

*Football has played a major role in the recovery of refugees and in connecting with their new culture, writes STARTTS project officer SHAUN NEMORIN.*

## The Game that Brings the World Together



I'm the son of immigrants from Mauritius and sport has come to mean so much to me, in particular football. My mother had the insight to first encourage my father to pursue his passion. That passion was perhaps an odd one: football refereeing. From the age of four, when I was old enough, I would accompany him around Sydney while he officiated for the NSW State Football (then Soccer) League. What I was not entirely conscious of at the time was how the world citizen inside him - and by extension, myself - was awakened by the cultural diversity of the football leagues of NSW in the 1970s and 1980s. What we were a part of was arguably one of the most significant examples of community development in Australia's history: the establishment of these community-based sporting institutions was largely initiated by ethnic communities.

Communities self-identified that football was what would galvanise the interests of their constituents. What ensued from the 1950s and 1960s from migrant and refugee communities in Australia was a unique model, which was unprecedented globally. It was community-driven, and they used their own resources. But they had to do this because no funding body would support a sport for, as goes the title of Johnny Warren's famous book, "sheilas, wogs and poofters".

As these entities grew, they became sustainable through businesses and supporting clubs. Social clubs provided a space for people to meet and connect. The psychosocial benefits gained from those activities cannot be underestimated, especially for traumatised communities.

Why is it that people relate so intimately to the game of football? Maybe it's because it's a game where the best team does not always win and the referees often seem not to get it quite right, which can add to the injustice.

Having worked alongside refugee communities both at home and abroad over the last 13 years, I can see why people resonate with the drama of football. Yet despite injustices, you come back the following week in the hope that hard work and merit may be rewarded. When it does, you go home with that warm feeling of justice... until it doesn't.

I grew up in Sydney's northwest, which was largely white, middle-class and Christian, so accompanying my father felt like going on holidays every week: new cultures, new religions, new languages. I always felt included due to a mutual connection through sport.

It was a model that was replicated all over Sydney, and spread throughout the entire country. The forging of connections through football could be thought of as a form of 'social capital', and its influence on communities is most profound when these relationships are among



heterogeneous groups.

When people from diverse backgrounds connect, a greater range of associations and opportunities are created for the broader community. Thus bridging social capital is not only essential for enhancing social inclusion but also for improving an entire community's ability to develop.

For me, Australia's multiculturalism was a given. I grew up in an environment where, for the most part, communities embraced one another and through the refereeing fraternity, my father's peers included people from Jewish, Italian, Lebanese, Greek, Yugoslavian, Maltese and Chilean backgrounds.

His greetings would easily alternate between 'Shalom' to 'As-Salaam-Alaikum'. He would often go out of his way to emphasise that he was amongst friends. The unconscious things we process throughout our lives can be the most profound. The things we observe through mentors or environments but take for granted because we simply do not know anything else.

Looking back, it is like I learnt my skills of conflict resolution, cultural competence and effective group facilitation through those NSW football referees. These often new migrants used attitude and courage to facilitate potentially aggressive environments when their language skills or physical presence were not automatically commanding.

Although the dominant narrative in Australia is that the ethnic-based clubs model gave rise to conflict, having either personally played or witnessed thousands of matches, I can count on one hand the instances where I observed overt racism.

In fact, I would even argue that the model seemed to be a buffer against more systemic examples of inter-communal conflict. Of the few well-documented incidents of football rioting in Australia, the narrative fails to address or understand the nature of intergenerational trauma and the way communities may have an inability to simply "let things go" once they arrive in Australia.

Author and psychiatrist Judith Herman writes that traumatic events have primary effects not only on the psychological structures of the self but also on the systems of attachment and meaning that link individual and community.

She also writes that the fundamental stages to recovery from the erosion of trust and community breakdown are establishing safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community. Community football clubs became institutions that assisted in such recovery processes.



Sadly, the sporting system of today is now much more top-down, outside-funded and reliant on moneymen. They are no longer community owned. What individual communities once did themselves, through volunteering and through donations, are now reliant on government grants or corporate backing.

Now there are more financial hurdles for parents than ever before to support their children to have the opportunity for proper sporting participation. With the disparities in income and peripheral costs involved, the inability to participate due to lack of funds is a very real prospect for some families.

To address these challenges, STARTTS has been implementing Sporting Linx since 2013. It is a bio-psychosocial, sports-based intervention targeting refugee youth in high schools across western Sydney and uses sports as a tool to enhance inclusivity and increase self-esteem.

Targeting students from refugee and non-refugee backgrounds alike, it adopts sports coaching sessions from industry professionals with specific attention placed on fostering teamwork and sportsmanship, while also encouraging participants to improve their connections to one another. Addressing self-esteem among young people through communication, sharing and support, are all essential elements in building social capital.

For as long as I can remember, Dad would start any speech about my life with, "We put Shaun in sports..." I would always feel uneasy with this comment. As if games should command such an important role in one's life...but it turned out to be unexpectedly true.

From Beijing to Timbuktu, I have used sport as a psychosocial tool to alleviate stress and trauma, to mitigate dropping-out in schools, to decrease recruitment into armed radical groups, and often as a way to build peace between ethnically divided communities, and help prevent sexual and gender-based violence.

In lieu of funding or local capacity, I would bring lots of footballs to humanitarian emergencies. I think Dad would be proud of that. R