

The Item

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1,500 players travel to Sumter

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Chip Chase / The Item Two players battle for the ball Saturday afternoon at Patriot Park. Dozens of soccer matches for Kohl's Youth Soccer American Cup and Publix Palmetto Classic Cup were held Saturday and will continue today.

Amid blustery breezes and abundant sunshine, the firm smack of a purposely punted ball and attendant shouts of advice and encouragement abounded throughout Patriot Park on Saturday while dozens of soccer matches unfolded simultaneously.

Soccer enthusiasts from all over the state were in town to take part in Kohl's U.S. Youth Soccer American Cup, which continues today at Sumter's newest sporting facility, hosting the event for the first time.

"It's a nice set up. The fields are nice and well kept," said Scott Sander of Lexington about lunchtime, enjoying the shaded shelter of a temporary tent along the edge of a field. "It supports a good tournament."

Sander's son Drew, 9, was playing with Lexington United Soccer Club. His team mate Matt Horton, 9, bemoaned an earlier 6-3 loss to a team from Florence, but vowed vengeance for the afternoon match against a Columbia team in between hearty swigs from a Coca-Cola.

"I'm gonna be so aggressive," Horton, a mid-fielder, promised. Gina Dunning, also of Lexington, with her son Daniel "Moose" Dunning in tow, laughed, and praised Patriot Park. "It's beautiful -- once we could find it," she said, laughing.

Sander and Dunning agreed that Sumter's newest soccer fields are impressively kept and offered the view that Patriot Park is better than their fields back home. Eddie Dukes, president of the Sumter Soccer Club, said he'd heard nothing but good things about the tournament thus far.

"The commentary's been good so far," he said, as soccer balls pinballed around the fields' perimeters, dribbled and booted by players unwilling to chill out in between matches.

"Everybody's raving about the complex," said Jeanie Crotts, while her son David, 10, swilled Gatorade to stay hydrated for his next match. Crotts was heading up T-shirt sales as part of being on the board of the Sumter Soccer Club, and said sales were brisk.

"The T-shirts are going like hotcakes," she added, with the profits raising money for the club, which is definitely in a growth mode and looks to add more girls teams.

"Hace color. Mucho viento," said Marlene Magana of Columbia, commenting on the bright sun and steady wind. "Pero muy bueno," she added, rating Patriot Park's fields much higher than the uneven acreage at Polo Road Park where her son Gabriel, 11, plays back home. "The fields are really nice here," Magana said. "It looks very organized."

Maria Perez and her 11-year-old son Jesus compared Patriot Park to facilities in Rock Hill and Greenville, which they said rank among the best in the state. The vibe in Sumter, Perez said, was markedly better, though.

"It's a little more laid back," she said, smiling. Don Mikell, the cups and games director of the S.C. Youth Soccer Association, said about 1,500 players from 95 or 96 teams were in town this weekend.

"We quite easily have 4,000 people in town for the tournament," he said early Saturday evening, when factoring in family members and support personnel. "Things have gone tremendously well today. We've had beautiful weather, everyone's come to play and have a good time, and there's only been minor problems with communication and logistics."

Today's weather could be a little cooler than Saturday, he noted. "It's been a wonderful experience for us and we're tickled to be here in Sumter to do it," he said, noting that matches start today at 8:30 a.m. and final games should get underway about 5 p.m.

"The feedback we have heard, from most of the people that have made comments about the facility -- we're glad to be here and pleased to find a quality facility to come play in," he said. "Sumter should be proud of what they've got here. It's a very positive thing for the community."

