

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Soccer to Iraq

The past few weeks in Boston have been quiet at the State House. August began with an exhausted legislature. We had worked past midnight to pass, override and reject legislation, and it took the better part of two weeks for our clerks to process the work. The Democrat and Republican conventions took members of each party away from town. And we cannot meet formally (for votes) for the rest of the year, so the halls will continue to have an unusual quiet to them.

Since there's not much activity for my report, today's Byline will return to a favorite topic of mine: soccer balls. Specifically soccer balls for the children in Iraq.

I've been trying for years to send soccer equipment to Iraq and receive in return photographic documentation of the soccer balls in the hands of Iraqi children. Touched by news stories of soccer's popularity in Iraq and tales of children creating homemade balls out of soda cans or shirts, I became a "soccer to Iraq" mom. It took several tries, but the pictures are finally here.

In 2004, I worked with the Longmeadow Soccer Association as they collected many boxes of nets, shirts, balls and other apparatus. They bundled them and sent them off to a military unit in Mosul. Then we waited to hear from the recipient soldiers. A brief report came, but that's all.

Mosul had been a quiet city in the year after Hussein's overthrow, but it was on the edge of disintegration. So I'm afraid the new American-built park might not have become the soccer playground that we envisioned. And our soldiers had more critical duties than taking snapshots of soccer balls.

Undeterred, the LSA again sent off equipment a year or two later. I did not hear of the feedback from that shipment, so I was still waiting to see results of Longmeadow efforts.

This year, I opened a State House e-mail that asked for donations to a new effort to supply our troops. Along with the suggested personal items for soldiers was a request for soccer balls. The e-mail explained that Marines wanted the balls to give to children as they patrol the neighborhoods.

A Cape Cod legislator was working with townspeople to assemble a big shipment to local Marines serving in Iraq, and their effort gave me the opening to try again to get soccer balls to the Iraqi kids.

Spalding, with its Chicopee offices, has always been a strong supporter of such efforts, and my request to Dan Tuohey at the company led to quick delivery of two dozen soccer balls to my home. From there to Boston; then to the Cape; and finally to Iraq. Here are two photos of their destination, in the hands of some very happy children.

The whole operation is a reminder to me that our troops are still in the field, working to strengthen the fledgling democracy in Iraq. My thanks and appreciation go out to each member of our armed forces performing that duty. I am very proud of those troops and appreciate everything they do.