

## Living for Sports in Peru

*By Maya Ajmera  
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**Lima, Peru** — In Villa El Salvador, a vast squatter settlement outside Lima, it's easy to describe kids based on what they and their families don't have. Most of their parents are landless rural migrants who don't have steady jobs. The settlement's 300,000 residents live in makeshift houses built on a landfill overlooking the Pacific Ocean, without electricity or running water.

Schools are overburdened, and most families don't have the means to pay for their children's education outside the slum. Children in Villa El Salvador often don't have enough to eat. Violence in the streets and at home means that safety, fun, and caring are also lacking from daily life.

The list of what's missing is a long one, yet Sara Diestro looks at the same children and sees aspirations, talents, and potential, all waiting to be developed. As a former social worker for a professional Peruvian soccer team, Diestro learned the allure that sports have for children—and the positive values and healthy environment that inclusive sports programs can provide.

Using soccer as a draw, she runs the Escuelas Deporte y Vida (Sports and Life Schools) program, which she established in 1996. The program gives 6- to 17-year-old boys and girls in Villa El Salvador a chance to play sports and to develop self-esteem and life skills that help them succeed on and off the field.

An interest in sports may bring kids to Deporte y Vida, but once they get involved they gain much more. Each activity meets a clear goal. Deporte y Vida's after-school tutoring and library offer a complement to public schools. Classes in music, theater, and crafts develop valuable skills and creative energies. Sustained, loving attention from teachers and coaches strengthens kids emotionally. And soccer games that reward teamwork and fair play instill the message that winning is about more than scoring goals.

In 2002, The Global Fund for Children (GFC) helped to establish a school in the Jardines de Pachamac neighborhood of Villa El Salvador, paying salaries for teachers and a psychologist and helping to buy sports equipment and supplies. Last fiscal year, the Overbrook Foundation, through GFC, gave Deporte y Vida additional funds to replicate its program in poor communities in Peru and elsewhere.

Today, Deporte y Vida runs four community schools following this successful model and serves 1,400 children. Alfonso, 17, is one such youth benefiting from the program. He used to hang out with a local gang, but was invited into the program when Diestro saw him playing soccer in the streets. "Deporte y Vida is my family, my new house," Alfonso said.

Most exciting to Alfonso and the other kids, the program's soccer team was among 22 teams selected to participate in the First Street Football World Championship, held July 2–8, 2006, in Berlin, at the same time as the 2006 World Cup. Although teams from Africa dominated the championship, it was honor enough for the children from Villa El Salvador to represent Peru.