

# sports

## Former soccer players help refugees

JANE HAVSY  
@DAILYRECORDSPTS

Sacir Hot remembers a fence and a gate. Inside was an artificial turf soccer field, as good as anything he'd played on while growing up in Fair Lawn. Outside, hundreds of children "with ripped shirts, sweatpants, no shoes ... begging to get in."

The coach of FC Motown, Hot was part of a delegation of former professional soccer players trying to Kickstart Joy in the Zaatari refugee camp in Jor-

### How you can help

Kickstart Joy hopes to organize another trip next year. New or gently used soccer uniforms, including socks, and cleats would be particularly useful, as would soccer balls, pinnies and other gear.

For more information, email The Catalyst Foundation for Universal Education at [info@thecatalystfdn.org](mailto:info@thecatalystfdn.org)

dan in late August. They brought 600 uniforms, 200 pairs of cleats and 150 soccer

balls, and taught clinics for the Syrian boys and girls living in the massive camp.

"Soccer can be used for a lot more. It's bigger than we think," said Kickstart Joy founder Mehdi Ballouchy, a Moroccan emigre who lives in Engelwood.

"To see how happy these kids could be, getting them out of their situation for an hour and a half, getting them out on the field, that was probably the most eye opening thing. Soccer is way, way bigger

**See SOCCER, Page 2B**



SAM POWERS/LENS ON LIFE

Young Syrian refugees prepare for a drill during a Kickstart Joy soccer clinic at the Zaatari camp.

# Soccer

Continued from Page 1B

than I ever thought. ... To see soccer put that much joy on their faces is something I've never seen. We all get happy from playing soccer, but the gap from where they come from, and just stepping on the field and being happy is bigger than anything I've ever seen."

Opened in July 2012 under the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, Zaatari is estimated to have more than 83,000 residents squeezed into two square miles near the Syria-Jordan border. It has evolved into a semi-permanent community with markets and schools, but there is no running water, and electricity is only available for a few hours each evening. The Asian Federation Development Program and Union of European Football Associations had donated the field. Local coaches, most of them refugees themselves, run practice for about 5,000 children during the week, and a monthly tournament between teams from the different camp districts.

Kickstart Joy was the first sports-themed trip sponsored by the New York City-based Catalyst Foundation for Universal Education, with gear donated by Ballouchy's former team, NYCFC, and Major League Soccer. Since there were not enough shoes for all the kids, they were worn for the clinics then left at the field. They are still being used for soccer training with the Syrian coaches, boys in the morning and girls in the afternoon.

"I think people scoff at whether kids need soccer. 'Let's focus just on the classroom and basics,'" said Elizabeth Cheung-Gaffney, a senior program officer at Catalyst and former Columbia University soccer player



SAM POWERS/LENS ON LIFE

**Sam Powers shows a young Syrian refugee some of the soccer cleats Kickstart Joy brought to the Zaatari refugee camp.**

who helped with the girls clinics.

"But seeing them there really shows you how much they need enrichment programs like that. It was so much joy for them to play and forget."

Mid-day temperatures reached 115 degrees, so Hot appointed himself "water police." He kept an eye on the youngsters — particularly the girls — making sure the limited supply of water at the field was carefully rationed.

For Hot, the Zaatari trip brought back memories of childhood visits to cousins in Montenegro. His parents, Valbona and Salih, had fled to Canada in 1991 to avoid the conflicts, then slipped into the United States in a cement truck. Valbona Hot

was six months pregnant with Sacir, who grew up in Bergen County, playing soccer at Fair Lawn, in the Red Bulls academy and United States under-20 national team, and at Boston College.

"When the kids walked through that gate, and put on a jersey, socks, shorts, cleats, they didn't look like war refugees," said Hot, part of Montenegro's Muslim minority.

"They had smiles on their faces. They were high fiving, talking, running around. They forgot about that. They were kids."

Staff Writer Jane Havsy: 973-428-6682; [jhavsy@gannettnj.com](mailto:jhavsy@gannettnj.com); [www.dailyrecord.com/writerjane/](http://www.dailyrecord.com/writerjane/)