



PRESS-REGISTER

Goal-oriented: Vigor and Blount embrace soccer, renew old rivalry

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Rule No. 1: Kick the ball.

Rule No. 2: Don't use your hands.

Are there any other rules?

That's essentially what athletes at Vigor and Blount knew about soccer back in January, as the two schools launched girls and boys programs. This is the first season either school has fielded a girls team, officials said, while the boys programs have been dormant for about a decade.

"Why can't we have soccer, if other schools have it? We've got athletes, why not try it?" Vigor girls coach Beverly Coleman said.

Players at both schools apparently embraced that attitude, even if they were skeptical about the hands-free sport.

"I didn't know nothing, but I knew it was going to be fun," Vigor freshman Corneisha Spelton said. "We know this is our first year, and we know we're not going to win because they (players at other schools) have been playing since they were kids. And this is our first year playing. We're trying our best."

In Alabama, soccer has long been a bastion of suburban and private-school power. In Mobile, inner-city schools have fielded teams sporadically through the years, Mobile County schools athletic director Calvin Crist said, but Blount and Vigor had never fielded a girls team before this season.

Coaches and players remain optimistic about the sport, but they admit it hasn't always been easy.

Vigor and Blount have predictably struggled on the field — battling opponents armed with a decade of youth-league soccer experience — but players and coaches say they're learning lifelong lessons about perseverance, teamwork, sportsmanship and humility.

The four teams have combined for just one victory — Vigor's boys defeated Blount earlier this season — but that hasn't dampened their enthusiasm.

"We have a lot of fun," Blount boys player Shakir Patrick said. "That's what sports is really about — having fun — and teamwork and good sportsmanship."

None of the 70-plus players from Vigor and Blount had ever played high school soccer before this spring.

At Vigor, coaches said they had no players who had ever played youth soccer. At Blount, Patrick said he played in a youth league before quitting at age 9.

Such inexperience forced the players to learn everything from the proper way to wear shinguards to the intricacies of the sport's offsides rule.

Through it all, the players have learned valuable lessons.

"They never quit," Blount girls coach Jarvis Wilson said. "Every team says, 'Coach, it looks like the girls are having so much fun.' The other players say it, too. Their parents are on them for not beating us by 10, but our girls play hard, and they never give up."

Added Vigor boys coach Jeff Moody: "We stress, 'Guys, this is a new sport that you've never played before and you're playing against guys who have been playing since they were little kids.' But it's been tough sometimes."

Sure, players say they'd love to win, but coaches focus on helping players improve every day, taking away much of the pressure to perform.

"Even though we're still new to the game, every game we accomplish something — even though it's not a win," Vigor senior Kelvin Ratliff said. "You're not going to win every time. You've got to take losses."

There is no youth soccer program in Prichard, a sign that soccer remains unknown to many of the city's youngsters. That could change if the programs at Blount and Vigor thrive.

"What everybody sees — if our program and Blount's program will succeed and work — maybe the other inner-city schools will follow suit, and then you have a whole city playing soccer. If that happens, soccer in Mobile wins," Moody said.

Independently of each other, officials at Vigor and Blount decided to launch soccer programs this spring, allowing both to experience the baby steps together.

Coaches at both schools say opponents have been understanding — meaning no one has tried to embarrass the fledgling programs — and opposing players have offered tips during games to help Vigor and Blount players improve.

"You wouldn't believe the sportsmanship I've seen," said Michael Carroll, a Mobile Soccer Club coach who has helped start Vigor's program. "There's good lessons there."

Coaches at both schools preach that they're building for the future, but what about this season?

"As far as aspirations, we want our kids to be successful inside the game," Moody said. "We knew we were going to struggle. We knew it was going to be a long season. But to see kids be successful — maybe not in wins and losses, but inside the game — they're not at home and they're still involved in something. That's what we really wanted to do, to give them another option."

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