

# Soccer a major economic force for city

By Janet S. Lee

In addition to time-honored baseball and softball tournaments, Clinton has become a hot spot for soccer in just the last few years. During the first two weekends in May, Clinton played host to two youth tournaments which brought hundreds of players and supporters into town.

The first weekend in May saw the Admiral Cup, the year-end Mississippi Soccer Association recreational tournament, come to town. Featuring players ages six through sixteen, it attracted hundreds of participants and their supporters. Drawing from four geographical sections (north, south, central, and west) that comprise the playing districts, the top four teams from each district came to Clinton for tournament action. Each team was guaranteed to play three games; play was continuous throughout the weekend, with the final game not being decided until after 7 p.m. Sunday night.

Through entry fees, the Mississippi Soccer Association paid referees, but the financial benefit for the Clinton Soccer Association came through monies from concessions and parking.

City businesses also benefitted through hotel rooms, restaurant meals and gas to fuel vehicles coming from across the state. Justin Roberts, who works with the Mississippi Brilla Juniors, calculated 110 teams over the two weekends: 23 Clinton-based teams, 44 metro-area teams outside

Clinton, and 43 teams from parts of the state outside the Jackson metropolitan area.

With a minimum of two hotel nights from out-of-area guests (\$40,850) and a restaurant impact of two days of meals (\$198,000), the two soccer tournaments combined produced an estimated \$238,850 spent within the borders of Clinton.

The second weekend of May brought the Brilla Juniors Spring Finale, with seventy teams and players from ages eight through nineteen. More teams from the metro area participated in that tournament, which finished out the year for the players whose skills and interest may carry them past the casual level of play. Each team was also guaranteed three games.

The Brilla Juniors Tournament allowed the more competitive teams, who are coached by professional coaches rather than parent volunteers, an opportunity to showcase their skills. The Brilla Juniors program has branches in Clinton and Flowood, with more than three hundred top area players involved.

According to Clintonian Rusty Bryant, Executive Director of the Brilla team of the Premier Development League (PDL), the explosion of soccer in Clinton is great for the community as a whole and for developing young players.



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“We’ve really seen a great increase in the number of players involved in Clinton,” he said, “and we’ve been able to bring a number of tournaments to our city because of the support we’ve received.”

As an example of the interconnectedness of the soccer community, Bryant serves as Executive Director of Brilla, a team in the PDL, the “farm system” of major league soccer, similar to Major League Baseball. But he also coaches three-year old Mighty Mites in what is the first exposure of the youngest players to the game.

“Brilla has helped expose Clinton folks to soccer and helped educate them to what it can offer. Our Brilla

players are not paid to play, but we attract some of the top college players who can maintain their eligibility and play their way up in the system. From mid-May until the first of August, we demonstrate the highest level of soccer through our schedule, which includes the seven home games we play at Clinton High School.”

He says it has been an educational process to embrace a sport that is perhaps more popular in other parts of the world than the U.S.

“The tricky part is to educate our market about the opportunities for youth play through a systematic, more methodical system.”

The Brilla team operates in the smallest metropolitan market of the seventy-five teams in the PDL but has made itself at home in Clinton.

“Our goal is to attract one thousand fans to each home game,” says Bryant. “It’s important to the community and the kids who are invested in soccer, because Brilla shows them the level of professionalism in the sport. This is high skill-level soccer on display for the whole family to attend and enjoy locally.”

Fans at Brilla games may see soccer stars of the future, too, as seventy percent of players who are drafted into major league teams come through the PDL.

## Mt. Salus Christian School welcomes new headmaster

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Bill Maner has been appointed Headmaster of Mt. Salus Christian School, in Clinton, and will lead a fresh phase of development for the school when he takes over in July.

“I feel like I am coming back home. I first started in coaching and teaching at Mt. Salus,” said Maner. “I was at Mt. Salus from 2003 until 2007. Those were great

years, and I have great memories of students, families, faculty and staff. I am grateful for Mt. Salus, because they gave me an opportunity which shaped and formed me as a coach and educator.”

After leaving Mt. Salus in 2007, Maner spent two years in graduate school at Mississippi State University, where he earned his M.A. in Spanish. Upon completion of his studies, he and his family traveled

to El Salvador and spent nearly two years there as missionaries. There, he taught English as a second language at a Christian university and coached their men’s and women’s basketball teams.

Maner currently serves as the boys’ basketball coach, Spanish teacher and Athletic Director at Laurel Christian School. Of returning to Mt. Salus, Maner has said, “The mission of Mt. Salus is

to educate children with a Christian world view. We want our students to not only be educated but be able to see Christ as the center of all that we do.”

The Chairman of the Board of Trustees at Mt. Salus Christian School, Sean Milner, said Maner was selected in part for his character, enthusiasm and passion for education, and the school in particular.

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