

Dear Friends and Family,

First and foremost, thank you for helping me out on this trip to Haiti. It honestly meant a lot to have so many friends and family supporting me, encouraging me, and praying for me during this time. The trip was very challenging and eye opening for me, and it would not have been possible without your help.

Now as you know, the primary reason for this trip to Haiti was to help run a soccer program and tournament for youth in the area where we were staying, and to encourage them in their work and faith.

Thanks to many contributions, we were able to bring down roughly 75 soccer jerseys, 10 referee jerseys, 25 soccer balls, 10 pairs of shorts, 10 pairs of shin-guards, 8 pairs of shoes, 4 pairs of goalie gloves, 4 goalie jerseys, 4 pumps, lots of pins for the pumps, 50 small orange pylons, 2 trophies, 50 whistles, two small white boards and dry erase markers (for coaching), and lastly a couple of box of granola bars (for me to eat of course). As you can imagine, the young adults and kids we gave these soccer materials to were overjoyed.

As for the formal soccer tournament itself, it was a great success. There were some small problems, and not everything went according to plan, but that was expected on a trip such as this. However, from what I saw and heard from the Haitian people, the tournament was one of the most exciting events all year for both the players and their fans. Not only was this an opportunity for the players to come, play the game they loved, share a free meal together, and learn a bit from the message, but it was also a chance to be part of something worth taking pride in.

For one, this was definitely the first time in their lives these guys had the chance to play together with real team jerseys, good quality soccer balls, goalie gloves, and for the top teams, to win a trophy.

As well, the tournament brought together four competitive rural village and town teams who had never played one another before. To us playing a team in a neighboring town is commonplace, but with only a small percent of the people having access to a (working) vehicle in the rural parts of Haiti, walking is really the only option- making it hard to get to another village to play.

And so walk they did! On average, the teams would walk over an hour each way to play and watch the games, with a large number of fans tagging along as well. I would guess that for most of the games, there were easily a hundred to a hundred and fifty fans that came to cheer on their team.

So as you can imagine, there was quite a buzz in the air each night when the teams came to play. And it was definitely good quality soccer to be sure.

Personally, I was responsible for refereeing the majority of the games, which proved to be a fun but challenging position. The Haitians definitely know how to play soccer, but I found out that there are some discrepancies between international rules and local Haitian rules. On this note, I owe a big thank you to Peter Sing and the Lake Simcoe Soccer Club

for donating referee materials. I can tell you I used those red and yellow cards often to deal with some heated situations!

So the tournament went on for two fun weeks, with the finals coming down to a penalty shootout to determine the champion. As a soccer fan I couldn't have asked for anything better. We then had a big meal together and I shared a message with the teams before we said our final goodbyes. The next morning, I was on a small plane back to the capital, en route to Toronto, leaving behind many newfound friends.

While in Haiti, I learned a lot from the people there. In fact, though the soccer was a highlight for me, I would say the most memorable moments were the times I had to spend with individuals, talking to them and getting a small glimpse of the lives they live. One young man, Mezu, stands out to me above the rest. He is 18 years old, and works as a hired hand for the people we stayed with. With this money, he is able to pay for his schooling during the year. Mezu and I spent a lot of time together, and spent most nights talking about life, girls, sports, and God. I asked him many questions about his life, and he did the same. Mezu is in fact quite poor, and having seen where he lives and the reality of the conditions in Haiti, I realize it will not be an easy life for him. However, the joy he has in spite of this is convicting to say the least.

The most vivid memory I have is laying out under the gazebo where Mezu and I slept each night, hearing him pray and thank God for the day and for what he had, and then also praying for others in need. I guess it makes sense that God is very real for people like Mezu, as they depend on him greatly. Now I know he is not perfect- in many ways he is just like a normal 18 year old kid- but his life of faith and humility had a big impact on me and both challenged and encouraged me.

I was there to 'help' him and others in Haiti, but it was more the other way around. And for this I am thankful.

And so here I am back in Canada. At times, I find it hard to process everything I saw and experienced on the trip, but I feel greatly blessed to have had this challenging opportunity. Personally, I came back from Haiti with a new and changed perspective on life, on soccer, on poverty, and on faith. I met some amazing people too, and I can say this will be a memory I will carry with me for my whole life.

So thank you again, both for your support and for your encouragement and prayers. It meant so much to me to go to Haiti this summer and experience the things I did. And you never know, maybe I'll find my way back there again sometime soon.

If you have any more questions about the trip I would love to tell you about it, so feel free to ask.

Sincerely,

Andrew Ironside