

Spirit of Soccer

Enriching and Saving Lives Through the Beautiful Game

by Jim Marshall and Scotty Lee [Spirit of Soccer]

Background on Spirit of Soccer

According to the Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining (GICHD), a mine risk education (MRE) project should achieve the following:

- Provide information, assurance and encouragement required to encourage mine-safe behaviour.
- Identify and promote model mine-safe behaviour.
- Teach essential skills and ensure that beneficiaries can utilise these skills.
- Provide a social environment that supports mine-safe behaviour.
- Provide ongoing encouragement to sustain mine-safe behaviour.
- Encourage beneficiaries to transfer knowledge and information to others.

Spirit of Soccer (SoS), now in its 10th year of programming in the former Yugoslavia, has not merely satisfied the aforementioned criteria but has done so in a truly innovative manner: through multi-discipline (though primarily soccer) coaching clinics, physical education teacher training programs, poster campaigns and a sports re-equipping program.

From 1996 to 1998, the charity implemented its first Football Mine Awareness project in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), during which 7,500 players (ages 8–18 years) received sports and mine awareness training from the SoS coaching team. This project was largely funded by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and endorsed by the United Nations Mine Action Center (UNMAC) and the Ministries of Sport and Education in Federation BiH and Republika Srpska.

During 1999 and 2000, SoS made the same activities accessible to over 2,000 young people in Kosovo. Additionally, 5,000 mine awareness posters featuring players such as Ronaldo De Lima were distributed. With the help of domestic and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), UNMAC, demining teams, North Atlantic Treaty Organization troops and the Kosovo Football Association, these activities were also introduced into school curricula. Further programming in BiH from early 2003 to date has so far directly benefited over 15,000 young people throughout the country at 106 soccer

clubs, educational establishments and children's organizations.

This current programming has enabled SoS to influence the incorporation of the programme into the curricula of the Faculty of Physical Education at the University of Sarajevo. It has also encouraged the Federal Ministry of Sport to pledge funding for the coming years and to incorporate the aims of the programme into official government policy on the physical education of

star players from the English Premiership. These posters, purposefully designed to be bright and attractive, displayed the star players holding mine warning signs. Although no written messages were used on the posters, the overall impact was immediate, simple and clear to the recipients: "Beware of mines."

Children generally love to adorn their bedrooms with pictures of sporting, movie and music idols, as it is a natural way of expressing their



Spirit of Soccer distributes its message using posters of famous soccer players to capture kids' attention and teach them about the importance of mine safety.

young people in BiH. The U.S. State Department, the International Trust Fund for Demining and Mine Victim Assistance, and the Laureus Sports Foundation have provided funding for SoS's work in BiH.

Spirit of Soccer's Methodology

SoS's methodology is aimed at utilizing the passion young people have for sports, their creativity and positivism, as well as the need for a team approach not only to sports, but also to personal and public safety. Below is an analysis of the components of SoS's MRE methodology, particularly in the context of the last two years of refined SoS programming

Poster campaign. SoS designed, developed and distributed two different soccer/MRE posters during the course of the last two years, featuring

characteristics and identities within the family. Therefore, the poster campaign tapped into the potential of subliminally reminding youngsters of the mine risk in BiH. If such a campaign as that operated by SoS in BiH were replicated with the images of David Beckham, Britney Spears and Brad Pitt on posters, hundreds of thousands of children across the globe could be sufficiently influenced to be alert and practice mine-safe behaviour in mine-polluted areas. As a result of the poster campaign, 19,000 posters were distributed during 2003 and 2004.

Sports equipment distribution. A total of 106 soccer clubs, educational establishments and children's organizations benefited from the provision of nearly 1,500 soccer balls, basketballs, handballs and volleyballs through participation in the SoS scheme. The balls were a distinct gift and

afforded the children a sense of pride that they earned sports equipment while being properly aware of landmines. Over 15,000 children directly benefited from the distribution.

Football Training/ MRE Presentations

A typical SoS coaching/MRE session consists of 45 minutes of training followed by 15 minutes of direct provision of MRE. In total, 6,424 participants, including players, have been exposed to SoS MRE messages at 106 different clubs in 2003–2004. An additional 3,660 were exposed to SoS MRE messages through the “Open Fun Football Schools,” which are summer soccer camps. As a result of these sessions, 10,084 individuals have been exposed to SoS MRE messages.

The Faculty of Sport and Physical Education of the University of Sarajevo. SoS has long promoted the concept that sport is an excellent medium for disseminating health and safety messages to the youth of the world. In accordance with this belief, SoS organized a two-day workshop with student teachers of physical education to explore the potential of spreading MRE through other sports. Handicap International, UNICEF, BiH Mine Action Center (BHMACE) and Stabilization Force (SFOR) were invited to each make a short presentation outlining their roles and objectives to inform the students of what is currently being done to tackle the mine problem in the country.

Each student received a CD-ROM containing the soccer/MRE curriculum, an MRE presentation kit, an MRE slideshow as well as various other coaching and health information selected for coaches from around the world. As a result of the implementation of the plan, SoS can now influence and encourage the faculty to include MRE training as part of the degree curriculum for all sports teachers and coaches.

Open Fun Football Schools. Open Fun Football Schools was founded by the Danish NGO CCPK, and its primary objective is to encourage children aged 6 to 12 years—regardless of race, religion or colour—to participate in its annual soccer camps held in BiH in August. SoS met with the Bosnian directors in March 2004 at the request of the Bosnian Federal Ministry of Sport to examine how Open Fun Football Schools and SoS could cooperate in the summer of 2004. It was quickly agreed that MRE could prove a beneficial lesson to the children. It was therefore resolved that 40 Bosnian coaches from the Open Fun Football Schools project would be trained at a seminar in the town of Jajce on 12 July 2004.

During the two-day seminar the coaches were introduced to SoS’s unique method of presenting MRE through sport. Twenty-four of the coaches were provided with training guides and kits produced by SoS (basic guides to MRE) and the four most relevant subjects of the MRE methodology were covered:



In the Spirit of Soccer program, children receive important MRE messages through their teachers and coaches.

- Types of mines/UXO in BiH.
- Likely locations of mined areas.
- Conventional and unconventional mine warning signs.
- Behaviour when encountering a mine.

As a result of the seminar, 3,660 children attending 18 summer camps were provided with MRE. Open Fun Football Schools and SoS will continue what has so far been a fruitful partnership in 2005 to target a further 5,000 young players.

The Bosnian Football Association. During the course of the last two years, SoS has enjoyed a productive relationship with the Football Association of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Working alongside the education department of the association, SoS was invited to demonstrate MRE, as well as the latest coaching techniques from around the world, to candidate coaches studying for their Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) B and A licenses. The elite coaches attending included many from Croatia and Serbia (including Kosovo) who are themselves no strangers to the risk of UXO and mines. Exposure to the types of coaches attending allows SoS the opportunity to identify and select coaches with all the right attributes to promote MRE to young people.

Although not confirmed, it has been seriously discussed that the SoS MRE methodology should be adopted into the UEFA B curriculum in the country—in short, this approval would require candidate coaches to participate in an MRE presentation. B licences is a foundation course, primarily aimed at youth coaching, and SoS believes there is a potential to reach thousands of young players were the MRE methodology adopted.

The Bosnian Federal Ministry of Sport. SoS has worked for almost a decade alongside and enjoyed a very productive relationship with the Federal Ministry of Sport under the leadership of Minister Mustafa Demir. Minister Demir has both scheduled SoS visits to Bosnian football clubs and initiated cooperation with other institutions relevant to optimal capacity building.

Furthermore, Minister Demir has pledged 20,000 Bosnian Marks to support the SoS project in BiH in 2005. A further 20,000 Bosnian Marks will be earmarked to support a 2006 project.

The Future of Spirit of Soccer

SoS aims to build on the enormous success of a decade of programming in the former Yugoslavia by embedding the programme in 2005 and beyond. This insertion will be done through training of trainers, the creation of a Bosnian-registered country office, the commitment of Bosnian governmental funding for the coming years and the adoption of SoS’s methodology by appropriate bodies in the provision of physical education in the country.

SoS’s programming is not only sustainable in the context of BiH but replicable in mine-affected areas throughout the world. Therefore, SoS is currently identifying funding to replicate programming worldwide and examining ways to spread imaginative mine-education messages through global media. As an example, it is SoS’s aim to fund and develop a public information television campaign featuring a globally recognizable player to promote mine awareness.

It is clear from SoS programming in what were conflict zones of the former Yugoslavia that young people respond well to positive reinforcement of MRE through professional football training in an informal, relaxed environment and with creative rewards for their participation. It is a formula that is easily transferable to other areas of the world, a formula that has, does and should continue to “enrich and save lives through the beautiful game.” ♦

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