UC SANTA BARBARA

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Success On and Off the Field

In the United States, soccer is the second-most popular youth sport behind basketball. Between 3 and 5 million American boys and girls play the game — and many dream of becoming the next Cristiano Ronaldo or Abby Wambach.

A new initiative at UC Santa Barbara is designed to capitalize on the passion young soccer players bring to the sport and aims to show them that success in sports can lead to success in the classroom. The one-day program is an innovative outreach partnership among the Materials Research Lab (MRL), the Santa Barbara Soccer Club, the Lompoc Chelsea Football Club and the men's soccer team.

The two competitive soccer clubs brought players in 5th and 6th grade as well as some in middle school. "This is an important demographic because middle school is a critical time for these boys," said Barbara Walker, director of research development for the social sciences, humanities and fine arts. "It is the moment at which they typically start to de-identify from school."

The day began with a bio-inspired soft robotics project. The MRL education program coordinator, Frank Kinnaman, other MRL volunteers and members of the men's soccer team helped the boys build sculptures using straws, rulers, scissors and rubber bands.

"The soft robotics workshop provides a way of engaging the kids by doing hands-on activities so that they can learn about various aspects of science that they may never have heard of," said program organizer Joan-Emma Shea, a professor in the

Department of Chemistry and Biochemistry. Shea's son, as well as Walker's, participated in the program.

"The day on campus provides an opportunity to inspire these kids. Maybe it will make a difference and they will think about college and possibly even a career in science," Shea continued.

The science segment was followed by a soccer scrimmage on one of the campus's fields and lunch in the Carrillo Dining Commons. For many of the kids, the highlight of the day was a tour of the locker room at Harder Stadium led by Waid Ibrahim, the outreach coordinator for the men's soccer team.

Ibrahim, a UC Santa Barbara alumnus, understands firsthand how soccer can pave the road to success. A graduate of the first class of the Africa-based Right to Dream Academy, he left Ghana to attend Dunn School in Los Olivos, California, and went on to play soccer at UC Santa Barbara.

"Soccer prepared me to be successful in life," Ibrahim said. "It has shown me the importance of hard work, honesty and teamwork. Above all, it has molded me into a person of character."

The young soccer players heard similar sentiments echoed by other mentors. Vince Alvarez, another former soccer player, told the boys that success — in sports and in school — takes dedication and commitment. "Ask yourself where you want to go," he said. "Then create goals for yourself and find out how to get there."

According to Cesar Jimenez, head coach of the Lompoc Chelsea Football Club, hearing such advice from others not only confirms what he tells his players but also will help them envision themselves as college students, scientists and scholar-athletes.

"I always tell our kids to use soccer as a vehicle to gain an education," Jimenez said. "So today really helped them, hearing it from somebody else that's done it. I'm grateful for this opportunity because if we can get them going in that direction, it would be really amazing."

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.