

Hello. My name is Matt Palmer and I have been involved in Southern California soccer since I stepped on a field at the age of five, 23 years ago. I coached with Laguna Niguel Soccer Club from its beginning in 2002, through the conclusion of last year's season. During my time with LNSC, I enjoyed working with coaches and administrators who believe in individual player development first, and achieving a winning record second. Last year I made the difficult decision to take the season off from coaching and explore some other opportunities I had with my graphic design business, as well as do a little traveling. I didn't know that my year off would create an opportunity to help change and develop players around the world.

My wife and I accepted an invitation to Cato Ridge, near Durban, South Africa, to visit a friend who founded an orphanage there called God's Golden Acre. I heard updates about the orphanage online and from individuals who traveled to GGA and my wife brought to my attention the soccer program at the orphanage and in the surrounding areas. I considered bringing some spare soccer balls I had accumulated, but hearing that the boys were being sponsored by European soccer clubs, I thought my second hand gear might be seen as patronizing next to their brand-new equipment. My assumptions couldn't have been further from the actual situation on the ground in Valley of a Thousand Hills, South Africa. Our stay at the orphanage was awesome and humbling. The work they do putting shattered young lives back together again really put our own little problems into focus. On

one of our last days there, the local soccer league coordinator, Miyoyo, asked if I wanted to see some league games down in "the valley". I agreed to go, but had no clue where we were going or what I would encounter. What I did know is that the valley he spoke of is where the orphanage receives a majority of their children; the valley has one of the highest HIV/AIDS mortality rates in the world.

We made our way down into the valley making several stops to pick up players in a small Toyota van. Eventually the van made for 8 carried a team of 16 players and one coach. Africans do what they can with what they have. When we arrived I could see three other teams warming up and being organized by their coaches. I walked across the dirt field with my team and watched as the coach pulled some very nice uniforms (won 2 years earlier in a local tournament) and 8 pairs of heavily worn soccer shoes out of a large duffle bag. The shoes were lined up on the touchline, awaiting 8 of our players as he called out the starting line up. There are 11 players on the field; meaning 3 players were going to play without shoes. I was concerned but it appeared to be the norm as players without shoes played with as much passion and aggression as those with. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary for the first half of the game but 15 minutes into the second half the game ball split and deflated. I didn't think anything of it at first, coming from Southern California where soccer balls are always ready to be thrown on the field, but as the game stopped and the players looked around the sidelines to the hundred or so onlookers I suddenly

realized IT WAS THE ONLY BALL ON THE FIELD. These kids had no current, fancy European sponsors; most of the equipment was two years old. They played four practices and two games a week with the same stuff. My heart sank as Miyoyo and another coach jumped into the van and drove away to get another ball. I watched three other games that day and each team was as poorly equipped. I shared the

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sidelines that dusty afternoon with knowledgeable, dedicated coaches and some pretty fantastic players; talking, smiling and joking. On the plane ride home, I couldn't stop thinking about the experience.

I decided that I needed to talk with my soccer friends at home about forming the foundation that is now called FreeKick!. One of these friends is Angel Varela, founding member and President of Laguna Niguel soccer club. Knowing Angel's dedication to the development of players and the game of soccer, he was my first stop. I told him about my experience in the Valley of a Thousand Hills and he knew exactly where I was going. We both got

excited at the thought of California players of all ages sharing surplus equipment with people on the other side of the globe and making lasting connections with other cultures. We talked about how our simple but fiercely loved sport could bring hope and vitality to a part of the world so overwhelmed by disease, poverty and violence.

I have been approached by other non-profit organizations offering to help with the program, but I have believed from the start that LNSC would be the right choice to give FreeKick! the momentum needed to turn this idea into action. There is no other soccer community I know that can put an effort like this on the right track; an organization that embraces so many of the ideals I share about the value of sport to bring direction and cohesion to so many people in the world. We want to get soccer shoes on the feet of players who are as passionate about soccer as we are.

Here's how you can help FreeKick! get a kick-start:

- » **Give shoes and soccer balls** – If you have spare pairs of soccer shoes lying around the house that would fit 10 – 17 year old boys and girls, tie them together, put them in a grocery bag and drop them off at one of our collection locations. Or soccer balls, one size fits all.

Ace Tube Bending
14 Journey
Aliso Viejo, CA 92656
(Aliso Creek Road, Turn onto Journey, first left then veer right, location on right side)

- » **Organize a soccer shoe drive** – Ask others on your team to bring shoes to practice so you can drop off a number of pairs at once. If you know anyone playing soccer in AYSO or another club, consider organizing a team drive with them as well.

- » **Make a donation** – FreeKick! is in need of seed money to help promote the organization, but more importantly, to ship shoes and soccer balls to South Africa. Please make checks out to LNSC*, noted for FreeKick! and mail to:

LNSC
24 Camberley
Laguna Niguel, CA 92677

**All funds are tax deductible through LNSC, a non-profit organization. Funds will be forwarded in full to FreeKick!*

Thanks for reading my story. I hope you will consider helping equip my friends in South Africa with soccer shoes and soccer balls. I believe that FreeKick! can only be successful with open dialog from motivated individuals like you. If you have any questions or suggestions for the program, please contact me directly by phone or email.

Your friend,



Matt Palmer

Founder, FreeKick!

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KICK!
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