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Special Report: The Power Of Football In Africa

In this June 28, 2007 edition of *African Talking Point*, we focus on a Special Report – The Power Of Football In Africa. Goal.com's Africa Editor Ibrahim Dabo gives an insight into this topic and unravels some of the true life experiences from Angola to South Africa. He says 'football is not only meaningful to many fans across the continent of Africa, but it also plays an undisputable and remarkable role in reviving the lives of people who have been greatly devastated by civil war.'



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For millions of people in Africa, hope, loved ones and personal belongings may all have been lost. However, that which is never lost is the passion for football.

War is widely known to break down communities, create enmity, wash away lives and cast a bitter experience on the lives of millions of ambitious children.

Not least to say, war often leaves an open wound on the minds of all those who have fallen victim to it, regardless of age, sex, ethnicity or location.

Indeed, such memories are hard to forget. So where does the role of football come in? Many would agree that amid all these constraints as a result of war, the passion for football never dies.

We can also say that football rekindles the fading embers of hope in the lives of many and transforms them into a direct blazing flame. The unbeatable and earth-shattering joy that the sport can bring is an expression of such hope.

I am highly inspired to be sharing this in-depth editorial, which says a lot about the power of football in Africa. More precisely, as you may have noticed, I am focusing on how football is being used as a vital instrument in revitalizing the lives of those who have undergone a bitter experience of civil war.

Not very often do we link football and war together. However, those who have been victims of war can testify that although everything else may have been lost, football is a sport that not only lingers to bring about moments of ecstasy. It also

serves as a driving force of unity and in other exceptional cases, brings along marvelous accomplishments that are worth celebrating.

Rwanda is a good example of such achievement. They made their first African Nations Cup appearance in 2004; exactly a decade after between 800,000 and 1 million people were killed in the Central African country that became synonymous with genocide.

Within ten years of that genocide, the country was able to focus on both a rehabilitation process and a national team building process. One can only imagine how many of the approximately 2 million refugees who fled the 1994 fighting felt when the *Wasps* qualified for Africa's premier football showcase. Two words might help describe such feeling: "Euphoric" and "Memorable".

There are times when blissful moments from football are short-lived. This is because the negative impacts suffered from war are too much to bear and those sour memories hardly ever fade away. The good thing is that the much cherished game of football truly puts a smile on the face. No matter how little one smiles, it is truly meaningful.

In 1997, at the age of fourteen (14), I was forced to leave my country, **Sierra Leone**, when the rebels invaded the capital city Freetown. I left everything behind and little did I know my destination, only to find myself seeking refuge in **The Gambia**. Around the time of my departure, teenagers were being forced to join the rebels or risk being killed, something I feared greatly being in my early teens then.

While I thank God for my life and for enabling me to escape unharmed, I always think about those youths who were not as lucky as I was. Many became child soldiers and were put on drugs while thousands of others lost their lives. I strongly believe that many of those who were killed, some brutally, had aspirations of becoming the future **George Weahs**, **Michael Essiens**, **Samuel Eto'os** and **Didier Drogbas** of African football.

While I also thank God for having the opportunity to use my talent and promote African football on this site for seven years now, I many times become deeply emotional when I think that many other youngsters may have had ambitions of becoming football journalists, only to lose their lives in unjust civil wars in Africa.

Many youngsters who survived the amputation of limbs—one of the worst atrocities in the last century—by rebels in Sierra Leone have today undoubtedly demonstrated a captivating indomitable spirit and love for football. They have shown that even though a hand or leg may have been viciously chopped off, they can still happily take to the field and play the game they adore so much.

Suleiman Sesay gave an account of how his limb was hacked off by rebels, who

used axes and machetes. Sesay and others were given an option of choosing how long or short their limb was to be amputated, a development that followed after they refused to perform a task the rebels had ordered them to do.

"They [the rebels] gave us a choice," Sesay told CNN.com in a report published in April 2006. "Do you want short sleeves or long sleeves?" "

"They chopped my arm at the elbow... Six swings and my arm came off."

Even though his situation was brutal and a cowardly act, Sesay unfortunately also lost one of his friends during the heat of the moment.

"My other friend, Mohammed, a very good soccer player, had his leg chopped off," said Sesay.

"The rebels said they'd done it deliberately so he could never play again. Mohammed bled to death some hours later."

A Sierra Leone Single Leg Amputee Sports Club was set up after the war, which brought many players together.

In February this year, Sierra Leone hosted Africa's first amputee football cup, which was supported by Fifa. The other participating teams were **Liberia, Ghana and Nigeria** while **Angola** were unable to make the trip.

An estimated 3,000 people lost their limbs in Sierra Leone during the war and most of the players who made up the Liberia and Sierra Leone teams had lost their limbs as a result of war.

Even in a foreign country while seeking refuge, football can be a life-changing activity. Thousands of people who fled the war in Sierra Leone and Liberia moved to neighbouring countries, one of which was **The Gambia**. Many embraced football as a last resort of happiness, and perhaps even more.

"During the interregnum in Sierra Leone, a lot of Sierra Leoneans escaped the unbridled violence to neighbouring countries like Guinea and The Gambia." **Abdul Deensie** told *African Talking Point*.

"Football [was seen] as a form of counseling and social rehabilitation. The sport became a tool of unity among Sierra Leoneans. Football fields where our teams played became a meeting point to get news about what was happening back home. For once, football united Sierra Leoneans and helped preserve hope in us as in a fortress."

Many of the talents that featured in teams that were set up have already started to blossom, a success story for ambitious players who had to strive when it

seemed they had lost everything in life.

Sheriff Suma, who now plays for GAIS in the Swedish top division, recalls how tough it was.

"It was not that easy," 20-year-old Suma told *African Talking Point*. "Firstly, you had to know someone to recommend you as a footballer and to have a better team that will help you through your needs as a refugee. Football was the only way to survive."

Even for many Gambians, it was touching to see how refugees could cope and use football as a means of minimizing the stress.

"There were a bunch of Sierra Leonean stars whom I faced in the [Gambian] league," **Ismaila Badjie** tells *African Talking Point*.

Badjie, a 24-year-old Gambia striker who currently plays for Swedish side Karlslund IF HFK, says he was struck by how many handled the pressure.

"I could remember those days how I felt playing against those guys, although I was a small lad who just started playing in the first division. I could have never pictured myself in their position; fleeing my country, leaving everything behind — and even some of them lost everything including their parents. And with all that pain, they were able to play a game that needs hundred percent concentration."

In neighboring **Liberia**, a bloody civil war ensued between the period of 1989 and 1996 claiming more than 200,000 lives. It was not too long though, before the healing process began when the country qualified for their first ever African Nations Cup finals in 1996.

The nation was at the time without sufficient electricity supply as a result of the war but the unbeatable electrifying spirit which followed the team's qualification, sparked a beam of light in the hearts and eyes of many across the West African state.

When it comes to football in Africa, even enemies bond together and it was therefore not surprising that many of the former combatants put their differences to rest, embraced each other and vigorously celebrated the team's success.

Legendary footballer and former African, European and World Best Player, **George Weah**, who had a vision of becoming the nation's president in the most recent presidential elections, played a leading role in the team's success over the years.

Although the *Lone Star* made a first round exit in the '96 finals, their appearance did mean a lot.

"The appearance of Liberia for the first time in the African Nations Cup in 1996 marked a significant milestone in the history of the nation, especially as the nation was going through civil crisis," said **Methuselah Doe**, a football enthusiast from Liberia who shared his experience on ***African Talking Point***.

"It actually assisted the nation to some extent by unifying the division that was evident. It also accelerated the desires glaringly of young people who were eager to be sports professionals. Lastly, it made people who were bearing arms to voluntarily put their weapons down and make the society gun free."

Liberian international striker Dulee Johnson, who plays professional football for AIK in the Swedish top division, shared similar sentiments about the mood in Liberia after the country qualified for the Nations Cup.

"It was a very, very big thing as after the war, it helped people forget about all the guns and the things that happened in the past and celebrate," the 22-year-old Johnson told ***African Talking Point***.

"It was a very big moment in Liberia and even kids watching their country and professional players playing on television - and they had the courage that one day things will be better. I think it helped in a way to bring people together and know there is hope somewhere."

In the **Ivory Coast**, civil unrest had left the country divided with rebels controlling the north while the government held the south. Interestingly, many of the players who make up the national team come from different parts of the country; north, south, east - you name it.

So when the *Elephants* qualified for their first ever World Cup finals in 2006, 'peace talks' were not needed to send a frenzy throughout the nation and bring thousands together in jubilation. Young fans were so happy that they took to the streets in the country's capital Abidjan chanting: "The war is over! The war is over!"

In a move to further use football as a means of brokering peace in the country, reigning African Footballer of the Year and Chelsea striker **Didier Drogba** has been playing an instrumental role.

In March, the Ivory Coast captain made a visit to the north of the country where he called on the nation to unite in the name of peace. He took his African Footballer of the Year award with him to show the people of Bouake and from the podium of the famous Carnival Square, he said: "I have come here to offer you a golden ball, it's the golden ball for the whole of the Ivory Coast."

"This is only the beginning. In June the whole Ivory Coast national team will be at

Bouake for the match against Madagascar [in a qualifier for the 2008 Nations Cup].

"3 June will be a memorable day — it will be the victory for Ivory Coast football, the victory of the Ivory Coast people and quite simply there will be peace."

Indeed Drogba honoured his word and led the team to thrashing Madagascar 5-0 in Bouake on 3 June. Drogba registered a goal in the victory along with **Saloman Kalou, Yaya Toure** and **Arouna Kone**, who scored a brace.

Nearly 2 million people have been displaced plus an estimated 200,000 to 400,000 dead in **Sudan** after conflict broke out in the western region of Darfur in 2003. Most people in the country might be touched following these developments but at least, *The Desert Hawks* have made a major breakthrough which many Sudanese can cheer about.

The team has now qualified for the 2008 African Nations Cup finals, their first in 32 years. And what did qualification mean to many Sudanese?

"I was so happy I broke the television," a labourer was quoted as screaming on BBC Sport.

"There are no words to describe this feeling."

On a more positive note, I believe Africa is ready to put wars behind it and unleash an enthralling moment of ecstasy in 2010 when **South Africa** hosts the world's most popular sporting event—the World Cup finals. Six slots have been allocated to Africa for the finals and it will be the first time in 8 decades that the extravaganza will be staged on the continent.

"Soccer is my life," **Claude Reddy**, who is excited about his country hosting the 2010 World Cup, tells *African Talking Point*.

"This [the hosting of the World Cup] means a lot to me and also to my fellow Africans as we are finally being given recognition for our progress in the world. The [mood will be] vibrant, joyful, ecstatic, emotional...but overall, jubilation.

"Most war victims would feel a sense of pride and joy to know that the World Cup would be coming to Africa. Football is life to many in Africa."

Just as South Africa president **Thabo Mbeki** had put it: "Africa is ready, Africa's time has come, Africa is calling."

In conclusion, we continue to hope and pray for an end to senseless and unjust wars in Africa, so that we can enjoy football even more. The problem is not only limited to the ignorant combatants involved in mayhem during wars, but especially to the highly educated individuals who get involved because of some form of personal and selfish gain.

We hope they will finally get the message through **football**, as the time has come for us all to embrace one another in the spirit of love, and take Africa to a different level. It is better to 'lead' rather than 'mislead'.

The continent is very rich in promising talents who have the potential to make it to the highest level in football if given the necessary support and encouragement, and surely, we need not deprive them of these basics.

Instead of sadly having *child soldiers*, we can merrily have *budding stars*. What could be more thrilling than to see those talents blossom over time? Indeed, "Africa is ready," the wars can be stopped and we can all proudly say: "Africa is calling."

Ibrahim Dabo

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