



Fall 10-6-2022

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Julia Perez
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Recommended Citation

Perez, Julia, "Soccer and World Cup Exhibit Highlights Unity of Sport, Cultures" (2022).
News and Events. 4237.

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Soccer and World Cup Exhibit Highlights Unity of Sport, Cultures

Oct. 6, 2022

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — Soccer is the universal thread connecting different cultures of a local club whose stories will be featured in a soccer and World Cup exhibit at Illinois Wesleyan University's Hansen Student Center Oct. 15 through Dec. 20.



An example of the international soccer stamps that will be on display at the exhibit.

The exhibit titled "The Beautiful Game: Just Kicking It In Bloomington-Normal" will showcase interviews with members of the Park Drag Soccer Club — a group of soccer players in the Bloomington-Normal area — and postage stamp displays from the members' home countries. The exhibit will open at 1 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 15 with a reception.

The Park Drag Soccer Club was first organized on the IWU campus in 1998, mostly composed of faculty and international students. Soon, word spread to the international students and professors at neighboring Illinois State University and membership grew.

Agbenyega Adedze, associate professor of history at ISU, started playing soccer at a young age "like most African children," he said, and has been part of the local club for around 20 years.

"This is a very relaxed group of dedicated soccer players who have fun at every game. Some consider our game as a place to destress because of the various skill and age levels as well as nationalities and the fun we have playing," said Adedze. "Multiple languages are spoken during the games and there's no fuss about it.

Even if you don't understand, we just play soccer."



A portion of members from the Park Drag Soccer Club of Bloomington-Normal.

Adedze said club members share more than a love of soccer — they share meals, life experiences, investment strategies, jokes and support, on and off the field.

Today, the Park Drag Soccer Club includes around 50 members from 30 nations. The group has met at various locations over the years to play, including the detention basin in Normal off Linden Street and Park Drag Lane — thus the club name. Anyone is welcome to join the group to play, no matter their skill level, and can email jsimeone@iwu.edu or adedze@ilstu.edu for play times and locations.

Illinois Wesleyan Professor of Political Science Jim Simeone is also a member of the club. He and Adedze are lead organizers of the exhibit on campus.

"Soccer is an international game, but it has strong roots here, too. It promotes healthy exercise as well as camaraderie and community," said Simeone.



A portion of members from the Park Drag Soccer Club of Bloomington-Normal, including Illinois Wesleyan Professor of Political Science Jim Simeone, front row, second from right.

The exhibit at Illinois Wesleyan will honor soccer and its culture from around the world, featuring large-scale posters of stamps from the 30 countries represented in Park Drag Soccer Club. Adedze considers himself a collector and curator of postage stamps and will oversee the stamp display at the exhibit. His interest in curating this new exhibit came after new stamps were released for the 2022 FIFA World Cup which will be held in Qatar from Nov. 20 to Dec. 18, 2022.

Information about the soccer traditions in Bloomington-Normal will also be highlighted.

This summer, students with Illinois Wesleyan's Summer Enrichment Program took time to interview members of Park Drag Soccer Club. Those video interviews will also be displayed.

Normal Mayor Chris Koos and Bloomington Mayor Mboka Mwilambwe — who is a past member of the club — will speak at the opening reception of the exhibit, along with remarks from Adedze about the featured stamps before the film of interviews is presented.

"I want to emphasize the diversity of a small, midwestern town where people from all over the world, including Americans, are united by a soccer ball," said Adedze. "Furthermore, I want to demonstrate that despite the latent intolerance and discrimination by some people, there is a flourishing community of people from all over the world in Bloomington-Normal who celebrate our diversity and enjoy being together."

By Julia Perez