



Our 1999 ODP player, Don Nicol from Caldwell, shared an informative and insightful recap of his first international experience after being selected for a USYS Region 1 Friendly event in Turkey last month:

By Don Nicol

In February, I had the unique opportunity to travel to Istanbul & Antalya, Turkey with the Region I ODP 1999 Boys Squad. For me, this journey started several years ago.

In 2011, I tried out for ODP for the first time. The following year I returned again and earned a spot on the state team and the Region I Camp. At the end of the camp, we all headed into the cafeteria to see if we had been selected to the Regional Pool for the 2012-2013 season. Finally seeing my name on the list was a great moment for me. It also meant that I would be off to Kutztown University for the Region I call-back camp. Although I was in the Regional pool, I was not selected for any events that year. Instead of giving up, I went back to NJ ODP the next year.

I was very proud to see my name on the NJ state pool, state team and Region 1 pool again. Playing with the top 70 1999 boys from Region I was an accomplishment all its own; but this year, I was chosen as one of 18 players selected to go to Casa Grande, Arizona to play against the three other U.S. Youth Soccer regional teams. After winning that tournament, I learned I would be traveling with 16 other players to Antalya and Istanbul, Turkey to play friendlies against some of the top Turkish youth teams last month. This was my first time out of the country.

We played four games over the course of the trip; we defeated Guneyspor and tied with draws against Antalyaspor and KJELSAS, a 1998 Norwegian team. Our fourth game to us was like playing in a final. Saving the best team for last, we would travel back to Istanbul to play against Bestikas. Having the opportunity to play such a high level team was a great experience.

The game was very level but Bestikas won 2-0. They were not a bigger team physically, but were so technical on and off the ball that we had a hard time following runs into the box and around the top of the 18. The privilege to see how these international teams play was a great experience.

We had some time to sight-see in Antalya & Istanbul. But the most exciting part of the trip was to attend the Turkish Derby. The Derby is a game that is played between the two top rivals in Turkey - Galatasaray vs Bestikas. To be able to watch a game at this level –with 60,000 fans in attendance – was incredible.

Playing and touring internationally helped me learn many things that I will not soon forget. I will continue to work and train hard and hope to be back in the Regional Pool again next year.