

# Local soccer academy combines sport, character building, community service

[Nikki Cole](#)

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1 / 6 Springwater United Soccer Academy founder Mark Cristante, left, and director Cesare Tripodo were excited to host their first-ever Community Youth Soccer and Culture Day on Saturday at the Barrie Community Sports Complex. | Nikki Cole/BarrieToday

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A new soccer club is aiming to make a difference in the community — both on and off the pitch.

The Springwater United Soccer Academy, which was founded in May, hosted its first Community Youth Soccer and Culture Day on Saturday afternoon at the Barrie Community Sports Complex, with the goal of bringing awareness not only to the club, but also to an important local organization — the Women and Children's Shelter of Barrie.

"We really want to be a community-based organization and focus on the community and the grassroots while developing these kids all the way through to become young leaders and mentors," said founder and academy director Mark Cristante. "We really want to connect with the community as much as possible and (do) things that support different organizations that are doing great work — like the shelter. We want to get that community outreach happening. For me, sport is about purpose and having a mission to help people, make them better people, while supporting the organizations out there that help those in their time of need."

In addition, Saturday's event was about showing people what the Springwater United Soccer Academy is all about, he said, telling *BarrieToday* it was created to help fill a gap and to provide a structured player development program in Simcoe County.

"The idea is to have kids come up all the way from U3 to U21," said Cristante, who brings with him more than four decades of experience as both a player and a professional coach. "We are based here in Springwater. There was a need here. The Springwater Soccer Club folded five years ago during COVID. Barrie is growing like crazy and there is a demand for programming in Simcoe County, and high performance and high standard, too."

Often, parents who want structured coaching for their children have to travel south of Simcoe County, he said.

"We are trying to run it at an affordable cost as well to keep people local."

Through the program, Cristante and the team are excited to help grow local youth not just as players, but as people.

"I want to help them become better citizens and make an impact on their community through sport," he said. "We want to keep these kids focused and, as they go into their teenage years especially, when they need that extra support, be there to provide them with that mentorship."

All three of Johnny De Silva's children play soccer. The Barrie resident said he brought them to check out the event and see what the new club is all about.

"I think what they have going on is really good for the kids. I think the training, from what I have been told, will be upgraded, because a lot of kids look forward to the possibility of having a career in soccer, or going on to something that leads to this sports-wise," he said.

Barrie-based singer, songwriter and motivational speaker Errol Lee, who serves as an academy sports ambassador, was also on hand for the event.

Through his music, Lee teaches kids about character development, something they can also learn through sport, he told *BarrieToday*.

"The arts use emotion to get to the brain. Within the character initiative part of it, we talk about moral traits that are virtues and performance traits that are virtues. That performance trait often gets more developed within sports," he said. "You take courage, initiative, responsibility, determination and perseverance, and this is where you develop those traits that help to show you care about yourself and your future."

Those traits, he added, are all transferable off the pitch.

"Even if a person doesn't become a professional athlete, they can take these qualities and apply them to their future endeavours, goals and careers," he said. "Michelangelo says, 'Without courage, one cannot practise any of the other virtues,' so we want them not only to have the courage to play and shine on the field, but to have the courage to practise the moral side like mutual respect, empathy and compassion ... and having a positive attitude that applies to both on and off the field."

Academy manager Cesare Tripodo has more than 50 years of experience both on and off the pitch, having been involved in establishing girls' soccer within the East Gwillimbury Soccer Club in the late 1980s as well as serving as executive director of the York Region Soccer Association from 1993 until 2007.

Tripodo is looking forward to bringing those decades of experience to help young local athletes, he told *BarrieToday*.

"Soccer is in our blood. We have done this all our lives. There are a lot of kids that would like to play at a competitive level but realistically, in order to train, would have to go a long way. We are just moving that level up a bit further north to make it easier for kids to play," he said.

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