**Karon Beyer: For the love of a league**

Karon Beyer didn’t grow up wanting to be the president of a state soccer association. She didn’t even grow up wanting to be a soccer player. Beyer found the sport in her thirties, when her son’s soccer coach recommended she try out playing.

Before that, Beyer had never played sports. She “was that asthmatic kid that always had to sit on the side in the gym,” she said. When she started playing in adult soccer leagues, she found out she had a competitive streak, and she was hooked.

“I found that soccer gave me a challenge,” Beyer said, “and I found that I really enjoy that. I just wanted to get out there, boots on the ground, hands in the dirt. Soccer is a passion, and a community, and it’s just something that, once I found it, I didn't want to let go of it.”

But in the ’80s, adult leagues were sometimes hard to find, or those that Beyer could find had room for improvement. In the years since, Beyer has helped found and shape countless adult soccer leagues across the state of Georgia.

She started in her own county, Cobb, when, in the late 1980s, her husband was invited to join an adult league soccer team. But there was only one league, and it was more competitive than his beginning level. Beyer went to Georgia State Soccer Association, curious about where her husband could start to play. The answer was: not anywhere, really. There was just one men’s league in the state.

Beyer would help change that.

Already coaching at the local YMCA, Beyer joined the Georgia Soccer board as director of membership. In the twenty plus years of volunteering with Georgia Soccer, Beyer helped create more than 12 adult leagues across the state of Georgia, in places like Roswell, Dekalb and Warner Robbins. Now, she is administrator of Cobb Adult Soccer League, a men’s soccer league affiliated with the NWYMCA in Cobb County. She works with team managers and oversees the scheduling of matches, securing of field rentals, and other league business for a league that can draw over 1,000 men on a given weekend.

Creating a league wasn’t easy, especially in the ’80s when “soccer wasn’t a buzzword,” Beyer said. “Now soccer is everywhere,” she added, but back then, she remembers the adults had to pick rocks and help lay sod on the fields set aside for them by the county.

Beyer has also worked to found groups like the Cobb County Soccer Council, coming together with the county’s soccer leaders to secure fields for both adult and youth players.. Beyer sits on the National Board of Directors of the United States Adult Soccer Association. She has attended US Soccer and USASA’s annual general meetings for over 30 years, where she gets to see how adult soccer leagues function in other states, which “broadens your vision of what you want your league to be,” Beyer said.

In many of these soccer-related spaces, Beyer has been one of few women with a seat at the table. As a coach, she would sometimes enter a meeting with her “team dad,” a father of one of the players, often to have him mistaken for the coach, and her as the team mom. When she began coaching at Cobb United, formerly an all-girls club, Beyer was one of the only female coaches, and she helped create new bylaws that would encourage the onboarding of more women coaches. Getting her National Coaching license in the 1990’s, she was only one of two women in the class.

“It’s hard for women to envision a place at the table, unless they see other women there,” Beyer said. As a player, U.S. star Michelle Akers was one of Beyer’s role models; on the administration side, longtime president of Georgia Amateur Soccer Association Marilyn Childress, who helped reorganize Atlanta-area women’s soccer programs and get women’s soccer into the Olympics, was someone Beyer wanted to work with as a leader.

“I want to make sure that women understand that they are needed. We need you to be seen,” Beyer said. “If you're out there, bring your light.”

While Beyer played and organized, she also coached. She originally began coaching her daughter’s team, when her daughter’s then-coach told the group of seven-year-olds, “Don’t get dirty.” Beyer thought: “Okay, this is not going to work for me. That’s not my daughter.” Her daughter should get dirty, get in the air, and play soccer without any inhibitions. “You’re allowed to jump up and you’re allowed to be strong.”

Beyer began reading books on soccer, watching matches and attending every coaching clinic she could find, trying to stay one step ahead of her players, who she told, “Most of you have been playing longer than I have.” She began coaching teams outside of just her daughter’s, in private youth clubs and middle school programs, and is proud of the fact that many of these teams still keep in touch to this day.

That’s part of what she loves about leading leagues, too — the community. “I just get so much energy from what I do,” she said. “When I step on the field, it’s like recharging a battery. I have met so many wonderful people through my league. This Sunday, I got to meet four brand new teams that I only communicated with by text and email — to go out there and put faces on these people, it’s just a great kind of energy.”

A CASL team, Senegal United, recently lost their coach, and they renamed their team “the Kader Boys” to honor him. They were able to represent Georgia State Soccer at a regional competition, and while they didn’t advance they understood what an honor it was to be able to attend. Beyer said when she goes out to league matches on the weekend and sees these players , and sees the relationships they have created, she knows “soccer has that power… I don’t know too many places like it.”

The league is more than just Sunday matches. It looks out for its own families, setting up memorial funds for families of players or managers that have passed and hosting an annual St. Nicholas Charity Soccer Event, which helps fill the shelves for families in the county.

Whenever anyone involved in soccer calls Beyer on the phone, “I want to talk to them, I want to know their story,” Beyer said. “We are all family.”