

For this soccer lover, no headlines for his efforts

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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

09/11/2007



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MARYVILLE — Nicholas Karidis and Jeff Cooper share a love of soccer. Both men want to do what they can to promote the sport — they are just going about it in very different ways.

The Post-Dispatch has written plenty about Cooper's proposal for a \$402 million soccer stadium and development project in Collinsville. How he wants the city to become a partner by issuing bonds for the project. How would those bonds be repaid? By the taxes collected on sales and tickets at the soccer stadium, of course. The City Council planned a public hearing on his proposal Monday night.

Cooper is a big-time lawyer with big-time connections. He earned a national reputation by winning more than \$1 billion in awards and settlements from asbestos cases. His office in East Alton is decorated with soccer balls and athletic jerseys.

The paper has not written about Karidis. He's no big-time lawyer. He's a former professional soccer player from Greece who came to the United States to pursue his education. He accomplished that — a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in sociology — and went to work. But Karidis, now 37, missed soccer. He turned pro at 17 and spent years playing professionally for teams in Australia and Greece.

Karidis, married and the father of two, spent six years "out of the soccer arena. Then my little guy started his select soccer experience, and I just noticed that the soccer program in the United States is very different from the European." And not in a good way. He knew there was a better way to train young players to be competitive.

So Karidis sat down with his wife, Kari, last year and decided to start his own soccer club for kids. After 10 months of planning, Juventus Premier Futbol Club held its first tryouts in June. About 140 children and teenagers ages 4 through 19 play for Juventus on eight teams. The youngest kids play on a developmental team; the others compete in the St. Louis Youth Soccer Association. All the games are played on fields in St. Charles and St. Louis counties; the players come from towns across the Metro East.

Starting a soccer club the way Karidis did requires three big items: time, people and money. Karidis spends 40 to 50 hours a week coaching, teaching and running Juventus. That's on top of his full-time job as an insurance fraud investigator. Like Karidis, all of the coaches of Juventus teams are nationally licensed through the U.S. Soccer Federation. One selling point for the club, Karidis said, is that there are no parent-coaches. "I coach, but I don't coach my own son," he said.

Joe Caradonna, 25, coaches one of the teams. Caradonna played four years of varsity soccer at Collinsville High School. Now he spends five nights a week and weekends working with Juventus teams. In an average week, he said, he spends about 14 hours on Juventus-related business. It's an unpaid position for now. "I like soccer, so that's OK with me," he said.

The club's practice fields sit on about 16 acres of land behind the First Baptist Church of Maryville. Kari Karidis is a member of the church, and the couple asked Fred Winters, the senior pastor, about using some of its 70 acres. "Part of our mission is to benefit the community, and we see this as a means of doing that. And, it maintains areas of the land we weren't using," Winters said. Four or five nights a week, teams practice on the fields from 5 p.m. until 8 p.m. — or until it's too dark to see.

Lights are high on the wish list. But they will cost money, and Karidis has already spent plenty of his own. He's taken on a slew of sponsors like Puma, Four Flags Motors and Clarkson EyeCare. Sponsors help, but select teams still are expensive. The fees for a season with a Juventus team run about \$775. If a player can't afford the expense, the team offers financial aid. "I'm a firm believer that every kid who has the athletic ability should be given an opportunity to play, and we don't want a financial burden to stop them," Karidis said.

Karidis estimates he's spent about \$50,000 of his own money on his dream. Cooper has spent about \$2 million of his own money on his dream. They both love soccer. They're just showing it in different ways.

For more information about the Juventus soccer club, visit the website at www.juventuspfc.org