

## Eight Months and Counting

Written by Erik Bojnansky  
January 2009

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### Little Haiti Park has developed detractors and defenders alike



Officially it's still known as Little Haiti Park, but a sign posted on the grounds gives another name and reflects the park's principal function: "Emmanuel 'Manno' Sanon Soccer Park." Sanon was the Haitian national team's star player during the 1974 World Cup competition and died this year at age 65 of pancreatic cancer. Kenneth Newman, an energetic man with a bushy mustache, smiles as he points at the sign. The name, he says, was his idea.

Newman, a part-time referee for the Florida Youth Soccer League and a parks advocate, supported the late Miami Commissioner Art Teele's quest to create some green space in the middle of Little Haiti's warehouse section at NE 2nd Avenue and 63rd Street. Newman even served on the city's soccer park committee, which tried to guide the park's development.

On May 3 of last year, thousands attended Little Haiti Park's grand opening, which included a match between a Miami soccer team and one based in Haiti. Fifteen acres in size, the park has a manicured, Bermuda-grass "professional" field sandwiched by a covered grandstand on one side and bleachers on the other. There is also a worn soccer practice field, a playground, a kids' water park, picnic pavilions, a paved jogging path and a 5000-square-foot community center now under construction.

So Newman is happy, right? Wrong. Stretching his arms wide, Newman says, "Told you. What a waste."

His main gripe: Another sign warning people to stay off the main, "professional" soccer field. "They are keeping people off the field to make it look nice," Newman complains. "But no one is playing on it *at all*."

While the nearby practice field is open to anyone free of charge, the city reserves the main field for those who can pay rental fees, explains Lara De Souza, spokeswoman for Miami's Parks and Recreation Department. "The main field is classified as a professional soccer field," De

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Souza continues, “which means that we need to protect the grass from daily wear and tear that comes from practice and pickup soccer games, so that when a group comes to rent the stadium out, they have a field that is usable and we are not placed in a situation where we cannot have a tournament or special soccer event at the park due to the poor conditions of the field.”

So far, in the eight months the park has been open, there have been a mere five games on the professional field, two of which were city-sponsored events. And only once were fees waived by an act of the Miami City Commission, according to De Souza.

And what are those fees? The basic facility rental fee is \$700, the concession fee is \$150, use of the press box is \$100, lights cost \$50 per hour, plus a staff cost of \$600. For a three-hour, nighttime soccer match, that amounts to some \$1700.

High schools can use the field for a flat \$1000. A middle school can have it for \$300. Youth organizations can use the professional field for \$125 per hour, plus a \$50 concession charge, plus \$35 for the press box, and another \$120 for lights during night games.

Lou Confessori, former vice president of the Florida Youth Soccer League, has never visited Little Haiti Park, but he fumed when Newman told him the fees the city expects to collect from its use. “They build this beautiful facility,” he says. “Obviously it is for the adult leagues, and that is fine. But the adult leagues are not there in the middle of the afternoon. It would be nice for [kids] to be able to play [on the main field].”

Newman says Little Haiti’s neighborhood kids would be better served if the fields were made freely available to competitive soccer organizations like the Florida Youth Soccer League. “Basically the city is in the 18th Century when it comes to its sports program,” Newman grumbles. “It’s not interested in giving kids opportunities.”



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Donald Lutton, superintendent of recreation for the city's parks department, counters that the fees charged at Little Haiti Park are comparable to those charged by Miami-Dade County for its stadium park facilities. Lutton also says the city has its own soccer program in which residents of nearby parks play against each other, as well as teams from the City of North Miami. Unlike the Florida Youth Soccer League, Miami residents can play in those games for free, Lutton notes. (Fees at Florida Youth League Soccer vary from team to team. For example, the Miami Lakes Soccer Club charges kids \$325 per season plus \$40 per month.)

The fee structure at Little Haiti Park doesn't bother Tom Mulroy, president of Copa Latina, a soccer promotions and marketing company. In fact, to Mulroy a restricted field makes sense. "If you have a park like that, you can't let just anyone on it," he asserts. Part of the reason for restricting the field's use is that you cheapen the value of the venue. And then there is wear and tear on the field. "If it is a grass field," he says, "you can only play X-amount of hours on it before it wears out."

Mulroy says he considered using Little Haiti Park for an event and may do so again. "I was talking with one of our friends and we were looking at doing a celebrity game [there]," he says, "We couldn't get all the I's dotted and the T's crossed [to make the game happen] but Little Haiti Park would have been where we would have hosted it."

Currently the parks department is looking at the possibility of changing the fee system for neighboring schools, says De Souza.

Although Newman is angered by park policies regarding the main soccer field, many nearby residents and business operators are just glad to have a park at all. Sophia Lacroix, an artist and Little Haiti resident, loves the park and visits all the time. "In the afternoon," she says, "it's packed with young people from the neighborhood. Not just Haitians, but Hispanics and Haitian boys who play against each other [on the practice field]."

Leonie Hermantin, a longtime activist in Miami's Haitian community, says the park's design could have been better. For example, there are no locker rooms or showers at the facility. However, Hermantin says the park is "a good result to a most tumultuous beginning. They truly brought something beautiful."

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Indeed Little Haiti Park generated the most controversy at its very conception, when Teele began pushing for its creation in 1998. Back then Teele wanted a 60-acre park. Local property owners, wary of having their properties seized via eminent domain, fought the scheme relentlessly for years.

Many Little Haiti residents, meanwhile, were more concerned about employment than green space, Hermantin says. "It didn't strike us as a priority at that point to build a park," she remembers. "We did not see it as the kind of investment that would generate jobs for the neighborhood."

Eventually a compromise for a smaller park was hammered out. But legal bills and land costs pushed the taxpayer total up to \$34 million. Commissioner Teele himself didn't live to see the park finished. In the summer of 2005, facing multiple corruption charges brought by state and federal authorities, Teele shot himself in the lobby of the *Miami Herald*. The park's community center, which is scheduled for completion this April, will be named after Teele.

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