THE GREAT FOOTBALL GIVEAWAY

May/June 2006

By Paul Clarke

CHAPTER 1

Ok. So here we go. Tomorrow we leave for Malawi. And boy are we excited.

I'm remembering back to this time eight weeks ago. It was just an idea. "Let's take a suitcase of footballs to Malawi". Having just shipped a full container load of thousands of balls, I feel an odd mix of pride in achieving what we have done so far, and nerves. We have promised thousands of people that we will deliver balls, on their behalf, to children in one of the world's poorest countries.

There are still so many hurdles to overcome - we'll have our ups & downs, but the thought of seeing so many kids enjoying themselves, kicking around footballs that they would not have otherwise had, is motivation enough.

As I sit here now, in the comfort of my own home, there's one little thing I'm really looking forward to. After all this is over, I can't wait to sit on my sofa, crack open a beer and tune into England vs Paraguay in the World Cup, feeling that in some small way I, as well as everyone that has given us a ball to take with us, deserve to enjoy it.

We are not charity workers. Nor are we doctors, engineers, priests, politicians. Sarah and I are just two Londoners who love football, had an idea, and are making it happen.

What fun.

Paul

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CHAPTER 2

It's been a long day. It started at about 4am when I first woke up too excited to sleep. This has been a theme to the start of my days recently.

It feels as though one chapter is closing and another is beginning. Today we fly to Malawi, one of the world's poorest countries, to give their children thousands of footballs. It's really quite bizarre.

I have no idea what to expect. We think they will welcome us - everyone has been pretty friendly to date. Everyone seems to want footballs.

But it's a strange feeling going somewhere so unknown. Most of the schools and orphanages that we will visit don't have telephones, or emails. You can't just go online to find out directions. You can't just text them to ask what time would suit them best. We have all become so dependent on the technology around us, that it's rare that you ever get the chance to not know where you're going anymore.

Ever since we first had this idea, the same little niggly thought has worried me. How? How are we actually going to distribute the balls? How are we going to make sure that the footballs people have given us, actually get into the hands (or feet) of the children in Malawi? It may be that we are very naïve in our approach. A part of me thinks it will be OK to just rock up and say "Hey. Anyone under the age of 16 want a football? Please form an orderly queue."

No, of course it won't be like that. But it raises the question, how do we do it. Clearly we cannot drive our lorry into a small town, open up the back of the container and start giving away footballs. Bedlam would ensue.

Whilst we have tried to make this feel like a big event over here (the name The Great Football Giveaway" has a sense of scale and event to it), over there we will be very discrete. That was of course until The Minister of Youth Sport & Culture in Malawi called us. We have his full support, but I'm worried that if things start becoming too 'official' the beaurocracy might hinder us rather than help. We are due to meet with the Minister on Monday so we'll see.

At the moment we're on the plane. The jumbo is struggling slightly with the weight of Sarah's bag, but the pilot is confident we should reach Johannesburg in about nine hours. From Jo'burg we fly to Blantyre in Malawi.

We have only been to Malawi once before. I would like to say that the last time we were here we travelled the country, absorbing the local culture and experiencing life through Malawian eyes. But that would be a lie. We stayed in very privileged places and rarely stepped foot outside the gates of the various hotels that we stayed in.

The only real time we did, was when we went to watch a game of football between two local village sides. There was a carnival atmosphere - hundreds of people had turned up, mainly kids, and two teams of eleven battled it out for the prize of victory. This was football stripped of all its marketing. There were no sponsors, no advertising hoardings, no photographers lining the touchlines (apart from Sarah and her digital camera). It wasn't like the Sunday League football I play. We have never had more than three people turn up to watch us and here there were hundreds (or was it thousands?).

They had a ball. Not a great ball, but nevertheless a ball. They had to stop every now and then to pump it up, but it was round and it served its job. But what struck us more than anything were all the other handmade footballs that the children had made, from bits of plastic bag and rubber tied together with string. It was at this point that we thought "next time we come let's bring a suitcase of brand new footballs for the children here". OK, so that suitcase has become a container load, but I've never been one for doing things by halves...

So as day drifts into night and night drifts into day we look forward to the unknown adventure that awaits us. After a cat nap on the plane, we will wake up in Malawi.

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CHAPTER 3

Blantyre has won my heart. Before I came here I thought it would be one of those cities that I would just want to get out of. Why be surrounded by urban chaos, when minutes away lie the open arms of the Malawian countryside? After all, what I have left behind is London, the capital of western hustle & bustle.

But there is something about Blantyre that is so refreshing. It's difficult to put your finger on it, but I think it's something to do with it being a frantically busy city but where the people are friendly, helpful and calm. In my experience of busy cities, these qualities aren't often found together. It's chaos here of course, but it comes with a smile.

Blantyre is small. We thought we were lost the other day, but one left turn, followed by a quick right and we were home. There is not much here - the commercial centre is one or two roads that heave in the way you might expect African cities to heave.

The government has recently embarked on a program to clear all the street vendors off the streets. The vendors had previously set up camp at a spot near our lodge (a road equivalent to London's A1), which seemed like an odd & dangerous choice. But the talk here is that it is a much cleaner place now the problem has been 're-located' somewhere out of view. The reaction has been mixed. Some say it's a good thing, others find it inconvenient that they now have to go an effortsome kilometer into town to get their groceries. And I don't suppose anyone has asked the vendors themselves what they think.

Anyway, I'm glad I've spent enough time to get to know Blantyre. We have been conscious to try and immerse ourselves in the culture of the place. We're realising that our football project is an opportunity not just to visit a country, but to really get to the heart of it.

Football is so much more than just a game. It's been extraordinary to see what doors have opened up because of what we're doing. Some of them reveal quite awe inspiring, yet tragic rooms.

We met with the Malawian FA (Football Association). We thought it would be an appropriate thing to do, but were conscious not to let our project become someone else's agenda. We wanted to introduce ourselves and then leave.

I have mixed feelings about the FA in England. On the one hand they had been quite helpful to us in England, on the other hand they had only been 'quite' helpful. Given that Malawi is one of the FA's priority partner countries, I had rather assumed that the English FA would wholeheartedly embrace what we're doing and actively want to assist us. But no, in England things don't really work that way and the general mix of 'too-busyness' and other things being more important, meant that the English FA did nothing proactive to assist us.

A short rant if you'll permit me (skip on if you don't want to listen). A few days before we left for Malawi I got a phone call from the FA. Months ago, Mitre, official ball suppliers to the FA, had very kindly given us a full page ad to run in the programme of the FA Cup final. Brilliant. This worked with our timings and could lead to loads more balls to give to kids in Malawi before the World Cup. The FA called me when they saw the ad, to say that the ad could not run because The Great Football Giveaway was not one of the FA's official charities. A whiff of corporate guidelines was in the air. I calmly pointed out that Malawi is a partner country of the FA and they should be doing everything possible to support our project. Equally I pointed out that we would be

visiting SOS Children's Villages in Malawi anyway (one of their 'official charities') and the more balls we could get to give them the better. They insisted we remove our logo from the ad and made it look like an ad for Mitre rather than an appeal for people to give balls. It was either that or not run the ad at all. By now I was boarding the plane for Malawi, so I had no choice. Pathetic. I'm sorry FA, you should be ashamed of yourselves.

Cut to the Malawian FA. We walk through the door and within minutes we are sitting in a room with the General Secretary, the Head of Operations and the Director of their Urban Development programmes. All of them hugely welcoming and fully supportive of what we are doing. The President wasn't in the office that day, but had he been there he would have joined us in that room too. In 20 minutes we had achieved more with the Malawian FA then we did in 8 weeks with the English FA.

We mentioned to the Malawian FA that we wanted to deliver our footballs direct to children that would most benefit from them. This wasn't an organised and structured 'programme' that we had spent years developing, backed up by reports, studies, surveys, research, and all the usual inefficient ways we westerners like to be efficient. This was just us, a couple of Londoners who have brought a whole load of footballs over to Malawi to give to children that look like they might enjoy them.

The Malawian FA suggested we visit some of their urban development schemes, which the following day we did.

Patrick runs 'Playsoccer'. He is an immediate source of inspiration. He gets his hands dirty, by going out into the hearts of the poorest communities of Blantyre and amidst the chaos arranges opportunities for thousands of children to learn to play football. This keeps them off the streets and out of trouble. They learn social skills, teamwork and dropped into the programme is education about key issues such as HIV. But above all the kids have fun.

Patrick took us to Bangwe. A district that opens your eyes to the reality of urban African life. They say you can never be prepared for how you feel when you first walk through a truly poor township. And they are right.

At first you've seen it all before. Most days our televisions beam pictures at us showing hardship across the world and when we've had enough, we turn over to watch the Holiday programme and dream of our next sun kissed beach. And then you realise that this isn't television and that those

faces peering through the windows of mud huts with tin roofs aren't news stories, but they are real people. And then it hits you like a train. Anger, disbelief, embarrassment, shame, all momentarily combine forces to punch you in the stomach.

I turned to Sarah, but surprisingly she was smiling. What she saw was something very different. She saw the smiles, the kids playing in the streets, the effort that the ladies had made to dress as smartly as they could.

We were both right to feel they way we did. This was a poor place but a happy one.

I will never forget that journey into the heart of the Bangwe township (or district, as they call it here). And more importantly I will never forget walking into the small haven, slap bang in the middle of one of the poorest parts of one of the poorest countries in the world, and seeing thousands of children having fun kicking balls about.

The tragedy was that despite receiving funding from the US for this programme, they only had twelve balls to play with. If I had our lorry filled with balls parked outside, I would have just opened the back and walked away. We return next Saturday with footballs. I can't wait.

I knew that demand would massively outstrip supply, even if we had a million footballs to give away. How people must feel when it comes to distributing food or medical supplies at time of humanitarian crisis, I shudder to think.

But would we have any footballs at all to give? Next stop, the infamous Malawi Revenue Authority.

Probably the heaviest item of luggage in our bags is the paperwork we have prepared for the MRA. Documents signed by this person, faxes sent by that person, emails printed out in triplicate from everyone and anyone that might be able to help.

We were chancing our luck. It was a Friday afternoon and we were hoping to catch an official in a good mood before the weekend. We pushed back the Customs & Finance door, expecting to see a thousand people arguing about how unfairly they've been treated, and it was quiet. Two ladies sat calmly staring into the weekend ahead.

I waited until one of them caught my eye, and smiled. Good start.

It wasn't that she didn't want to help, just that she wasn't going to volunteer to help. The good news was that she had a file with some paperwork in it, marked "The Great Football Giveaway". I recognised some of the bits of paper - inventory lists, shipping contracts, and on top of all if them was our trump card: the letter from the Minister. Our pair of scissors, especially sharpened to cut red tape.

"Oh, you have a letter from the honourable Minister. Yes, this should help".

Should? Should! It better.

She didn't want to make any of the twenty calls that I made her make that Friday afternoon to find the piece of paper that said we could have our container of footballs.

Eventually we tracked it down. It was waiting for the personal signature and stamp of the Chief Financial Controller of the MRA. Was this a good sign or a bad sign? She didn't want to call his office, but I politely made her. We were so close to getting our balls - I could almost smell the synthetic leather.

"He's in a conference". "Until Monday".

It was a similar feeling to earlier this year when Luton were 3-1 up against Liverpool at half time in the FA Cup. And lost 5-3. My heart sank. So near, but yet so inevitably far.

I received a phone call that day from Mr Justin Saidi, Director of Sport in Malawi, inviting us to come to an international match between a club side from Malawi and a team from neighbouring Mozambique. The Minister of Youth Sport & Culture would be there and this would be a good opportunity for us to meet him.

The game was taking place in Mulanje, a district in the south west of the country, about an hour's drive from Blantyre.

The football pitch at Mulanje is arguably one of the most beautiful places in the world. People that have travelled the world will I'm sure say there are more spectacular places, but my vote, for today, goes with the Mulanje football pitch.

Sat at the base of a table top mountain, Mulanje football pitch is enclosed on three sides by trees. The fourth side is an open view of the mountain. The English would love to build a cricket pitch here and quaff their Pimms as the sun sets alongside the mountain. But this is football and it is real. Hundreds of people line the touchlines, using the trees as their stands. Children play with home-made footballs, engineered from bits of plastic bag and rubber tied together with string. A local DJ blares music out and the crowds dance on the touchlines. The atmosphere is alive with excitement, fun and enjoyment.

At this point Sarah has one of her usual brilliantly perceptive thoughts. It's not us that should be helping Malawi, it's Malawi that should be helping us. If we were at a football match in England, by now we would probably have suffered the ritual abuse of being sworn at, spat at and had our mothers insulted - because that's what we do in England. And we are so proud to be so civilised.

There is an air of expectation about the Minister's arrival in Mulanje. Everyone has turned out to see him (or were they just there for the football? Probably both) - the local MP, the Director of Southern Regions football, the President of Malawi FA, the Director of Sport, and on the list went. And then little old us. These funny English people who have brought a container load of footballs for the children of Malawi.

We were honoured guests, but still acutely aware that our job here is to give balls to the kids, not serve anyone's political agenda.

We were introduced to the Minister who immediately came across as a charismatic and welcoming person. He understood what we were here to do and offered to help in any way he could. We thanked him and took our seats just behind him to watch the game.

What a belter. Two great teams, playing on a surface that English footballers wouldn't even have as their back gardens, the skill was outstanding. The local Malawi team won 2-1 which seemed a fair result.

We got hit by a bombshell. Just as we were leaving, celebrating the glorious victory of the local team, the Director of Sport mentioned to us about a programme that the Minister had put in place for us to distribute the balls. Via his local MPs. I have no doubt in my mind that the Minister is a very good man - he has been very helpful from day one, and supported us at every turn. But we have a contract with the people back in Britain that we have to honour. We have promised that we will hand deliver the balls ourselves to children in schools and orphanages across the country

and that is what we will do.

I asked the Director if could arrange a meeting with the minister.

Now I've had some business meetings in odd places, but I've never met a Minister in the changing rooms of a local football club before.

An official ushered us in and we sat in the corner of the away team changing room, perfumed by the stagnant sweat that only those who have had a half-time talk at 85°F can understand, and entered into discussions with the Minister.

The Honourable Minister Mr Jufalla Mussa is one of the good guys. His intentions were clear - to aid us in distributing the balls to the children. We discussed our 'contract' with British public and I think he understood. We had to play it carefully. We held firm on our position that we wanted to be responsible for distributing our balls, but agreed that we would join him in Lilongwe for a press call with Malawi TV & newspapers, to formally recognise the support we have been given by his Ministry. This seemed like a good outcome. I breathed a sigh of relief.

That is, of course if the MRA play ball - otherwise all of this could become academic.

The drive back to Blantyre from Mulanje was an experience I would quite happily forget. Malawians have a strange approach to driving at night. They would rather save the battery on their cars than the lives of their fellow citizens. Only when it is pitch black do they then turn on their lights. That is, of course if they have any lights to turn on.

Added to the handicap of not being able to see any oncoming traffic, or any braking in front of you, is the fact that Malawians believe that man and motor should co-exist. On the same road. In the middle of it. Pavements do not grace the roads of Malawi and people meander down the streets as if drunk on the Kings Road. They treat the inches between themselves and lumps of metal travelling at 60kmph, with unerring disregard. There were times when I found myself driving so slowly that I was overtaken by an old man on a bicycle.

Somehow we made it home without increasing Malawi's already high fatality rate, but it does worry me that we are going to spend so much time on the roads these next few weeks.

So much has happened these last few days. Including today (Monday) - our return to the Malawi

Revenue Authority.

This is African paperwork working its very hardest. I understand now how people stranded in the desert feel when all that awaits them at the horizon is another horizon. Upstairs to sign a form, then take it downstairs. Get it signed and stamped then back upstairs to get the stamp authorised. Then downstairs to get it counter signed. We went sideways at one point which was quite refreshing, but then upstairs and downstairs one more time.

We have now called the MRA headquarters 'The Upstairs Downstairs Building'. When you leave the MRA, scouts for the national steeplechase squad are waiting at the doors to recruit you.

The good news is that ten minutes before they closed, our man from the freight clearance company walked out with a beaming grin clutching a piece of paper that was proudly titled Customs Clearance Document, embossed with a bright red stamp.

We're in business. We have our balls.

Paul

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CHAPTER 4

Whatever you are doing, stop it right now. Book yourself onto the next flight to Malawi and come and join us. You will have a reason of course not to - and a good one, no doubt - but this is something everyone should experience, no matter what the time, financial or emotional cost. So cancel everything for a week and come to Malawi - you may never get this opportunity again.

Today we went right into the heart of Malawi, itself the warm heart of Africa. We drove for an hour into the villages. We took with us footballs and netballs, the first of many thousand, to give to the kids in the villages.

I wish you all could have been there.

The road to XXXX is a bumpy one. Surging forward in our battered Landrover, (the world's toughest car that breaks all laws Newton ever set down) we bounced, crawled and creaked our

way further and further into the dusty unknown. Blantyre is surrounded by mountains. The moment the tarmac ends everything changes and the rough terrain and wild open mountainside becomes the natural habitat. It is breathtakingly beautiful.

Sarah pitched in with another astute observation, as we looked out across the wild rolling hills "People would pay millions to live here". As she said this we passed through a village where the simple mud huts with open windows blended effortlessly against the dusty background. Sarah is right of course and this is the grand and tragic irony of Malawi.

Malawi has so much to offer. It should not be so poor. It has a rich a beautiful culture, it has a rich a beautiful environment, with rich and beautiful opportunities. It is not for me to comment on the business, political or social structures of Malawi as I am an outsider, but it is a country that has so much to offer.

There is water in Malawi - over half the country is made up of one of Africa's largest freshwater lakes. The soil is rich in places, harvesting some of the finest tea and tobacco in the world. The truth is that Malawi should be self-sufficient. It should not need the help of so much international aid. Yet it does. Rich 4x4s, polished bright and shiny, cut through the harsh environment, as out of place as the billboards that line the streets from the airport to the townships. These are the cars of the NGOs. It takes money of course to give money and the debate rages on, perhaps with no right or wrong answer, about the five star hotel accommodation, cars and expat lifestyle of the NGOs, and the extent to which their work really helps.

Of course it does help. An expat explained to me yesterday "There is no middle class in Malawi. You are either poor or rich. We do not have a cinema here because either you have your own plasma screen with surround sound, or you don't really even have enough money for food. The middle class is the engine room of society and without one you cannot hope to grow and become profitable as a country". Said the man who was going to the West Indies for a month to watch the cricket World Cup.

I mentioned before that Malawi is a tragedy, that comes with a smile. No purer example of this is what we witnessed today. A drive through some of the purest and most unspoilt countryside in the world, I must have waived to over a thousand people in under an hour. And every one of them, beamed a huge grin a smiled back. When there is food in their bellies, the people of rural Malawi seem some of the happiest people in the world.

It is impossible just to turn up and give some footballs to the children in a school in Malawi and then leave. This merits a ceremony. The children are all gathered together in front of you, to see the presentation with their own eyes. They don't know what to expect, yet you can see the expectation. They hope it will be something they will like.

I think the Malawian for football is 'football' because when I mentioned the word, the whole school erupted in a cheer. When I took a ball from the box it was as though the village chicken had laid a golden egg.

The younger children stared is disbelief. The older children pinched and punched each other playfully and you could see that all they wanted to do was play.

I had to pinch myself. All the time and effort was worth it. The decision several months ago that I would take time away from my well paid London job, with a slightly crazy dream of filling a container with balls and delivering them to the children of one of the world's poorest countries, had paid dividends.

Barely able to contain myself and my emotions, I threw a bunch of balls into the air towards the children. I wish I was William Wordsworth, Pablo Neruda or my father, so I could do justice in words by describing what I saw. In the corner of some foreign field there was, that brief moment, pure happiness.

I wish I could bottle what I saw and take it to show the heads of FIFA, the bureaucrats at the English FA, the premiership footballers that may be good at football, but don't really understand what football is. They think football is about skill, success, achievement, glory, victory, competition, financial reward, lifestyle, celebrity. But it's not. It's about the simple pleasure a ball that bounces can bring so many people. This is football, and that day I was privileged to witness the power of football in its purest sense.

I read a book a long time ago by Alejo Carpentier called "Los Pasos Perdidos" (The Lost Steps). He travels deep into the Amazon jungle in pursuit of the origin of music. What he looks for is music untouched by influence, amongst a tribe that have never had contact with other forms of human life - the most primitive of primitive. I cannot claim that the village we visited today had no contact with the outside world, but the reaction to that bouncing ball was something far more raw than I had ever imagined I would experience.

As I said, stop what you are doing and come out now. You won't regret it, whatever your reason for not coming.

Paul

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CHAPTER 5

At 2.34pm today, Bluey gave birth to a beautiful set of baby balls.

It has been a long and quite painful labour. We had our first contractions over a week ago, where it seemed the birth would be imminent and relatively straightforward. Since then we have had a few false starts, a number of premature rushings to the maternity ward and an agonising final day today. At one point we appeared to be just seconds away from becoming proud parents, only for the social worker to arrive and threaten to take our babies away.

It was a proud moment for us all in the delivery room when, with the aid of a quick squirt of WD40, out popped our first new-born.

For so long we have looked forward to the patter of tiny feet. Tomorrow we start the next chapter, as we offer up our little ones for adoption.

Paul

(OK, so anyone arriving at this blog for the first time, you'd better look at previous postings below to see that Bluey is in fact our container full of thousands of footballs destined for the children of Malawi. All should then make more sense...)

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CHAPTER 6

The harsh reality of African life has reared its head a number of times since we have been in Malawi.

I woke up the other morning excited by the prospect of visiting a scheme in one of the poorest townships of Malawi, that uses football to help take kids off the street. I called Patrick, who runs the scheme first thing in the morning. During the night his young boy Pius, aged three, had contracted Malaria.

Patrick had to make the journey to the hospital twice during the night, and the little fella that we had seen just days before ambling through the townships without a care in the world, had suffered the tragically inevitable bad luck that most Malawians go through at some stage in their lives.

Pius was one of the lucky ones. There was a hospital that he could visit and be treated. It made me think about some of the villages that we have visited, that are several hours drive away from a major city hospital. I'm told that more people die from Malaria in Malawi every year than of AIDS. Yet Malaria is just accepted as a way of life here. Unlike AIDS, Malaria is a low profile disease. It gnaws away at the country, debilitating the workforce and dampening spirits. It receives none of the international help that AIDS gets. Only the very rich have mosquito nets, repellent or prophylactics. There is no international coalition that has declared war on Malaria (or at least if there is, no-one here knows about it). Maybe this is because Malaria does not exist in America or Europe, unlike AIDS, so it's not seen as a global threat? AIDS is headline news. But every morning little chaps like Pius wake up with Malaria and nobody seems to do anything about it.

A few days ago I wrote about visiting a village in the hills outside Blantyre. How we drove across terrain that only the sturdiest of vehicles could dare take on. Having given the children in the village a number of footballs and netballs and witnessed a reaction that will live with me forever, we headed home. Fazenda stopped the car. A group of women were walking towards us, bearing a small leafed branch in front of them. Fazenda, our driver and source of local understanding in Malawi, bowed his head as the group passed by. He paused a moment, eyes closed and then turned to me. "A funeral. Of a very young baby."

My heart sank. What was I doing here with footballs?! People had often asked me back in England whether I thought it would be better to channel my efforts into raising money to build hospitals, dig wells, supply food or provide other more valuable and vital services. I always wanted to reserve judgment on this until I was out here. I had a stock response in England "I'm

not a doctor, engineer, nor a specialist in humanitarian aid. I'm just an ordinary guy from London who loves football and believes that kids are kids across the world, irrespective of their circumstances, and they like kicking balls about."

I don't know for sure, but I imagine that the life of that newborn baby might have been saved under different circumstances. Maybe it was AIDS or Malaria, or maybe it was just the same thing any baby in the world could have suffered. But there was not a hospital within walking distance, and ambulances do not exist here.

As the funeral passed by, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of shame and embarrassment.

Pius' malaria and this brutally sad funeral have not stopped me from feeling that what we are doing is good and right. There is a feeling that life goes on no matter what is thrown at people here. Last year they had a poor harvest and many people died in Malawi. This year thankfully the weather has been kinder and spirits are high. I am beginning to understand that happiness exists within a relative context. That is why young children, dressed in rags walk barefoot down a slum, splashing through disease ridden puddles, with smiles on their faces.

When the harvest is poor there is of course little to be happy about. But when the harvest is good, that is the time to enjoy life to its full.

The very small gesture that we are doing, thanks to the people back in Britain, giving out footballs and netballs, allows the kids here to get more out of those moments when life is to be enjoyed.

Our team for the first phase is complete now. Pete and Bob have arrived and their help is invaluable. I always wanted the spirit of this project to be an open one. On the website I said that anyone was welcome to join us - all they had to do was sort their own flights, accommodation and car hire (if needed) and come out. We will not organise it for them, but if they take it on themselves to organise it then they would be welcome to join us.

I said this to Pete, as I did to many, and a few days later he called me back to say he had booked his ticket, had had most of his jabs and would see us in Blantyre in a few weeks time. I couldn't believe it - I was thrilled.

I had no idea who Pete was. A complete stranger. I met him in a pub in London a few days before we left. Things got off to a bad start when he declared he was a Manchester United supporter,

with a soft spot for Watford. I wanted to reimburse him his ticket immediately. But Pete had a similar attitude to me. He didn't really have a reason why he wanted to come, other than he thought it sounded like a good thing to do. Perfect.

Pete thanked us the other day for letting him come along, but really the thanks are the other way. I want as many people as possible to experience what we're experiencing. It's good for the soul and the more that can be part of it the better. Who knows, maybe he'll return a better man, rejecting the profound commercialism of Old Trafford and see the light of becoming a Luton Town supporter.

It was touch and go whether Bob would arrive. He was always part of the team, but one thing led to another and the final decision to come wasn't made until the day of his flight. Sarah and I were so relieved. Bob is not only a great friend but he's blessed with the skills of practicalities. He can build houses from scratch, strip a car to pieces and put it back together blindfolded. I struggle to tell the difference between an alternator and a carburetor. Sarah scratches her head over a wrench and a spanner.

So when Bob said he was coming out, we breathed a sigh of relief. It became an even deeper sigh of relief when our car went clank and Bob was there to tell us that the universal joint on the prop shaft had broken and needed replacing. Sarah asked if that was anything to do with the cigarette lighter? I said maybe. Bob breathed a sigh of disbelief.

I feel that we are now a full team - lots of different people from different backgrounds all together with one common, slightly bizarre, goal. To give away as many balls to the children of Malawi.

I have noticed a small change in both Pete and Bob over the last few days. It is a humbling experience being surrounded by thousands of children every day that are so excited to see you. Bob can talk for Britain, but yesterday he was very quiet on the two hour journey back from the remote villages we had visited in southern Malawi. I could see him trying to take it all in.

Having different people around you helps make sense of what's going on. Whilst waiting for a rather fundamental looking spare part to arrive for our car, a young girl walked by. She was barely old enough to walk herself. In England she would probably been in a pushchair, mollycoddled by her subservient parents. Slung over her back was a baby, probably her sister.

Bob and I started chatting and came to the conclusion that the children here have such a short

childhood. They are thrust into the responsibilities of adulthood before they have time to be children. Maybe this is why the reaction they have to the footballs is so acute.

Children in Malawi are very disciplined. They are hugely respectful of their elders and a stiff word from a mother or teacher commands immediate silence. There is always a buzz of excitement when we turn up at a school or orphanage. Children surround the Landrover, necks craned and eyes curiously exploring the contents of this alien object.

We ask to speak to the head teacher and more often than not it is the head teacher that we are speaking to. You can feel the excitement in the kids itching to burst out. But they have not been given the signal by the person in charge to do so.

When we eventually bring out the balls and toss them into the air, for just a moment the children can be children. They forget the hardship of their daily lives, their adult responsibilities towards those younger than themselves, the recent bereavement of a friend or family from AIDS or Malaria, and they remember what it's like to be a child.

At its most profound, for just a few moments, I think we give them a bit of their childhood back that would otherwise be lost to the realities of daily hardship. We can see it in their faces and hear it in their voices as they scream across the plains chasing those little balls that bounce.

It's funny the thoughts you have when waiting for a spare prop shaft to arrive.

[Oh my God. Staring at me right now is a big fat ugly spider. It must four inches from toe to toe and its little front feelers that probably harbour dangerous fangs are twitching. Is it one of those jumping ones that attack at will? I'm going to remain very still and hope that it goes away. I'm not going to kill it because maybe its big brother will come and get me. Who knows, maybe I'll be lucky and a big snake will join us in the room and have him for breakfast. I hate spiders.]

Today we have our busiest day yet. I'm realising that it's physically and emotionally hard work giving these balls away. Every day we get up at about 6am and are out there until dark. We have made a commitment that we will hand deliver every ball and that's what we will do. Time is not on our side and often I wish we could spend more time with the children, rather than shooting off moments after we have given them the balls. But it is more important that we visit as many schools and villages in remote areas as possible. This is such exciting and rewarding work that every evening, I can't wait for the following morning.

Paul

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CHAPTER 7

"Taxi?"

"Yes sir. Step this way."

It was a dark night and we had returned to Blantyre for an evening to re-stock with footballs and meet with Patrick and Pauline for a traditional Malawian home cooked meal.

The taxi driver walked us past a line of cars that I had previously thought was a dumping ground for disused motors. Just before we arrived at a shiny 4x4 Toyota Hilux (no doubt that of an aid worker) the taxi driver stopped and proudly introduced us to his battered old Mazda.

Not many cars in Malawi would pass a British MOT, but the Thing our taxi driver asked us to step inside would not even have been accepted as scrap in England.

There was a man asleep in the front seat, snoring. Was it his car? Or was it just slightly more comfortable than the gnarly and dusty road outside? "Out! Ah dafflamah mouina!!" (or something similar). "Please sir, your taxi."

There have been few times in my life when I have wondered about life insurance, wills, final telephone calls to loved ones, am I wearing clean underpants..? And this was one of them.

I went to open the door, but there was no handle. "Allow me" he said, as he stretched across and opened the door from the inside. He was parked on a hill, which was lucky because the car lacked a starter motor. We freerolled the first ten feet before hopping and jerking into action.

Bob was sat in the passenger seat. He reached behind for his seatbelt and fingered the thin air like a magician revealing there is nothing left in his hand. Never mind. Even if there was a seatbelt, it probably wouldn't work anyway. I saw Bob then go to open the window. A short twist of the handle and the window dropped like a guillotine, disappearing into the body of the

doorframe.

The first twenty meters we drove over a bumpy road. No lights, a shattered windscreen, springs instead of seats, doors that shut ajar. It was a feat of engineering that this car worked at all.

As we hit the smooth tarmacked road, the bumpiness of the first twenty meters continued. Every single mechanical part of that car was shot. Bob (our mechanically minded mate) quickly identified that
- each of the four wheels were clearly a different size
- there was six inches of play in the steering wheel
- all the bearings were shot
- the rear wheels had a left to right wobble as well as an up & down motion
- there was only one headlight to guide the way.

I have taken my car to the garage a few times when the stereo has broken or a brake disk needs replacing and seen the mechanic suck air through his teeth, grimace and say "Not good, I'm afraid. Not good at all. It's gonna cost this is". If I had the money, I would ship his battered Mazda to England and drive it down the Arches just to see the reaction.

Of course he had no petrol. But running a car dry is normal here. We free-wheeled a right-hand turn across a busy road into the garage, narrowly avoiding oncoming traffic that lacked the willingness or ability to brake. Had we crashed not only would I have face-planted into the ornamental CD player, but also into the CD that was dangling like a religious icon from the mirrorless rear view mirror. There is no more humiliating way to go than having Lionel Ritchie's greatest hits embedded into your forehead.

At the petrol station the driver asked us for advance payment so he could put some petrol in the car. It's an interesting place to keep the fuel tank, I thought, as he opened the boot of his car.

Not exactly "Fill her up!", more a quick 50pence squirt and then screw the cap on before the precious vapour evaporates. As if normal, the petrol attendants pushed the car out of the garage and the master of jump starts did his thing again.

"Please drive slowly" I asked rather sheepishly. "Yes sir". Driving slowly was achievable on the flat, but more challenging when faced with a downhill slope and limited brake [sic].

Downhill. Good. An opportunity to save on petrol and battery. Turn the engine off. Gather as much speed as possible for the upcoming hill, hold it, hold it, just a little longer...it was like waiting in the trenches for the final command to go up and over... Now! Jerk jump clank, we're back to motorised transport again and all is OK.

How we ever made it to Patrick's house in the suburbs of Blantyre will remain a mystery. I would not have been surprised had we experienced one of those comedy moments where we got out, closed the door and the car collapsed into pieces as if it had come flat-packed from Ikea.

We were welcomed by Patrick and his father-in-law. They live in a pretty smart house about 15 eventful minutes from the centre of Blantyre. The house was immaculate. Every chair had it's own pressed linen cloth draped over it. The walls were filled with small religious paintings, reflecting the father-in-law's ministerial responsibilities.

We all sat down and started chatting. After a few minutes Patrick asked if Sarah might like to join the ladies of the house in the kitchen, preparing dinner. Sarah is cultured enough to not take offence by things like this and disappeared next door while the men got down to the serious business of discussing not a lot.

It was a lovely evening. The effort they had gone to was huge. A true Malawian banquet awaited us at the table and the importance of our visit was clearly evident. I really like Patrick and his family. He does what he can for the people of his country and makes a real difference. If there were more people like him that combined initiative and effort then I think Malawi would be a different place.

There is too much dependency on aid here. This is evident all around. When we were in a township in Mulanje, in some of the most fertile tea growing parts of the country, there was no local produce. Either people would wait for the aid trucks to arrive or they would rely on people to make the two hour minibus journey to Blantyre to collect their fruit and vegetables.

Maize is the only thing that is home grown and milled. But you can not live off maize alone.

There is little here to incentivise people to become fully self sufficient. Why should they when the brightly polished brand new cars of Oxfam and Unicef will surely deliver, if only they wait long enough.

In the more touristy lakeshore part of Malawi, where contact with foreigners is more usual, the attitude of the local people is considerably worse than in rural areas. The minute they see that we are mazungos (white people) in our battered Landover, they run up to us and hands together as if in prayer and say "Give me money".

Maybe this is inevitable. The more contact they have with aid workers and tourists, the more they feel that this is how life is. They come to expect it and depend on it. If all aid was to be withdrawn, would Malawi survive? Yes. Probably. It would be political suicide of course, but in the long term the country should and must be able to stand on its own two feet.

The Indian community here (which is quite large) has found a way to make it work. Their hard working ethic has produced results and Limbe, a predominantly Indian district, has now become the commercial centre of Blantyre.

So when we arrive with footballs, are we doing any good?

I am conscious that what we do should not feel like aid, but of course it is. We felt sorry for these people so we thought we'd try and do something about it. Is this helpful or patronising?

So far we have visited primary schools, orphanages and villages in remote areas. We have been to the cities. We have thrown balls out of the back of the car. We have caused small skirmishes (nothing serious) and mass ecstasy. We have kicked balls into crowds of youngsters and taken individual children aside and explained why and what we are doing. We have met with elders of villages, religious ministers, expats, MPs, local businessmen, sports administrators, the rich and the poor.

Every single one of them thinks that we are doing is a great thing. We have been on national news, in the papers and on the radio.

I too am still convinced that what we are doing is good. But it is only the start. Sport is not a priority for a country whose national economy is in crisis, or whose government faces corruption charges on a regular basis. But what is evident is that it is up to local Malawians to build on the aid that is given them, not to rely on it.

When Jimmy, our local guide in Mulanje said that having seen the reaction of the children, he was going to arrange a league competition with all of the schools that we have visited in that area, I

was elated. This would mean that our 'giveaway' wouldn't just be a giveaway and stop once we had left.

I also think that a football or netball is a unique object of aid and it comes wrapped with its own lesson of learning. On several occasions we have seen youngsters become posessive about their new object (especially those exposed to foreign materialism in the touristy lakeshore area). The children grab and run. One child even sat on his ball, clearly marking this new possession as his own.

After a short while that kid got bored of sitting on his football. He stood up and kicked it to his friend. A football is no good on its own, it has to be shared.

In the rural areas and in orphanages, the attitude is very different. There is no singular possession. Everything is shared and I think this is why they are so happy to see footballs. Yes they are bright and shiny and new (very little in Malawi is new), but the amount of shared enjoyment from that little white bouncy thing is extraordinary. A football is something for the community, not the individual.

But this giving away of footballs is hard work. In the last three days we have visited 15 primary schools in rural areas, and spoken to over 20,000 children. Only one of those schools had a football (just one, that looked more like an unpeeled cauliflower than a football). Some of the schools were running a scheme where for the last few years they had been trying to get 10 kwacha (4pence) off as many students as possible, so they could buy a new football for the school.

Each time we gathered the whole school together onto the playing field (they all have a football pitch) and do a short presentation to the children. Every time we say something different (whatever comes to mind), but the gist of it is often the same:

"We have come from England and have brought with us some small gifts that have been given to us by the people of England, to give to you the children of Malawi (stunned faces). In particular these come from John Smith in Manchester (applause). There is nothing serious about these gifts. They are simply for you to have fun and enjoy being children (clapping and cheering). We have brought [I reveal] footballs (explosion) and netballs (screeching)." At which point we throw half a dozen balls over their heads and into the playing field behind them. It is the end of term, birthday and Christmas all in one. The teachers lose control and themselves give in to the wild

happiness all around them. They let go for just a moment. It is the teachers that come up to us with smiles wider than their faces and say "You see. The children are happy. Very very happy".

It is a small gesture what we are doing, but an important one. Malawi needs more people like Jimmy and Patrick, who see scenes like these and realise it's the start, not the end. It is up to them to continue and build the future of Malawi.

We are not here to embark on any socio-political crusade. But while we are here we will invite anyone we meet to come along and join us. On Tuesday we have arranged for two of Malawi's most privileged children to come with us for the day. They school at Malawi's equivalent to Eton. They are the rich elite and future rulers and businessmen of Malawi. Like most rich Malawians they don't go out into the villages and meet the real people of Malawi. Like us in England. Shamefully we stay in our nice middle class houses and lock our car doors when we accidentally take a wrong turn and find ourselves in a run down area.

It will be interesting to see the reaction of these boys next week. After we've visited a few schools, I will make them do the presentations and see what they say.

Who knows, if all goes well maybe in years to come one of them will become successful and do something to give back to the people of Malawi. They might even sort out the transport system and burn that Mazda in Blantyre.

Paul

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CHAPTER 8

We're on the road again. This time in a new car. Yes, our rather romantic love affair with a battered Landrover came to a grinding halt yesterday. I don't whether it was when the fuel pump came disconnected or when the steering wheel came off whilst driving (both true), but after a few stern words the relationship was over. So now we drive to Lilongwe in a slightly better, but rather bouncy, Toyota Landcruiser.

If you come to Malawi, be careful about who you rent cars from. Cowboys in England would have

wet dreams about what they get away with. Their cars are dangerously bad and I'm sure one day they will be directly responsible for a serious accident. I hope they read this and try to sue me for libel. I will shut them down and probably save lives.

Anyway enough of cars - I have lost the last two days to mechanics that don't show up and when they do, siphon out petrol from your car to theirs so they can get home. Quite frankly I can't afford the energy.

Sarie is still not 100%. She caught a flu bug a few weeks ago and she now has a bit of a chest infection. Nothing too serious, but it's such exhausting work that it's tough for her. She's one tough cookie though. I'm sure I'd have given up a long time ago and hot-footed it to a beachside resort in South Africa.

But whenever you feel a bit sorry for yourself, Malawi hits you with a dose of reality. Here I am tapping away on my fancy little mobile device in the car heading for Lilongwe, and we pass by a queue of people by the side of the road. The queue is over 50m long. They are waiting for the maize to be delivered and handed out.

We have deliberately come to Malawi at a time when the harvest has been good and there is food. Of course the World Food Programme still hand out maize, but thankfully there is very little starvation at the moment. Hunger yes, but not starvation. James, our driver and now most important and valued member of the team, tells me that the area we are driving through had a bad harvest, which is why the aid trucks are out delivering food. The earth here is much more baron than in the south. The ground does not have the same rich red texture to it. It is a lighter, dustier colour. The maize crops appear withered and bleached by the harsh sunlight. But it is spectacularly beautiful. Everywhere you drive in Malawi, there seems to be a mountain range just ahead of you.

There are so many people in Malawi. The few tarmacked roads that exist are lined with people walking to and fro with bags, buckets and sticks balanced professionally on their heads.

Why do we use our hands in England to carry things? Biologically it makes little to no sense. All the weight is downwards forcing the pressure onto the finger muscles, which are relatively weak. When you put something on your head, all the weight is downwards through your body to the ground. The only real muscles used are those of your neck, which if you are a good balancer are barely used at all. When you have to walk long distances in the heat, you learn energy saving

techniques like this. When you have a motor car, you stay primitive.

To our left is Mozambique. To our right is Malawi. The road is the perimeter border. Burnt out houses remind of troubled times in the mid '80s when civil war broke out in Mozambique. Thankfully for Malawi the fighting never crossed the border. Many praise the then leader Dr Hastings Banda who despite ruling with dictatorial brutality, kept Malawi in peace while its borders burned. I'm informed by James that President Samola Mashier's communist party was supported by the Russians, fighting against Renanmo's Ferimo party supported by America. Battle of the super parties, hosted by Mozambique. James's English is good, but not great, so I think this is what happened. Note to self - look up history of Mozambique when I return. That must have been Reagan vs Gorbachev? At the time of Perestroika and Glasnost? Using Mozambique as their battleground? How did I miss that one?!

We're off to Lilongwe to meet up with Tanya and Tamsin who have just flown in. Never before have I met a more bubbly and energetic pair of sisters. I can't wait to see them. They will accompany us as we head north into some of the poorest parts of Malawi. They are people's people. They love kids and have an effortless way of fitting in with anyone. They love sport and have gregarious personalities - perfect. And they jumped at the chance to come to Malawi and help out.

Tanya has spent the last few weeks celebrating that right of passage some of us have been lucky enough to enjoy - graduation. I doubt she's slept a wink since her final exam. She knows how to party.

Tamsin is an aspiring actress who has been touring Portugal with a small team of actors, visiting schools and performing for them. She has an electric personality and a smile that will launch a thousand fishing boats on Lake Malawi.

Both Tanya and Tamsin will provide a welcome boost of energy, akin to that of the electric chair.

For me it's time to forget everything we have learnt to date: how to approach the schools, the elders of the villages, what works, what doesn't work; and start again. Let's do it their way. I will throw them in at the deep end. Drive them to a school in a remote village, give them a box of balls and the names of the people in England that have donated them, and send them in alone. It's up to them what approach they take. All I know is that they will love it.

This project is all about a journey into the unknown. We're trying to involve as many people along the way as possible. We picked up Andy, a random hitchhiker, and took him with us for a day. He didn't know what hit him. When he left the following day to continue his travels, rucksack packed, we gave him 5 balls from 5 different people in England. We asked him to hand them out on his way north to Monkey Bay. He sent me an email the other day, which I'm sure he won't mind me publishing:

Hi Paul,

Thought I would let you know how I got on with the footballs. After lugging them up to Monkey Bay and onto the Ilala ferry (where they provoked much interest amongst locals) I landed in Nkata Bay. The footballs were given to the local childrens team that had been set up in the area. Needless to say that they provoked much excitement. The team themselves are struggling to get going. They are not aloud to compete in the local league due to a lack of kits and boots. Hopefully the footballs can help them on their way!! I was then invited to partake in the kids training session which was a great amount of fun. In the evening the Nkata Bay team were playing the local rivals Lilive (sorry I have no idea how to spell it) anyway the official match ball for the match was provided by your goodselves (although I made sure it was returned to the kids afterwards)

Thank you so much for the opportunities you have created for me by giving me these footballs to hand out, and for the incredible unique experiences down in Mulanje. Safe to say I will never forget them.

In Nkata Bay I met up with the local organisers from the World Food Programme, a guy called Dominic Nyirongo. He was very interested to hear about what you are doing. In the Nkata Bay area they have a huge problem with children dropping out of school. Part of the WFP's programme is to give away food at school to encourage attendance. Dominic was saying to me how the footballs would probably be an even bigger incentive to many kids than the free porridge!! He has given me his details to pass on to you guys just in case that you are in the area and would like someone to liase with: Dominic Nyirongo World Food Programme Tel: +265 08395 333 I did explain to him very clearly that I had no idea if you had plans to be in the area, and he fully understood. I hope you don't mind me doing this. Sorry that I don't have time to type up my journal, or upload any photos. I am in Tanzania at the moment on the way to Dar Es Salaam and Zanzibar!! Its a tough life.

Thank you so much once again. Anything I can do to help you with any future schemes then please let me know. It absolutely fantastic what you are doing and I hope you continue to have success with the rest of your time in Malawi.

Take care,

Andy

I have already spoken to Dominic and arranged to meet him in Mzuzu on Monday. He will come out with us and will no doubt lead us to some extraordinary places. If footballs can help increase school attendance (which almost all the teachers here seem to suggest), then great.

So everyone seems to enjoy The Great Football Giveaway. Even the three rich Malawian children from Blantyre's poshest private school enjoyed themselves, when we took them on a slightly unusual school outing - to give away some footballs.

As we drove through the hills, I asked Cuthbert, Jack and Clarissa what they wanted to be when they grew up. An accountant. An interior designer. And a fashion designer. Most kids here just want to be older.

They couldn't believe the state of the school we visited. They might have expected a lack of swimming pool or tennis court, but no windows, electricity, paint, toilet facilities, text books (and on the list goes) was so much worse than they had unprepared themselves for.

When the balls came out and the school erupted like a volcano, I could see the penny drop in each of them. That something so small and insignificant could make such a big difference. Just imagine if...

They all spontaneously said that when they were older they would do something to try and help their fellow countrymen. They have a few more years yet to mature into full adults (the richer you are here, the longer you are allowed to be a child), but you never know, this visit to a part of their country they had never visited, nor thought about visiting, might just stick with them when they become the next leaders of industry in Malawi.

I hope Tanya and Tamsin will get something out of this trip. Most people that get involved seem

to find it hugely rewarding and that's great.

As for me, something surprising, shocking, hilarious, frustrating, fun, fabulous happens every day. It makes me feel more alive than ever before.

Paul

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CHAPTER 9

No! Don't get the guitar out. Please... Too late.

We have decided to treat ourselves while we are in Lilongwe and have checked into a hotel. Not a lodge, but a hotel. The only problem is that a group of 40 bible belt Americans have decided to do the same thing. They are here to spread the word to an already very religious country. They have a tour bus, broad West Virginian accents and a guitar.

At 7.00 every morning, after they have greedily devoured the entire breakfast buffet, they burst into verse. Being American, they have not thought to ask any of the other guests, but assume that their way is the right way and that the world around them can benefit from what they are doing. Still, at least they only come armed with a guitar this time. The world now takes cover when the Americans want to help.

I may not go to church every Sunday, but I do have faith. I believe in some greater force but I don't really know what it is or what it does. I've never really been one for forcing my views on anyone and I worry this is what these evangelists are here to do. I know they think they are here to help and faith is such an important thing when you have so little else to hang onto, but I don't think the solution is a bunch of happy-go-lucky American tourists with a guitar.

Sarah is better. Now there's something I really can thank God for. A few coughs in the night, but definitely better. The antibiotics that the family planning doctor (the only doctor we could find) gave her, might just be antibiotics after all. Better than a packet'o'three I guess.

So time to pack up the bags and start the long journey up to Mzuzu in the North of Malawi.

I have enjoyed our time in Lilongwe. It has marked the end of stage two and the start of stage three. Bob has left and Tanya and Tamsin have arrived. And now we head north, to one of the very poorest parts of Malawi.

I am devastated that Bob had to return to UK, but he has important things to sort out in UK and it was right that he left when he did. Bob was such an integral part of the team and the hundreds of thousands of kids that we'll meet up north will miss him too. Bob - if you're reading this, then a massive and public thank you for everything you've done for The Great Football Giveaway. We could not have achieved what we did without you. Even our (un)trusty Landrover misses you. By way of proof, just after you got on the plane yesterday afternoon, it threw a tantrum and went clank (something to do with suspension apparently). So once again, for the fourth time now, the mechanic is on his back removing large chunks of metal from the base of our crumbling car.

Lilongwe is much quieter than Blantyre. It's a surprisingly a peaceful city with a pleasant atmosphere. Of course it's busy in the centre and street vendors check over their shoulders before becoming your best friend for the minutes they try to sell you their crafts. But Lilongwe doesn't have that same rather charming feeling of chaos that Blantyre enjoys. I think this is because they push all the abject poverty outside the city, into what they call 'Areas'.

Area 25. We went there yesterday. I think they call it an Area, because to call it 'squalid township number 25' maybe gives the wrong impression. Accurate, but not so easy to swallow.

[He's tuning up now. Any minute now they will burst into verse. Please, just a little longer. At least let me have my cup of t... Too late. They're off. Oh good. "Cumbayah, my Lord", one of my favourites.]

Area 25 is as bad as it gets. Like everywhere in Malawi it is filled with children. When I first read the statistic that over half of the population in Malawi are children and that the average age is just 16, I was shocked. Comfy on my sofa of course, but shocked. Somehow I saw it as a two dimensional picture: take a snapshot in your mind of a group of people in Malawi and half of them will be children. But after four weeks of seeing living breathing people, everywhere you go, on every street, in every house, in the cities, the villages in mud huts, every minute of every day, and every other person is a child, then you really notice it.

When I was back in England I didn't really think about what it meant in simple day-to-day

practicalities. Who'll wake the kids up in the morning? Drop them off at school? Cook them lunch? Keep them safe at night? The children here do it all themselves. They take their baby brothers and sisters with them to school. On their backs. Aged 6. This is everywhere. The children here have to look after themselves as well as their youngers and their elders. One talks about child labour, but what do you do when three quarters of the labour force are children.

They are tough though. Fragile of course, like any child, but physically much tougher than they're English counterparts. The other day I saw a young boy, aged about five, playing on a home-made swing. He swung as high as he could, jumped six feet in the air, lost control, rotated 45° and landed face first on a rock. My heart fell down to my feet. In England someone would have called an ambulance immediately, just in case. But he got up, looked around with an helplessly empty gaze and walked away. He didn't even cry. I couldn't believe it. Maybe it was because there was no-one around to pick him up and give him a reassuring hug; maybe he had just run out of tears; or maybe he had already experienced too many other things far more painful, in his adult childhood. At the tender age of five, can you really be too old to cry?

Tanya and Tamsin are brilliant. They have energy bursting out of every pore of their bodies. They are fearless in their approach, striding confidently into schools and orphanages with enthusiasm normally reserved for children opening their Christmas presents. They are completely unintimidatable (I know this word doesn't exist but if it did, it's dictionary definition would just say "See Tanya & Tamsin".

The kids love them. Tamsin is of course a natural. She has spent the last year touring Spain and Portugal with a theatre company, performing and entertaining children in a way that helps them learn English. Tanya is strong willed and sports crazy. She can't wait for that moment where she tosses the balls into the crowd and a game of 600 vs 700 takes place. And she will be right in the middle of it.

It is a great relief to have them here. I feel confident just giving them a car load of balls and sending them on their way. James, our driver and adopted father figure, keeps us moving from place to place. It is so difficult to leave. We could spend hours, days, months, years with every child, school or orphanage we meet. But it's a tough balance to get right, spending as much time and visiting as many places as possible within the time we've got here.

As I said earlier, I am not the most religious person in the world, but I heard something very beautiful the other day at one of the primary schools we had visited. The kids were running and

screaming and laughing and cheering, kicking catching and chasing the balls we had given them, and one of the teachers turned to me and said:

"You see God's smile in these children today. Thank you."

We have all been affected by what we have seen. I will never forget how tightly a young child in an orphanage grabbed my hand as I walked towards the car. He may have been too young to speak but he wasn't too young to use his hand to say "Please don't go". When Sarah once said to the children in an orphanage "Whenever you play with these balls, just remember that people back in England are thinking of you" I nearly smiled and cried at the same time. It hit Bob 24 hours after he left, sat in the airport at Johannesburg, where he had to find a quiet corner and sob. It only took one morning to break Tanya, one of the toughest girls I know.

We have been privileged to see the real Malawi and in so doing understand a little more about life. I don't think I've changed much as a person. I have not had a Road to Damascus experience, nor a melodramatic calling to save the world. But I do feel I have a wider perspective on life now and that can only be a good thing.

There is something about the relentlessness of what we are doing (although I am acutely aware that this relentlessness is short lived and terminal). But we have not just visited one school where they have no walls or roof to their classrooms. Or one orphanage that has over 200 nursery school children that have lost their parents to AIDS. Or one village where children aged five have responsibilities that should be reserved for adults five times their age. Every day for four weeks now we have tried to visit at least ten of these such places with just one day off. We have travelled over 5000km already covering the length and breadth of the country. And the truth? We have barely scratched the surface.

Money is not the answer. Don't just pay charities to do the work for you. The next time you go on holiday, don't just go on a safari or go skiing in the Alps. Just this once, pack a suitcase with a load of footballs, hire a car and drive it through somewhere remote and hand them out to the kids. You won't regret it I promise.

Paul

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CHAPTER 10

Oh boy. It is certainly remote up north.

Most of Malawi feels quite densely populated. Maybe it is because nobody seems to stay at home. Instead they spend their days walking down roads, narrowly missing our Landrover.

We had a stroke of good fortune on the road to Chitembe in the north. We nearly hit a cow. There aren't many cows that wander the street of Malawi without a boy shepherd and his stick, but these ones seemed to be masters of their own destiny. Had they escaped? I asked our driver why there was no-one looking after them.

"Ah, the cows of Chitembe. They were owned by a local sorcerer and are believed to be cursed. If you steal one or kill one then bad things will happen to you. They have been roaming the streets for years now and no-one will touch them."

Spirits run high in the north.

There are great chunks of Malawi where there is vast openness. Tiny villages find themselves dotted across the landscape, scattered randomly alongside dramatic mountains or lining crocodile infested rivers. To the north of Rhumpi there is not a lot. Nyika National Park is not dissimilar to the Scottish highlands, only with zebra running wild.

At one of the primary schools in the north we visited the other day I asked the headmaster what was the normal distance for children to walk to school. In a very matter of fact way, he replied "A lot of students walk at least 10km to get here".

So you have to be a fairly committed 6 year old to walk 10km every day, there and back, to study Maths at a school that uses a disused straw hut as a classroom. That has virtually no roof, walls or windows. The lacks desks, toilet facilities, running water, exercise books, pens, chalk; and so the list continues.

Rather romantically we look at this place and think it is beautiful. The sun streams through the holes in the straw roof, casting shadows across a homemade blackboard. A cool breeze drifts through the windowless windows giving some welcome relief from the scorching sun outside. For a moment you forget the poverty and think how wonderful it would be to learn like this. Out in the

open, at one with nature's elements. Are we wrong to think like this?

We stay long enough to see the sun start to set behind the mountains. As the cool evening breeze starts to bite, we go to the warm shelter of our car. And the children start their 10km walk home.

So what happens in July, when the wind becomes bitter and the rains set in? How many children make that journey? How beautiful does the brutally exposed, cold cold school look then? Does the romantic vision of an education without walls hold fast? Of course it doesn't. It is a disgrace and those responsible in Malawi should hold their heads in shame.

The teachers all say the same thing. That the government talks of the importance of education, but when it comes to the crunch, does nothing to help. Those schools that are lucky enough to have brick built classrooms have them because an aid agency or international organisation has donated them. What we saw today was the results of Malawi operating without help from the outside world. And the result was sadly pitiful.

So once again that question is raised in my mind - are we just fuelling the problem, with just another handout?

Malawians live life for today. Not in an idealistic Hollywood Dead Poet's Society kind of way, but through necessity rather than choice, which is very different. When the harvest is good, they eat as much as they can and hope that next year's harvest will be good too. There is little to no thought about what happens if the next harvest is not good. There is no planning for the future, because the present is so uncertain. This is one of the reasons why Malawi has become so dependent on aid. And this is why so many NGOs and aid organisations attach strict conditions with their handouts.

Someone from the United Nations World Food Programme in Lilongwe told me that they would be stopping the supply of porridge to the children of one particular primary school because the headmaster had repeatedly misreported the schools enrolment figures. So the children will suffer from the mistakes of those supposedly responsible for them? This seems a little unjust to me. Are they playing God?

The dependency on aid is a serious issue. For the government it is easier for them to generate income through appealing for aid, than it is to invest themselves in programmes to educate the

population on issues such as diet, farming, health and industry.

In Malawi all they eat is maize. Nsima is a pattie made from ground maize flour, water and...that's it. Nothing else. Occasionally they will have a tomato sauce to dip it into, but no-one grows or eats vegetables. Occasionally you may see a sweet potato, cassava, pumpkin or a fiery chillie, but these are not really part of the stable diet. I was once told that if there is no maize (but plenty of rice and vegetables) this is considered a famine.

Malnutrition is a bigger problem here than starvation. Pot bellies are all around, but when we visit schools, there are no programmes teaching children to grow and eat vegetables. In every school there is a football pitch, but I have not seen one allotment. I would like to return here with Jamie Oliver and do a "Malawi's School Dinners". Let's teach them how to grow & eat vegetables, throughout the year. We know the appeal how great the appeal and demand for footballs and netballs is, so why not use these as a reward for growing and eating their own vegetables? If anyone knows Mr Oliver, do get him to give me a call.

So are we fuelling the problem by just handing out footballs? I don't think so. When we speak to teachers they all say the same thing. That having footballs and netballs at school will increase attendance and performance of the children. It gives them motivation to want to learn, so that in the afternoon they can be rewarded by playing with the balls.

And what about when we just hand the balls directly to kids on the side of the street? Well children need to be children. Their reaction is unprecedented. Their faces light up and they almost explode with excitement. They can't wait to run off and share it with others around them. If you could witness the purity of this happiness as we have, then all the bigger socio-political debates become irrelevant.

We are on our last leg of the journey. Only a few more hundred balls to give away now. I'm starting to feel sad. I wish I had another ten thousand to give away. But we knew when we came out here, that no number would ever be enough. I just wish we had more.

Paul

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CHAPTER 11

“7,500 pupils”. That’s what the headteacher said. Can you imagine it?

Maybe that explains why the small handful of classrooms overspilled into the damp and muddy areas outside. Children aged five to fifteen huddled together around blackboards exposed to a cold and miserable drizzle. “There are so many children that they have to come to school in shifts. We teach the young ones in the morning when it’s light and the older ones later, as it gets dark.”

Every teacher was armed with a stick. A proper stick. Inches in diameter and over a meter long. As they walked through the school, crowds of children parted, cowering for fear of being the next victim of that bamboo baton. One can understand the need for such strict discipline, given the disproportionate number of children to teachers, but it should never have come to this. It should never have been left to get this bad. In my mind, those sticks have become a symbol of the tragic consequences of just letting a country go to waste.

It was both fitting and ironic that this was the last school we visited in Malawi. We were on our way to the airport to return to England, mission accomplished, and had a few balls left in the boot of our Landrover to give away. It was a humbling reminder of the scale of the problem in Malawi and left us knowing that there is so much more that needs to be done to address the very serious issues the country faces.

The face of charity has to change. It is no longer good enough to just give money and hope that the big organisations will do something with it. Money is of course important, but it is not really the answer, because more often than not it does not filter down to the people that need it. I feel qualified to say this about Malawi because I have seen it with my own eyes. The millions and billions that the country receives in international aid every year does not even manifest itself in a school without enough classrooms to house its pupils.

I am sure this problem is not unique to Malawi. So people need to start helping in whatever way they can. Take or leave my advice (most choose the latter), but if possible try not to just take the easy option and give money. Whatever small active gesture you can make will have disproportionately huge effects. I like football, so we took a load of balls with us. We soon realised

that it wasn't really the footballs that the children loved, it was the fact that a group of strangers from some place far away had shown they cared enough to try and do something about it.

The Great Football Giveaway has travelled over 6,000km in the last 6 weeks. We have been north, south, east & west across Malawi. We have visited over 150 primary schools, countless secondary schools, and a tragic number of orphanages and children's centres. We have distributed over 3,000 footballs and netballs direct to the children of Malawi, on behalf of individuals in England. We have spent time in all the major cities and their suburbs. We have got right into the heart of village life in Malawi. We have visited the most remote areas on the tops of mountains and the middle of vast open plains. We have used binoculars to spot children in the distance playing with homemade balls and we have crossed rivers by car and foot to get to them. We have spoken with mothers, fathers and village headmen. We have met Ministers and government officials. And we have chatted with hundreds of thousands of children.

This has not been a celebrity one day visit, arranged by a large international organisation. We have not raised millions of pounds to get lost in the system and not filter down to the people that really need it. We were just a group of people who had an idea and saw it through.

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to be part of The Great Football Giveaway. This whole project could not have happened without the incessant help of Sarah who turned fantasy into reality every day. It needed great people like Bob, Peter, Tanya and Tamsin to take the initiative and join us in Malawi to help distribute the balls. It needed Amanda to run the office back in England. It needed local Malawian drivers like James, David and Happy to steer us to the parts of Malawi that people never otherwise go to.
So before the wheels of this plane touch down in England, I vouch that this is not the end but the start. The planning for what to do next has already started.

Goodbye for now.

Paul