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1,000 soccer players, parents attend 10-year-old San Jose boy's funeral

By Julia Prodis Sulek
Mercury News

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Junior Bernal started it. Then R.J. Cabral. Then Rudy Castro. As their teammate's white coffin was lowered into the ground Monday, the 9- and 10-year-old players from the Santa Clara Sporting Green soccer team pulled off their green-and-white soccer jerseys, and, one by one, threw them into the hole.

"It was for him to remember us," Junior Bernal said.

Jonathan Manzo Chavez, 10, was buried in his own soccer jersey on Monday — just like the one he was wearing when he was killed Nov. 15 in a crash on the way home from a tournament in Manteca. Before he died, the San Jose boy had begged the paramedics not to cut off his jersey because he had a game the next day.

The crowd that had started 1,000 people strong at the funeral at St. Maria Goretti Catholic Church in south San Jose on Monday morning stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the Gate of Heaven cemetery in Los Altos. Under gray skies, they cried and applauded as the final jersey was thrown.

"For us, it was just like, wow, Jonathan really united this whole soccer community," said Ligia Brasil, the team manager and coach's wife. "He made everyone come together. For these little guys, the power of their teammate, the bond that they had, it's just amazing."

Jonathan died after the family minivan driven by his mother, Amalia, collided with a car that had spun out of control in front of her. She and her older son, Rafael, 15, and daughter, Zaira, 13, survived with minor injuries. But the brunt force of the impact caused Jonathan internal injuries.

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Ramiro Rodriguez, 10, (center) and his mother, Lupe Rodriguez attend the funeral... (Gary Reyes)

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As paramedics tended to him on the side of Vallecitos Road in Livermore and tried to cut his shorts and jersey, he yelled, "Don't cut them, don't cut them, I have a game tomorrow."

His mother pulled his jersey over his head and kept it as Jonathan was airlifted with his sister to Children's Hospital in Oakland. He died holding his sister's hand before they touched down.

Jonathan's death struck a deep chord in the Northern California soccer community after the story of his last words and passion for the game were published in the Mercury News and circulated among soccer leagues. A Mercury News online guest book and a blog set up by the Santa Clara Sporting Club league (<http://prettyboychavez.blogspot.com>) drew hundreds of parents and children to express their sorrow and compassion. When word spread as far as Australia and Costa Rica that the family, whose father is a

truck driver, didn't have health insurance, a bank account was set up. In the first six hours, \$10,000 had been donated. By Monday, the total had reached roughly \$20,000.

"This hits home for everyone," said Steve Robertson, a coach in the Santa Clara Sporting Club league. "Everyone drove home that day. It could have happened to anyone."

Greg Giampoali, 37, whose son plays in the same league, said the outpouring of support "just shows that this little soccer club is a family. It's not just a weekend thing. It doesn't matter what team you're on, everyone came out."

Jonathan's funeral and burial Monday capped two weekends of tributes to the boy. At tournament games all over Northern California, players "took a knee" — a customary gesture for an injured player — during moments of silence before every game. Players also wore black arm bands bearing Jonathan's number — 8. Girls wore green-and-white ribbons in their hair. A vigil Sunday night also drew more than 1,000 people. His teammates signed a jersey and framed it for Jonathan's family.

At the funeral Monday, his family and friends wore white t-shirts with Jonathan's picture on it and his nickname "pretty boy" — earned because of his love of dressing up and gelling his hair.

"He was practically our leader of our team," said R.J. Cabral, a 9-year-old teammate. "He was always happy."

He had even scored a goal in his final game — a rare occurrence for a defender. He was so elated at the time that he ran to the half field and did a little shuffle dance.

When Jonathan was killed, R.J. said, "our whole team just fell apart."

The team had a good shot at winning the NorCal State Cup qualifying tournament in Manteca the weekend Jonathan died, coach Carlos Brasil said, but it forfeited the rest of its games instead.

When the funeral was over and the casket was laid in the hearse, a soccer referee who had officiated at Jonathan's last game blew his whistle, signaling the end of a game. Jonathan's teammates gathered together and shouted one last time, "Good game, Jonathan."

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