

Benin Education Fund Soccer Championship 2004

The 2nd annual soccer tournament sponsored by the Benin Education Fund was held from August 23 to 29 in Tampègré, a small town north of Natitingou (the Atacora provincial capital).

The tournament was very successful and filled with all the drama of major league soccer. Everyone played with the sole objective to unseat the defending champion from last year. Teams from nine towns participated in the tournament, up from just three last year. Most of the games were evenly matched and both semi-final games were decided by Penalty Kicks (PKs). The home team, which won the championship last year, lost in the semi-final game through a PK shootout.

The championship game brought the largest crowd probably ever witnessed in this little town of Tampègré, that draws its name from its proximity to the mountain. People came from as far away as 250 KM just to see this event.

The championship game was between Toucoutouna and Natitingou, two of the bigger towns among the nine that participated. For these fans, it had perhaps the drama of a big game such as the World Cup Final. Seeing people praying on the sidelines and running up and down the field to keep up with the ball, it was apparent that nothing mattered at that moment but the game on hand. Whether soccer fan or not, the whole town came out to watch, cheer, and dance. It did not matter that the home team has already been eliminated back in the semifinals.

Half time was capped with a local traditional dance from the Otammari tribe. The dance was performed by mostly 10-year-olds, a performance so beautiful that it brought tears to the eyes.

Although everyone enjoyed the soccer tournament, soccer was not the only thing on people's minds during the five days of the actual games. Women prepared and sold food, the local alcoholic drink, art work, and other goods from 7:00 am to midnight. It was like "Market Day" every day, which was good for the local economy!

Although fans and players were enthusiastic about supporting their own teams, overall everyone involved with the tournament displayed great sportsmanship and camaraderie. Also, one of the benefits of the tournament last year was that the incentive of playing soccer kept some of the kids from dropping out of school. So our hope is that these positive ripple effects continue.