

The power of soccer

Can the popular sport be leveraged to resolve conflict?

By Bernard Dichek

IN THE soccer fields of Tel Aviv's Florentin neighborhood, Jerusalem's Beit Safafa and the Palestinian village of Der Istiya near Nablus, a unique initiative to help overcome the challenges of this region is underway.

Youngsters between the ages of 6-13 from Jewish, Palestinian and African asylum-seeking families attend biweekly training sessions, learn soccer fundamentals and play with one another on mixed teams. They are among the 11,000 young participants in a global project initiated by Italy's Inter Milan professional soccer team.

Known as Inter Campus, the social action program aims to ease friction among different communities and cultures in 29 countries.

In October, Inter Campus trainer Alberto Giacomini, wearing the trademark Inter Milan away-game uniform with the Firelli and Nike logos, could be seen running up and down a Tel Aviv sports field calling out instructions in Italian. Local coaches translated his comments into Hebrew for a group of about 30 youngsters.

Giacomini, along with several colleagues, comes to Israel and the Palestinian Authority twice a year to oversee the program and offer advice to local coaches.

"We aren't trying to create great players so much as we are trying to achieve educational goals," says Giacomini, 38, who originally joined the Inter Milan organization as a right fullback with one of Inter Milan's semi-professional teams. Today he dedicates himself full-time to Inter Campus.

Traveling around the world to visit the different program sites, he notes that each country presents different challenges. "One time when a colleague and I were approach-

ing a soccer field in the *favelas* (slums) of Rio de Janeiro, some local gang members didn't recognize us and they stopped us with guns pointed at our heads," recalls Giacomini. "Fortunately, local community members were nearby and able to explain what we were doing there."

Giacomi points out that in many of the countries where Inter Campus operates, the organization partners with local NGOs to leverage the children's enthusiasm for soccer in order to incentivize them to cooperate in other areas.

"In Brazil and Cambodia, for example, the kids must show a slip of paper indicating that they have attended school that day. In Uganda, they are required to comply with local vaccination and other healthcare conditions," he explains.

In Israel and the Palestinian Authority, participants are not obligated to fulfill any prerequisites, yet Giacomini concedes that the local program is probably Inter Campus's most challenging venue.

"We realize that the problem here is much bigger than us," he says, referring to the political tensions.

Palestinian leaders do not usually allow Palestinians to engage in sports of any kind with Israelis, he notes, so there is a sense of accomplishment just in getting families from both sides to participate.

"Still, it can be very frustrating, and sometimes we feel that for every two steps we take forward, we end up going three steps backward," he says, referring to games and tournaments that have been canceled during periods of unrest.

"But I love coming here and I'm happy to see that we keep on growing and now have

about 200 kids participating," he adds.

The program currently comprises about 75 Israeli and African children in Tel Aviv, 65 Israelis and Palestinians in Jerusalem and 50 Palestinians in Der Istiya. The three groups meet for training sessions in their respective cities twice a week after school.

About once every two months, Inter Campus arranges transportation and security permits to bring the Palestinian participants from Der Istiya to either Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, where the three groups intermingle and play together.

Resistance to the program can also come from the Israeli side, says Arturo Cohen, who supervises the Jerusalem program. "Not only do Israeli families have to drive their children across the city to Beit Safafa, but on top of everything else, the soccer field there is adjacent to the minaret of a mosque. So when parents arrive the first thing they often hear is the loud prayer call of the *muezzin*," he says.

"Also, just finding a soccer field in that part of the city where we could play wasn't easy," he adds. "We kept on looking without any luck for an organization that was willing to take part until finally Ali Ottman heard about us."

Ottman, a star professional player who currently plays for the Bnei Sakhnin team in the Israeli national league, also oversees a soccer field in Beit Safafa, Inter Campus staff learned.

"Ali Ottman was the first Arab player to play for the Israeli national soccer team, so the idea of an integrated program really appealed to him," explains Cohen.

Cohen, a political science student at Hebrew University who immigrated to Israel



An Israeli youngster passes the ball to a child from an African asylum-seeking family; in the Inter Campus soccer program, Israelis, Palestinians and Africans are all teammates

from Milan five years ago, is enthusiastic about the program.

He recalls, however, a period a few years ago, following a spate of terrorist stabbing attacks, when a decision was made to temporarily move the program to a soccer field in the western part of Jerusalem.

“It was something I personally didn’t like to do. I almost felt like it was our fault that we weren’t able to continue,” says Cohen.

But that low point, adds Cohen, soon gave way to a high one. After the Jerusalem youngsters played for about a month in Ramat Rachel, the Inter Campus program returned to Beit Safafa.

Later in the year, the staff decided to organize a picnic with the families of the participants.

“The best part was a soccer game with the fathers of the boys participating,” says Cohen. “It was great to see a mixed group of Jews and Arabs, young and old, playing and laughing together, speaking both Hebrew and Arabic, enjoying themselves thoroughly.”

ANOTHER GOAL of Inter Campus is to encourage girls to play soccer. About a dozen girls from Tel Aviv and Jerusalem already participate in the program. And though there currently aren’t any female participants from Der Istiya, that is about to change as two Palestinian women recently completed a coaches training program in Milan.

In the Tel Aviv branch, a key focus has been to acquaint the children of Israeli and African refugee families with one another, says Yasha Maknouz, the director of the Israel Inter Campus program.

Maknouz, like Cohen, was part of Milan’s small Jewish community of about 5,000, before immigrating to Israel in 2006. A sales manager of a hi-tech company by day, Maknouz is also a soccer enthusiast and social activist, who in 2002 founded a Milan NGO called Ghetton. The volunteer organization initiated soccer matches within the Jewish community as well as with the local Muslim and Christian communities.

Once in Israel, Maknouz decided to found an Israeli version of Ghetton aimed at the teenage children of African asylum-seeking families. Ghetton’s project caught the attention of Inter Campus staff and, in 2013, Maknouz was invited to become its Israeli director.

Maknouz points out that many of the Israeli, Palestinian and African children in the program had no contact with members of the other groups prior to joining Inter Campus.

“The first thing that draws them in is often just the chance to wear the Inter Milan jerseys. Some kids tell me it’s the best gift they ever received,” says Maknouz, referring to the free uniforms Inter Campus provides participants. “Some kids even sleep with their jerseys on.”

Maknouz points to the power of shared interests to transform negative preconceptions. “Once the children realize that they all have the same interests, whether it is a love of soccer or watching the same Lady Gaga or other songs on YouTube, it’s amazing to see how easily they become friends,” says Maknouz, 43, a father of three young children, including a 6-year-old participant in the Tel Aviv program.

“In addition, like in any other peer group,

good players tend to attract friends regardless of where they come from,” he adds, noting that the kids are eager to have their new friends be on their side in tournaments or sit beside them on the bus.

One of the NGOs working with Inter Campus in Tel Aviv is Elipelet, which provides child care support for asylum-seeker families.

“The program also makes a difference in the way the African kids relate to one another in their own community,” says Arielle Cohen, an Elipelet staff member. “At the beginning of the season, everyone was sort of in what you might call the refugee survival mode. Each kid was just chasing after the ball for himself. Now you can see them passing the ball back and forth and working together as a team.”

In November 2016, the three-time European champion Inter Milan team came to Israel to play the Hapoel Beersheba team. The underdog Beersheba team had little experience playing with top-level European teams and was down by two goals at half-time. Then, in the second half, the game turned into one of the most memorable soccer games in recent years as Beersheba came back with three unanswered goals, including the deciding goal in the last minute. They defeated Inter Milan 3-2.

Among the spectators cheering for Inter Milan in Beersheba’s Turner Stadium were the Israeli, African and Palestinian participants in the Inter Campus program. “But we weren’t disappointed,” recalls Maknouz, referring to the warm way the kids from all the groups sitting together related to each other that night. “The real power of soccer was there in the stands that night.” ■