

There was a very different kind of hustle and bustle on State Street in downtown Harrisburg this Labor Day. Instead of the usual politicians and Pontiacs and lobbyists and Lincolns, the J.T. Dorsey Foundation and the Central Pennsylvania Youth Soccer League (CPYSL) partnered to fill the street with soccer balls and goals and about 60 kids displaying fancy footwork and a contagious soccer spirit, in their second annual “Free Kick” soccer tournament.

The J.T. Dorsey Foundation is a non-profit organization that provides education and wellness services to at risk youth and their families. Its goal is to nurture and educate children in social and financial need to lead fulfilling and productive lives. CPYSL is the major financial supporter of the “Free Kick” tournament and works year-round to provide opportunities for players to play soccer outside their normal club program, play with highly talented players, advance in individual and game skills and be identified for an Olympic Development Program. The two organizations join forces each year to present the “Free Kick” soccer tournament to give inner-city children, ages 6-18, a chance to play soccer, test their skills on the street surface, meet new friends and participate in an important exercise of teamwork.

Teams of three competed in seven minute games in round-robin format on State Street’s unforgiving asphalt surface.

“Playing in the 'Free Kick' is a tough challenge because you play on the street,” says 15-year-old Abdoul Nachar-Allayn, who lives in Harrisburg. “You can't slide and that makes you work to control the ball, work on your footwork and use your team,” he says.

And that's just what Julian Dorsey, executive director of the J.T. Dorsey Foundation, was hoping the athletes would figure out - teamwork.

“Everybody wins in our 'Free Kick' tournament,” he says. “And it’s spectacular to have this many kids out for fun, just enjoying the game, creating new friendships and learning to work together and learning that the game doesn’t have to be formalized to enjoy,” he says.

An increased level of participation this year, coupled with a new, central, location at the Kipona Festival, brought spectators to the side lines.

“Having the tournament on State Street helped to put the kids in the spotlight and helped create awareness about the sport of soccer,” Dorsey says. “People stop by and they see kids from the suburbs working together with kids from Harrisburg, making friendships. That’s what it’s all about. The world is diverse. You can’t talk about diversity if you can’t create diversity,” he says.

And speaking of diversity, the 'Free Kick' soccer tournament is also co-ed, putting girls and boys face-to-face on the asphalt field.

Andrea Rodriguez is 13 years old. This was her second year participating in the 'Free Kick.' "Playing soccer with boys is the same as playing soccer with girls," she says. "Take 'em on! This tournament is really fun. You get to spend time with your friends and play soccer!"

And Johan Pizarro, 17, participated in the Harrisburg tournament for the first time this year. "It's nice to help people who are just starting to play and show them about the sport," he says. Soccer is a great way to get in shape."

John Gregg is the Director of Coaching and Player Development for CPYSL and says his organization sponsors the event to promote youth soccer in underdeveloped areas, as it's played throughout the world. "This country is one of the only countries where soccer is a suburban sport," he says. "You don't have to have a grass field or backyard to play soccer. People in the inner cities can play, too. Throughout the world, soccer is played on streets, hillsides, dirt, sand and is a sport that everyone plays no matter what kind of economic background they come from," he says.

The 'Free Kick' soccer tournament brings young athletes together to play soccer on asphalt; a challenge of teamwork and toughness, it puts young men and women on the same team; a challenge of confidence and camaraderie, and it incorporates a variety of skill levels and ages; a challenge of patience and perseverance. It's not only all-terrain soccer the J.T. Dorsey Foundation and CPYSL are sponsoring in their annual 'Free Kick' tournament; they're inspiring personal growth, development and an appreciation for diversity in life. They're also giving 90 percent of the athletes a chance to win their first trophy or medal in their lifetime.

Dorsey and Gregg hope the "Free Kick" tournament will some day take over State Street at the Kipona Festival. Their dream is to have soccer balls and goals and kids displaying fancy footwork and that contagious soccer spirit all the way from Front Street to the steps of Pennsylvania's Capitol.