



Soccer for all?  
Or soccer for some  
more than others?

## TURF WAR

A band of hard-charging Lincoln Park activists scuttled the Latin School's deal for priority use of a new soccer field on public parkland. But, in the end, did anyone really win?

BY DEBRA PICKETT

**I**F YOU'VE EVER WALKED ACROSS THE SOUTH END OF LINCOLN PARK, headed for North Avenue Beach, you've probably seen the battleground. Before the war, it was just a patch of grass, low and mostly flat, though those who remember it fondly now say it was a "meadow." For months, it stood as a big, weed-covered mound of dirt, partially obscured by a windscreen fastened to a chainlink fence. A large sign on the fence declares it to be the "Chicago Park District South Lincoln Park Athletic Field," but the smaller signs, hung all around it, tell more of the story: "Keep Out" they say. "If unauthorized individuals are seen on site, please call 911."

This virtually inconspicuous four-acre expanse of scrub is the central front of the Great Soccer War of 2008. In it, the city became locked in a seemingly endless battle with a scrappy neighborhood group that had sued to block what it characterized as a sweetheart deal hatched in darkness between the general superintendent of the Chicago Park District, Tim

Mitchell, and one of Chicago's elite establishments, the Latin School. The deal to build a soccer field on the site, said its opponents, amounted to a land grab in which powerful government insiders took \$2 million in exchange for giving priority use of the field to Latin and its soccer teams. The city defended the arrangement as a creative financing package that would have had rich people footing the bill for amenities everyone could enjoy.

The conflict underscores not only the scarcity of prime parkland but also the odd confluence of issues necessary to whip up Chicago citizens into a state of outrage. After all, had it been in any other neighborhood involving any other school, would anyone have cared? The controversy surrounding the soccer field has now dragged on for more than two years, and the whole mess has emerged as a kind of object lesson in how to win—and then lose—against city hall.