



Diary of Trip to Tanzania - 2004

Day 1: Visit to Temeke & Mtoni Schools (in Dar es Salaam) (Nov. 30th)

I arrived last night with 15 other Olympic athletes from around the world. It's a nice to have 15 other pairs of eyes to help capture the events of the week because I know that there will be a LOT to take in. We had an opening session and discussed what we would expect to see over the next 5 days. Having already visited a Right To Play camp, I definitely had a different outlook than most the other athletes. On the bus on the way to our first school, several of the athletes shared that they were excited to change the lives of these children. Most African children don't have any idea what an aerial skier or even a golfer is, they don't care if we have an Olympic gold medal, and an autograph from a celebrity certainly won't change their lives. Quite honestly, none of these children will probably be changed too drastically by our short visit. But I know that many of these athletes will go home changed themselves and understand how sports and play can transform a child.

We visited 2 schools today. The children put a song and dance together for us. They were so proud to perform for us and they smiled as we clapped along. We jumped in to join them and they immediately took to us. We then played a bunch of games with them that created a tremendous bond between us all. I was initially concerned about the language barrier. The children all spoke Swahili and we all spoke English (or at least broken English) and French. I quickly learned that in sports, language isn't an issue. A laugh is still a laugh and a smile is still a smile no matter what the language. At the end of our visit we gave them a few soccer balls, Frisbees, volleyballs and a net. I could never imagine American kids being SO excited to receive a few meager pieces of sporting equipment. You would have thought that we offered them a new pony or something. Before we left, the kids performed a skit that they were working on. In their performance play, the kids learn about real life issues like HIV/Aids, women's issues, political strife, etc. Through their role playing, I was amazed to see what the life issues were that they had to worry about. When I was 12 or 13, I was worried about what boy would ask me to the school dance, not if I would contract HIV or lose a parent in a political battle.



At the next school we visited, we learned about a number of unique games and activities that these children do. While foreign project coordinators are implementing these programs, they are training local coaches here, and there is a great effort to keep the local cultures and traditions in mind. Many of the games include traditional Tanzanian dances and chants. They also try to take advantage of their local resources because it's not always easy to get something as simple as a soccer ball. The children have learned to take recycled material such as plastic bags and wrap them into a ball that's wound in string to create their own soccer balls. They also look for the future of their sporting programs by having the oldest children teach the middle-aged children, the middle-aged children teach the preteens, the preteens teach the younger children, and so on. This also teaches the kids leadership and responsibility skills.



Day 2: World Aids Day (Dec. 1st)

Today we participated in a World Aids Day festival. Unfortunately I was stricken with some kind of bacteria in something I ate (which truly let me experience African health issues), but I still took part in all the activities. We watched the children play soccer, netball (similar to basketball), and volleyball in the morning. In the afternoon it started to pour rain, but it didn't seem to bother anyone as we joined in with all the games. We played a number of games that taught the children about HIV/Aids and influenced the development of positive health behaviors in their everyday lives. The first game, we ran around and acted out the ABC's of preventing transmission: **A**bstain (wagging finger back and forth to everyone and saying "No sex"), **B**e Faithful (shaking hands with just **ONE** other person) and then **C**ondom (pretending that you are trapped inside a large condom. Next we played a game where a ball was kicked and A, B, or C was called out. If you caught the ball, you yelled out "Abstain", "Be Faithful" or "Condom". Then we played a game like "Hot Potato" but the person holding the Red ball when "stop" is yelled must step out of the circle because this person has symbolically contracted HIV. Another game had the kids form 2 lines and one of the lines would pass a small coin (representing the HIV virus) secretly behind their backs and the other team had to choose who had the virus. This taught them that you never know who has the virus and the only way to truly find out is to be tested. A last game we played had us all run from one side of the field to the other. In the middle of the field were a few coaches that represented the HIV/Aids virus. If you were tagged when running across the field, then you contracted the virus and you were then part of the team in the middle tagging those who were running across the field. This teaches the kids how the HIV/Aids virus grows and as it grows, it becomes harder and harder to avoid. All the games had a break-down session afterwards where the kids discussed what the game represented, how they could avoid HIV, what risks there were, etc. It was absolutely amazing to see 12 year old CHILDREN yelling "No sex" or hearing them talk about finding a faithful partner. I learned that speaking about sex at that age is not really any more acceptable there in Africa than it is here in the US, it's just that it's such a prominent issue in Africa that they HAVE to talk about it! It made me recognize how sometimes health and well-being go above and beyond social barriers. I truly believe that these kids wouldn't have really absorbed these valuable lessons if they were lectured to in a classroom. Kids love games and playing is a great channel to convey these messages. And on top of the message, the games are building self-confidence in children. This self-confidence can help young girls learn to say "No" and can teach young boys that their sexual exploits don't define their character. Once the fields got too muddy from the rain, there was always dancing. As you danced with one child, mimicking each others moves, you could always spot another child, out of the corner of your eye, waiting in the wings to jump in to dance with you as soon as you were ready.



Day 3: Visit Orphanages (Dec. 2nd)

We went to an orphanage today. It was heart-wrenching to think that many of these children were orphaned by parents who had died of Aids or families who had lost their lives in some kind of political dissension. But no matter why they were orphaned, they are still just kids, and kids love to play. The Athlete Ambassadors were all personally trained on implementing games that would promote healthy development mentally, socially, and physically. It was fascinating to see how familiar games that I grew up with could be adapted to teach the kids important messages about health, peace, hygiene, spirit, etc. Games like “Red Light, Green Light” could be altered to teach the kids important issues about washing their hands. Or “Duck, Duck, Goose” could be adapted to teach the kids about nutritional issues. And when you ask the kids about the educational issues they have been taught, they have actual **LEARNED** the issues because you have gained their attention through something they love. I have spoken at enough schools to know that it is extremely hard to keep a child’s attention through dialogue alone. But even a 3-year old can recall powerful messages that are taught through play. Leaving the orphanage was very hard as there were so many children that I wish I could have taken home. It is comforting, though, to know that the sports and play are helping to make the children’s lives a little more complete.



That evening, one of the Athlete Ambassadors, Safari Gasisa, a Basketball player from Rwanda, told us the whole story of how he escaped being killed by the Hutu militia. Safari told us about how his mother and friends were slain and how he risked his life to catch a ride on a small boat to flee to the Congo. And his adventures didn't end there. I had heard Safari speak about losing his mother before and how playing basketball had helped him get over the pain and fear, but I never realized just how traumatic the whole experience was. And it's obvious how strongly Safari feels about the power of sport as he has now devoted his time to working as a Project Coordinator in a refugee camp in Rwanda. He told me that it can be very scary and lonely at a refugee camp and sports and play programs help the kids feel the warmth, security and confidence that they have lost through their harrowing experiences.

Day 4: Trip to a Rural Village (Dec. 3rd)

This morning we learned about helping children with disabilities. You think of how hard it is for people with disabilities in more advanced cultures. It has to be incredibly hard for children living in refugee camps or rural areas to deal with these disabilities. Teaching these children the importance of inclusion in sports educates them on relevant social issues that they will carry with them for the rest of their lives. Unfortunately, I don't think we do enough of this here in the US.

This afternoon we boarded the buses to make our way to a rural project one hour outside Tanzania's main city of Dar es Salaam. Unfortunately, we never made it to the village. Being rainy season in Tanzania, the downpours had taken a toll on the bumpy, dirt roads. After swerving and sliding down two hills, the bus came to a steep uphill and just couldn't make it up. As we tried to turn around, the bus got stuck in a ditch and it took several men (including a Norwegian weightlifter) to push the bus out. It was sad to think

of all the children who were waiting for us to come visit and play with them. But what was worse to think of, was the fact that this was probably not a unique occurrence for them. These were the roads they dealt with day in and day out. And as we stood there in the rain, I realized that the children didn't have an auditorium to play in when the weather got bad. They would play outside in their make-shift fields or they wouldn't play at all.



That evening we went to a beach to talk to some of the local Right To Play coaches. The coaches definitely believed in the power of sports and spoke passionately about how Right To Play has not only changed the children, but it's changed their outlook as well.

My Biggest Lesson:

All in all, I actually think I took away a great deal more than I left. My objective for my Independent Study was to make observations of the footprint I could leave through my unbelievable experiences. I actually think I walked away with the footprints of every child I met. I left for Africa just after hearing that my Mom was diagnosed with very aggressive breast cancer. I first questioned if I should go at all for I didn't know how my spirits would affect the experience. Once there, I was filled with hope and inspiration and couldn't help but leave each day with a smile. At the end of the trip, we did some short interviews and the last question the videographer asked me opened my eyes to how sports can genuinely impact these children. He asked me to respond on why it was that whenever he filmed me, I had a huge smile on my face. I have relayed stories of how playing sports can help a child forget some of the turmoil they are dealing with. I now TRULY understand that sports and play can help you forget the hurt or worry, if even for a while; and maybe more importantly, it somehow teaches you to appreciate the moments you have and just live for the day!



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