

Soccer, Anyone?

This Montana orthodontist and summer camp director looks to the Walker Mower to help maintain his three soccer fields.

Two weeks out of the year, young soccer enthusiasts and college soccer coaches from around the country converge on Kalispell, Montana to attend Flathead Soccer Camp. What makes this non-residential and not-for-profit camp different from other such venues is its founder and operator, Mike Stebbins. The 66-year-old orthodontist started the camp 15 years ago primarily to give local youngsters a place to grow their soccer and life skills.

“Most families cannot afford to send their children across the country to attend a camp,” Stebbins relates. “So a soccer friend convinced me to turn a portion of my 100-acre property into three soccer fields.”

To borrow a famous big-screen line, the orthodontist built it, and they came. These days, during the last two weeks of July, the camp hosts roughly 200 youngsters, ages four to 18, along with eight coaches, including college coaches and former professional and college players.

“We try to make the camp fun for coaches, too,” adds Stebbins. “They are attracted by the valley’s natural beauty and Kalispell’s spectacular location just 30 miles from Glacier National Park. During their afternoons off they can water ski, golf, ride wave runners, go whitewater rafting, hike or fly fish.”

Mike Stebbins started his soccer camp 15 years ago. He spends at least one day a week mowing its three fields with his Walker Mower.





Stebbins with Glacier High School varsity soccer coach Ryan O'Rourke. In between operating his dental practice, running Flathead Soccer Camp and refereeing, Stebbins volunteers at the high school as an assistant coach.

UNLIKELY BEGINNING

The orthodontist/coach is among the seventh generation of Stebbins to call the Flathead Valley their home. He grew up on a farm (his teacher brother still operates the family farm), attended dental school at Washington University in St. Louis, and spent three years in the Navy prior to specializing in orthodontics.

"I moved back to the area, set up practice, and before I knew it I was coaching my kindergarten son how to play soccer," he recalls. "If you're a father with sons or daughters who enjoy sports, you know the story."

Stebbins admits that coaching soccer, a sport he didn't play in school, never crossed

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his mind. But there he was, coaching his son and then his daughter, and he's still coaching 23 years later. In his spare time, he also enjoys being a referee at the high school.

But it's the camp that gives Stebbins the most pleasure. Billy McNicol, a friend



Even though his children have long left their nest, Stebbins (in foreground) remains committed to coaching youngsters.

and former Glasgow Rangers player and MLS (Major League Soccer) coach, was the one who urged Stebbins to build the fields. Proceeds from the camp, which costs \$155 for one week or \$280 to attend for two weeks of morning and evening sessions, help sponsor travel for local teams, and allow Stebbins to fly in coaches from around the country.

“I hired a local contractor to seed the fields, but I irrigate, fertilize and spray the field for weeds myself,” Stebbins explains. This is not much different than the farming he did as a youngster. “Then, I needed something to cut the grass. Local dealer Vaughn Penrod, owner of Penco Power Products, suggested that a Walker Mower was just what the fields needed.”

Stebbins has since owned two Walker Mowers, his latest model powered by a



For Stebbins, teaching soccer is also a way to teach some of life's greatest lessons.

26-hp Kohler engine, with two deck options: a 62-inch side-discharge deck and 52-inch GHS deck. “I mow the six acres of fields once a week with the larger deck when the camp isn’t operating or when other groups aren’t using the field,” he notes. “During camp, I switch to the GHS deck to make sure the fields are in perfect playing condition.” The power dump box, Stebbins adds, comes in especially handy during the two-week collection period.

CATCHING THE COACHING BUG

Even though his children have long left both their nest and the soccer field, Stebbins remains incredibly committed to being around youngsters and coaching. During soccer season—in between operating his practice, running the camp, refereeing games and operating his Walker

Mower—he’s an assistant varsity coach at Glazier High School in Kalispell.

During practice, Stebbins points out several players on both the boys and girls teams who have attended his camp. “Nice stop,” he yells to Sean, the goalie. “Keep it up.”

You know, it’s not just about soccer,” says Stebbins. “It’s also learning about life. When my son was 16 years old, we took two teams to Scotland. For most of the players, it was not only their first trip out of the country, but also their first ride in a plane. Playing any sport, no matter where you are, teaches teamwork, camaraderie, and the true spirit of competition; how to win and how to accept defeat.”

For Stebbins, soccer is more than a ball, shin guards, uniforms and a goal. It’s a way to learn some of life’s greatest lessons.



For information about the camp go to flatheadsoccer.com.

