

# Journal of Conventional Weapons Destruction

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Volume 17  
Issue 3 *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action*

Article 13

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October 2013

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### Recommended Citation

Geddes, Mike (2013) "Spirit of Soccer in the Zaatari Refugee Camp," *The Journal of ERW and Mine Action* : Vol. 17 : Iss. 3 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cisr-journal/vol17/iss3/13>

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# Spirit of Soccer in the Zaatari Refugee Camp

The Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan is home to almost 150,000 refugees from the Syrian conflict—many are children. Spirit of Soccer uses soccer to bring hope and teach the children of Zaatari skills that could save their lives when returning home.

by Mike Geddes [ streetfootballworld USA ]



Spirit of Soccer helps keep Syrian refugee youth occupied through a curriculum of games and exercise. All photos courtesy of Spirit of Soccer.

Zaatari is now the second largest refugee camp in the world; by population, it is Jordan's fourth largest city. According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR), 60 percent of the refugees fleeing Syria are children below the age of 17.<sup>1</sup> "We are now able to sustain food, water and shelter as the numbers are more stable, but we are still facing some serious issues like keeping the youth under control and away from trouble. The youth here desperately need our attention," said Kilian Kleinschmidt, UNHCR senior field coordinator at Zaatari, during a briefing for

the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) president, Michael Platini (17 June 2013).<sup>2</sup>

Spirit of Soccer works with the children of Zaatari using a beloved pastime—soccer. The organization engages youth and provides mine risk education (MRE) using a curriculum that combines games and exercises with simple safety messages about landmines and explosive remnants of war (ERW).

Depending on the age of the participants, a typical Spirit of Soccer MRE session lasts 90 minutes. The *Fédération Internationale de Football Association*



A soccer session with Syrian refugees at the Zaatari refugee camp.

(FIFA) endorsed the curriculum, and the techniques are tailored to suit participants' needs. Novice players receive a fundamental overview of the game, while more experienced players receive advanced lessons.

Participants are challenged in a fun, yet informative and competitive environment, and soccer-coaching sessions are followed by MRE. Tailored to the ages and specific needs of the children, MRE sessions are 10 to 15 minutes in duration in order to maintain players' full attention. The sessions involve verbal question-and-answer discussions and use printed materials like posters, laminated pictures of local ERW and even printed soccer balls. Moreover, sessions include the types of mines/ERW found in the region, possible contaminated area locations, conventional and unconventional warning signs, and how to react when encountering mines/ERW. Spirit of Soccer also addresses the issue of scrap-metal collection and encourages children to pass the information on to friends and family.

Spirit of Soccer uses coaches from Iraq to train local Syrian and Jordanian coaches in how to deliver the curriculum. These Iraqi coaches have received referee training in how to organize local youth tournaments that

promote MRE through community-level competition, as well as MRE training from senior staff and the General Directorate of Mine Action in Iraq. They are able to pass these skills on to the coaches in Zaatari. All Spirit of Soccer employed coaches are also trained in basic first aid and can treat trauma injuries and shock sustained from mines/ERW.

Founded in 1996 and funded by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), FIFA, Laureus Sport for Good Foundation, the Asian Football Development Project (AFDP) and the UEFA, Spirit of Soccer has reached more than 260,000 boys and girls living in conflict-affected communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Iraq, Kosovo, Laos, Moldova and Syria. During 2012, more than 46,000 children received MRE from coaches trained by Spirit of Soccer.

### **MRE Through Soccer**

A common Spirit of Soccer exercise involves asking a young boy or girl to outrun a soccer ball kicked by one of the coaches. No matter how quick, the child



In Zaatari refugee camp in northern Jordan, a MRE session warns Syrian children of the ERW they may encounter when returning home.

cannot run faster than the ball, and the coaches use this as a metaphor to explain how outrunning the blast of a mine is impossible. To give children a frame of reference for the effective range of these weapons, another common exercise involves kicking a ball 50 to 100 m (55 to 109 yd), and instructors explain that a detonation at this distance can still injure or kill.

In late 2012, Prince Ali bin Al Hussein, a member of Jordan's royal family and founder of AFDP, approached Spirit of Soccer Founder Scott Lee in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Prince Ali heard about several young children who were killed by a landmine while playing soccer on an abandoned airfield.

"Prince Ali asked if we would come to Jordan to see if we could bring our program to the kids in Zaatari," recalls Lee. "We visited the camp in late 2012, and ...[quickly] put forward a proposal for support to PM/WRA and AFDP.

With their help, we were able to begin delivering our programs in Zaatari in February this year."

"It is our responsibility to ensure that the kids believe in a better future," said Prince Ali at the launch of the program. "And what better way to inculcate a positive attitude amongst them than to use soccer's transcendent abilities that can help create a favorable environment for the boys and girls."<sup>2</sup>

Lee brought several of his coaches from Iraq to Jordan for a series of workshops to train local Jordanian and Syrian coaches in delivering MRE through soccer. Of the 10 Jordanian and 15 Syrian coaches initially selected, nine were chosen for intense MRE training and coaching. The coaches work on the program with a team of MRE officers from the Arab Mine Action Consultancy Company to schedule and supervise the program in Zaatari and surrounding cities. Spirit of Soccer works

both in Zaatari and in the surrounding villages, which are home to tens of thousands of Syrian refugees staying with local families. So far the organization has reached almost 10,000 children.

“Conditions in that camp are incredibly tough,” says Lee, who visited Zaatari several times in 2013 to support the training of local coaches. “These are kids with very little food, little shelter, no hope. Many of them have lost friends or family, and they have been forced to come to a strange country. But soccer is one thing that brings them together, that reminds them of their old life. We’re teaching them important things that will help keep them alive when they go home—but we’re also giving them a bit of joy and hope, even for just a few hours.”

The project has attracted the support of the biggest names in soccer. Both Sepp Blatter, FIFA’s president, and Michel Platini, his counterpart at Europe’s governing body UEFA, visited Zaatari within months of each other. “This is a very difficult stage in the lives of the displaced children, and I am proud to witness how UEFA’s support is bringing them positivity and ways to learn and feel safe,” said Platini during his visit in June 2013.<sup>3</sup>

### A Better Future

Sports are often one of the easiest and most effective ways to engage children living in refugee communities and restore some semblance of normalcy in their everyday lives. More organizations hope to provide sports activities in Zaatari. For instance, the international charity Save the Children organized a three-day soccer workshop with professional coaches from Brazil in July 2013.

“We have to move from the battleground to the playground,” said Tamer Kirolos, Save the Children’s country director for Jordan. “Sport(s) can become an important tool to prevent violence and demonstrate to the [children] that participate that life is more than violence and wars.”<sup>24</sup>

The Spirit of Soccer program, on the other hand, goes deeper than just giving boys and girls a chance to play. “We realized that many of these kids are arriving at the camp deeply traumatized,” says Lee. “If you’re traumatized, you just can’t process information, such as mine risk education, in the same way.”

In April 2013, Spirit of Soccer took its Iraqi, Jordanian and Syrian coaches to Amman, Jordan, for a course entitled Coaching to Heal, which was delivered by international curriculum design experts from Edgework Consulting. The intensive four-day workshop taught

the coaches to recognize, understand and cope with traumatized children, as well as offer educational content more effectively. Training topics examined the fundamentals of understanding trauma and emphasized the positive role that coach-player relationships can have in the lives of children affected by trauma. It also provided an introduction to simple approaches using sports to support trauma healing among players.

In total, 30 coaches attended the workshop, including 15 Syrian, 12 Jordanian and three Iraqi coaches from Spirit of Soccer and two Jordanian staff from the Arab Mine Action Consultancy Company.

Spirit of Soccer is currently assessing the results of the pilot workshop and the potential for expansion. “For many of these kids, their soccer coach might be the most important adult influence in their life; someone they can open up to and trust,” says Lee. “That means our coaches have a huge responsibility.”

Spirit of Soccer intends to continue work in the region as long as the financial and security situation allows. It plans to expand into Syria as well as Lebanon, and is trying to secure funding from AFDP and others for 2014. ©

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Mike Geddes spent six years working as a reporter for the BBC during which he made documentaries about the use of sports for facilitating social change in disadvantaged communities. After spending several years in Africa, he now works for streetfootballworld, an international NGO that connects a worldwide network of over 80 organizations that use soccer to address social issues like poverty, disease and lack of education.

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