

Reflections. The Great Football Giveaway, Angola 2007

"Last time I was here I was dropping bombs on this village. Now I am giving them footballs".

The Colonel is a blunt man. Unsurprising given the thirty years he spent fighting such a brutal civil war. His laughter booms louder than the exploding mortars he once fired, as he throws a football into a group of children and watches them run off down the road leaping with joy. It was a mistake that the Colonel became our driver, but it was the best mistake we could have made. He became the embodiment of what The Great Football Giveaway was doing in Angola, offering gestures of unity to the children of a country who had previously only known war.

You cannot be in Angola without staring the scars of war in the face. People talk with an unnerving honesty about how their brothers were murdered, or their children maimed. Buildings still bear the battle wounds that provide constant reminders of not just what was in the past, but of what could be in the future. For those in power during this peacetime, there are obvious advantages for leaving those everyday reminders very visible. No-one wants a return to war and Angolans of today will happily suffer neglect, if with it comes peace.



The war in Angola was not rooted in simple ideology, of good versus evil. Instead it was a tangled web of conflict involving the Cubans, Americans, South Africans, Russians, Congolese all scrapping for territory, power and control over the country's natural resources. All of them cleverly using Angola as an overseas battleground, suffocating generations of Angolans from any chance of peace.

Today's children of Angola may have grown up listening to tales of brutality from their parents instead of nursery rhymes, but five years have now passed since the war. For this generation there is a real chance to build a future where peace is the base level of normality. And with these children lie the nation's cautious optimism.

So that's why we are here. We come free from any political persuasion and with no vested interest but to provide some unadulterated fun for the children of a country that has had little to smile about for so long.



It has often been said that football is a magical game. When stripped of all its greed, celebrity and media obsession, it is just a ball, bunch of mates, and a kick-around. Football is something that connects the richest premiership footballers with the poorest children of Africa.

We have already seen from Malawi last year that football can bring wondrous smiles to children in some of the world's poorest communities. Kicking a ball about is one of life's most simple pleasures and no child should be denied the chance to enjoy this. It is our belief that children are the same across the world: irrespective of their circumstances kids just want to have fun.

So we are putting this to the test in a country where the nation's children have grown up on a gruesomely unhealthy diet of war, war and more war. We have come here armed only with a gut feel that what we will do will work. None of The Great Football Giveaway team have been to Angola before. Some have never even been to Africa. None of us have any experience in operating in war-scarred countries. We have not commissioned a piece of research to pre-judge how effective our work will be. Some may say this is naïve, even

irresponsible. But with this naivety comes a fresh approach unsullied by what will not work, but open to what could work. This was the spirit that we packed into our bags and took with us to Angola...along with a container full of more than 3,000 footballs given to us by people back in UK.

"Bom dia director. E possivel todos as criancas no compo de futbol?" (*"Good morning headmister. Possible is it all children on football feld"*). OK, so my self-teach Portuguese won't win me any prizes, but it seems to do the trick.

We are in a disused and derelict outdoor cinema that now plays home to a project run for street children in Lobito, one of Angola's most industrial cities. In front of me are sixty or so 5-15 year olds. I stumble my way through telling them that we've got a surprise for them. Nothing serious, just something fun, for them to enjoy being children. Their eyes are eager and they inch forward in excited anticipation as I unzip our mysteriously oversized bag of goodies.

This is it, the moment of truth. Months of trying to raise funds and fighting bureaucracy. Sleepless nights worrying about landmines, visas, transport, corrupt officials. In a few seconds time it will all be worth it. In slow motion I throw out the balls, and once again The Great Football Giveaway bursts into life.



Before the balls have even landed, the first punch was thrown. I have to be honest, what followed was not a playground scrap, spurred on by the excitement of kicking a brand new ball. This was about possession. These kids were tough, from the street, and they were in it for themselves. The boy at the bottom of the pile was not letting go of that ball despite the army of fifteen on top of him. I felt sick.

This was everything I hoped The Great Football Giveaway would not be. My naivety slapped me in the face and immediately I knew that things would be different here to Malawi.

But something fairly extraordinary then happened. Fifteen minutes later, that disused cinema became the home to more than fifteen games of football, basketball and handball. No-one told them to do it, it just naturally happened. This is the beauty of sport. Some of the games started as solitary games of keepy-uppy, but as soon as the ball was in open play, it became a fight of feet. And thus football was born.



I have no doubt that right now, a month or so after that initial fight, those street kids of Benguela will have formed teams and regularly play with each other. A ball is no good without someone to kick or throw it to.



The Great Football Giveaway was originally set up to reach out to disadvantaged kids living in poor rural areas, who simply do not have access to things such as footballs. It is a beautiful thing to light up a child's life with the gift of a ball. The more we travelled into the heart of Angola, the more we found that the simple act of randomly handing out balls to children on the side of the road was hugely appreciated.

To my knowledge there are very few organisations that indiscriminately go around giving away something fun to children. Thankfully there are many organisations which concern themselves with putting in place long-term structures working with governments, local authorities and NGOs to ensure that children are protected from some of life's evils. But

having been to Angola, I remain more convinced than ever that our organisation has a strong, positive and supportive role to play.



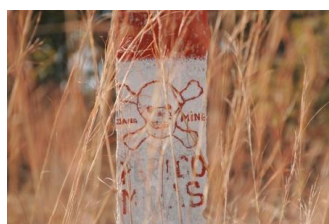
In a country like Angola, lucky breaks are few and far between. Childhood is brief and no sooner do you move from being dependant on others, to others being dependant on you. Life as a child is hard work and the future holds little to look forward to. So when someone stops you in the street and gives you something that you know can only be used for the purpose of having fun, it feels like it's your lucky day.

It is always our aim to involve local people in what we do. We are happy to support any organisation or people working with children, be it the largest NGO or a mother who has adopted a child from the street into her home. We do not over-plan our route and pre-arrange who we meet or give balls to. We rely on local people to advise us where we should go and who we should meet. This allows for spontaneity and gives us the chance to support those who work on the ground, rather than those administrators in their lofty offices.

In total I think we visited over 100 schools in Angola. We tried to focus our efforts in concentrated areas so that schools from one town or village would have a reason to connect with neighbouring schools. Sport is a real reason for children to come together and providing schools with the basic materials to do this is a great start.



In the area surrounding the town of Bocoio, we teamed up with an incredible individual who has dedicated his life towards helping schools to rebuild. Adriano believed passionately in what we were doing and offered to be our guide for the time that we were there. We spent several days visiting schools both in the town and in some very remote and inaccessible areas. These were villages that fought against each other during the war. One village he took us to was somewhere he had not visited in twenty years. He told us they had ransacked his home town and killed members of his family. Now he was there on a gesture of peace, providing the children of those soldiers with an invitation to play with the children of his town. This was so much more than just giving away footballs.



I have driven on many African roads, but none that compare with Angola. Thirty years of mortars, mines and general lack of maintenance make for excessively large potholes. Twenty minute journeys take several hours. Landmine signs on either side of the roads dissuade you from taking the quicker, flatter, off-road option, especially in the central areas of the Huambo & Bie provinces, where the war was most fiercely fought.

The city of Huambo played host to some of the war's most brutal battles. Barely a building exists without a bullet hole or worse. This was The Colonel's territory. "I bombed this place" he said almost as if he was reminiscing about the good'ol'days. "1976, the year after the war started. This was Savimbi's house [Savimibi was the head of UNITA, the rebel forces supported by the Americans and the South Africans during the Cold War]. "I didn't know he was there, or even that this was his house, but when our unit spotted a cavalcade of cars parked outside one day, I knew it was someone important."

Savimbi's house is now little more than a pile of bricks. A sweeping staircase extends into the open skies. It feels as though this place has been left untouched since it was bombed, a shrine to the city's then leader. A group of children



play in the rubble. "This is where the mortar landed", the Colonel points to the left hand side of the building. "If Savimbi had been in this room as opposed to the one next door he would have died. And then I don't think there would have been any war".

It became clear to me that no-one could undo the past, but looking at the kids now playing in the rubble, we can all do something about the future. Moments later, thanks to the Colonel, those kids were now kicking around balls and having fun. As The Colonel left he gave me a smile that came from the heart, that said "That felt good. Thank you". I'm not sure that the Colonel had felt like that in a long time.



Driving through Angola it was often the rear view mirror that told the real story. Many of the children in Angola are unsurprisingly cautious and suspicious. In areas where we travelled, the last time a Landrover filled with white people drove past, they were foreign troops armed with very different intentions. The children have heard the stories and as soon as they saw the Landrover stop, they would run off scared into the bushes. So we would leave a ball & pump

by the side of the road and drive away. In our rear view mirror we would see the children appear from the bush, pick up the ball and leap in the air with joy. Not everything in life has to be bad. Time and time again we would be met with caution by the children, but then when it became clear what we were doing, we saw some of the warmest smiles and hugs that children have to offer.

You cannot plan this sort of spontaneous happiness. This can only come about by random acts of giving. Yes, some of the balls may end up in the hands of children that may be more privileged than others, but there is no doubt that we reached many children whose reactions said it all. They had no expectations of anything special happening to them that day, and with this one gesture their outlook suddenly changed.



Day after day we spent visiting schools, orphan centres and community projects, in towns and remote villages. I'll be honest and say that the children living in the larger towns or cities showed a much more grabby & needy approach to sharing the balls than we had ever seen in Malawi, but in rural parts there was that same willingness simply to share. We drove thousands of kilometres on pot-holed roads, camped cold nights on river beds or in the container, and drove through areas that were heavily mined to get to

places others rarely went. We supported projects that encouraged amputee victims to use sport as a way of re-integrating back into society and saw awe-inspiring enthusiasm from both children and adults who have lost limbs through no fault of their own. We organised football matches between orphan centres and neighbouring community teams. We helped urban street projects with their constant battles to keep kids off the street and away from drugs. The list is endless. We bunny-hopped our way across southern Angola stopping wherever we saw children playing by the side of the road. We swapped hundreds of hand-made rag balls for brand new balls and made thousands of children feel like today was their lucky day.



Angola may have been one of the most difficult countries in the world to carry-off a project like this, but it was hugely successful in every way we had hoped. We have done our bit to put some smiles on the faces of children from a war torn country, to help bring communities

closer together, to allow children of once sworn enemies to play as friends, to re-build trust and faith that not everything in life has an ulterior and sinister motive.

In the words of the Colonel "It was good to replace bombs with balls. I have seen a different side to my country".

For those of you with the vision to realise that football can be so much more than what we see on our TV screens, and gave us the balls to take to Angola, thank you. This would not have been possible without your support.



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The Great Football Giveaway

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