





Witnesses to HISTORY

An exciting trip to Europe turned epic as Darlington School athletes played soccer, soaked up culture, and earned the privilege of saying 'I was there' for a major soccer moment.

By Loyd McIntosh



Members of the Darlington School boys and girl's soccer teams enjoy the scenery during their European trip in March.



Members of Darlington boys team show off their FC Barcelona (FCB) spirit outside of Campo Nou, the home stadium of FCB.

FOR MANY TEENAGERS, SPRING BREAK IS

a time to relax, head to the beach, and turn off the brain for a while. However, for one lucky group of young people from Georgia, spring break was nothing short of epic.

In March, a collection of soccer players from Darlington School, a coeducational boarding school in Rome, had the opportunity to travel around Europe and play a little soccer while they were at it. They also had the chance to see a little game featuring Barcelona FC and Paris St. Germain you may have heard about. Truly, epic is the only word to describe this once-in-a-lifetime expedition planned by Premier International Tours, a Colorado-based company that specializes in organizing soccer tours for American teams throughout Europe and South America.

Chad Liddle, the director and founder of Darlington's Soccer Academy, took members of Darlington's boys and girls soccer teams on a tour of Spain and the south of France. Along the way, they got to see a plethora of historic sites, but they also got to see how they compare against youth teams from the world's soccer hotbeds. Liddle began organizing these trips shortly after forming the soccer academy in 2004, and he believes they offer the school's young people important cultural and athletic experiences by competing against some of the best youth soccer players in the world.

"I love doing these things just because the kids get so much out of it," says Liddle. "These European trips are great for team bonding as well as just the overall experiences of the kids. They not only get to have the soccer culture but they get to see a great deal of history mixed into it."

Liddle fielded teams made up of close to 40 boys and girls, and competed in five matches — three games in Spain and two in France — playing against such teams as the youth club of Montpellier HSC of Ligue 1. Darlington only lost one match during the junket, earning the respect of their peers across the pond, many of them still harboring out-of-date perceptions about the quality of American soccer players. "It's not



Right: Posing for photos in front of the Sagrada Familia Basilica, Barcelona, Spain.
Below: Darlington boys hanging out in front of the Arc De Triomphe in Paris, France.





Darlington School's boys and girls teams played in five games against some of the most talented youth players across Spain and France. The experience was important in terms of soccer growth as well as cultural understanding.

surprising to me but I think it does surprise the European competition that we can play," Little says. "There is still the mentality that the Americans can't play as well. I just enjoy those cultural interactions where you earn their respect immediately."

For the young people, the trip may have been a chance to have a good time while expanding their horizons, but Little regards these trips as opportunities for each student to learn about the world around them, develop camaraderie with their teammates, and push themselves physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

"I truly believe you can learn a lot about life through the game, and the multiple cultures and the things they're passionate about all around the world. So, I'm a big proponent of doing those experiences for the kids, and I hope that they take those experiences and learn more about themselves and what it takes to be successful," says Little.

This is the sixth trip Premier International Tours has planned for Little, sending his student-athletes to England, Scotland, and Germany in addition to Spain and France. Premier International Tours handles everything from preparing travel and lodging for the players, scheduling games against quality opponents, and acquiring tickets to high-profile soccer matches, including 50 tickets to the Poland-Ecuador World Cup game in 2006.

"Getting fifty-five tickets to a World Cup game is unheard of. Presidents of countries can't get 55 tickets," Little says. "If you can get that many tickets to a game like that it proves you are connected."

For the 2017 trip, however, Premier International Tours outdid themselves by providing dozens of tickets to the UEFA Champions League second round contest between Barcelona FC and Paris St. Germain (PSG) in Barcelona on March 8. The game was a rematch of their earlier game in France in which PSG shut out Barcelona 4-0 in February. PSG looked to be in good shape to advance to the third round by having Barcelona on the ropes with what appeared to be an insurmountable four-goal differential. Of course, Barcelona would mount a comeback that shocked the world of soccer, defeating PSG 6-1.

Darlington's seats were located near a large contingent of PSG fans, giving them an interesting perspective on the scene that erupted into pandemonium after Sergi Roberto's sliding strike in the game's 95th minute. Being in the stands on that historic night, Little says, made an immediate impression on his group of kids, none of whom could believe what they had just seen.

"They were just in a state of shock because of the atmosphere there with 100,000 people chanting and going crazy after witnessing one of the greatest comebacks in the history of FC Barcelona. That was pretty epic," Little says. He says it's moments like this that make it all worth taking a group of teenagers halfway around the world because, "you know you just gave them a memory of a lifetime."

"They'll never forget that. And, just the atmosphere that you can't get anywhere in the U.S. when you come out of the stadium and people are singing, banging drums, and dancing all around and chanting. It was a great atmosphere. You just can't duplicate it. All of those experiences add up on the field, and then to put the icing on the cake going to FC Barcelona," he adds, "they got to see an elite team — possibly the best team in the world — and their entire set-up. Their training grounds, the academy, all the way to the first team playing in front of 100,000 fans."

Now back at home in Georgia, these student-athletes have settled back into their normal lives of studying, training, and playing games. For many of them, such as junior Sarah Hardin, this is surely to be one spring break she'll remember for the rest of her life.

"I loved getting to experience the street of Las Ramblas with all the girls, watching the FC Barcelona game, walking around the Montserrat, seeing the beautiful Sagrada Familia, and roaming around the walled city of Aigues-Mortes in France," she enthuses. "The DSSA trip to Barcelona and France was an unforgettable adventure that I was blessed to be a part of, and I am so glad I got to spend it with such a great group of people." 🐦