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Photos by LEA SUZUKI / The Chronicle

The Black Queens, the national soccer team of Ghana, perform warm-up exercises at the new soccer field at Garfield Square.

SAN FRANCISCO

Revamped athletic field a hit

Foundation and city team up to renovate community parks

By Heather Knight
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Children in San Francisco's Mission District need to come up with a new nickname for the soccer field at Garfield Square.

Long known as "el parque donde te rompes el pie" — or "the park where you break your foot" — because of its uneven natural grass and rutted surface, the field at 26th and Harrison streets debuted Wednesday evening with gleaming, smooth artificial turf, new goals, a picnic area and improved fencing, lighting and bathrooms.

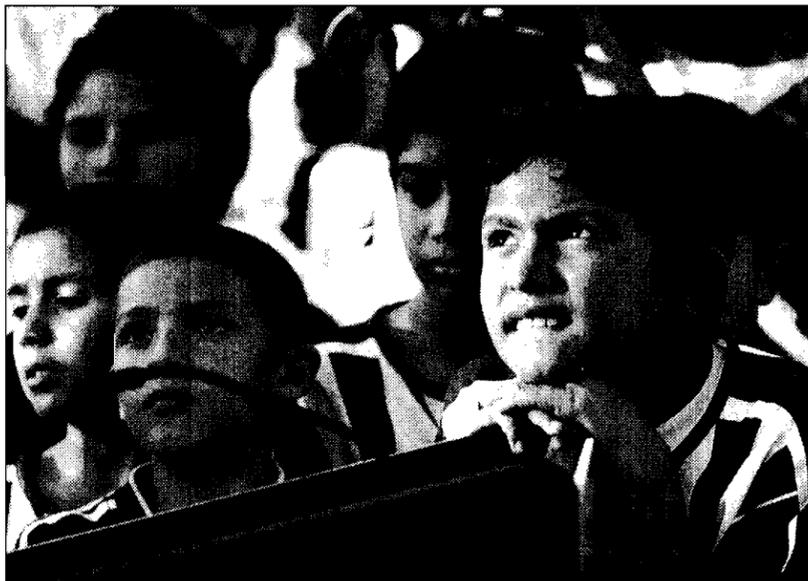
As of press time, not a single

foot was broken.

Garfield Square is the first one in an ambitious joint project by the nonprofit City Fields Foundation and the city to improve athletic fields around San Francisco. Children in the Bayview district will get a similar treat next month. Artificial turf is being installed on the entire athletic field at the Silver Terrace Playground, and a soccer field, new fencing, lighting and benches also are being added. A computerized reservation system for athletic fields around the city should be online by the end of the year.

"This is the first one in San Francisco — not in Pacific Heights, not on Russian Hill, not on that side of town," Mayor Gavin Newsom told the crowd gathered at Garfield Square park on Wednesday. "It's here in this

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Jimmy Quinonez, 9, and his Chivas teammates attend a ceremony celebrating the improvements to Garfield Square park.

Public-private partnership a big win for deteriorated parks

► FIELD

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community.”

That was long-awaited good news to the neighborhood's avid soccer players who said they long had to contend with a field consisting of lumpy dirt and sparse grass, along with the occasional broken glass, trash and syringes.

“It was all ugly and stuff,” said Sergio Navarro, 12, who plays there at least three times a week. “I think it looks cool now. We never really get to have anything special and this is kind of our park. I hope everybody takes care of it.”

Ashley Toledo, 10, came to the park with her dad and two sisters. She said the field used to be “all dirty and brownish” and that it's nice to have bright green grass. Her little sister, Emily, 5, spoke only in one-word sentences. Soccer, she said, is “fun.” The park before was “ugly.” And now?

“Beautiful.”

After a ribbon-cutting ceremony, scores of children kicked balls around with some special guests: two women's teams, the San Francisco Nighthawks and the Black Queens of Ghana. The latter is here to play against several American teams in preparation for the upcoming African Cup and next year's women's World Cup. Their male counterparts ousted the U.S. men's team from the World Cup this year.

Fred Crentsil, the chairman of

To learn more

For more information, visit www.cityfieldsfoundation.org.

the Ghana women's team, said he likes the new field at Garfield Square a lot — with the exception, maybe, of the artificial turf.

“I must say, we don't have it back home,” he said. “I'm used to grass.”

Formed last year, City Fields was the brainchild of Bill, John and Bob Fisher, the sons of Gap Inc. founder Donald Fisher. Growing up in Presidio Heights, the Fisher sons played soccer and baseball in parks all over the city. Now with children of their own, they're more aware than ever of the need for more athletic fields and for the improvement of existing fields.

They borrowed the concept of private-public partnership to improve athletic fields from the Take the Field foundation that has worked with New York City to improve 43 public school fields there.

“We started out trying to figure out what we felt would be a great contribution to San Francisco, and we just thought that was a great idea,” said Bill Fisher.

It also was a worthwhile project in the eyes of those at the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department. A 2004 assessment by the department found that to

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► For more photos from the Garfield Square soccer field, visit sfgate.com

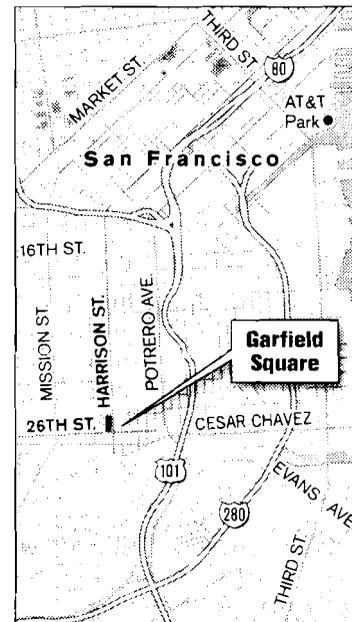
adequately serve children and adult athletes, the city needed an additional 27 baseball and softball fields and 33 soccer fields.

The partnership between City Fields and the city was approved by the Recreation and Park Commission in February. The foundation and the city then signed off on a memorandum of understanding authorizing the parks department to accept future gifts from the foundation as long as they were approved by the commission. The Board of Supervisors and Newsom signed off on the deal in May.

The foundation contributed \$4.5 million to the projects at Garfield Square and Silver Terrace Playground, which were supplemented with \$1 million in city funds. Bill Fisher said they'll continue improving as many fields as they can raise money to support.

“This is not really about us although we kick-started this project,” he said. “It's about trying to get everybody to participate because we think it's just a great idea. We think it's a win-win situation for everybody.”

Yomi Agunbiade, manager of the parks department, said he anticipates \$60 million total, includ-



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ing \$20 million in city money, being spent on renovating 12 to 16 facilities around the city, some of which will have multiple baseball or soccer fields.

The notion of a public-private partnership to improve athletic fields isn't entirely new to San Francisco. In 1999, then-Mayor Willie Brown and then-Supervisor Newsom proposed a plan to improve the city's ailing parks, playgrounds and recreation centers through a \$100 million bond, which passed the following March, but also through encouraging philanthropic donations of millions of dollars annually.

As for the new nickname for the soccer field at Garfield Square, 11-year-old Christian Morales had an idea: “The Greatest Park I've Ever Seen.”

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LEA SUZUKI / The Chronicle

Adrian Guterrez, 6, tries to catch a ball kicked by his father, Alberto (not shown), as his sister, Wendy Guterrez, 4, winces.