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Youth soccer team carries hope to South Africa

By NOAH BAYMAN
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8 Israeli and Palestinian teens will leave for Johannesburg next week.

While the Israeli national team did not qualify for the World Cup taking place this month in South Africa, a group of eight Israeli and Palestinian teenagers will travel to Johannesburg next week to compete in the FIFA 2010 Football for Hope Festival.

It may be Israel's deepest involvement in the World Cup since 1970, when the national team last qualified for the world's top sporting event.

The team will join underprivileged youth from around the world in a weeklong "street soccer" tournament representing 32 countries, playing across town from some of the top national teams in the world.

The youth teams are delegates of organizations from around the world that share in a mission to combat social issues through soccer - drug trafficking in Colombia, HIV education in South Africa, land mines in Cambodia and street violence in America, among others.

The team from Israel, known as the "Peace Team," makes for a diverse group: four girls and four boys, four Arab players and four Israeli players, one Arab coach and one Israeli coach.

The players, who leave for South Africa on Sunday, were chosen in January from among the top players in an apprentice coaching program run under the auspices of the Peres Center for Peace.

"This is our opportunity to show people that Israelis and Palestinians can play together, and also that we can live together," said the Palestinian coach, Kamal Abu Altom.

He said that the language barrier has made communication within the team difficult. But on the field, he said, the team will be a strong contender.

"We want to be number one in the tournament," he said.

The style of "street soccer" may pose the largest obstacle, Abu Altom added. In regular soccer, which the participants have spent years playing, each team fields 11 players. In this tournament, the eight-person teams will compete in a less structured environment, without even a referee to make the calls.

"Everyone should be like a leader on the field," Abu Altom said.

Team organizers chose not to release the names of the players to the press until they arrive in South Africa in order to protect them before they leave, said Inbal Yohanan-Halpert, the spokesperson for the Peres Center for Peace.

All of the players are graduates of the Twinned Peace Sports program, a joint Israeli-Palestinian initiative that brings underprivileged children together around sports and peace education.

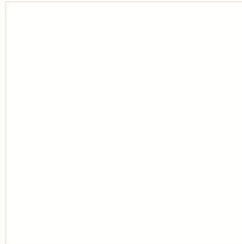
Aside from local soccer coaching in low-income neighborhoods in Israel and the West Bank, the program hosts joint Israeli-Palestinian activities on a monthly basis.

The program, which today reaches as many as 1,600 young Israelis and Palestinians every year, emerged in 2003 out of collaboration between the Israeli Peres Center for Peace and the Al-Quds Association for Democracy and Dialogue, a Palestinian non-government organization.

"Only through dialogue and cooperation can we hope to produce a more normal life," Tamar Hay-Sagiv, director of the sports department at the Peres Center for Peace, stated in a press release. "Soccer is a great tool to exercise it."

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