

San Antonio Express-News (TX)

Neighbors - South/East Page 05SE

Achieving their dream

Edmundo Conchas EXPRESS-NEWS STAFF WRITER

Publication Date : February 8, 2006

When Donna Whitley's daughter was in third grade her soccer team qualified for a national tournament. Although they didn't win, she said they swore they would make it there again.

"But not only did they say that they would be back when they were in high school but that they would also win it," Whitley said.

They achieved their goal as Team "AJUUA!" traveled to Orlando, Fla., recently and competed in the National Kick-It 3v3 Soccer Championships where they won the U-17 girls competitive division. The girls played five games and defeated the defending national champions in the finals.

The team members are 17-year-old twin sisters Emily and Sarah Hernandez from Antonian High School, Incarnate Word High School student Marisa Bonilla, 17, MacArthur High School student Allie Moran, 17, and 16-year-olds **Cristina Mercedes** from Taft High School and Michelle Whitley from New Braunfels High School. All six play soccer at their respective high schools.

"It was really exciting," Marisa said. "All of the teams were really good and I didn't think that we were going to win."

The team, coached by Marisa's father, Dr. Juan Bonilla, played the championship game in mid-January. He said the girls have played together for many years and that was one of the reasons for their success. The girls all play club soccer as well.

"It was really their team play that got them through," he said. "They've played together for so long that they're interchangeable and I think that made a big difference because the teams that they played are really skilled. I'm very proud of them because they played very mature out there."

The 3v3 format features a smaller field with smaller goals and has two 12-minute halves. The tournament featured more than 1,000 players from across the country ranging from under 7 years old to collegiate players. In the U-17 division, Bonilla said there were eight teams.

Bonilla also explained that the girls start their season with games all over the city and state and work to qualify for regional and national events.

"We were really nervous because it was the biggest game that we had ever played," Sarah said.

"But I think that this shows that we play well together," added Allie.

econchas@express-news.net