



DEEP DIVE: CREATING PUBLIC SPACE FOR THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Indiana Soccer Association

THE STORY

Between 2015 to 2025, Indiana Soccer Association has built, repurposed, or otherwise inspired 20 futsal courts across the state. All the courts are free to use, based in public parks or schools, and available to anyone to walk on and play at any time.

The program was inspired by a belief that soccer in Indiana has seen the limitations surrounding formal, structured ways to grow the game. What they felt was needed to take the next step is what you find in all other soccer-loving countries - access, at scale, to public spaces where you can play the beautiful game for free.

Looking for a low-cost starting point, the Indiana Soccer team focused on repurposing disused black tops in public parks. They commissioned Marian University to conduct a feasibility study of potential sites, cross-referenced it with a list from the Indy Parks & Rec Department, and set their sights on an old tennis court in Rhodius Municipal Park, Indianapolis.

They created a dedicated, fenced off public space for futsal. Kids who love soccer felt like it was space made for them, and they showed up. Based on that success, next up was a court at Indianapolis' biggest high school - Arsenal Tech. Ten years on, the school hosts one of the busiest courts in the program with over 100 kids playing on it every day.

Since then, Indiana Soccer has added courts in middle schools and more public parks, delivered refurbishments and new builds, and worked with municipal planners to include courts in redevelopments. The efforts also engaged support from ex-players (including Fort Wayne native DaMarcus Beasley) legislators, and a range of funding partners to make it happen.

Across the 20 sites created so far, court dimensions differ to meet the space available, and local artists give each space a unique local feel. Otherwise, the model is tight: all courts are concrete to keep build and maintenance costs low, based in accessible public spaces, and essentially free-play zones with little or no programming, so kids self-manage access and games.

Indiana Soccer is growing futsal but is doing so by taking on a much loftier challenge - reclaiming public spaces and handing them back to young people. Their belief is that we don't need a pristine garden and the best gardeners to grow the game - we need to plant more seeds. Then, in the long term, the soccer outcomes we all want to see on the pitch will come.



THE LEARNINGS

LEARNING 1: DON'T FORGET THE BASIC TASK OF PROVIDING SPACE TO PLAY

Discussions about creating places to play soccer can default to building high-spec facilities with tenant teams and complex scheduling. There is of course an important role for these facilities within the soccer ecosystem, but they are expensive, can put up barriers to access as much as they present opportunities for play, and they often don't allow a perceived or actual sense of community ownership. Our approach has been to tackle the more basic, fundamental need within our community to simply provide public space for young people to play. Not only is it cheaper, it also tells young people that their community has a space for them to play, to congregate, to make memories, that is always open and free. By finding futsal in their community, their ultimate connection to soccer may well be deeper for it.

APPLYING IT IN YOUR CONTEXT: What is the real need in your community? What are the barriers to play? How open are the custodians of public spaces to partnership? How many free to access public spaces could you provide for the same cost as a more sophisticated facility?



LEARNING 2: DON'T LET THE PERFECT BE THE ENEMY OF THE GOOD

Concrete is often thought of as an unfashionable surface for soccer, but it comes at a fraction of the cost of other surfaces to lay and to maintain. That means we can persuade more funders of the return on investment, be more confident about sustainability, restrict usage less, and ultimately create more spaces that will be played on for more hours over a longer period. And, in our experience, kids adapt their game to not slide or dive in, allaying some of the safety concerns.

APPLYING IT IN YOUR CONTEXT: Think about what you are ultimately trying to achieve and consider seriously the trade-offs and compromises you can make to deliver on that vision. There is no “one size fits all” for places to play, and sometime the less fashionable strategies are the ones that work.



Oscar Charleston Park Indiana

Stockwell Park Parque Latino Indiana

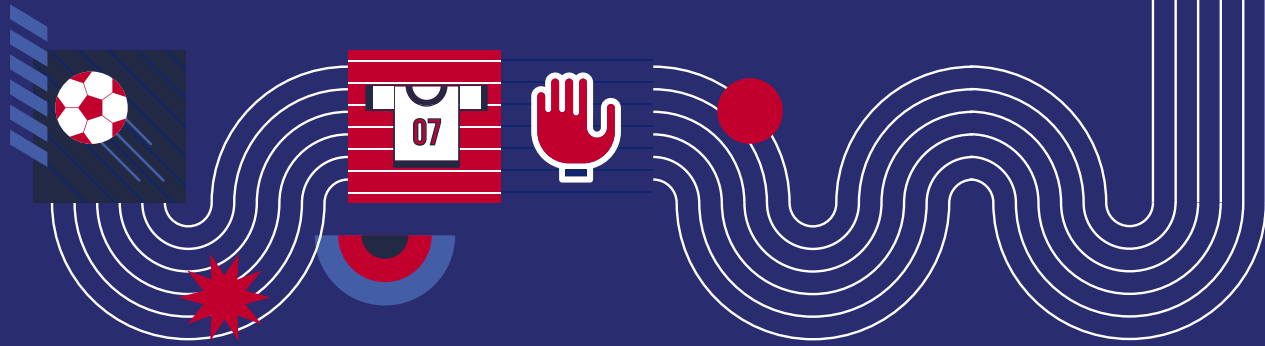


LEARNING 3: PROGRAMMING IS GREAT, BUT FREE-PLAY ALSO OFFERS DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

We get a lot of questions about why we don't program our sites, and what benefits kids are missing out on by not accessing professional activities and coaches. We flip the question and say, what are they missing out on by not having access to free-play where they make soccer happen, and they make the rules. We know that free-play is diminishing in all areas of childhood, including soccer. Kids who come to our courts self-organize, self-regulate, manage relationships, resolve conflicts, and can express themselves with a ball in the way that feels right to them. There are great programs out there offering highly structured social and emotional learning opportunities, but we think kids can also learn critical life skills independent of adult influence. Plus, the free-flowing nature of futsal lends itself to this philosophy!

APPLYING IT IN YOUR CONTEXT: Can you offer free-play times for kids at your facility where you truly stand back and offer up a space where kids are free to play, learn, develop and manage themselves? What challenges or resistance might you face, and from whom, in trying to offer this opportunity and how could you mitigate such obstacles?





LEARNING 4: LOCAL SUPPLIERS CAN PROVIDE PRICE-LESS BENEFITS

The goalposts at several of our courts have been built by the Latinas Welding Guild, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Indianapolis, that offers welding training and job placement for marginalized groups. The goalposts they create are outstanding and, in our opinion, contribute to some of the best futsal courts anywhere in the country. They are more affordable than most commercial suppliers, helping to make our model more sustainable. Working with Latinas Welding Guild allows us to contribute to wider social development in our community; in turn, they are incredible champions for our work, helping us build authentic trust and relationships, especially with the community in Indianapolis where they are based. Aligning with community-based suppliers in equitable partnerships can strengthen your work in ways that conventional commercial suppliers simply cannot.

APPLYING IT IN YOUR CONTEXT: How can you engage your community through equitable supplier relationships? What benefits can those engagements offer that strengthen your work beyond the product or service that you're receiving. How can you lift up other community organizations, and be lifted up yourselves through partnership?



LEARNING 5: PUBLIC HEALTH FUNDERS ARE ON THE SAME TEAM

We have found that organizations concerned with public health are the lowest hanging fruit when it comes to funding and partnership development. They know the benefits of getting people active and opening up public spaces for sports - they are already in our corner, fighting the same fight. They see our work as a preventative health intervention, and our approach as relatively low cost versus other more complex projects.

APPLYING IT IN YOUR CONTEXT: What funders or public bodies in your community are concerned with public health? Is there someone in your network who could drive connections with them? How does your place to play stack up next to other programs they're aligned with? What are their objectives and how can you support them?



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