

An inhuman price

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You don't realize how small the world of sports is until you go into a sporting goods store and start reading the fine print.

Almost every brand of soccer ball is hand-stitched in Pakistan. Rawlings' baseballs come from Haiti, as well as China, which also supplies Spalding with its basketballs, Mikasa with its rugby balls and Wilson with its volleyballs, footballs and tennis balls. A Nike football could come from Thailand or the Philippines. A Tachikara indoor volleyball is stamped in Indonesia.

Shirts and shorts originate in Singapore, El Salvador, Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia and Hong Kong.

But, really, where are they from?

"A business partner in India who rescued 60,000 adults from slavery over the last 20 years told me about an area of the country where so many children were enslaved in the making of soccer balls," said Sara Symons, the founder of the Massachusetts-based Emancipation Network. "As a parent with two children (an 8-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son) who play soccer, I was devastated by that fact.

"I put my kids in sports because they love it, and it's a positive experience. But how can they have any joy at the expense of someone across the world who has had their entire childhood taken away, who are injured, disfigured, malnourished and may never go home?"

To raise awareness and funding to fight the global horrors of human trafficking, Symons' Website sells a variety of products that are called "fair trade," a certification a company gets if its adult-only workers are paid enough to sustain basic living expenses and proper health care.

Workers making 50 cents a day in sweatshops would make four to five times that at a fair-trade company, allowing them to meet basic needs so families theoretically don't feel forced to hire out their children illegally to make ends meet. The goal of fair trade is to eradicate global poverty and promote social justice.

"Fair trade is a much larger movement in Europe, and Americans start to find out about with coffee and chocolate, then with clothes, jewelry . . . and now, hopefully, with soccer balls," said Symons, whose products are generally made by survivors of slavery.

The results of her Internet search for a fair-trade sports supplier that could make her a "Free To Play" soccer ball was surprisingly limited. But at least there is one such company.

Fair Trade Sports, based just across the Puget Sound from Seattle, claims to be the first eco-friendly sports equipment company in the U.S.

It was launched just last August by Scott James, a lifelong soccer and baseball player who has lived in many places across the country, including Westlake Village.

"I grew up with typical recreational sports in my neighborhood," said James, a soft-spoken 35-year-old father of two. "It never actually occurred to me to think about where my sports balls came from. That's probably a common reaction for a North American consumer.

"Of course we want the equipment made by adults, getting paid fairly in healthy conditions. But how do we know?"

James connected with Talon, a Pakistani company run by four brothers that makes two million soccer balls a year, but only four percent of those are fair-trade orders. Talon, whose U.S. offices are in Temecula, now supplies Fair Trade Sports with balls for soccer, rugby, futsal (indoor soccer) and volleyball. Footballs, basketballs, baseballs, softballs and soft-core training baseballs are in production for this fall.

James' altruistically created soccer balls run more on the higher-end of the cost spectrum (\$30 to \$80) because he doesn't want cheap knockoffs like those often stocked in department stores. The goal is to have a ball that high school and college leagues would find usable, customized to their needs without the standard orange "Respect" logos that Fair Trade Sports generally offers.

Which means if everything's equal with quality, cost and appearance, why wouldn't a team or league want to invest in fair-trade made equipment instead of stuff whose origins aren't convincingly documented?

"These balls definitely become a teaching tool for kids," James said. "And our funds are reinvested into children's charities and causes. That's the core motivation. I'm not looking to make this a wealth-generating venture. I don't even pay myself a salary yet."

James admits it's easy to get enamored with the fair-trade movement through agriculture products, and sports equipment isn't something you generally hear in the same conversation with coffee and bananas.

"Coaches talk about respecting yourself as an athlete, respecting competition, and now, it can be respect the hands that made the balls," James said. "If we can get folks into the fair-trade movement through this medium, everyone wins."

With that said, why not just do it?