2008 Provincial Reconstruction Team News

-U.S. Sports Academy Honors Iraqi Soccer Team with Award-

Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker presents Team of the Year award to Minister of Youth and Sport Gassem Mohammed Jaafar

By Armand Cucciniello
Special Correspondent

Baghdad - Athletes and team sports in general got a boost in Iraq with the recent presentation by the United States Sports Academy of its "Team of the Year" award to the Iraqi national soccer team.

Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker presented the Award on behalf of the Academy to Minister of Youth and Sport Gassem Mohammed Jaafar during a ceremony April 26 at the Rashid Hotel.

"It's an honor and a pleasure to be here today to recognize the achievement of the Iraqi national team in its victory in the Asia Cup last year," Crocker said, recalling the team's 1-0 Asia Cup Championship win over Saudi ArabiaJakarta. in the final match in

The July 29 victory was well remembered, as thousands of Iraqis, who had been following the match in Indonesia on television, rushed into the streets of the capital and other cities to celebrate. In the final minutes of the Asia Cup finals, an Iraqi Kurd named Hawar Mohammed passed to Younis Mahmoud, an Iraqi Sunni, who knocked in the game's winning goal.

Crocker added, "Iraq's triumph in the Asia Cup was a great victory in sports. It was also a great victory for the new Iraq. The fact that 22 of Iraq's finest young men could come together, practice and play – sometimes under very difficult conditions – demonstrates to Iraq, and indeed to the world, that Iraq after 2003 is coming together as a society and as a nation and will be a strong force on the world stage."

The U.S. Sports Academy is America's leading academic institution focusing on the development of athletes and athletics. Located in Daphne, Alabama, the Academy is a degree-granting university that offers bachelors, masters and doctoral degrees in sports areas like management, fitness, coaching and medicine.

Each year the Academy presents an award to two athletes (one male, one female) and to two teams (one men's, one women's). The Iraqi Men's Soccer Team is the Team of the Year in 2008.

"It was the judgment of the Academy that there was no finer team in any sport anywhere in the world," Crocker said, speaking to the Minister, his deputy, Member of Parliament and Iraqi soccer star Ahmed Radhi, as well as other Iraqi officials in front of the Iraqi and pan-Arabic press corps in Baghdad.

"Today we join with Iraq in remembering and celebrating a great victory; but it is also a day to look forward to the new challenges. We have the Olympics, and the World Cup competitions are getting underway. And thanks to your victory in the Asia Cup, now we all expect great things," the diplomat said.

The U.S. Government supports sports programs in a number of countries, including Iraq, as a means to unite people faced with divisive cultural and political differences.

Universally, sports teach teamwork, leadership and respect for others, requiring practice, discipline, and determination – all qualities leading to success not only on the playing field but also in the classroom and later in business or public service.

The State Department's Bureau for Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA), which is a prime organizer and source of funding for such programs, works through programs like Sports United and the World Cup Sports Initiative. Both involve training and exchange programs for foreign youth in sports like baseball, basketball, football, track and field, soccer, volleyball, wrestling, archery, boxing, swimming, and fencing.

As well as becoming better athletes the programs provide foreign youth with the opportunity to establish connections with American sports professionals as well as learn more about U.S. life and culture when they travel to the United States or are coached by U.S. trainers.

The Sports Visitor programs are for non-elite athletes (not Olympic or national team members) and coaches. All athletes must be between the ages of seven and 17 and be a mix of boys and girls. This year, the Sports Visitor program will run from July 6 through the 19th.

Six boys, six girls and two coaches from Iraq will be sent to the U.S. for the 2008 program, making it a first for Iraq.

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), in combination with their military partners with support from the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), have constructed soccer fields and provided uniforms for teams throughout Iraq.

Recently, the 3rd Brigade Combat Team (3BCT) of the 3rd Infantry Division built the Al Wahdah Soccer Stadium in Al Mada'in, a qada (district) of Baghdad Province, using funds from the Commanders Emergency Response Program (CERP). Since 2003, $2.66 billion of CERP funds have been devoted to small-scale humanitarian relief and reconstruction projects in Iraq.

The stadium features a grass field, concrete spectator stands and changing rooms for the players. Newly dug wells provide water for the field, along with a system that will allow efficient use of water. The complex is not only the first stadium, but also the only grass soccer field in Al Mada'in.

On opening day, April 4, children filled the stadium proudly wearing their team uniforms while chanting their favorite soccer cheers.

The Al Mada'in Qa'im Makom (Mayor) officiated at the event saying, "Through sport and education, we will create a better future for our children, a future of peace and prosperity in Iraq."

Other local Iraqi leaders, American and Georgian soldiers of the 3rd BCT, as well as members of a Baghdad Embedded PRT (EPRT) were all present for the opening. Six local teams that had received uniforms and equipment through the USAID Community Stabilization Project (CSP) then displayed their soccer skills.

The 2,100 local youth who received uniforms and equipment under this initiative are also participating in a qada-wide soccer league organized by CSP and the qada Council Youth and Sport Committee.