

## **EXPERIENCE—MARK DIVINCENZO, BUFFALO, N.Y. A LEAGUE OF HIS OWN**

### **Mark diVincenzo confronts discrimination within his community youth soccer league.**

As a community league soccer coach in Buffalo, N.Y., I was asked to take over an under-16-year-old team that needed rebuilding. All along I had been asking myself, “Why am I doing this?” It was taking me away from my career as a fine artist, my family and, my responsibility as a district leader within the SGI-USA. However, based on SGI President Ikeda’s encouragement to become active in the community, I decided to commit myself to the task.

I gathered a group of foreign kids that I knew through my wife, Susan, who is an ESL teacher in an inner-city high school. A lot of boys came out, enough to develop two teams. Many of them were refugees and I wanted to give them a chance to be part of a team, to give them an opportunity that they would never get in their own countries. I wanted them to experience club-level travel soccer in the U.S. The boys barely spoke English—they were from the Sudan, Somalia, Togo, Vietnam, Laos, Greece, Spain, Serbia, Kosovo and others mixed in with Americans. We were the “city teams.”

I certainly know that racism exists and I have always fought for justice, but I truly never experienced it firsthand so severely as I did with my teams. Other teams were frightened of us just because we looked and sounded different. It was so obvious that, in the beginning, we laughed about it and the boys nicknamed themselves (sarcastically, of course) “The Immigrants.” I guess it was their way of easing the tension, but I see now that it did not deal with the real issue.

Several games went by with me not knowing everything that was being said on the field. I learned later that there were vicious racial slurs thrown at my players. At every game, while the slander and taunting were directed at my team, I would just encourage the boys not to get influenced.

But it started to become more and more of an issue, so much so that every time I chanted, the team was always at the forefront of my mind. I really believed that I was controlling the situation, but I was wrong. As quickly as a flash fire, a nasty fight broke out at one of the games; it went out of control and when the chaos ended, I just dropped my head, let the air out of my lungs and was devastated. I couldn’t believe it. Here I am, the Buddhist, the leader, the one who fights for peace and there is my team out there fist-fighting and throwing karate kicks.

One player involved in the fight was Phillip, who told me that he defended himself because he was being called names. I told him it was wrong, that violence was unacceptable, but I don’t think what I said penetrated him.

As Arun Gandhi says: “The relationship between passive violence and physical violence is the same as the relationship between gasoline and fire. Acts of passive violence (name-calling, teasing, insulting) generate anger in the victim, and since the victim has not learned how to use anger positively, he or she abuses anger and generates physical violence. Thus, it is passive violence that fuels the fire of physical violence.”

These boys have been so badly treated by people with such ingrained hatred toward

them that by me admonishing them not to fight, it only showed them that I did not understand their situation. Fighting was the only way they knew because they were never taught any other way. I preached fair play and expected my players to rise above the negativity, but now I see that I was being idealistic.

At the following practice, I shared President Ikeda's guidance with them: "Jesse Owens, who won four gold medals at the 1936 Berlin Olympics, later remarked that one's inner life is the true Olympics. Life itself is an Olympics where we strive each day to better our own personal records" (*For Today and Tomorrow*, p. 191).

It was heartfelt and I think they felt that I was trying to teach them to win from the inside. We were happy and united—but the worst was yet to come. Even though I was working with my team on this issue, the league and the referees seemed ignorant of the situation.

I started to get very concerned when two games had passed and the tension was getting worse. One thing that kept going through my mind was, could this be a racist league without the officials recognizing it? You would think that in the sports world—especially soccer, since it is an international sport—that all human beings are equal. Labeling the league as racist is serious. But what I have seen and witnessed with my exclusively multi-racial team in this league made me question that possibility. I also kept thinking, what are these boys (who were blurting out racial slurs) being taught at home? One thing's for sure, the parents and the officials were ignoring this discrimination. This had to stop.

The next game was so repulsive, abusive and slanderous that I began protesting to the referee. I became very angry, not just about this game but about the entire season. Sure enough, Phillip was pushed and he retaliated, and a fight broke out. Another teammate flipped out, and I had to run, tackle and restrain him. There was so much chaos that it became dangerous out there. We adults were scrambling to gain control.

When I settled my one player down, he said he couldn't take it anymore. I looked at him and said, "You are right." I continued: "Listen. There will be changes. I promise, because now I see clearly what the real issue is and the league is going to hear from me."

I was so angry, it was amazing that I even kept my composure. When one is treated so unfairly, you want to strike back! But that of course never solves anything. It was my responsibility to do anything I could to cease human degradation and bring justice.

I was determined to show the league the prejudice that existed and to teach them about passive violence. I chanted to overcome my anger and to allow my deepest wisdom and ability to influence my environment positively. I then took action by sending a serious letter to the league, protesting the season and exposing the racism that was present. I also, insisted—diplomatically—on Phillip's reinstatement from his season-long suspension. I also spoke to some people of influence and informed them that my story could make the newspapers.

Finally, I contacted a lawyer to file a legal affidavit in the event we needed to press charges against the league for discrimination. I then went back to my team and told them everything I did so they could learn the correct way to handle a situation like this. I think they were a little amazed that a "white American"—their coach—would do all this for them. I just told them that all human beings are equal and that this was a real life experience that I hoped they would learn from.

A top official eventually called me and we talked for 45 minutes. Even though it was like pulling teeth at times, I knew that when we were done, he understood that I was someone who was very clear on the seriousness of this issue. I made sure his life heard

everything I had to say. The power of my prayer was evident.

The next day, Phillip was reinstated without a formal hearing, which set a precedent. That weekend there was a regional tournament with 80 or so teams. It was like the dark clouds lifted and the sun was beaming. The air was so clear and every referee and team treated us with the utmost respect — there wasn't one iota of a racist remark. My team was so happy to feel accepted. After the tournament, the coordinator came to us and personally invited us back the next year. He told us that we are the team of the future and that we were an example of what world soccer is all about.

The remaining three games were equally as great. The best part is that I proved to my team and to myself that humanity can win, but you have to work at it and you have to make the right causes.

Chanting Nam-myoho-renge-kyo is truly amazing. While I was wondering why I was working with this team of immigrant boys in the beginning of the season, the answer was evolving — to do my mission, to be a humanistic leader in society and to set an example for the 18 boys who witnessed and won in a battle of racism without the use of violence.

With President Ikeda as my mentor, I will continue to follow his example “to strive to better my own personal record.”