



Soccer partners find kicks together

Wildcats, WW-PSA eye future

By Bob Nuse, Sports Editor

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Vince Baldino prefers to look at the big picture.

And in his big picture, he can see years into the future when girls' soccer players in the West Windsor-Plainsboro Soccer Association have come through the ranks and are now playing at the highest level with the New Jersey Wildcats.

"I think the Wildcats give the West Windsor-Plainsboro Soccer Association something to look up to," said Baldino, the president of the Wildcats. "With a lot of soccer associations, you develop and develop, but what's the goal? If you see the Wildcats, it gives the girls a goal that someday they want to play for that team."

The Wildcats, of the United Soccer League's W-League, have formed a partnership with the WW-PSA that should pay dividends for both sides. From the Wildcats' perspective, they are now aligned with a group that will provide practice fields, fan support and maybe, someday, players. For WW-PSA, the partnership should provide many benefits.

"Until recently, we played our games from May until the first week of August and it was over," said Pat Ruta, the Director of Marketing for the Wildcats and a West Windsor resident. "Now, what we're doing is we're creating a youth organization around the Wildcats and reaching out to the local clubs so we can take some of the trainers and coaches we have and use that expertise at the younger level. It's really a working partnership between the younger players and the women."

The WW-PSA includes 2,400 players. There are 1,600 recreational players, 600 travel and more in an adult program. The group has been expanding its facilities and upgrading others. Now, with the help of the Wildcats, those upgrades are in full swing.

"One of those parks is as of yet completely undeveloped," said Robin Dean, the Executive Director of WW-PSA. "Duck Pond Park was earmarked a few years ago for athletic field development. The location is big enough to accommodate four full-sided soccer fields. We have plans initially to build three grass fields adjacent to each other. And that work will probably start in August this year so we can bring the fields on line next year.

"The fourth field area is a bigger, long term plan that we have earmarked to be a synthetic turf facility with bleachers, lights, and possibly concessions. The key is to raise the money to do it."

That fourth field, when it is completed, could become the home base for the Wildcats. And in an ideal world, it would give the young female players in the program a goal to reach — of someday playing for the Wildcats.

"For three months out of the year it would be the Wildcats home base," Dean said. "And for the rest of the year it would be the West Windsor-Plainsboro Soccer Association headquarters and training center. The initial development is already in place. The township has put in the basic infrastructure with an access road and parking. And we've already basically approved the funds and planning for the three grass fields starting this year."

Until that time, the partnership figures to still pay dividends for WW-PSA. Members of the Wildcats will conduct clinics for players and coaches, while also being able to use WW-PSA fields for their training.

"Part of this is we integrate the Wildcats training program for our girls from a young age," Dean said. "The Wildcats look at developing select summer teams. We've talked about the U-23 girls' league. This could essentially be a feeder program into the Wildcats team. Or the Wildcats can produce more than one team and play in more than one league.

"Eventually, we create an environment where girls who are currently in college come back for the summer and train with the Wildcats. We host the Wildcats practices on our fields in West Windsor. And for an hour and a half on those fields before the practices start, the Wildcats players and coaches run training sessions for West Windsor youth players. Then they stick around and watch the seniors practice. And from the Wildcats point of view, they are developing a fan base."

The Wildcats will train this season on the newly upgraded field at Conover Park beginning May 12. The Wildcats will be the first to use the new field. Down the line, they hope to pay back the program with instruction, camps and development of players.

"Youth Soccer Alliance, in conjunction with the Wildcats and West Windsor, we've started a Camp of Champions Series and we want to bring high level, elite soccer players to participate in a soccer camp, clinic before the players go to Beijing," said Wildcats coach Socrates Nicolaidis, who will have Christie Pearce-Rampone and Shannon Boxx at the camp July 7-11.

"That will start the elite training of the players in the area. Later, the players that have started in West Windsor and have gone on to play in college, they come back now as experienced soccer players and they could be coaching and putting something back into the community. They can become mentors for the young kids."

It's a situation that everyone involved is excited about and appears to be able to benefit all involved.

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