

Something's afoot



Reagan Richards and some of her Santos FC Crossfire teammates broke the tension between tournament games with a pillow fight at the hotel.

Crossfire spends weekend not kicking back at Surf Cup

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The girls crowding the couch at the Starbucks on Orange Street in nearby Coronado look to be at home. They sip frappuccinos and mochas.

"Man, this is so sweet!" one girl shrieks. It's been a long time since she's had sugar. She hasn't been allowed to drink anything but water for days. None of these girls has. Their soccer coach won't allow it.

In fact, the girls of the Santos FC Crossfire probably won't tell their coach they ate at a Mexican restaurant and scarfed down three baskets of tortilla chips. They definitely won't let him know they guzzled Shirley Temples. He might make them run a few extra miles at practice the next day.

The constant laughter draws stares from the more serious coffee-drinkers who engage in philosophical discussion. But, just ask the girls, they have serious conversations, too.

"Hey, what's your favorite George joke?" asks Reagan Richards, the group's only high school senior.

"Oh, oh, I know," says Amanda Nelson, the team's goalkeeper and loudest member. "OK. You ready?"

"It's two thirty. Must be time to go to the dentist."

After a three-second pause, the girls roar with laughter. One of them, Marlina Fletcher, rolls her eyes with a bit of embarrassment. George is her father, the team's pun king.

The other folks in the restaurant might guess these girls are athletes. They walk with an enviable coordination. Some of them wear soccer-related clothing. The muscles in their legs bulge from hours of running.

But no one could guess from the demeanor of these girls that just a few hours prior, they lost in one of the biggest soccer tournaments of the year, the weekendlong San Diego Surf Cup.

FRIDAY

The Fletcher's blue minivan is packed to capacity. Black duffel bags (two per girl) are

"We know," they say in unison, as though it's something they've heard before.

"But you don't know," he says. "You have to get that instinct."

They nod. This is an important year for the team members, most of whom are juniors. College is near, and college coaches will be everywhere at the Surf Cup.

SATURDAY

A 5:30 a.m. wake-up call starts the first day of competition. At 6:20 a.m., groggy-eyed girls pile into various vehicles with Arizona license plates.

"I don't know why we're leaving so early," Marlina Fletcher says.

Her teammates echo her concerns. The Crossfire must be at the Cup by 7 a.m. for its 8 o'clock game.

The team and the parents realize quickly who's running the weekend. It's Coach Luis Dabo, the head of the club and the team's trainer. This is the first time he's traveled with the Crossfire. The team's coach, Harry Estep, couldn't make the trip, so Dabo stepped in for the weekend.

The parking lot for the Surf Cup is loaded with minivans and sport utility vehicles. Parking for the weekend costs \$8, probably the most reasonable fee of the weekend. The entry fee for each team is \$650. Teams can only stay in Surf Cup-recognized hotels. The Crossfire's hotel runs \$100 per room, per night.

"Soccer definitely isn't inexpensive," George Fletcher says. "We spend between three- and five-thousand dollars a year on it."

As the first game starts, parents set their digital watches for 30 minutes, the length of each half. They've already lathered sunscreen on their arms and legs. Sunglasses and hats have been in place for almost an hour. They know college coaches are walking around the 18 fields at the Cup.

"Maybe we should put out a sign," says Tim Haren, father of Maggie. "Will work for scholarship."

The other parents laugh.

During the game they're surprisingly quiet. They'll clap and cheer, but they know coaching their daughters is a no-no. Even Coach Dabo is silent. He saves instruction for halftime.

The scene is quite the opposite of the adjacent field. Indecipherable screaming comes from the sidelines. The loudest comes from the coach of the Tophat Gold from Atlanta. He has a chair, but doesn't use it. Instead, he paces, screaming directions to his team about defensive positions during corner kicks. It's doubtful they can even hear him.

At halftime, he drags his chair to the field and sits in it while he confers with his team. They sit on the ground in a circle, looking up to him.

Crossfire parents watch the scene and laugh. They're a different breed. Coach Dabo quietly stands and speaks to his team. The girls nod, even giggle at some of his comments.

"It's so nice to be a part of this team," parents say. "Coach Dabo is a professional."

Everyone is conscious of the college coaches, especially Marlina Fletcher, who pulled her left quadriceps muscle during the final warm-up before the game.

"It's frustrating," she says. "All of the coaches are here, and I didn't miss practice and now I get hurt in warm-ups."

After tying the Dallas Sting 1-1, the team makes a music-filled 20-minute drive back to the hotel. Maggie Haren and Brianna Weymouth make audio tapes for each of their teammates. The game — and pulled muscles — are forgotten. Singing is a priority.

The tactical elements are traded for a discussion of unmentionables.

"Did you see their shorts?" Jennifer Doss says. "They were so tight! I mean, you could see their underwear! Yuck!"

The team has just enough time for lunch in their rooms. Coach Dabo doesn't want them lolly-gagging around. The weekend is about work. They pile back into the vans at 12:45.



Brianna Weymouth (left) celebrates with Santos FC Crossfire teammate Jennifer Doss after a goal at the San Diego Surf Cup last weekend. The Crossfire lost in the quarterfinals.

They win the second game, 1-0. Parents hold their breath throughout. A couple even shout out to their daughters. Dabo isn't pleased.

"Please do not coach," he says to parents after the game. "I trust that they're going to make mistakes. I want them to learn, to think independently. That's why I don't coach from the sidelines."

The parents nod. They know that Dabo's not only correct, but in charge.

The girls are hungry again. Ruthanne Nelson, the team mom, spends the afternoon on the phone trying to find a restaurant that will take a group of 35. After a few rejections, she finds a restaurant — Italian, per Dabo's request — not too far from the hotel.

The dinner doubles as a birthday celebration for Coach Dabo. The girls purchased a Surf Cup T-shirt as a present. None of the parents or girls knows how old Dabo is. They're too embarrassed to ask him and too fearful that they may insult him. The consensus is that it's better not to ask.

Lights out comes when everyone arrives at the hotel. They get to sleep in for Sunday — wake-up comes at 7 a.m.

SUNDAY

The game is crucial: If the Crossfire wins, it receives a first-place entry into the quarterfinals. A loss will garner the team a No. 2 seed. Parents seem more concerned with the numbers than the girls, whose only concerns are sleep and a pasta-free meal.

The game doesn't go as planned. They lose, 1-0, but still earn a spot in the quarterfinals. The parents seem more let down than the players. The girls want food. Not pizza. Not pasta.

They have a long break — almost five hours — before it's time to prepare for the quarterfinals. After lunch, they go back to their rooms to watch television. Some sleep. When it's time to leave for the game, they seem tired. The ride seems longer because it's so quiet. None of the mix tapes are played. The girls instead tape on their shin guards in silence. They don't seem ready for the game.

They fall behind, 2-0, in the first half and don't seem to be able to regain control of the game, which has turned physical. The Santa Clara United start pulling on Crossfire shorts. Players begin to fall. It doesn't look as if a semifinal game Monday is in the Crossfire's future.

The only yelling comes from a near field, where a team from Bethesda, Md., begins play. The team has a long pre-game chant. Parents scream. Siblings double as cheerleaders.

Instead of worrying about their

daughters, the Crossfire crew gawks at the circus behind them. Mothers jump up and down. Dads exchange high-fives. Every touch of the ball is met with a shriek.

"When is that game going to end?" the Crossfire parents ask.

The loud game lasts longer than the Crossfire's. They lose, 2-0, and are eliminated from the tournament. Coach Dabo talks to the girls for 10 minutes. Smiles stay on their faces, even though they have an expression of loss across their brows. A couple of tears stain the faces of players who keep remembering missed opportunity.

After talking to the team, Coach Dabo asks the parents to gather.

"I hope you are not disappointed, because I'm not disappointed," Dabo says. "This team is going places. This is just the start."

The parents agree. Perhaps they had their hopes set too high Friday. After all, the Crossfire hadn't played a full game in well over a month; California teams, however, played matches all summer.

Players attribute the loss to a lack of drive. Maybe they didn't want the win in the first place. Maybe they weren't using the strength they acquired in their six-day-a-week practices.

"I am disappointed," Courtney Russell says. "I played horribly. We had no heart, no drive. Something was missing. At least we know what's the matter."

Some parents opt to drive home immediately. Most have work in the morning. Duffel bags and gas tanks are quickly filled. Half of the team stays for the night, for a ritual San Diego celebration that won't involve pasta and won't be sugar-free.

"I can't wait," Courtney Russell says, as a grin spreads across her face. "Starbucks, anyone?"



McCook (left) and teammate Jessica Heller stretch following a first-game tie. The Crossfire took a break and won its second game that afternoon.

stacked in the back so high, George Fletcher almost can't use his rearview mirror.

They're a bit behind schedule. It's almost 1 p.m., and the girls need to be at the hotel in San Diego by 7 for a team meeting.

The time doesn't bother Marlina Fletcher, Jennifer Doss or Natasha Harley, the three girls in the van. The silence annoys them.

"Dur-kee, turn on the radio!"

Durkje Fletcher, Marlina's mother, obeys their wish. The Backstreet Boys blare as the van pulls onto the freeway.

The trip marks the beginning of the season for the Crossfire. Though the team hasn't changed much since age-group regionals in June, expectations have. Parents and coaches of the Crossfire, now a state champion, expect good things this season. The Surf Cup is the start.

The girls talk very little about the Cup. They're more concerned with typical teenage fascinations: soap operas, fashion magazines and getting their first cars to go with their new driver's licenses.

Talk eventually steers toward soccer, after a bit of persuading by George Fletcher.

"You guys need to realize you can win this," he says, glancing at them through the rearview mirror.



After playing four games in two days, the players' primary food and sleep.