

Record Year for Moscow Youth Soccer League

By [Kevin O'Flynn](#)

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The Moscow Youth Summer League's winners of the division for 6- and 7-year-olds posing with trophies. Victory came after a long penalty shootout. **Andrei Joosten**

The end-of-season final was typically tense, with a goal disallowed and emotional fans on the sideline. As it ended in a draw, both teams had to face a penalty shootout, and the referee made an unusual decision after players began missing penalties.

"They had so much difficulty that the ref decided to move the ball closer to the goal," said Andrei Joosten, one of the organizers of the Moscow Youth Soccer League, where expat and Russian children as young as 3 have been playing for the last six weeks.

The players' difficulties in the final were quite understandable, as they were just 6 or 7 years old. The shootout eventually went to 12 penalties for each side, Joosten said.

A record number of children — 667 — took part this year in the league, set up more than 15

years ago by Moscow Times founder Derk Sauer after he couldn't find a place for his children to play football. The last day, Oct. 15, saw a series of finals for the six different age groups.

"I started refereeing, and I enjoyed it so much watching the kids I got much more involved," said Joosten, 41, CEO of investment bank Lincoln International Russia & CIS, who joined the league six years ago and whose son, Danilo, 6, plays in the league.

"The real nice thing about the league is it's very family orientated. Everyone gets involved — the parents, the coach, the team," Joosten said. "The kids love it. The main thing is to first get the shirts, and they then wear them every day and go to sleep in them. ... My son starts to speak about the next game when the previous one finishes. He wakes me up at 7 and tells me the game is on and we have to get there."

The league is heavily supported by local international schools, and children are from lots of different nationalities, American, British, French, German, a number from South America, plus a growing involvement of Russian children.

Games are divided into four quarters for younger ages, starting at 10 minutes a quarter for the youngest and going up to a full-length football game of 90 minutes and two halves for 14- and 15-year-old children.

"They enjoyed it. If the season had gone on longer, they'd have been happy," said Steve Sherman, 51, operations director of O'Stin, the fashion clothing division of Sportmaster, whose son, Jack, 7, and daughter, Ella, 9, took part in the league.

Even though his daughter broke her foot playing early in the season, Sherman was enthusiastic about the league, saying it was also a good social event for meeting new people — for both children and parents.

"[My son Jack] was playing for Planeta Sushi. We had the best defense but not so good attack," he said. "He scored two of their three goals. It's a tough league."

Numbers reached a record high this year, more than the previous best in 2007. With the links between the league and the expat community, the increase or decrease in numbers — 2008 saw a drop — is a small indicator of how expat business is doing in Russia, Joosten said.

The league is a nonprofit event and supported by more than two dozen companies and brands from Playstation to The Moscow Times. Division winners this year were Men's Health in Division 1, Pepsico in Division 2, Auchan in Division 3, Moscow City Racing in Division 4 and Lincoln in Division 5. All Division 6 players, the youngest in the league, received medals.

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