

‘Kicking with their wings,’ RP kids seek fame in Africa

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Contributor

WHEN NINE TEENAGED FORMER street children fly to Durban, South Africa, on Thursday, they will be doing more than crossing an ocean and representing their country in the first annual Deloitte Street Child

World Cup (SCWC).

They will be trying out the new wings they have each discovered they possess, wings that have grown with each kick of a football.

The Philippines is one of eight countries chosen to take part in this unique 7-a-side foot-

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ball competition. From March 15 to 23, the team will play against street children from India, South Africa, Tanzania, Brazil, Nicaragua, the United Kingdom and Ukraine.

The competition gives street children a chance to show the world just how much they can achieve, given a little love and opportunity.

Perhaps most importantly, playing football has taught them to dream.

"When I was on the street, I did not have any dreams for myself because I thought nothing would happen to my life," says 15-year-old Erika Mae, the Philippine team captain. "But now, I've learned to dream big—to finish college and to work. If possible, I also want to teach football to street children as a sign of gratitude."

The six boys and three girls playing for the Philippines, aged 14-16, were chosen from 200 players representing different NGOs, charities and government-run shelters. Trials were held at "PinoyFutbol Festivals" last year, organized by team co-manager Ed Formoso.

The players were selected by the Philippine team, which played in the Homeless World Cup last year.

All team members have lived on the streets at some point in their lives but eventually found a safe place to live, at Tuloysa Don Bosco Street Children's Village and Nay-on Ng Kabataan/DSWD.

In their new homes, each child was introduced to the game that has changed their lives.

Aside from playing football, the Durban event will allow street children from around the world to

unite in one voice. A conference where different team members will talk about the rights of street children aims to come up with a Street Child Manifesto, which will form the basis of an international campaign calling for street children's rights to be recognized.

The SCWC is organized by the Amos Trust, a British charity which uses sports, culture and the arts to uplift the lives of impoverished children.

Hard work, faith

The Philippine team would never have made it to South Africa without the hard work and faith of a group of organizers, coaches and house parents, and the financial support of its *Ninongs* and *Ninangs* ("Godparents") and corporate sponsors such as Deutsche Bank and Deloitte.

Team coach Jess Landagan has come full circle. A former street child himself, "Coach Jess" credits football for his new life. Now, he wants to offer others the same opportunities life gave him.

This former Philippine national football player says: "When I was about 7, I slept on the streets and spent my days collecting trash to help my parents earn money. A priest at Don Bosco one day saw me and suggested I attend some of the classes they were offering. He introduced me to football and it was through sport that I got an education and work."

Philippine team co-organizer Craig Burrows says: "Coach is a fine example of how you can change your life. These children need heroes—people to look up to and say 'Wow, if he started as a rubbish collector and is now coaching a



KICK OFF Members of the Philippine team who will compete in the First Deloitte Street Child World Cup in Durban, South Africa. From left, Jess Landagan (coach), Raymond Ilona, Jayson Simangan, Lorelyn Cabanayan, Roberto Orlandez Jr., John Robert, Erika Mae Inocencio (captain), Ladylyn Ampe, Mario Titoy and Jayson Simangan.

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team that represents the nation, then maybe I can do the same."

Father Rocky Evangelista, founder of Tuloysa Don Bosco Street Children Village, explains why sports can help street children recover from their emotional scars: "They have very low self-esteem and they need a corner of life where they can prove themselves worthy of doing something."

"The most natural activity for a child is to play but for the child to discover how good he is, you must give him a good opportunity to play," Father Rocky adds. "Once he realizes, for example, that he plays ball well, he starts to build his confidence in other areas—academics, work, behavior..."

Playing for their country abroad also has a multiplier effect.

"It affects their life image," Father Rocky says. "They are no longer 'I was just a poor child, beggar and no one took care of me.'

Working hard to earn a spot on the team and now being able to see the world outside has been a source of empowerment."

Value of teamwork

Erika, the captain, describes how she felt when she learned she would lead the team: "I felt undeserved but then as time goes by I feel proud of myself. I will lead them by my good example. It's the key—if you are a leader, you can't lead unless you do this."

How has football changed Erika's life?

"Football is a team sport... You cannot win without teamwork," she says. "Just like in life, it is not only you—many people are involved. It also made me realize that both in life and in a game, it doesn't end when you fall. It is important to stand up again and go on."

She says football not only gives her joy, but "I have also learned to accept defeat."

Training with other street children has also given Erika an opportunity to emotionally heal.

"I've learned to smile despite my bitter and painful past," she says. "I can see it in their eyes that they've also been through the same experiences [as I], or even worse, but still they can smile sweetly."

The team, organized under the auspices of The Henry V Moran Foundation, has grown from a mere group of individuals into a family.

"A lot of them started out angry with the world and with themselves. Sport has taught them forgiveness. If a team member misses a penalty, you have to forgive or you will lose," Burrows says.

The feeling of belonging to something for the first time in their lives has enabled some to come out of their shells.

"The team went to see 'Invictus' so they could learn a bit about South Africa," says Burrows. "We have one excellent player who always keeps to himself and never smiles. When they came out of the theater, we saw him put his arm around a teammate. It brought tears to my eyes."

Father Rocky says: "I saw him start to teach the smaller children in the school to play football. Have you seen a veteran dog teaching her puppy to jump or walk? It was like that. This boy who had never had anyone care for him was communicating feelings of concern."

Fifteen year-old Philip was the original team captain but due to an injury, he is not going to South Africa. Still, he has remained involved with team training.

Philip has a message for chil-

dren living on the streets: "Don't think of yourself as the most down person and that you have nowhere to go [and] you have no future at all. There is always a better way to get out of that situation and move on. Don't lose hope, always seek a better life."

Each team member has known, while living on the streets, what it was like to feel "invisible" or looked down upon by other people.

Philip's message to such people is: "Don't look at them as the lowest kind of people. They are the kind of children who strive hard every day in order to survive, to have a better life, a better future."

God's children

Erika says there is something others should admire about street children.

"They are actually strong persons who never give up. Instead of putting them down, give them courage for they need more of it to go on. If possible, help them for they are also God's children."

The Philippines does not have a strong tradition of playing football. In Durban, it will compete with countries where kicking a ball is part of their culture. The other players will be taller, bigger and faster, and victory will not be easy.

No matter what the final score will be, the members of this team will come home winners. The pain that was once in their eyes has been replaced by a feeling of excitement that comes with achieving something never dreamed possible.

For the first time in their lives, they have felt love and learned to love. There is no stopping them now.