

# Building Leaders

Youth Futures International's Leadership Through Sportsmanship is designed to help soccer players build their skills on and off the field.

**F**or young soccer players, perhaps nothing can help development more than getting out of their comfort zone and becoming fully immersed in new experiences. For those with the ambition and desire to experience an international trip that simultaneously focuses on soccer and service, look no further than Youth Futures International (YFI) and its Leadership Through Sportsmanship program.

Founded by Executive Director Dave Butler, YFI is a non-profit organization based in Amherst, Mass. YFI has been sending young people abroad for almost a decade after starting out by providing summer camp programs for youths diagnosed with HIV/AIDS in 1994. In 2010, YFI launched its first Serve, Learn, & Empower program in Ghana and added its Ultimate Med Internship in India in 2014 and Leadership Through

Sportsmanship in the U.K. 2016. The organization's programs are designed for high school and/or college students who are strong students and are looking to experience unique international service and educational opportunities.

## Unique Experience

In 2017, YFI is putting together the second year of its Leadership Through Sportsmanship program in London, England for high school-aged girls and boys soccer players. In the first year of the program in 2016, YFI partnered with London-based soccer clubs Queens Park Rangers and Millwall.

A total of 12 participants headed across the pond to spend a week with QPR in West London and a week in Southeast London with Millwall. Most of the participants were

at least high school varsity-level soccer players, with several of the female players who were getting ready for college soccer. This is an important aspect of participation, as students will have a more enhanced experience if they play the game and understand it to a decent level due to the immersion into an elite level youth player



environment.

“During the week with us, the students experienced engaging in training like a young professional player, working with academy coaches, experiencing nutritional talks, and getting to experience every aspect of what it is like to be part of a professional team,” says Pablo Blackwood, youth and communities manager at QPR. Blackwood has been in his current role with QPR since 2013 and has been working alongside young people for more than 15 years.

“They got to see behind the scenes, taking in all of the media and hospitality elements as well as seeing the first team play on match day,” he adds. “From a social community strand, they went out into the local communities and engaged with our soccer school participants, which are ages 5-11. They also worked alongside our Tiger Cubs for adults and young people with down syndrome, and they got to take part in Get Started in Football, an initiative run by QPR and hosted by the Princess Trust, a large U.K. charity that works with young people. I work with that group as a tutor, and they help young people with coaching education. The YFI participants received first hand experience of what we have to go through to become first level FA coaches.”

### Team Approach

Although QPR and Millwall are rivals on the field, when it comes to community work, the organizations know how to work together. This is why a joint partnership with an organization such as YFI works so well.

“We all share the same common objective of empowering young people through football,” Blackwood says. “They have very similar elements of community work to what we



do at QPR. In fact, through London United, all of the professional London clubs have an agreement that ensures we do not obstruct the community work that we are all doing. We do the opposite, making sure young people are served in the right ways. We may be rivals on the football field, but from a community perspective, we all work together. When the YFI participants came over, the Millwall team also had them working in soccer schools, toured them around the city and gave them a cultural experience.”

The cultural experience is a critical aspect of the YFI Leadership Through Sportsmanship program. Most of the YFI participants came from suburban towns in New England, and the trip allowed them to experience what life is like in inner city London. Working in a multicultural, lower income demographic served as a real eye-opener and helped participants witness how clubs like QPR and Millwall use sport in the U.K. as a tool for social change, empowering and uplifting at-risk youth through positive interventions.

### A Little Taste

Building off of the success of the first year of the program, coaches from QPR and Millwall came over to New England in January and February of 2017. This was the first time that YFI has done this kind of a promotional tour, which came about because of the success with the trip to the U.K. in 2016.

“They decided it would be good to bring



the two clubs involved in the trip last year over to the U.S., allowing us to essentially bring a taste of the London experience to the kids here," Blackwood explains. "The main purpose of why we came over was to give young people a snapshot of what they would experience if they came to London as part of the program."

During the trip, coaches engaged young people at a number of regional high schools during their physical education lessons in Massachusetts including Milton High School, Andover High School, Norwood High School, Dedham High School and Turners Falls High School. They also worked with regional soccer clubs, such as Galway Rovers in



Massachusetts and CFC in Connecticut. As one can imagine, the sessions at the high schools were structured much differently than those geared toward club level soccer players.

"At the schools, you may only end up working with a few students that actually play the game. In those settings, our focus is more on leadership and using sport and physical education to bring out leadership skills," Blackwood says. "At the evening sessions with the football clubs, that was more of a bread and butter professional soccer coaching experience, whetting their appetites to see what they will get if they come to the U.K."

Blackwood says the coaching methodology utilized by clubs like QPR and Millwall tends to be different than what is commonly found in the U.S. Here, he says it tends to be a more autocratic and coach-led experience. Alternatively, the philosophy that Blackwood and his colleagues use tends to be more of a guide and discover approach.

"By giving the players various scenarios and seeing how they do, it allows you to explore and identify which players have leadership skills and the kinds of leadership skills they have. It can be very eye opening for the participants, and you could see that some of

them were not normally left to find a way to solve various scenarios," Blackwood says. "We want them to demonstrate that they have the capabilities. We look at ability, application and attitude, and we see ability as the least important component. That is because if attitude and application are right, then the ability will improve. If the opposite is true, then ability will stagnate. It is all about empowerment,

creating young people who can think for themselves and be positive leaders. That is the point of the program. We promise that the experience will help people become better, more rounded people on and off the field."

### Coming Up

Feedback from last year's U.K. tour and this year's visit to the U.S. has been profoundly positive. For example, the soccer coaches that worked with Blackwood and his colleagues in New England indicated that they liked the use of Q&A sessions within practices.

"Time is so precious with their facilities that they have to get into intense practice quickly and then everything is over," Blackwood says.

"We are able to break our sessions down to get more buy-in from the players and set challenges in different scenarios, and this allowed the coaches to see their players in different lights. We didn't get to work with the kids for very long, but it did provide a snapshot of what a week in the U.K. will be like and hopefully got them interested in going."

Another element of the U.S. trip that was well received was its global citizen event that brought together all of YFI's elements. Bringing YFI's Leadership Through Sportsmanship program together with its education in Ghana program and medicine in India program allowed attendees to see all of the strands of YFI in a single forum and hear about the different experiences that participants have had in each program.

Additionally, Blackwood says the participants of last year's U.K. trip have all indicated how enriching they found the experience. To add more value to the experience looking ahead, QPR, Millwall and YFI have been looking for ways to give YFI participants more opportunities to demonstrate leadership. In fact, this summer's trip will include an end of trip festival of sport, with YFI participants and local young people in the U.K. running a festival of sport for four hours.

"They will be working with young people from the local community, guiding them and showing them U.S. and U.K.-style activities,"

This summer from July 29 to August 14, the program is hoping to bring 32 young people over to the U.K. in two squads of 16 as part of the YFI Senators. These will be the squads led by successful accredited high school coaches who will work with Millwall and QPR coaches to help students improve their game on the field and beyond. During the first week, YFI



participants will go to Millwall and engage in their leadership activities as well as soccer training and matches. For the second week, participants will join QPR and get involved in a number of community leadership and engagement activities as well as soccer training and preparing for the festival of sport.

Ultimately, YFI strives to provide empowering and inspiring educational opportunities that will instill self-confidence, sound leadership characteristics, and maximize potential while being immersed in the culture of a program's host country and community. This is what the Leadership Through Sportsmanship program is all about.

"The biggest thing for me that makes a difference for participants is the cultural exchange," Blackwood says. "Just by being in inner city London and walking everywhere, you see so many different ethnicities and diverse cultures. Participants can come from the suburban U.S. and get a real international flavor by seeing the communities and young people we serve, as well as being immersed in the complete football experience."

For more information, please visit [www.yfisports.com](http://www.yfisports.com) or email Dave Butler at [dbutler@youthfuturesinternational.org](mailto:dbutler@youthfuturesinternational.org).

