

**“A Sporting Push for Peace in Israeli-Palestinian Relations.”** By James Masters, *CNN*. Updated June 19, 2013



Breaking barriers – Palestinian children play football in front of the Israeli security fence in the West Bank village of Abu Dis, on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Organizations such as Mifalot help bring Palestinian and Israeli kids together through the power of football.

Mifalot, an initiative backed by one of the biggest club sides in Israel, Hapoel Tel Aviv, brings together children from all backgrounds -- not just across Israel and the Palestinian territories, but from countries across the world.

The non-governmental organization, which has a center at Hapoel's training ground, runs over 300 projects across the globe including Angola, Benin, India, Rwanda, Cameroon and Haiti. Backed by Avraham Burg, former speaker of the Israeli parliament, and funded by a host of charities from around the world, Mifalot uses the power of football to educate the next generation.

It offers a civil service program for those who are not able -- or allowed -- to enter the Israeli Army at the age of 18, instead giving them the opportunity to earn a qualification as a sports coach and secure employment.

Arabs, Jews, Bedouins, Druze all take part, while there is a program dedicated to those members with special needs.

The scheme has won great acclaim and has given hope to those who grew up when the idea of such a scheme would have seemed like a far-fetched dream.

**Time for change**

"I think the younger generation wants to make a change," [Yael] Lee-Weiss said.

"From a very young age, they have an open mind and they don't have any inhibitions.

Sometimes, they are coming from a background where they need this scheme.

"We just capture the power of football and the love that children and adults have for the sport, and we are trying to educate them and give them values. They are very curious about knowing each other. We are neighbors, Arabs and Jews. The kids are curious because they hear a lot of things but they haven't always met an Arab or a Jew and seen things with their own eyes.

"They might not have spoken to people outside of their circle but when they get to know each other, they just speak in a non-formal way without any thoughts which we see elsewhere in society."

Another example of integration is Israel's national Under-21 team. While it failed to progress from the group stage of the international tournament -- the final of which was won by Spain on Tuesday -- its impact off the field should not be underestimated.

A squad including five Israeli-Arab players, two Ethiopians and a Bedouin brought attention to how, in even the most volatile regions, sport can break through barriers.

Several Arab players have represented Israel in the past, with the likes of Rifaat Turk, Walid Badir, Zahi Armeli and -- perhaps most famously due to his goal in a 2006 World Cup qualifier - - Abbas Suan having all worn the blue shirt.

While Arab players do not sing the Israeli national anthem, essentially an ode to the Jewish homeland, they also refrain from speaking in their native tongue during training to avoid dividing the group.

### **Great honor**

Israel's hosting of the U21 tournament has been mired in controversy, with protests against the country's treatment of Palestinians.

But while the politics are debated off the pitch and around the world, the players appear happy with the progress being made.

"It's a great honor for me to represent Israel," Munas Dabbur, an Israeli Arab striker who plays for Maccabi Tel Aviv, told CNN.

"I always felt that I was proud to be invited to the team and I want it to continue.

"I think this tournament can be really important for football in Israel. It's the first time we've had games like this in the country and there's been a huge push. I hope that this will continue in the future."

It is a sentiment echoed by his Jewish teammates.

Omri Altman, 19, plays his football in England with Premier League club Fulham and says the pictures he sees on television bear little resemblance to the country he calls "home."

"My friends at Fulham think, 'Israel, oh, it's very scary.' They don't want to come here to visit because they hear in the news about the things which happen here," Altman said.

"But it's different. You come here, it's very quiet in most of the areas. So when teams come to play here, I hope the whole world will see that.

"I think it's very important that the tournament has come to Israel.

"In our team, we're all friends and everybody is the same. We are all people, it doesn't matter where we come from and who we are. We come to play football and that's the most important thing."

### **Next generation**

These words would have been noted by the next generation of talent, young hopefuls who have been watching an international football tournament in their own backyard for the very first time. While Altman and Dabbur were busy on the pitch, hundreds of young children were given free tickets to watch the games.

Some of those were from Mifalot. They hope that the example set by their nation's young footballers can spread a message beyond the country's borders.

While the U21 players were busy playing in modern stadiums, hundreds of others were running around fields, concrete courts and dirt tracks pretending to be an international footballer.

"I think that this project is great," said Nasser, a Palestinian coordinator in Sussiya, in the West Bank.

"The activities and interaction greatly helped the kids get to know others who are different and to play together as one group.

"I hear the kids talking and they really enjoyed themselves."

Another group bringing communities together is the New Israel Fund (NIF), which works alongside the Israeli Football Association (IFA).

Founded in 2003, the NIF's Kick Racism and Violence out of Soccer scheme has flourished, with the charity supporting civil society organizations working towards social justice, women's rights and environmentalism.

Back in 2007, a survey it carried out concluded that 60% of Israelis believed more needed to be done to tackle racism in football, while 37% said they would attend more games if the situation improved.

Through the work of the NIF, the IFA began to punish clubs with fines for racist abuse.

### **Breakthrough**

Suan was a founding member of the Kick Racism and Violence out of Football organization, and he says sport can be the vehicle which unites people in one of the world's most troubled regions. As one of the few Arab players to wear the Israeli soccer shirt at the time, Suan says he suffered abuse every time he touched the ball until a groundbreaking moment.

In the final minute of a qualifying game for the 2006 World Cup, Suan unleashed an astonishing effort which clinched a 1-1 draw against the Republic of Ireland, and etched his name into Israeli folklore.

That goal on March 27, 2005, represented a fundamental change for Suan. He says it was a day Israeli society finally began to realize the significance of Arab players.

"I am a Palestinian because I have a lot of brothers and cousins in the Arab countries," he said.

"And I am Israeli because I live here and don't go out of my lands.

"I never felt discriminated against in anything that had to do with football. I didn't let anyone do it to me. Everywhere I went, I felt not merely at home, but like the boss.

"I have a lot of Jewish friends and they are like brothers to me. But I do feel discriminated against when it comes to infrastructure and development in the Arab sector.

"But when my children have a sports lesson in a courtyard without a pitch, that's discrimination. It makes my blood boil. It's unacceptable that in a city like Sakhnin, there is not one tennis or basketball court worthy of the name."

Suan's case has been featured in two documentaries -- "After the Cup: Sons of Sakhnin United" and "Divided Nation" -- both of which focus on Arab citizens in Israel.

Now head of youth at Bnei Sakhnin, one of Israel's top Arab football clubs, he lectures against racism and violence in the game, drawing on the experiences of his difficult road to the top.

"If I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing," he added.

"I pursued my career to represent the community and to bring the two peoples closer together. I paid a great personal price, but I'm satisfied."

The scheme has also embraced the Bedouin community, where the likes of Israel international Mohammad Ghadir and under-21 player Ahad Azzam learned their trade.

But in a society where female participation is frowned upon, there is one woman who refuses to be denied.

### **Female Maradona**

Meet Miriam Abu-Ghanem -- the one they call the "female Maradona" in her town of Tel Sheva in southern Israel.

"I came out of my mother's stomach with a ball at my feet," she said.

"Our girls don't play sport because they think it's shameful. We suffer from this. I come from a supportive home, without violence or repression, but many other women suffer at home.

"There are still families where the women don't go out to learn at all, or who suffer in marriage."

After establishing the first women's football league in her town and becoming the first Bedouin player in the Be'er Sheva women's league, injury prevented her from going further.

Instead, two bachelors degrees in physical education and special education, as well as a masters in educational management, have allowed her to become the first PE teacher in the Bedouin community.

"A woman doesn't need to request equality from anyone and doesn't need to receive the rights of a man, but the universal rights of human beings as human beings," she added.

"I always believed in my own capabilities ... I worked very hard. I refused to stand to the side and be the forlorn girl. Now here I am."

It is stories such as these from Suan and Abu-Ghanem which gives hope that sport can unite people -- even in the most troubled of times.

Back in Tel Aviv, sitting in her office surrounded by application forms from prospective members, Yael Lee-Weiss, the international development officer, sees a chink of light at the end of the tunnel.

"It gives me hope," she said. "They are the future and I know we won't make the biggest changes to our world and bring about peace in one day, but we do give those children a way out and something good to look for.

"The changes will take a few years but those children are growing up."