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Spirit of Soccer

by Mike Geddes [Spirit of Soccer]

As the world's most popular sport, soccer emerges as a powerful tool to address social issues, such as poverty, disease and lack of education. This article explores how one organization, Spirit of Soccer, is working with mine-action organizations to help young people living in conflict areas avoid the dangers of landmines and explosive remnants of war.

In the early- to mid-1990s, British soccer coach Scott Lee drove convoys of relief aid to villages in Bosnia and Herzegovina affected by the Yugoslav Wars (1991–1995). While there, he was informed that a child set off a landmine while playing soccer (football) near Sarajevo International Airport. The resulting explosion killed three children and maimed four more, all of whom were under 10 years old.

This tragic incident made Lee certain of two things: Firstly, no matter the location or risk, children will always want to play soccer, and secondly, love for a game could be harnessed to teach safety messages and prevent future tragedies. In 1996, Lee used this experience to found Spirit of Soccer, a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing mine-risk education to children through the combination of soccer games and drills with safety lessons about landmines and explosive remnants of war.

With the help of the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA), Spirit of Soccer's main funder since 2003, the organization has reached more than 100,000 boys and girls through programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Iraq, Jordan, Kosovo, Laos and Moldova. On the ground, Spirit of Soccer forms close partnerships with local mine-action organizations. Spirit of Soccer shares information on areas that need to be targeted for mine-clearance, and mine-action partners share information on which areas could benefit from MRE.

"When we first started, mine-risk education was in its infancy. There was nothing that was really targeted at young kids," recalls Lee. "We took lessons from the Bosnia-Herzegovina Mine Action Center, the International Committee of the Red Cross, MAG (Mines Advisory Group), Norwegian People's Aid and other experts, tested those messages on kids in our soccer programs, and gauged the reactions.

"We keep our messages simple and very interactive" he says. "We teach kids how to recognize different kinds of ERW that are present in their community and what to do if they come across them. They learn to understand the basics: to recognize what can harm you and whether it's an ERW, mortar round, cluster bomb, fragmentation grenade or whatever it may be. We teach them how to look for natural signs that might mean an area is mined. And finally we teach them responsible behavior, to respect the weapons and the dangers they pose."¹

A typical Spirit-of-Soccer exercise involves a young boy or girl who races against a soccer ball that a coach has kicked. No matter how fast the children run, they can never beat the ball. The coaches use this as a metaphor to explain how

the children cannot outrun a mine's blast. Another exercise involves asking the participants what qualities it takes to become a professional soccer player. The coaches then elaborate by saying that aside from needing talent and dedication, they also need their legs. Coaches use exercises to describe a landmine's impact. They kick a soccer ball typically 50–70 meters away and ask the participants to imagine that the ball is a mine or a bomb, illustrating that even at a distance it can still kill or maim.



Spirit of Soccer coaches deliver MRE in Xieng Khouang province, Lao PDR, in March 2011.
All photos courtesy of Spirit of Soccer.

A Universal Appeal

"Our program works because of the universal appeal of soccer," says Lee. "It's the Number 1 sport in the world and is played by everybody—all cultures, all religions, all sexes, all ages. This makes it a great partner for mine-risk education, because while there may be slight differences in the types of weapons and the environment in which they occur, the rules and regulations of mine action are the same everywhere, and it's the same for soccer."

"Our whole idea is to train local people as soccer coaches to become positive role models within the community who can deliver these important messages. Through soccer you gain the trust of young people, because they all want to learn new skills,"¹ Lee continues.

Spirit of Soccer often works closely with the local football/soccer federation. Within conflict and post-conflict zones, the local soccer federation usually recovers as a national institution quickly and can provide a unifying point for the country (as Iraq proved when its national soccer team won the Asian Cup in 2007). The program also uses educational materials, like exercise books and posters, that feature top soccer stars, such as Wayne Rooney of Manchester United and Cristiano Ronaldo of Real Madrid, to encourage children to pay attention to the messages. Spirit of Soccer primarily uses stars from the English Premier League on their material because of their worldwide popularity. This is effective for the participants because the children value the stars' images. However, local soccer coaches often deliver the MRE curriculum.

Spirit of Soccer's Progress



Girls take part in a Spirit of Soccer mine-risk education festival in Battambang province, Cambodia.

Spirit of Soccer began working in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo. In 2005, there were 875 mine/ERW casualties in Bosnia and Herzegovina reported by the Bosnia-Herzegovina Mine Action Center and 267 of those deaths were children. In 2006, there were no child deaths from mines/ERW, so it was decided the funding would be better spent in Cambodia. In 2005, Spirit of Soccer began operating in Battambang province, Cambodia, where it delivered coaching clinics in provinces along the Thai border, including the K5 mine belt, where forced laborers laid three million mines during the Khmer Rouge regime.²

"The children here react more enthusiastically to the messages than if we just delivered them in the classroom," says Stephen Sonderman, Spirit of Soccer's Country Director for Cambodia. "They get a chance to run around and burn off some energy before they sit down for an MRE session. They look up to the coaches who are delivering the messages because those same coaches just helped them learn about soccer, which is what they all love."³

Partnering with local organizations is crucial, as illustrated in early 2011 when a Spirit of Soccer team delivered MRE at a school in Pailin province, Cambodia.

Sonderman explains: "As normal, at the end of the session our coaches asked the children if they had [previously] seen any of the weapons they had learned about in the MRE training session. Two children raised their hands and pointed to the schoolhouse, and said they had ERW in there. We talked to the teachers and discovered they were using some old ordnance as doorstops. Our coaches immediately called in the local demining team from MAG, and it turned out the school 'doorstops' were live unexploded ordnance containing several pounds of TNT, which MAG quickly disposed of." Spirit of Soccer has continued working in Pailin province, hosting an MRE tournament there in January 2012.

"We measure our success through decreases in the child casualty rates, by the number of children reached each year and through anecdotal evidence from children, teachers, parents and community leaders regarding the effectiveness of our messages," says Sonderman. "Our monitoring and evaluation shows that children remember the MRE delivered

by Spirit of Soccer many months after the program, and that they share these messages with their family and friends.”³

Expansion to Lao PDR

According to the Cambodia Mine Victim Information Service, since Spirit of Soccer operations began in 2006 child casualty rates decreased 50 percent in provinces where the organization has worked.⁴

In neighboring Lao PDR, the most heavily-bombed country in the world, the majority of the population makes a living by subsistence farming. In order to survive, families take huge risks by farming polluted land.

In 1995, Bounmy Vichack was planting rice near his village in Xiengkhouang province when he triggered an unexploded bomb that blew off his left arm. In March of 2011, Vichack was among 29 other candidates applying to be the first Spirit of Soccer coaches in Lao as part of a program—Spirit of Soccer Laos—supported by PM/WRA.

“This is so special for our team, for our community and for our country,” Vichack said during the coaching session in Phonsavan, the capital of Xiengkhouang. “It’s a wonderful idea to use soccer to teach Lao children about unexploded bombs. I never thought there could be such a link.”⁵



Each soccer game is designed to contain an MRE message and the soccer balls are printed with mine signs to aid recognition.

The candidates came from all walks of life and included former soldiers, teachers and young soccer players. They took part in a five-day course run by Spirit of Soccer and the Lao PDR Football Federation, graduating with a professional qualification from the Asian Football Confederation.

“The biggest challenge is getting access to remote villages, which often have the highest concentration of ERW,” says Rachel Haig, Spirit of Soccer’s Country Director for Lao PDR. “Laos is a very mountainous country with poor infrastructure, and it can be difficult to get to many of the villages, especially during the rainy season. Our programs have been received very well by the Government of Laos and by the individual communities where we work. Currently, we are only operating in Xiengkhouang province, but we would like to expand our programs to other provinces,” she says.⁶

Iraq and the Middle East

In 2008, Spirit of Soccer began work in Iraq and delivered programs in Baghdad, Basra and Kirkuk. In 2010, Spirit of Soccer, in partnership with the international football association (*Federation Internationale de Football Association*), the Jordanian Football Association, Generations for Peace and Jordan’s National Committee for Demining and Rehabilitation, implemented a regional Soccer/MRE course targeting coaches and children from mine/ERW-affected communities in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank. This course trained 30 coaches and 64 children from the four mine-affected countries and at the end of the course, a tournament was held on National Mine Awareness Day.



A female Spirit of Soccer coach sits with participants holding up MRE posters at a soccer training session in Kurdistan.

Challenges and Future Plans

Local tribal and religious conflicts create a big challenge for the organization’s programs, but Lee says soccer provides a “common language” that can help the process. “In Iraq the ongoing ethnic and sectarian violence presents a challenge for program delivery because of the danger posed to participants when we deliver programs in areas such as Baghdad and the restrictions on movement that frequently accompany violent incidents which makes it hard for us to get large groups of kids together to deliver training.

“ERW and soccer are two great unifying forces,” says Lee. “These weapons don’t care who you are or what religion you are, and neither does the sport. Based on these simple principles, we have been able to navigate the very difficult political and cultural environments, so we can operate and deliver [MRE] messages. Soccer is the common language, and in Iraq we’ve organized

programs that bring together Sunni, Shia and Christian coaches and kids.”¹

According to Lee, a simple, transferable model that combines years of experience and the unique, universal appeal of soccer gives the Spirit of Soccer program potential for replication anywhere in the world.

"The greatest challenges we face come from trying to create and operate a new nongovernmental organization in difficult environments," he says. "Iraq is the first country where Spirit of Soccer hasn't established itself as an independent organization because the process is so laborious. Instead, we've partnered with a local Iraqi NGO to fund, design and implement our program, and this is the model we want to build for the future.

"Instead of trying to create a new organization from scratch, we want to come in and partner with local NGOs to adopt our program and assist them with immediate funding until the threat is reduced, and this is something we are currently looking at in Libya and elsewhere."¹ At this time, Spirit of Soccer has also received requests to expand their program in Palestine. Although they find benefit in expanding the program to additional countries, they do not see a need to branch out into other sports. Soccer is the most popular sport for children in the locations the program works, and it is the simplest to implement; it needs little equipment and can be easily adapted to small and large groups of children. Lee says, "We believe in supporting local expertise, and because soccer is popular worldwide, we think we have a very powerful tool to stop children from being killed and maimed all over the world."¹ ↴

Biography



Mike Geddes spent six years as a BBC reporter during which he made documentaries about sport as a tool for social change in disadvantaged communities around the world. Since 2008 he has worked for streetfootballworld, an international NGO connecting a worldwide network of more than 80 organizations that use soccer to address social issues, such as poverty, disease and lack of education, spending three years working in disadvantaged communities in South Africa.

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Endnotes

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