

## Football for Peace? Bringing Jews and Arabs together in Northern Israel

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### Abstract

Sport has been found to facilitate social development in a variety of contexts; typically where people's social and political differences would have prevented participation and sharing in the sport experience (Riordan, 1991; Kugelmass, 2007). Football in particular, has been used to promote peace in a number of socially and politically tense environments (Sorek, 2007; Riak, 2000), with highly publicised cases from South Africa and Northern Ireland serving as significant examples. Within the former nation, sport has been used to facilitate harmony in a country plagued by separateness (Keim, 2003). The latter example is one in which sport has been utilised as a notable tool in the peace process (Bairner, 2001; Sugden, 2004). This paper reports on a project that was initiated to facilitate social integration between Jews and Arabs in Israel. Football for Peace (F4P) is a British Universities programme staged annually in Northern Israel since 2001. This model uses value-based football coaching to facilitate peaceful integration within several neighbouring Jewish and Arab societies (Whitfield, 2006; Nujidat, 2007; Sugden, 2006). It is experiences from the 2007 version of this initiative that are explored here. This paper presents a discursive narrative from experience at 'ground level'. That is, the writing style is intended to give a feel for the lived experience of some of the participants on the F4P programme. In so doing it contains an exploration of the perspectives of both Arab and Jewish participants and coaches, as well as the opinions of some of the British volunteers involved in delivering the programme. The interviews provide an insight into the varying attitudes towards F4P in the context of facilitating co-existence between Jews and Arabs. The paper concludes with the suggestion that the principles of this model must be extended to the wider Israeli community in order to promote peaceful co-existence.

**NB.** This is a true account of the F4P 2007 Camp – the names of participants have not been altered, all permissions have been gained for this publication.

### Football for peace

We cannot co-exist as two communities of detached and uncommunicatingly separate suffering... the only way is of rising beyond the endless back-and-forth violence and dehumanisation, is to admit the universality and integrity of the other's experi-

ence and begin to plan a common life together (Said, 2002: 208).

“I never see Jewish kids. I have no relations with them,” says 11-year-old Bashar. “They don’t like us,” his friend Alaa agrees. “Like they are high society and we are less than them.” It’s a sweltering hot afternoon in the small town of Kawakab in Northern Israel. But like everyone else who lives in Kawakab, the two boys are not Jews but Israeli Arabs. In a nearby town, a Jewish boy, 10-year-old Ido, expresses an equally wary view of his neighbours. “I think Arabs are a problem,” he says. “But I don’t know.” Bashar and Ido live only a couple of kilometres from each other, and both are citizens of Israel, yet they might as well be on different planets. They speak different languages, they live in different towns, and they go to different schools. And Israel, the Jewish state, is at war with nearly every Arab nation. Yet the boys have one thing in common – they love football, and they both realise that football could bridge the divide between them. They express this with almost identical words: “This is why I’m here. I want to make relations with our neighbours.”

It is inferred by this that the boys wish for better relations as neighbours than they already have. The use of the term “neighbours” by the boys in this context is very powerful and worth highlighting at this early point in the paper, because the concept of “being neighbourly” grows in importance as the paper progresses. The notion of neighbours can be interpreted in two significant ways; neighbouring states at war with each other, versus, next-door neighbours wanting to play football together. Therefore, some basic questions arise such as, what does it mean for these boys to be neighbourly? And, is football really a neighbourly thing to do? F4P clearly think yes, that football can promote neighbourliness in both senses of the word, but are acutely aware of the aggressively competitive attitude that this territorial game can promote (Stidder, 2007). For example, it is unfortunate that much of the media rhetoric and hype surrounding the western game, such as league matches in the UK, seems to promote an aggressive state of mind in some dedicated followers of the game. That said, the global popularity of football seems to be the attraction and catalyst to bring these people together which is particularly useful for F4P’s aims as a charity working in this area (Boyd, 2007). Therefore, when participants do come together for the first time, it is the coaching of physical skills and ball control that are used to promote sharing and inter-dependence, rather than tactical game skills which risk promoting an attitude of conquering the opposition and territorial dominance. The latter may only serve, counterproductively, to reinforce the negative stereotypes they may have had of each other prior to taking part on the football camp. For example, playing a full-on (teamed) football match of say, Jews versus Arabs from the outset would be an irresponsible thing to set up, although, it might be an aim for F4P to have football matches at the end of their programme with mixed teams comprised of Jews and Arabs alike. The coaching pedagogy within F4P is to carefully select physical skills

and drills for participants to practice which help to break down personal barriers and develop some social understanding between them. As Stidder states: “It was clear that a focused approach to the teaching of desirable human qualities through the medium of football could be achieved and group cohesion could be developed” (2007: 95). Consequently, it is the pleasures of sharing and playing football together that are promoted by F4P with an emphasis on developing mutual respect and appreciation for others who may wish to share and participate with “you”.

An Israeli military helicopter flies above our heads, perhaps on the lookout for a resumption of last summer’s attacks from Hezbollah fighters across the Lebanese border just a few minutes’ drive away. A Jewish boy and Arab boy stand holding hands. They have been cajoled into a game in which the aim is to keep a football in the air without letting go of your partner’s hand. Both boys are reluctant at first even to hold hands and they let go the moment the ball veers to one side or the other. After a few minutes however, they forget their differences and are enjoying the game, holding tight, pulling each other from side to side and round and round, to keep the ball aloft without letting go. Now, all over the pitch there are pairs doing the same thing and it doesn’t matter who is Jew and who is Arab. They are just playing football.

It was with this vision in mind that Football 4 Peace came about, a project founded in 2001 by Rev. Geoffrey Whitehall and now run by the University of Brighton, the British Council and the Israeli Sports Authority (ISA). The model uses value-based football coaching to facilitate peaceful integration within several neighbouring Jewish and Arab societies (Nujidat, 2007; Sugden, 2006): “It’s not about politics, it’s about being neutral”, says Gazi Nojidat of the ISA, who is the project organizer in Israel. “We don’t want to change anyone, but we have to be optimistic.” On the first F4P project in 2001, there were six volunteer coaches from the University of Brighton, one leader, one pitch and one community. It started as it would go on: chaotic but determined, the only way possible given the complex state of contemporary Israeli culture. The Jewish community had to pull out at the last minute because of a bus-bomb in their neighbourhood. Nevertheless, the project went ahead with just Arabs and has grown in numbers ever since.

Six years later, and on fifteen pitches across northern Israel five hundred Arabs and five hundred Jews from communities all over the north of Israel are playing football together. The coaching sessions were delivered by fifty volunteers from the UK, the majority of whom were students and lecturers from the University of Brighton and Liverpool Hope University. Both authors of this paper were responsible for managing one of these projects. In addition, more than a hundred Arab and Jewish coaches assisted the programmes, serving primarily as translators to the British volunteers. The children were split into small groups, divided as equally as possible between Jew and Arab. The football coaches follow a specifically devised protocol in their

guidance manual:

“Through a carefully designed series of practical coaching activities, this manual emphasises, animates and embodies a series of values that promote play, co-operation, mutual understanding, and aid the cause of conflict prevention and co-existence”

(Lambert, 2007: 13).

Each day, there is an emphasis on a different value, such as respect, inclusion, equality and trust, and the games are designed to incorporate these themes. The emphasis is on fair play, not competition. So much so that even the tournament at the end is called a ‘festival’ to soften the competitive edge.

Neil Davies, who studied Sport Science at Brighton and now works as a PE teacher in London, was one of the coaches in the first hosting village, Ibilin. He says he could not tell the difference between Jew and Arab before he came, but once he had arrived he found the divisions to be obvious: “It started off as standard - Jewish kids sit on the right, Arabs on the left,” he says. By the end of day two, though, Neil could see a change. Among the off-pitch problem-solving activities the children were taking part in there were orienteering sessions in each other’s villages. “They were all just sitting together after they came back from the off-pitch activities on the second day. It was just like any football team. You had the good players sitting together and the not so good sitting together. This shows it works,” he says, before pausing and adding, “in the short term.” As to the chances of the team meeting in the future, he says “I don’t know. There doesn’t seem any incentive for the team to grow.”

Another UK coach, Aliy Kyezu, who is studying for a Masters degree in sport management at Birkbeck University of London, says the project has made him question his own attitudes to the sport. “This is bigger, this is beyond football. For me, this is what football is all about, bringing people together.” He contrasts this with the way the professional game works back home. “If a dad wants to take his son to football he has to pay £50 and if I go into marketing I will be finding ways to make people spend more money at football matches. In Britain, football is less about ‘the game’ now, and more about the money and the fame.” As well as seeing the benefits of the project on the ground, he says his time in an Arab village has given him an insight he would never get from watching the news. He says speaking to people from both Jewish and Arab communities has been a great education for him and the other UK coaches. “If these kids can do this more regularly, then the communities will be better for it. But we have to realize, football is just a small part. To be honest with you, this country is going to need the grace of God because I think the hatred is embedded. When they start talking about things, you can stand back and see around you...” He pauses and points to a Jewish settlement, surrounded by a wall, across from his apartment. “That wall has been built there for a reason and I don’t think football will bring it down. Football won’t open those gates.”

Having lived the first six years of his life in Zaire, Aliy knows conflict all too well, and he takes a keen interest in the situation in Israel and Palestine. Just as many Arab Israelis would call themselves Palestinian, Aliy still sees himself as Zairian. “Before I came here it was all Israel, but speaking to people you have to realize that a group of people came and settled here and gave it a new name. What do you do though? If you call it Old Palestine then what are you saying to Jews like Alon, Eli and Shai? And if you call it Israel what are you saying to Arabs like Ahmad and Mona? But I think what this project is trying to do is acknowledge that it is Israel and get the people to say: ‘Right, OK, we are here now so let’s go from here and move forward.’ There is no point in taking a step back.”

It is not only the children who are making steps towards co-existence, but the local adult coaches too. The normal relationship between the Jewish majority in Israel and the million Arab citizens is only a working one. During the F4P week it is different, with opportunities available to mix socially, at dinners and discos, and at each other’s homes. In Kawkab, on the evening after the first training sessions, Eli Fraktonik, the sports manager of neighbouring Jewish village Misgav, and one of his coaches, Shai, are drinking mint tea at the home of Ahmad, one of the coaches from Kawkab. The day before however, Shai had said: “I never socialize with the people from the Arab villages even though they live just a few minutes down the road.” With a few English coaches present, the conversation soon turns to how much they imagine English people drink. Shai says he drinks a little and Ahmad, a Muslim, does not drink at all. When everyone turns to the English there is a pause before everyone starts laughing – no need for an answer. “When I tell my friends in Tel Aviv I eat dinner with Arabs, laugh with Arabs, they can’t believe it” Eli says later. “They say, ‘How can you do that? Aren’t you afraid?’”

Alon Kartaginor was a F4P participant from the age of twelve to fourteen and now, aged seventeen, is volunteering as a coach on the project before going to do his compulsory military service with the Israeli army “to save our land”. Now he is laughing with a fellow Arab coach, but the sad reality is that in all probability he will soon be fighting Palestinians in the West Bank who are, as Gazi put it, the Israeli Arabs’ brothers. “I have always had Arab friends,” Alon says. “The problem is not with the Arab Israelis, it is from the Palestinians. They want to kill us. They think we stole all of their land and now they want all the land of Israel back.” Then he adds: “It is just the Palestinian government who think like that. The younger ones think what their parents think.” Alon points out how fearful Jewish society can be. “Sometimes Jews see on the news one Arab who wants to kill Israelis and think all Arabs want to kill Jews.”

When the state of Israel was formed in 1948 it divided what was then Palestine into two countries, displacing three quarters of a million Arabs – three-quarters of the Palestinian population. Nearly sixty years later, the Arabs who remain within the bor-

ders of Israel would in the main, consider themselves to be Palestinian, even though they are entitled to an Israeli passport. Some Palestinians criticize F4P and its founding principle that conflict between Arabs and Jews in Israel could be reduced if only they got to know each other better. They argue that the roots of the conflict lie deeper, in the formation of the state of Israel and its subsequent occupation of all of former Palestine. Gazi, who is a Bedouin Arab and has served in the Israeli army, understands that view but doesn't accept it. "It's hard to say that Arabs in Israel are separate from the West Bank because many still have family there," he says. "They cannot be isolated emotionally because they have blood relatives who are Palestinian." But he goes on, "We have some belief that the internal Arab population could be the bridge between the two nations. At the moment the Palestinians have conflict with a country of their brothers."

Could F4P be extended to bring Israelis and Palestinians together? "To put Palestinians in the project now is not practical," Gazi says. "In the current situation you cannot come and talk about football, it is too serious. I won't reject this for the future, though. The project began with a small cell. It has been seven years. Maybe in another seven years we could have a training camp in Damascus. Under one project the children from Jordan, Egypt, Israel and Palestine could all be playing football together." So how is this year's project now seen by the children who took part? Do the Arabs still feel the Jews don't like them? Do the Jews still think the Arabs are troublesome? "The Jewish children changed with us," says Bashar a few days after the project has finished. "The first day we were not talking and they came just to play football." He slots the fingers on both his hands together and smiles. "In the last few days, we were very friendly, encouraging each other no matter who was Arab and who was Jewish. All of us played as a team and passed the ball not just Jewish to Jewish but all over the team. We were very close to each other." Does he have any Jewish friends now? "Itai, Yinai, Guy..." The list goes on. Does he think he will see them again? The question is greeted with silence at first, and then he says: "On Football for Peace next year." Down the road in Misgav, Jewish children give similar answers, as poor initial impressions were soon transformed. "They are not that different," Nitai says. "They are just like us but with different traditions. We are all human beings."

## Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to report on the perspectives of coaches and participants regarding the use of football for 'building bridges' between Arab and Jewish communities in Northern Israel. Respondents offered insights into how the F4P project provides a medium for initiating positive and harmonious social interaction. Interviewees were quick to see the benefits of the programme but were also mindful of its limitations, set as it is in such a complex and divided society. Sugden argues that

“even in the face of the most challenging socio-cultural and political circumstances, if projects such as this are well thought through, carefully structured and well managed, they do have the capacity to make positive contributions to community relations” (2007: 181). Nujidat further outlines the potential significance of the problem, arguing: “Maybe the children who have experienced F4P will not grow up to be professional football players, but surely they will be better human citizens because of it” (2007: 154).

The project planned for July 2006 had to be postponed at the last minute. As news of the Hezbollah attack on Israel broke from Tel Aviv, the entire British volunteer base, including both authors on this paper, sat in a London airport waiting to board a plane to the Israeli capital. We were faced with the realisation that the project had to be cancelled, a development that further highlighted the need for such initiatives to be incorporated in Israel. As Sugden reflects:

As ever, we sociologists are usually much better at identifying social problems than we are at finding solutions... In the light of what happened in 2006 we could not be blamed for shelving F4P indefinitely as yet another – albeit small – failed peace initiative in the Middle East. Yet when I remember the disappointment etched deeply in the faces of our Jewish and Arab partners when they knew the project had to be cancelled, and think of the children and grown-ups who never had the opportunity to make new friends because we could not go and run our camps, I am minded otherwise (2007: 175).

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