

Nesbitt Population Explodes With Soccer Tourney

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An estimated 450 players, coaches and parents crowded into tiny Nesbitt this weekend for a season-ending tournament in a community soccer program that began five years ago with a handful of kids.

"It's an amazing thing to see," says Janna Mushie, who formed *Kidz Kicks* in 2013 as a local and cheaper alternative to organized soccer in Brandon. "When I started, I didn't know what it would become."

Mushie says nearly 120 kids registered this season to play on teams based in Nesbitt, population 25, coming from other local communities that don't offer soccer programming. *Read more about the program [here](#).*

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Kidz Kicks has proven so successful, a regional U-14 team will launch in 2019. The best players from Nesbitt, Wawanesa, Deloraine, Boissevain, Killarney and Hartney will compete against Brandon, Minnedosa, Neepawa and Rivers.

Nesbitt coach Mark O'Connor believes a regional team is the natural progression for the program.

"What started as a kick-about for a few local kids has just boomed," says O'Connor, who hopes to add a U-16 and adult team in the coming years. "If we stay static, if we stay in one position, we will lose. These kids get to U-14 and there's nothing for them after."

Among those competing in Saturday's tournament were Arsene Samuragwa and his sister Nicole Masambiro. Their family moved to Killarney last year from the Republic of Burundi, a tiny and largely rural country in Africa.

"I like soccer," says Arsene, relaxing on the sidelines between games. "But here, we mix boys and girls. Back home, it's just boys."

Soccer has been an important way for the newcomers to integrate, including learning a new language. Neither Arsene nor his sister came to Canada knowing any English except hello and thanks.

"There was a lot of pointing last year," says Killarney Kickers' manager Anne Smith. "They got to town in April and joined the team in May. But their soccer skill level is very high. That's the only sport they played before."

O'Connor, a long-time soccer player and coach, anticipates the new regional team planned for next season will be competitive.

"It'll be all players that want to play in a regional league," he says, "with a focus on skills development."