

Alex Paz Overwhelmed With Support During Paz Cup Fundraiser, Feels Optimistic And Grateful For Support From Granite, Collinsville Area

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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GRANITE CITY - The soccer communities in both Granite City and Collinsville are very close-knit and supportive. The rivalry between the Warriors and the Kahoks in the past has also been intense and oftentimes very exciting as well.

On Thursday night at Granite City's Gene Baker Field, both communities got together in support of a former Warrior goalie who has adopted Collinsville as his home to help him in his battle with liver cancer.

Alex Paz, who graduated from then-Granite City South and was a goalie on the IHSA state championship teams in the late 1970s, was honored as part of the inaugural Paz Cup match, which served as a fundraiser to help defray expenses on a liver transplant that's scheduled for the spring of 2024.

The Kahoks won the match 3-0, but the real winner was Paz and his family, who saw much money raised through a 50-50 jackpot drawing and sales of T-shirts in red for Granite City and purple for Collinsville. The back of the shirts highlighted a green ribbon, the symbol for liver cancer awareness, with the acronym YNWA, short for You'll Never Walk Alone, the famous song from the Broadway musical Carousel, which is also the theme song for Paz's favorite team, Liverpool FC of the English Premier League. It's a song sung mightily by the famous Liverpool supporters section, The Kop, on the right end of the team's home ground, Anfield, before every home match.

A version of the song, sung by the late Gerry Marsden of the 1960s group Gerry and the Pacemakers, was played prior to the kickoff. Marsden was an avid Liverpool supporter, and the song took on a much deeper meaning following the infamous Hillsborough disaster of 1989, when 96 fans were killed when an end of the stadium was overpacked with Liverpool fans for the F.A. Cup semifinal match against Nottingham Forest FC at the Hillsborough home ground of Sheffield Wednesday FC.

Paz and his brothers, Dave and Tim, presented the Kahoks with the new cup in a midfield ceremony after the game and felt very honored with how the evening turned out.

"I'm feeling overwhelmed, honored," the soft-spoken Paz said. "It's quite the event it turned out to be."

The idea of the Paz Cup was brought about as an idea by Collinsville High athletic director Clay Smith after Paz's diagnosis, wanting to help out with expenses from his eventual transplant.

"Coach Smith from Collinsville called Granite City," Paz said, "they worked together and put this whole event together and came up with the Paz Cup idea as a fund-raiser for me to help me get my transplant."

Granite athletic director John Moad got on board quickly and helped organize the event, with the students from both school helping out in sales and fund-raising. Everything came together and produced a grand night for Paz and his family

"Yes, it is," Paz said. "It was amazing."

Paz is originally from Granite City and following his time with the Warriors, enlisted in the Navy and came back to Granite, winding up in Collinsville with his wife, who had three children going to school in Collinsville. He currently has a photography business and takes pictures of both Kahok sporting events and Collinsville community events. He also takes pictures of Warrior games and Granite events as well.

"I try to do both Granite City and Collinsville," Paz said. "So whenever they play each other, I try to be there as many times as I can to photograph both teams."

Being a part of the Granite City soccer legacy under the late Gene Baker still means a lot to Paz as well.

"He'll always be a coach people should model after," Paz said. "He was an amazing coach, a great tactician. He was just amazing."

Paz is optimistic about his chances of making a full recovery, but also knows it's first things first.

"Well, the transplant isn't easy," Paz said with a smile, "but as far as treating and keeping the cancer from growing and spreading seems pretty good. So this is the easy part; the transplant probably sometime in the spring."