way again.

"I thought the homeless was like a guy pushing a shopping cart," he said. "But there are families out there, and young people, and all they need is a chance. I'll just say this: Don't look down on homeless people. You never know who they are. And God forbid, next week it could be you."

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