

**The Great Football Giveaway  
Q&A with founders Paul and Sarah Clarke**



**Q: Were you interested in football before going to Africa?**

Paul: Of course. I've always loved football although being a Luton Town fan since I was a child this has been hard over the years. Ever since I was a kid I've loved kicking or hitting a ball about. Whether it's football, rugby, cricket, squash, tennis, golf...any chance to play sport with a ball. Providing I can kick it, throw it, hit it or chase after it I'm never happier. My footballing skills are somewhat limited and I never really made it past the ranks of Sunday League on Hackney Marshes, but I love it. My little boy thinks I'm a footballing genius in the garden of course. I've tried to keep him from watching anyone else play when the penny will drop that his Dad has two left feet. For me kicking a ball about is one of life's most simple pleasures and this is something that is at the heart of what we're trying to do with The Great Football Giveaway.

Sarah: I have always been interested in sport - never really had the opportunity to play football - but enjoyed watching it on the telly. I used to do temp work in between studying and had a job for a while at Craven Cottage (Fulham) - when they were back in the 3rd Division.

**Q: Why did you go to Africa in the first place and when?**

Paul: Sarah and I went on holiday to Africa back in 2000. We were keen not to beat the trodden path so went to Malawi. Neither of us had spent much time in Africa before this and we felt bizarrely uncomfortable being restricted to seeing life there through tourist's eyes. We were made to feel safe inside the perimeters of the hotels, but to take care if traveling outside. So one day we broke out and walked a few miles into the countryside to a village where a local football match was taking place. This is where I fell in love with Africa and the idea of The Great Football Giveaway was conceived.

**Q: What inspired you to start the Great Football Giveaway? Who's idea was it and did the other person take much convincing?**

Paul: This football match was just village vs. village, but there were thousands of supporters, mainly children, watching. It was a carnival atmosphere. I remember they had one ball that kept deflating every time it went out of play. Each time there was a throw-in or a corner, someone would have to pump up the ball. What's more on the sidelines all the children had made their own balls from bits of plastic bag tied together with string. I remember turning to Sarah and saying 'next time we come here, let's bring a bag of balls with us to give to the kids'. Before the match had finished, the idea had moved from bringing a bag of balls to filling a huge truck and driving the length and breadth of Malawi, and anywhere we saw kids playing with a home-made rag ball, we'd stop and swap it for a brand new ball. I think Sarah saw a glint in my eye and we both knew that we had to make it happen.

Sarah: I didn't need much convincing about the idea. Paul always comes up with good ideas, it's always do we have the time or the means to follow them through! This one was so obvious and simple. Children all over the world enjoy kicking a ball about. So why not take as many footballs as you can out to a country where children are unable to get hold of them.

**Q: How did you feel when you saw the kids playing with the battered football? (Did you cry, were you humbled?)**

Paul: One might expect that seeing kids playing barefoot with rag balls might make you feel sad, angry, confused (the usual reaction we're expected to feel when you face poverty) but I had a very different reaction. I immediately saw the potential for a smile. I knew there and then that if I had a nice new ball to give away, it would be enjoyed in exactly the same way that I enjoyed it as a kid. That's their joy of football – its simplicity. All you need is a ball and someone to kick it to. With this in mind I accepted that I'm not a doctor who can administer anti-retroviral drugs, I can't build wells and I'm not an engineer. But I could find a way to help put smiles on kid's faces. This was why we set up The Great Football Giveaway.

Sarah: I was amazed by their ingenuity. We could learn a thing or two from African kids in disadvantage circumstances. On the whole they don't mope about, complaining about the things they haven't got. Instead they are much more industrious, creating toys and equipment from the scarce resources they have got.

**Q: How did you get things moving in the UK?**

Sarah: We decided in January 2006 that we would leave our jobs and take as many balls as we could back out to Malawi. If you want to make something happen you've just got to get on with it yourself. You can't expect anyone else to do it for you. We turned the project round from idea to delivery within 6 months. Starting up a charity, raising money, creating awareness, buying and shipping the balls, pumps and netballs, finding volunteers, hiring cars and drivers and getting out in the middle of nowhere to meet the kids!

Paul: The idea gnawed away at me until one day I quit my job and decide to set up a charity. Setting up a charity is never easy at the best of times and normally takes months if not years. We worked night and day to make it happen and six weeks later The Great Football Giveaway was born. We built a website: [www.thegreatfootballgiveaway.org.uk](http://www.thegreatfootballgiveaway.org.uk) and started our campaign to fill a container with thousands of footballs and netballs (the most popular sport for girls in Malawi).

**Q: How quickly did it take off?**

Paul: We came up with a very simple proposition - 'Give us a £10 and we'll turn it into a football and personally hand-deliver it direct to a child living in some of the world's poorest communities'. This is still our core promise. Within a few months we had persuaded enough people to support us and we set off for Malawi with a container filled with over 3,000 balls. It was hugely exciting.

Sarah: Most people we met loved the idea. Unlike with larger charities, where donations are often added to a big pot, people who gave to The Great Football Giveaway could contact us and find out exactly where their ball went. If they wanted they could also give us a message to give along with the ball. This is more than just giving, it's connecting people from all over the world together in their love of football and having fun.

**Q: Did anyone think you were mad to give up your jobs?**

Paul: Yes of course. To give away footballs to kids in Africa?! But in the back of my mind I always felt that we were the lucky ones. This was something we could throw ourselves into and I had this gut feeling that as and when I was sat in an interview for a new job, this would always be seen as a productive use of time.

Sarah: I never really believed we would give up our jobs for long. I thought we'd probably do the one project and then slip back into working life. But - instead we've continued with more projects...

**Q: When did you go back to Africa with the first load of balls? How did it feel and how did the children react to the gift?**

Sarah: Our first project was in May 2006. The response from the children was fantastic. Again, unlike with big charities, The Great Football Giveaway team (there were 6 of us in total, all volunteers) would go unannounced, three in each car to different schools, orphan centres and villages each day. We would hand-deliver the balls directly to the children and explain to them that they were simply for them to have fun. We would then make time to play and kick balls around with the children. What's more our gifts came with no strings attached. So often, we heard from children, "but what do you want in return"? As so often with other NGOs, tied with having to justify results and fill in reports, schools would have to report back with some requirement or other in order to get gifts. With us, The Great Football Giveaway, our remit was simple. Connect people from around the world. Let those who want to give sports equipment give it and find those children living in deprived circumstances who do not have access to footballs etc. and give them the balls, simply for them to have fun. This was our aim, but we were soon to find that there were many beneficial knock on effects. Schoolteachers told us that more children would attend classes knowing that they would be able to play with the balls after school. Children would attend football sessions, where they would also learn about healthy eating and receive a nutritious snack after training.

Paul: I remember feeling on day one that we could have given away all the balls there and then. But we'd promised to get out into Malawi's rural areas so that's where we headed. We had no idea what to expect. We

started visiting schools and the reaction was extraordinary. In between schools we would stop wherever we saw children playing with homemade balls and swap them for a brand new ball, telling each child the name of the person who had donated the ball back in the UK.

The average school had about 500-800 children in it and more often than not they only had one ball for the entire school. So when we showed up the reaction from the kids was extraordinary. We turned up unannounced time and time again and persuaded the teachers to get all of the kids out of the classrooms and onto the sports field (or in most cases a nearby field). We would then boot out a dozen or so balls into the crowd and the kids went nuts. There was a lovely moment where the teachers seemed to lose control of the kids and in the frenzy that followed, through the haze of a dust cloud, we could see the kids just being kids, running around booting balls into the air and having fun. It was magical time after time after time. What's more teachers started telling us that school attendance (which was a real problem in Malawi) would increase overnight if the children knew that they could come to school and play football in the afternoon after classes.

It was at this moment that I knew we had to organise and run more projects like this, again and again and in more challenging countries across Africa. As soon as we got back from Malawi we started planning our next project, to Angola, a country that was only just recovering from a brutal civil war that had lasted over thirty years. Angola has more landmines than children so this would prove a real challenge for all of us. What's more I had to leave just six weeks after my little boy was born, so that was of course tough on Sarah. In Angola we continued visiting schools, orphanages and community youth projects, but also focused on working with local people or organisations that help build reconciliation amongst children after the war. We heard many reports of children from rural neighboring villages, whose family once fought each other in a bloody war, now play together in peace, now that they had real footballs to play with. This helped strengthen our belief that children are children no matter what their circumstances and that kids just want to have fun and enjoy being children. If we could do our small bit to help then this had to be worth it.

The charity gathered momentum and suddenly we had teams of volunteers organising projects in countries like Uganda and Zambia, which we helped them organise and run.

We then pushed the boundaries further running a project in Rwanda, which also took us into The Congo, a country where the current war has already claimed over 5 million lives. We returned from this project at the end of last year and it was a huge success. The more we do projects like this the more we feel we want to keep challenging ourselves to push the idea further.

Sarah: It's important as well to understand how important it was for us as volunteers. Quite often, if you go to a foreign country on holiday, all you see of it is the hotel and maybe a few tourist attractions. Going on a Great Football Giveaway, you get the chance to go and meet local people, in their villages and communities. 99% of the time, people welcomed us with extreme kindness. We were invited into people's homes, given chickens to eat as gifts, and sometime villages even held parties in our honour. Such kindness is rarely seen in the developed world any more and it is a very humbling lesson I take home from Africa.

**Q: What's your most memorable experience?**

Sarah: the first school we went to. All the children were invited down to the field / football pitch next to the classrooms. We revealed the brand new balls and happy mayhem ensued.

Paul: On our last project in Rwanda we spent a lot of time trying to find a way that we could help child soldiers. It has always felt to me that there can be nothing worse for a child than stripping him/her of a childhood and replacing it with a gun. There are many child soldiers fighting in the Congo who risk life to escape the militia and cross the border into Rwanda. These children then undergo a programme of rehabilitation and reintegration. We organised a very special football game between a group of former child soldiers (who just two weeks before had been fighting in The Congo) against a team of local street orphans. It was incredible to see these kids just running around enjoying themselves. For a brief moment they were no longer child soldiers and street orphans, they were just children, running around playing. This for me is the real power of football and something I will never forget. The event was such a success that a more normal football programme is now being introduced on an ongoing basis as part of the children's rehabilitation programme. You can't ask for more than that.

**Q: Have you taken your own children to Africa? Or do you plan to? Do you think it's important for them to go?**

Paul: Our kids are still very little – one is aged 2 and the other just 1, so it wouldn't really be fair to have them bouncing around in the back of a landrover in the African bush for ten hours a day, helping us give away footballs. That said, maybe when they are aged 3...?

Sarah: The children are still too young - but in time - I'm sure they will be joining us on projects across the globe.

**Q: What does the future hold for the Great Football Giveaway?**

Paul: That's really up to the people that support us by giving us balls. Without them we don't exist. We are all volunteers with no paid staff or rented offices. We do not receive any sort of government grants or corporate sponsorship – the only money that we get is from people who want us to give balls to children on their behalf. I believe that the charitable world has become sadly commercial nowadays, where people are paid vast salaries to fundraise and not enough time is spent actually delivering charitable projects. It is an industry now, and shamefully competitive. Fundraising is never easy at the best of times... However, what is very exciting for us is that we have also spent the last few years documenting the story of The Great Football Giveaway and have produced a short film about it, which we filmed and produced ourselves (this was my background before I started The Great Football Giveaway). We are hoping that this will air in the UK and around the world this summer. Look out for it, or if you'd like a copy just get in touch.

**Q: Do you have any plans for this year's world cup? Is it particularly poignant being held in South Africa?**

Paul: Every charitable organisation I know is running a big football project in South Africa, to tie in with The World Cup. I'm not critical of that, but we have always done things differently and we feel a certain responsibility to run our projects in countries in Africa that will actually see no benefit from the World Cup. As a result we are currently fundraising for a project in Tanzania this summer. Our aim is to take over 5,000 footballs and netballs to personally hand-deliver to children living in some of the country's poorest and most remote communities. If people want to support us on this, they can donate to The Great Football Giveaway by visiting [www.thegreatfootballgiveaway.org.uk](http://www.thegreatfootballgiveaway.org.uk)

Sarah: The idea is to encourage as many people as possible to go and give away things like sports equipment. Unlike with aid - you don't have to be a teacher, or an engineer or a doctor... but you can go to a less developed country, meet people with very few resources and give children the excitement of receiving their first ever football. Do you remember how that felt as a child?

So we're taking more balls than ever out to Tanzania this summer, and we're hoping that as many people as possible will come and volunteer to help us distribute them. We'd love nothing more than football giveaways all over the world to spring up as a result of the Africa world cup.

**Q: Do you work outside of the charity too?**

Paul: I have just set up a small film production company (my other passion) specialising in making documentary films. It's early days but we are hoping to build on the success of recent work, specialising. I also run a small family business distributing healthfood products. So finding the time to do everything is of course challenging.

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**THE GREAT FOOTBALL GIVEAWAY**

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