

SOCCKER: Along with the games, spirit of TWIST rekindled with 2022 revival

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By Bryant Carpenter, Record-Journal staff

WALLINGFORD — The second day of The Wallingford Invitational Soccer Tournament was reaching its peak by mid-afternoon Sunday at Choate, with whatever championship games that needed playing getting played and the first of the trophy presentations being staged.

Manning the front gate next to tournament headquarters, Dave Rodriguez and Sean Stowik, two of the TWIST directors, were still bouncing with high energy.



throughout its history, which extended to 36 editions this weekend with a full return from a two-year hiatus due to the pandemic.

Like an athlete coming back after an extended absence, tournament organizers had kinks to work out, slack muscles to re-tone. But given their experience, they were able to make some in-house moves that pretty much all panned out and made for a smooth return.

“It’s exceeded my expectations on the basis of so many people in new positions, and still we delivered,” said Rodriguez. “There were things behind the scenes that we had to move resources and correct, but the public facing part of it, the games themselves and what surrounds it, has been perfect.

“The weather has been perfect,” he added. “The feedback we’ve been getting is phenomenal.”

That feedback included this from a woman who works special events at Wesleyan University: “Your customer service is unparalleled; it’s off the chain,” she said after observing Slowik work the front gate.

“It’s a good sign, right?” chuckled Rodriguez.

“See us in two hours,” quipped Stowik.

In two hours the last of the tournament’s 160 games would be in the books and TWIST volunteer crews would be sweeping across the Choate campus and all the other Wallingford fields used over the course of the two-day event, picking up trash and cleaning what they could before darkness fell.

A second sweep would follow Monday morning. Leave a place better than you found it, right? It’s the surest way to get invited back.

“It’s a trust,” as Rodriguez said, and it’s a philosophy that’s stood TWIST in good stead

“She was just watching; I was wondering what was going on,” Rodriguez related. “She said, ‘We have paid people at Wesleyan and we couldn’t pull off what you do to the level that you do.’”

Rodriguez and Stowik are long-time co-directors with Brian Burr and, for the first time this year, Dave Esch.

Burr’s experience drawing up game schedules came in handy when some teams backed out and other teams were added in the 11th hour.

“It was a little tricky because we had some teams pull out late and other teams come in, so we could keep brackets together,” Rodriguez said. “It’s a lot of work for Brian, but he always pulls through. And that’s the theme of the whole tournament: just a lot of people chipping in.”

In that regard, TWIST is looking for more people to chip in. Many long-time volunteers have grown up and out, and TWIST needs to rebuild its bullpen.

“We were stretched a little bit thin, to be honest. We felt it this year. Sean was all out, I was all out, Brian was all out,” Rodriguez said.

“We’re looking for young kids who have time,” he continued. “We’ve got a ton of kids that have played in the league who are here giving back, but it takes more. You need 100, really, to do everything right. Primary staff, maybe you need only 15-25, but then you need bodies. You need a lot of bodies to run something of this magnitude. We set the bar really high.”

Participating teams took note of that bar this weekend.

A coach of one of the North Stars teams out of New York, after losing a divisional championship game Sunday at Choate, told his players, “Look around you; take it all in. We hope to come back next year and try to win it all, but if we don’t, you will never play on fields as nice as these in a place as beautiful as this. Enjoy it now.”

“That’s the most satisfying part,” remarked Stowik. “That’s why you have a lot of these people who have been doing it for 10, 15, 20, 30 years: When you hear at the end of the tournament, ‘Can’t wait to come back next year.’”

In all, 80 teams played this weekend in 17 age divisions.

Not among them was a group of Rhode Island girls coached by Wallingford Youth Soccer alum Rob Schmitt. It was a team that had been making TWIST an annual trip before COVID hit.

The girls — Schmitt’s daughters included — are in high school now and their scholastic preseason conflicted with TWIST 2022.

Schmitt, whose history with TWIST dates back to its second year, still showed up. He served as a field marshall at Choate with Holly Francke.

“We keep in touch and he offered to come and help,” Rodriguez said. “He said, ‘I’ll be back as long as you need me!’”

The march to year 37 would appear to be on.