



JANET L. MATHEWS/The Columbian

Jonathan Mumley of Vancouver, standing foreground, offers a short prayer before players divide into teams for one of New Heights Church's weekly soccer games, which take place Thursdays at Salmon Creek Indoor Sports Arena. Most of the players do not attend New Heights.

Church leagues score

Church-sponsored teams offer friendly contests for competitors of all faiths.

By MARY ANN ALBRIGHT
Columbian staff writer

Mario Vidovic attends Catholic Mass in Portland, but that doesn't stop the Clark College student from playing in a local Baptist church's weekly late-night soccer games.

Love of the sport transcends religious differences. So, most Thursdays the Bosnia native and current Vancouver resident can be found at Salmon Creek Indoor Sports Arena, joining in soccer games organized by Elevate, New Heights Church's college ministry program.

"It's a time to relax and get away

from all the competitive soccer that I play," said Vidovic, 20. "People here don't get mad when they lose, and everybody plays fair."

Church sports programs can be low-pressure social outlets appealing to both novice and veteran athletes.

Several local church-run teams have seen increased participation in recent years, particularly among noncongregants. Organizers and players attribute the surge to the relaxed atmosphere and good sportsmanship encouraged by the church presence. Even though religion takes a back seat to athletics during games, its influence affects

how people play.

"It's a different kind of attitude," said Clark College student and New Heights member Nikki Hubby, 20, of Vancouver. "It's really welcoming and enjoyable and just an uplifting time for people."

Within three years, New Heights' soccer program has morphed into an eclectic mix with congregants in the minority. It began with 10 Elevate members and now regularly draws 50 to 70 people, mostly sports enthusiasts such as Vidovic who don't attend New Heights.

GETTING INVOLVED

■ Vancouver offers adult leagues for basketball, softball and volleyball. Groups typically sign up as a team, but individuals looking for a team can put their names on a list.

■ Contact Vancouver-Clark Parks and Recreation at 360-487-7082 for more information about softball and volleyball. For basketball, call 360-487-7025.

■ Some indoor sports arenas have adult soccer leagues with weekly games. To learn more about Salmon Creek Indoor Sports Arena's leagues, call 360-571-7628. For Clark County Indoor Sports Center, call 360-604-4487.

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In addition to New Heights' soccer program, Vidovic plays on the F.K. Balkan team in the Greater Portland Soccer District.

For that more cutthroat league, his team requires games every weekend and a midweek practice. He also logs hours in the gym each day cross-training. New Heights' weekly soccer nights are low-stress by comparison. There aren't any practices, and there's no obligation to make every game.

There are no cliques at New Heights games or pressure to join the church, Vidovic said, although he expressed interest in checking out the Orchards church after getting to know some of its members through soccer.

Recruiting new members is a bonus but not the focus of the soccer nights. The goal is to create a space where people with similar interests can bond, make new friends and play sports without worrying too much about whether they miss a goal, said Matt Edmonds, New Heights college pastor.

'Just relax and have fun'

The atmosphere is so congenial that arguments rarely break out among players and referees aren't needed, noted Edmonds, 26, of Vancouver.

"We do get highly competitive players who want to win, but because of the nature of these nights, those people know that there also will be some players who have never kicked a soccer ball before, and we remind them to just relax and have fun," he said.

Soccer, in particular, at-

tracts nonchurch members during this rainy time of year, as people seek ways to stay active indoors. Church leaders say all types of leagues are experiencing a similar influx, though.

East Park Church responded to demand for a men's soccer team by organizing ESPM (Eastpark Sports Program for Men) United.

'We are a nice team'

ESPM United started in September 2006 with about 10 players, more than half of whom were East Park Church congregants. It's grown to include 15 men, about two-thirds of whom don't attend the church.

The team includes a range of skill levels and anyone is welcome. While the competition can get heated, the church connection "does help take some of the edge off and add some perspective that win or lose, we're here to have fun," said team coordinator Scott Rosumny, 41, of Vancouver.

Pleasant play also is a hallmark of Footlutes, Messiah Lutheran Church's indoor soccer team for women 30 years of age and older.

When Footlutes first took to the field eight years ago, about three out of four players attended the Vancouver church. The ratio has since flip-flopped, with congregants now in the minority, said founding Footlutes member Brenda Gardner, 49, of Salmon Creek.

"We are a nice team. We're aren't overly competitive," she said. "We play for fun, and we aren't mean to the other teams we play against."

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Jose Delgado of Longview, left, and Mario Vidovic of Vancouver play in a New Heights Church soccer game. Vidovic also plays in the Greater Portland Soccer District.