



Guangzhou Youth Soccer League – An Evolving Story

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The Guangzhou Youth Soccer League (GYSL; www.gzsoccer.org) was first established in 2001 by a small group of expats looking for ways for their children to play organized soccer. The first location for the GYSL pitch was at Golden Lake Gardens and involved roughly 40 children playing in somewhat ad-hoc games. Given the need for organized sports for children within Guangzhou's expat community and the obvious benefits and fun associated to GYSL, word got around and within two seasons, the popularity of GYSL quickly outgrew the capacity of Golden Lake Garden's small pitch.

The venue then moved to the pitch of Apache Footwear, a factory partner of adidas, located east of Baiyun Mountain in 2003. There, more players and more teams played under the guidance of a growing core of dedicated expat volunteers – the Morel's, Buchgeher's, Kilian's, Smith's & Keefe's to name a few - with a clear mission. While ensuring that each child has a fun and memorable experience regardless of skill or ability level, the ever-improving GYSL organization always focused on teamwork, sportsmanship, and soccer fundamentals.

In 2006, the ever-growing GYSL organization teamed up with the Guangdong University of Foreign Studies where the games were held at the University grounds pitch in Baiyun; subsequently since 2007 on a world-class level grass pitch with ultra-modern stadium to boot in Panyu's Uni-Town.

But enough with this brief intro to GYSL history – the real stories are those of the organization team, the sponsors, the parent volunteers and obviously the children themselves.

GYSL is a non-profit, organization – organizers, age-division leaders or coaches do not get paid for their volunteering services. One cannot under-estimate the number of selfless hours and effort put in by the organization team to set-up and run a program of this size entirely with multi-national volunteer help. GYSL would not be possible without the organizers and coaches –an exemplary group of people that are willing to give something back to the community and its children.

GYSL's key leadership and organization team members for 2008 were: Peter Lohrum, Bruno Forcione, Federico Roth, Ray+Shelly Smith, Bob Jones, Robin Leeson, Joe Rocha, Stefan Truebenbach with support from Steve Black & Disha Bhojwani.

Typically the volunteering begins late-spring every year in preparation for a fall game season. From procuring the pitch, uniforms, equipment; finding the much needed sponsors; recruiting referee staff and sourcing F&B, transport logistics and medical support. Followed by the hectic marketing and running the registration day itself right after back-to-school. This year there were over 400 players. Thereafter, soccer fanatics like Federico Roth, with the help of the age division leaders, spend over 48 hours in putting up the teams based on age with a balanced mix of boys and girls of different sizes and skill levels in order to ensure an even playing field, as much as is possible. They then assign the game schedules for the season – no small undertaking for sure!

The season actually begins in mid-October; with the first game day of ten being hectic. Players get together for the first time, meet with their coaches, get their uniforms, get a brief introduction to the lay of the land and then start the games. It's amazing to see how quickly and well the games and consecutive game days end up running themselves overall given the size – 400 plus players in 42 teams – and the voluntary nature of this organization's support system. For that, we need to thank all the parents and guardians who volunteered their services as coaches, assistant-coaches and team-moms for all teams!

After each game day, I then have the pleasure of updating the website on Sunday evening with the latest scores plus pictures provided by many parents. It is hard to imagine the number of emails we receive and web-hits to the GYSL website after the updates are done – everyone from parents and children delighted to see their pictures online to that of parents empathetically letting us know if we got some of the game results wrong!

All this would not have been possible without the continuous support provided by organizations such as Apache Footwear in the past and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies since 2006, financial donations from corporate sponsors. Needless to say that the registration fees from participating children plus the donations from several sponsors allows GYSL to cover significant operating costs - pitch rental, referees, team uniforms, etc.

Not only does GYSL provide fitness and allows children to improve their soccer skills it also serves as a great platform for parents and guardians to indulge in Saturday morning socializing and networking while enjoying watching and supporting their children play and have fun, with great music playing in the background . These are some of the many reasons for GYSL's steady growth over the years from its humble, ad-hoc Golden Lake Garden beginnings with about 40 children to now roughly 400 children aged between 4-15 years playing on 42 multi-national teams.

GYSL's 2008 season was a resounding success despite one brutally hot game day, a wet and muddy one and a few, late colder ones. A lot of energy was expended in play, new skills discovered and developed, thankfully no serious injuries and most importantly, tons of fun had by all. The closing ceremonies and trophy awards - where every player is a winner - were a lot of fun too. It was nice to see the positive reaction from all involved regarding the end-of-season trophies & water-bottle gifts given to the children. Despite the many challenges involved in setting up GYSL season-after-season, seeing one's children and that of friends playing together, learning a new sport, furthering their sporting skills and hearing "Thank you coach" from the children or "You guys make our Saturdays so much fun!" from the parents make all the efforts well worth it!

The GYSL organization team would like to take this opportunity to extend sincere thanks to all the volunteers, parents, coaches and children who participated in making the 2008 season a resounding success. GYSL 2008 season scores and pictures remain available on www.gzsoccer.org until June 2009, after which the website will be updated in preparation for the upcoming 2009 season!

Due to the nomadic nature of expat life, maintaining a capable and dedicated core team of volunteers to organize GYSL has been and continues to be a challenge. GYSL strongly depends and counts on new expats to willingly and selflessly join our ranks to bring some fresh blood, new ideas, energy and passion to continue and evolve our mission, so please email gysl.organization@gmail.com if you are interested in supporting the 2009 season as a key volunteer.

We look forward to seeing you again next year for GYSL 2009 season...IT'S A KICK!!!