

U.S. girls in Brazil secure with Phil Ross at their side

Ridgewood grad is soccer team's bodyguard in South America

BY BRIAN FARRELL
Sports Editor

SAO MATEUS, Brazil – He has won numerous competitions in the field of martial arts, and he has served as a bodyguard at the Grammy Awards and New York Yankee parades. But Phil Ross, a 1980 Ridgewood High School graduate, had, no doubt, the most rewarding assignment of his career as a certified bodyguard when he was given the job by Dave Heitman to serve as the bodyguard of the North Jersey All-Stars girls soccer team he was putting together for their historic trip to this Atlantic Coast city in Brazil.

Heitman know Ross well. Ross has been his assistant wrestling coach at Mahwah High School the past two seasons and a friend of his for many years. Dave Heitman, who was the head wrestling coach at Northern Highlands High School for 13 seasons [1990-91 to 2002-03], is known not to have a large staff of assistants when it comes to coaching. Dave Heitman is known for choosing quality people, also pointing, as he did, to his former long-time assistant wrestling coach at Northern Highlands, Greg McDonald, who is now the athletic director at Ridgewood High School.

Dave Heitman always chooses the right people to help him carry out his mission, no matter what it is and no matter where it takes him, in this case to a region of Brazil where no American tourist would go, let alone a team of 18 high school girls to play soccer.

So, Heitman needed someone he could really count on, just in case, for, as we all know in our life, anything can happen, no matter where you are. His choice for that assignment was a "no brainer". Ross has owned the American Eagle Martial Arts Academy in Ho-Ho-Kus since 1988, and he is a seventh-level black belt in combat jujitsu.

"I chose Phil for a couple of reasons," Heitman said, "for his experience as a certified bodyguard who has guarded famous people [like former boxing champion Evander Holyfield] and for his experience in dealing with huge crowds. When we were at the games, there were hundreds of Brazilian kids and adults who wanted to get close to the girls and say hello and be their friends, so it can be scary with that amount of people. But the girls were never in danger."

After the North Jersey All-Stars played their first historic game in Sao Mateus, defeating the host city, 1-0, the throng of admirers was so deep that the van the girls were riding in had to be pulled onto the field, just as a precaution. There was also a good police presence at the games.

"Phil did an amazing job for us," said Heitman. "He had more work to do than we anticipated because of the numbers of the people that wanted to reach out to us. Phil has the ability to keep his cool in stressful situations, and he would not panic."

Ross also served as the team's physical trainer before and during the trip. Each Tuesday night for eight weeks leading up to the voyage to Brazil, Ross worked with the girls at his academy, increasing their strength, stamina and flexibility, qualities that are inherent in the program at his academy. Also, he taught the girls self-defense fighting techniques.

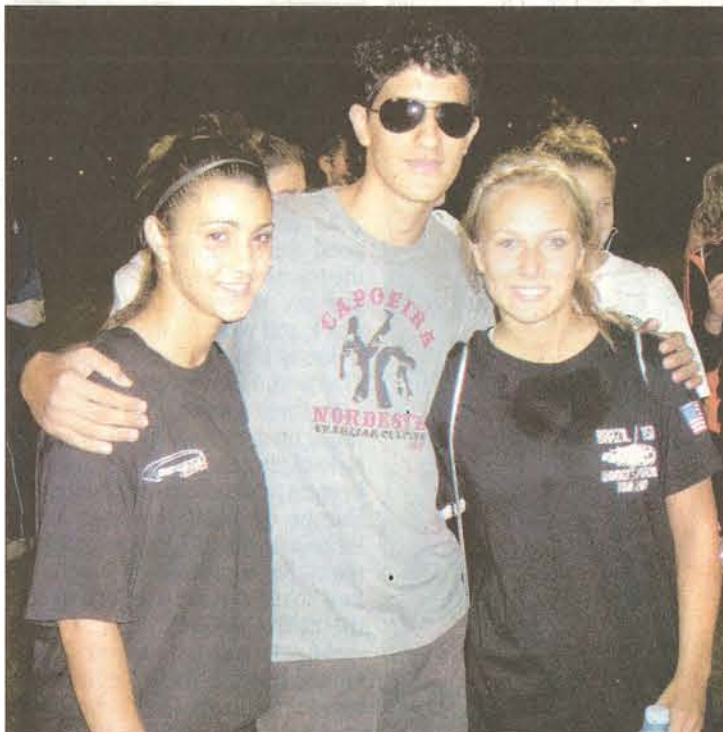
Whenever the 18 girls were together as a group on the Island of Guriri, where they stayed in a nice hotel right across from the Atlantic Ocean, in downtown Sao Mateus and Jaguare at restaurants and at all of the practices and games, Ross was with them every step of the way. He kept counting and counting, making sure all 18 young ladies were present and accounted for, including making nightly knocks on their hotel doors before

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Phil Ross, left, a 1980 Ridgewood High School graduate and a certified bodyguard, stands with two officers from the Sao Mateus Police Department that gave an escort to the North Jersey All-Stars for their historic, tour-opening soccer game against the host city on Aug. 7. Riding in this "Policia Militar" car to the game were, from left, Wyckoff's Cat Wolff and Zoey Talias and Oakland's Karen Schoepflin. The police officers are Altamiro Krause, second from left, and Sergeant Leonardo Stein, right. Ross served as the North Jersey All-Stars' bodyguard and physical trainer during their stay in Brazil.



Brazilian Admirer – Luiz Guilherme Pacheco Littig, 16, one of the North Jersey All-Stars' biggest fans from Sao Mateus, Brazil, meets and greets Indian Hills junior-to-be Karen Schoepflin, left, and Paramus Catholic senior-to-be Kristy Shedlock after an evening soccer practice on Aug. 3. Luiz is an accomplished soccer player.



Phil Ross, owner of the American Eagle Martial Arts Academy in Ho-Ho-Kus, gets together with these enthusiastic Brazilian teen-agers who gathered outside the North Jersey All-Stars hotel the final night the girls were there to say good-bye to them. It turned into a funfest of singing with the girls and dancing for them, and Ross, the girls' bodyguard, showed the boys some of his martial arts moves that have made him a seventh-level black belt in combat jujitsu and a champion in competition many times. These happy Brazilians were drawn to Ross, thoroughly enjoying his antics and his great sense of humor. Ross' easy manner in communicating with the young people of Brazil made him a true United States Ambassador.