

The Neighborhood League began as a sports initiative but it has also become a coexistence project. (Courtesy)



Not
just

competition

The relatively new soccer club Hapoel Katamon has set up a Neighborhood League to give a sporting and educational framework for children from different neighborhoods

• By ALLON SINAI

When fans of Hapoel Jerusalem decided to set up a new soccer club in 2007, they did so out of desperation. The dysfunctional ownership duo of Victor Yona and Yossi Sasi drove the supporters to start a club of their own, controlled and run by the fans, and named Hapoel Katamon Jerusalem.

It has been a roller-coaster ride for Katamon in the five years since, with the club's members even deciding to start from scratch once more in 2009, electing to play in the fifth division, Liga Gimel, in order to obtain full control of their fortunes.

The team has been on the rise ever since, achieving promotion in the past two seasons and currently leading Liga Alef Darom, Israel's third division.

However, while it remains to be seen if Katamon can become a factor in Israeli soccer, there is little doubt that the club is already making a significant difference off the field. Katamon always aimed to be more than just a soccer team, looking to enrich the community and contribute to the welfare of the city. One of the initiatives with which it hopes to do so is the Neighborhood League.

Initially set up three years ago, the league aims to give a sporting and educational framework for children aged 10 to 12 from neighborhoods across Jerusalem, particularly those struggling with socioeconomic difficulties.

At present, some 360 boys and girls in 24 teams from 12 neighborhoods meet up twice a week to play soccer. In addition, they receive guidance in educational centers with the aim of improving their academic prospects. Once a month, a tournament is held with all the teams, giving the children an opportunity they otherwise wouldn't have to make friends with kids from different areas and backgrounds. One of the more remarkable aspects of the Neighborhood League

is that it is run by a team of more than 25 volunteers, most of them in their 20s.

The man behind the initiative is 26-year-old Liran Gerassi, who came up with the idea and spends his time running and promoting it when he's not busy being a graduate student at the Hebrew University in the field of management of nonprofit organizations.

"I was supposed to set up a youth department for Katamon, but that didn't work out because of logistical problems, so I decided to start a social program and open children's teams across town," Gerassi says. "I never thought this would reach such proportions. I'm really happy we have managed to set up an empire thanks to so many good people."

The Jerusalem Fund, Marathon Investments and Hachshara Insurance Company provide the majority of the financial backing for the league, with the New Israel Fund last year adding the Neighborhood League to the many projects it supports as part of its Kick Racism out of Football campaign.

Since last year, the league has also worked in cooperation with the FC Barcelona Foundation, the entity through which the Spanish soccer giant conveys its corporate social responsibility. A group of 30 children from the project spent a week in Spain as Barcelona's guests last year, a collaboration that is only set to grow in coming years.

"We have aspirations to expand the league both geographically and to different age groups," says Gerassi. "The project wasn't supposed to be one of coexistence. It started off as an initiative focusing on sports, welfare and education. We began to set up teams across town, and one of the neighborhoods we initially targeted was [the Arab neighborhood of] Shuafat. As time passed, more and more neighborhoods in east Jerusalem inquired about setting up teams, places like Kafr Akab and Beit Safafa. As a result, it went on to become a coexistence project. We never planned that, but we are certainly happy about it."

Uri Sheradsky, chairman of Katamon, admits he never thought the Neighborhood League would take off the way it did and also sees an added benefit to having so many children wear the club's colors.

"I never believed this would be such a success. It is such a simple idea, but obviously there is a real need for it," he says. "For a small and poor club like Katamon, it is excellent that we have reached a situation in which some 500 children are part of its different programs. It is very important to the club from a values standpoint but also because it expands the fan base."

Many of the volunteers are also fans of Katamon and were brought to the project by friends. One of these fans is 18-year-old Adir Schwartz, who set up the girls' league. Besides being a 12th-grade student, chairman of Jerusalem's student council, an active Scout and holding a job in the evenings, he spends 20 hours a week running the girls' Neighborhood League.

"There's enough time for everything," insists Schwartz. "The more things you do, the more strength you have. When you do good things for other people, it makes you feel good as well."

He will leave the league in a few months to spend a year at Ma'aleh Gilboa Yeshiva before becoming a combat soldier with the IDF. He is hoping that Gerassi won't have too much trouble finding a replacement, but in the meantime he is just enjoying every moment with an initiative that has grown from nothing in three years to becoming a real source of inspiration.

"Soccer is not the goal but rather the means," says Schwartz. "The important aspect of the project is not that we allow girls to play soccer but that we allow them to meet other girls they would never otherwise meet. We give them an opportunity to expand their horizons in a way they wouldn't otherwise be able to. It gives you great satisfaction to put a smile on a child's face. These are the important things in life." •