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Thursday, Jan. 17, 2008

## Coach's passion for soccer never wanes

by Chris Brown | Staff Writer

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Soccer has been in John Cunha's family's blood since they lived in Portugal. It's no surprise that when he moved to the United States as a boy, he started playing soccer almost immediately.

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Now he is the girls' competitive soccer coordinator for the Linganore Urbana Athletic Association (LUYAA).

"Soccer is my passion," the New Market area resident said.

He has been coaching soccer for LUYAA since 1997, and said that coordinating for the organization is a way for him to share his love for the game and to pass it on to the next generation. His four children have all been on teams he coached.

Cunha came to Carney, N.J., as a 10-year-old Portuguese immigrant, and his love of soccer allowed him to fit in perfectly.

"What Pittsburgh is to football, Carney is to soccer," he said.

Cunha said he was fortunate to play on a team with several boys who would go on to be Major League Soccer players, including former U.S. World Cup teammates John Harkes and Tony Meola, during his four years of varsity play.

While some of his teammates went on to glory in



Tom Fedor/The Gazette

John Cunha, coach and director with the Linganore Urbana Youth Athletic Association, is a huge soccer fan.

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professional soccer, he sought another life path.

“After high school I wanted to get into electronics engineering. Then I started working full time, and didn’t have the opportunity [to play soccer],” he said.

Cunha moved to Woodridge Village, in Eaglehead at Lake Linganore, in 1995 when he took a job with CNN in Washington, D.C.

Two years later, once his eldest daughter Jayne, now 13, was old enough to play, he attended a soccer-coaching clinic, which LUYAA offers free of charge.

His other children, 5-year-old Owen, 8-year-old Carson and 10-year-old Olivia, have all played LUYAA soccer.

Jayne tried out for the U.S. Youth Olympic Development Program and earned a spot on Maryland’s team.

“It was thrilling to hear that my daughter tried out, and she made the state team. We’re really excited about her,” he said.

Cunha has also been involved with the Woodridge Village Association in Eaglehead since 2004. He has shown his dedication to the community’s children by organizing funds and volunteers to save a parcel of green space from development and to construct a playground on it.

Cunha’s approach to coaching and his dedication to his players has earned him the respect of other LUYAA volunteers.

“I work closely with John and he is a very compassionate loving person that strides to put the children before himself,” LUYAA field marshal Melanie Robinson wrote in an e-mail. “He has helped to guide LUYAA soccer to what it is today, with his continued effort and hard work he has allowed the girls soccer program to blossom into a very competitive league.”

LUYAA soccer commissioner Bob Locicero wrote that Cunha has been involved in every aspect of the development of LUYAA soccer, in the past working as coordinator for 5- and 6-year-olds and currently as coordinator for the girls competitive program and coordinator for the travel league program.

It was Cunha’s vision that got LUYAA accepted into the Washington Area Girls Soccer League (WAGS), the premier girls soccer league in the D.C. metropolitan area, Locicero wrote. LUYAA is only the second program in Frederick County to be admitted into WAGS.

Locicero credited not only Cunha’s dedication, but his coaching ability, with his teams’ successes.

“John recognized long before it was popular that developing foot skills in young players was more important than winning games,” he wrote.

Cunha believes it’s important to involve children in sports.

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“Not just in soccer, but in any sport, if you make it fun for children ... they will succeed,” Cunha said.

Cunha recalled a tournament in Carroll County, where his team won resoundingly. He said the exhilaration on his players' faces was well worth the effort.

“[Coaching is] worth sticking with. It's a feeling you don't normally receive in life. I love that, and that's why I keep on coaching,” he said.

Cunha simply loves soccer. He currently plays in an over-40 league that plays Monday nights at the SoccerPlex in Montgomery County. He and other soccer coaches play in the league to “keep us sane.” However, he said that playing soccer for most of his life gives him an advantage as a coach.

Cunha said he hopes to continue coaching and playing soccer for the rest of his life.

“I'm setting myself up so when I retire, I never retire,” he said. “I'll always be doing something. I'm looking forward to having a second career in soccer.”