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Vancouver Island soccer girls handed special World Cup role

[Cleve Dheensaw](#) / Times Colonist

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Back row, from left: Karen Hood-Deshon, Lower Island Soccer Association executive director, and selected Island girls Kennedy Aleck, Xanthe Evans, Molly Andulajevic, Amanda Moreira, Alegria Massa, Audrey Compton, Claire Grbavec, Tillie Curtis, Jordyn Smyth. Front row: Darya Rabbani, Kerstina Adams, Sophie Mallory, Rowan Picard, Alice Pilling, Freya Lumley, Naomi Hogg, Sophie Hayes, Kaylynn Rowlings. Also selected but not in photo: Cate Pontefract, Elise Fontes, Megan Lizotte and Cat O'Shaughnessy. Photograph By Submitted

As Team Canada defeated China 1-0 on Saturday to open the Women's World Cup, 22 Island soccer players were busy preparing for their special role at the final next month.

The girls, who range in age from six to 10, will hold the players' hands as they walk onto the pitch for the game, to be played July 5 at B.C. Place Stadium in Vancouver.

"My dad doesn't usually joke, so I knew it was true when he told me at school, and I ran back and told everybody in my Grade 3 class [at Oaklands Elementary]," said 10-year-old Alice Pilling, from the Bays United association.

The girls were selected at random. All 10 Lower Island soccer associations — Bays United, Juan de Fuca, Lakehill, Gorge, Peninsula, Prospect Lake, Saanich Fusion, Sooke, Cowichan and Salt Spring — are represented.

"Alice is very excited," said her father, Chris Pilling. "But I don't think the girls yet fully understand the scope of this, of marching into a stadium with the players, in front of 50,000-plus fans in the World Cup final."

The Island players were in Vancouver on Saturday and went through a practice walk-through at B.C. Place Stadium, empty ahead of the first pool matches there on Monday.

"I was super excited when I heard," said nine-year-old Kerstina Adams, who plays for Juan de Fuca and said she loves the game "because it's a team sport."

"It's a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

It is a tradition in big international soccer matches for the players to walk onto the pitch holding the hands of young players. The Lower Island Soccer Association was chosen from among B.C.'s soccer associations for the honour.

"I don't know who's more excited — the children or the parents," said Karen Hood-Deshon, the organization's executive director.

"Many of the young players might not realize the full sweep of this."

Hood-Deshon believes the organization was selected because of the strong support on the Island for the games being played at B.C. Place.

"We've been promoting the World Cup since it was announced," she said.

Of the 7,719 players registered in the Lower Island Soccer Association this season, 3,126 were girls. Youth soccer leagues across the country are preparing for a swell in registrations this September because of the World Cup.

"Watching the World Cup will inspire girls," Hood-Deshon said. "It's the type of event that produces spikes in registration and our clubs are ready and waiting for more girls to sign up in September."

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