

## How Soccer Can Change the World

By Gustavo Netto, September 2008

Isn't it interesting to see 22 men chasing after a ball, pushing each other, running up and down a 100-yard long field for 90 minutes just to kick a ball inside of a goal?

I find it fascinating.

Folks, let me share with you how soccer, the world's most loved sport can actually change the world.

No one knows for certain when soccer was originally invented but the game we see on TV today has been around for over 200 years and was first played in public schools in England.

Today, over 300 million people play soccer in more than 200 countries.

My history with soccer began at the age 5 in my home country Brazil; also know as the land of soccer. While in the United States soccer isn't as popular, you would be surprised how easily a match can be setup and how much joy comes from one. Growing up in Brazil for instance, like in many other countries, all it takes is soccer ball, an open space, a couple of pair of flip-flops to mark as goals, and a group of kids willing to kick around.

At age 7, I played my first soccer tournament and at age 12 I played my first international tournament when I was sent by my parents to La Serena, Chile. Imagine a 12-year-old boy going away from his parents for two months to live with a family of "strangers" not even understanding their language. From what I recall, that trip was a life altering experience and contributed tremendously to shaping the person I have become. Not only was I able to survive on my own, but I also made great friends and had one of the best experiences of my life.

Similarly, when I first arrived in the United States I didn't know anybody here or did I speak the language. It was early April and the New York City parks were filled with people from all over the world. This was fascinating to me! Every afternoon, I'd go to those parks to play the game and "talk" to new people. In fact, those were the places where I made my first few friends here.

What am I getting to here? Soccer is much more than a simple game, it's a sport that teaches you aspects of life; teamwork, leadership, humbleness, respect for others regardless of race, color, or religion; soccer unifies people who may not even speak the same language but share the same passion.

Soccer is a global language. The word soccer is commonly understood by millions; regardless of their native language. When I meet someone from another country, the first question that usually comes up is "do you like soccer?" 9 out 10 will say, "I love it".

The Federation of Football Association, also known as FIFA is the international governing body of associations of soccer or football as we call it. FIFA has 208 nation-members, 10 more than the United Nations.

FIFA promotes all types of tournaments around the world including Futsal or indoor soccer, beach soccer, youth and professional for men and women. The most well known is the FIFA world cup, which takes place every 4 years. In 2006, the world cup in Germany attracted approximately 3.4MM people to the games and over 715MM followed on TV.

FIFA's mission is **'Develop the game, touch the world, and build a better future'**.

FIFA is also involved in Social, Political, and Cultural initiatives.

As you are aware, the tension between South and North Korea has been going on for years. In 2006, during the world cup qualifying games the two countries had to confront each other for the group elimination. It was a mark in history as North and South Koreans were brought in to the same place including both of their presidents who actually shook hands. The game hasn't broken the tension between the two countries but it was the first step towards establishing a better relationship between them.

In 2004, the island of Haiti, was marked with street violence from former police men who were expressing their rage against the government by going off to the streets and killing thousands of people including children, women, and the elderly. The United Nations and FIFA organized a game between the Brazilian national team and the Haitian national team. The entire nation stopped to welcome the Brazilian players who were escorted through the city in war tanks followed by millions of Haitians running along aside. This initiative has not broken the violence yet, but since then the Haitian government has been promoting soccer tournaments to unify the same gangs who used to exchange shots on the streets and are now exchanging hand shakes on the soccer pitch.

While I was watching this documentary about Haiti, something touched my heart and I thought that I could also contribute for a better world. Growing up in a soccer environment and realizing how soccer can change the world, I believe it's my duty to share that with others.

This past summer, a friend of mine and I created a non-profit organization called United Nations Football Club (UNFC) with the mission of delivering inspirational youth soccer programs centered on leadership, teamwork, discipline and respect in order to enrich lives in the communities we serve.

UNFC has partnered up with Haiti Lumiere Demain, a non-profit organization based in Stratford, Connecticut that promotes literacy in primary and secondary schools in Haiti. This coming October, some of my teammates and I will be heading to Haiti for a 2-day soccer camp to play with the kids and share the values that comes with soccer.

With that, next time you come across a soccer match on TV, don't flip the channel, spend a few minutes watching it and focus on how those 22 men are willing to do much more than score a goal, they want to entertain and influence millions of people around the world. And those very same people, will share and pass that along to many generations to come.

Thank you.

Gustavo Netto