

Local Hispanic Underground Soccer League Growing

Launching Amateur Team for 2004

On December 19, members of the United States Soccer Federation will meet to discuss incorporating a team from the

past decade in areas where there are large numbers of Latino immigrants. Major League Soccer is attempting to tap into these leagues with an experimental 4-on-4 Hispanic league it sponsored this year called “¡Futbolito!” The first Hispanic National Championship was held in California on November 22. The winning team was *Los Santos*, from Columbus, Ohio. Despite these gains, Soto-Rodriguez says the Hispanic leagues still struggle for respect. “I get a lot of negativity. Nobody wants to help. It’s hard to find a field to play in,” she said. Currently, the teams play in Madison, and a field in Thompson that is privately owned. “Madison has been excellent to us,” she said.

from *La Mexicana* grocery store in Painesville. Alejandro Gutierrez, 25, who is considered one of the best players in the league, received a first place trophy for best goalkeeper. He is already fielding offers



Photo by Patricia Salciak

Alejandro “Guita” Gutierrez, standing with the championship trophies for “Best Team” *El Triunfo*, and “Best Goal Keeper”.

Painesville Men’s Hispanic Soccer League into amateur tournaments for the Ohio North Division. Edith Soto-Rodriguez, president of the Painesville league, says it is an opportunity for the players to get the recognition they deserve. She is putting together a team of the best players from the 12 Painesville teams she oversees. There are about 250 players in the Hispanic league. The majority are Mexicans from Painesville, and there is one team of Hondurans from Geneva. Soto-Rodriguez says the teams have grown since her husband began organizing them 10 years ago. “It started with four teams, now I’ve got 12. Next year we’re going to have 14,” she said.

Underground soccer leagues have spread throughout the United States in the

Hispanic soccer is somewhat different than American soccer. Soto-Rodriguez wrote the constitution for the Painesville league by adding penalties from a Mexican list she obtained. She also added in American items, which was met with some complaining by the players. “The Hispanic players need to learn the rules and regulations here,” she said. “Being a woman in charge of all men, I have to be strong. When I make a decision it stands.” She sees the chance of playing against non-Hispanic



Photo by Patricia Salciak

“Being a woman in charge of all men, I have to be strong. When I make a decision, it stands.”

Edith Soto Rodriguez
President, Men’s Hispanic Soccer League



Photo by Edith Soto Rodriguez

1st Place Championship Team, *El Triunfo*

leagues as an opportunity for the players to learn the way the sport is played here. “Sometimes we have different ways of thinking,” she said. “I think it’s good for us to mix with other teams.”

This year, the championship team was *El Triunfo*, sponsored by the Painesville Mexican restaurant of the same name. They also received 50 percent of their support

from the *delegados* of other teams to join them for next year. He has decided to play with *Puerta de Llave*, a team named after a *rancho* near Leon, Guanajuato. Gutierrez is known as “Guita,” named after a Colombian player. He is passionate about the sport as are most of the players. “It’s the most popular sport in Mexico,” he said. “In Mexico, we even played in the city streets.” This winter, the Hispanic players occupy a sports facility in Mentor, paying \$60 an hour for 3 hours every night of the week, hoping to remain competitive for next year. Typically after a championship game, a caravan of cars will drive around Painesville waving flags, honking horns and displaying their trophy. “People look at us like we’re crazy,” Gutierrez said.