

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

August 19, 2004

Shipping off Soccer

Soccer uniforms, shin guards, nets – 75 and soccer balls – are now on the way to Mosul, Iraq, courtesy of the Longmeadow Soccer Association. Heading to the U.S. Army in that city, the equipment will be distributed to the city's children. Saturday's shipment tops off a summer of planning that started with serendipity one morning in May.

I spoke on that Sunday morning at Longmeadow's Memorial Day ceremony about the good works of American soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan. As an example I told of soccer equipment sent to Iraq through the efforts of soldiers who had transformed a garbage dump into a new soccer field. Bill Togneri, a volunteer in the town's youth soccer program, approached me after the service and offered to collect the town's surplus equipment for shipment. I had no first-hand information about donations, but took down his name and promised to look for a recipient.

As it turned out, I did have to search very far. A couple minutes after Bill walked away, Steve and Susan Kennedy started talking with me about the work their son John is doing. John enlisted in the Army after September 11, and he is now a member of the Stryker Brigade working in Mosul. They thought he might be able to take advantage of the offer.

Bill went right to work on collecting the equipment. Longmeadow's youth soccer program began in 1986, and its years of fielding teams of young players gave it a store of excess uniforms. More than 300 team jerseys were collected; shin guards and goalie gloves were found. And 62 surplus soccer balls were all made ready for shipment. A phone call to Spalding Worldwide Sports in Chicopee yielded an additional dozen self-inflating balls. (It was the first time I heard of a self-inflating soccer ball.)

But we still needed final approval before we could send the equipment.

E-mails traveled back and forth, slowed by the scarcity of computer time in Iraq. John responded to the offer with an enthusiastic "Yes," and the Civil Affairs officials weighed in about how best to use the equipment. I was surprised to learn that Mosul is a city of 1.8 million people, so this would not be a simple operation. Our donation was being processed through military channels, and by the time we received detailed information about transferring the packages, John Kennedy had come home for his 15-day leave and returned to his post.

Clearance finally came from Iraq. Last Friday the Kennedys, past soccer president Larry Wilson and his children Carrie and Jack, gathered with me and the Togneri family to pack and seal 9 big boxes. The boxes are now on their way, shipping paid by the soccer association. And the soccer parents are already making plans for a town-wide collection of more supplies this fall.

This gift from Longmeadow will enrich the lives of many children. It will give them playtime, such a necessary part of childhood. And perhaps it will start another child on the route to the Olympic stardom of this year's team of the fledgling nation.

Iraq is a nation in transition. Its people have been freed from the rule of Saddam Hussein, but many are still deciding whether to trust Americans. Everyone working on the project realizes the importance of a successful transition to the new Iraq. And, as the accompanying letter from the soccer association to the officer in charge says, "We wish you and your colleagues all the best in successfully completing your mission and returning to the United States."

We are waiting eagerly for reports and pictures from the Mosul/Longmeadow soccer league.