




Football for Life

Bringing soccer to Beijing's migrant children

by Imogen Kandel

“One student even commented that her newfound love of football gave her something in common with her father”

What happens when an NGO collaborates with a community sports organization? You get Football for Life, a soccer program that trains, educates and inspires some of Beijing’s poorest students. CAI has a long history of providing educational services to migrant children in schools across the capital – courses focus primarily on the arts, including photography, drama and music, as well as basic physical education. What they were lacking was exactly what ClubFootball (CF) specializes in: professional coaching that teaches children more than just a sport. In the autumn of 2009, the two organizations came together to establish Football for Life (FFL), now a thriving soccer program that has already touched the lives of hundreds of children. *beijingkids* spoke with Judy Shen, the founder of CAI, and Keith Bradbury, the general manager of CF, to find out more about the “beautiful game” and why it’s more than just a sport. 

What exactly is FFL?

Judy Shen: In collaboration with CF, we introduced our FFL program in Fall 2009, which helped 141 migrant students in that semester alone. This semester we have 156 students enrolled in our program. The principal idea behind FFL is to bring the popular sport to migrant students who do not have access to football training, let alone team sports. As part of FFL, migrant students receive weekly football training from CF coaches and local Chinese coaches.

What inspired the creation of this program?

Judy Shen: CAI views sports as a great way to improve physical health while learning our four Cs: confidence, care, commitment, and courage. When we first met with CF, we learned that we shared a mutual interest in introducing football to migrant children with the goal of developing healthy, well-rounded youths with strong character.

Keith Bradbury: As a grassroots sports organization, we have a responsibility and a leading role to play in mobilizing the wider community in support of less privileged groups. After meeting CAI and learning more about their programs to help and support migrant children, it was clear that there was a very complementary fit – and so FFL was created.

Have you faced any challenges in getting FFL up and running?

Judy Shen: Our biggest challenge is finding adequate space at migrant schools for students to properly learn and play football. Most migrant schools do not have an adequate playground; the ground may be covered with potholes, gravel or uneven cement. Because of the coaches’ creativity and flexibility, we’ve managed to find ways around this challenge. However, the space limitation hampers our ability to reach out to more students who are eager to participate.

Keith Bradbury: Yes, but nothing is insurmountable and anything that is worthwhile is rarely easy. When establishing the initial courses, CF and CAI had to be prepared to underwrite most of the costs and resources required to get FFL off the ground.

What positive effects of FFL have you witnessed?

Judy Shen: Students who participate in FFL are, often for the first time, being exposed to a team environment where they have to learn to depend on each other, face challenges and exhibit leadership skills. At the end of the semester, when we received feedback from the students, their parents and their teachers, we saw that FFL had positively impacted other areas of their lives, namely in their homes and classrooms.

Keith Bradbury: One student even commented that her newfound love of football gave her something in common with her father; she could now look forward to sitting down with him and watching games on TV together.

Are you seeing much interest from girls in FFL?

Keith Bradbury: Absolutely! The classes that ran during the autumn 2009 semester involved 72 boys and 72 girls. There seems to be a prevailing perception [in China] that football (and many other sports) is for boys and that the girls should be on the sidelines in a “cheerleading” capacity. I hope that this stereotype is one that we can help to break down through FFL.

What do you hope to achieve with FFL, and are there any plans for expansion?

Judy Shen: Our primary focus is to ensure that the program is a meaningful one for the students involved. It has been wonderful working with CF and to see their dedication to the local community. Our goal is to expand the program to additional migrant schools.

Keith Bradbury: In terms of plans for expansion, we’re working very hard to generate extra funding to establish similar programs in more schools for migrant children in Beijing. In the longer term, we aim to move into further cities in China and reach as many children as possible.

Many people are involved in making this program a reality. What do you think they’ve learned from FFL?

Judy Shen: It is my experience that when giving, I receive much more than I actually give. For those directly involved in the FFL program, they get to see a different side of Beijing. There was heartfelt joy in carrying out this program week after week.

Keith Bradbury: It’s mainly the international coaches from CF who interact with the children and they’ve found it to be a really enjoyable and rewarding experience. The children are very friendly, incredibly appreciative of the opportunity to participate and very keen to learn.

How can people help?

Judy Shen: We’re currently seeking additional sponsorship. People can also help through in-kind or financial donations and by raising awareness about the challenges faced by migrant students. They can learn more about the current situation on our website [www.cai-china.org].



No pitch? No worries.

"I always played with only one best friend before. Sometimes it was only me, and I felt lonely. My classmates always said I was a sad old person. But after I took part in this activity, I was happy every day, and now my classmates ask me: 'Why are you so happy?' I felt like a happy elf when I was with these brothers from another country."

– Tan Dan, Grade 7

"I really liked this activity. It helped me change a lot of bad habits. Before, I did not listen carefully in class, and even fell asleep, but now I listen carefully and do not fall asleep anymore."

– Yang Mengmeng, Grade 5

"After taking part in the football team, I know what sharing and giving are and how to share my happiness with others. When someone is not happy, you should give your love to others and you will feel happy too. After taking part in the football team, I know what caring is. When people hurt, you should care for them."

– Hu Xiaowen, Grade 5

"I feel that it makes me happy and gives me confidence and courage to meet the challenges I will face. And I feel the spirit of teamwork, too. I really like this activity and our coaches. Thank you for helping me find happiness and courage. I will be more confident in the future."

– Sun Lan, Grade 7