

A Rough Guide to

**THE GREAT
FOOTBALL
GIVEAWAY**
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**A Rough Guide to The Great Football Giveaway:
Uganda 2008**

The very first thing that strikes you about Uganda is just how green it is; with the exception of the semi-desert in the extreme north-east of the country, most of Uganda is well watered and fertile and sits on the elevated basin at 1,000metres above sea-level between the eastern and western branches of the Great Rift Valley.



The second thing you notice is just how many children there and they really are everywhere you look.....by the side of the road, helping in the market, in the villages, in the fields and of course in the schools.

Sadly, the reality is that the large numbers of children in Uganda are as a direct consequence of the civil war that raged for over twenty years and that together with the legacy of the HIV/AIDS epidemic (one of the worst in Africa and one that continues to blight the country) has resulted in one of the largest population of orphans in the world.....around a staggering 2 million. Uganda is approximately the size of the UK and has a population of around 30 million of which 50% are under the age of 16. Moreover, the high levels of poverty across rural areas have been exacerbated by the devastation caused by the 2007 late summer floods

.....so what better place to come than Uganda; the opportunity to support schools, orphan centres and local organisations by providing some simple unadulterated fun for the kids is one that proved too difficult to resist!

We've seen from previous projects in both Malawi and Angola the positive impact and happiness that a football can



have on children in some of the world's poorest communities. The Great Football Giveaway's mission statement is: No child deserves to be denied one of life's most simple pleasures – kicking a ball about; at The Great Football Giveaway we will do what we can to change that.it is our firmly held conviction that children are the same all across the world; irrespective of their circumstances, kids just want to play and have fun. The majority of people in the UK enjoy a relatively privileged life, but the love of kicking a ball about is something that connects all of us, whether it's the pros at Anfield, our kids in the local park, or indeed some of the most disadvantaged children on the other side of the world.

So here we are in Uganda with our 3,500 footballs and netballs putting the theory into practice and using football, stripped of all its celebrity, avarice and money, as a force for good.

The drive up from Entebbe via Kampala to SOS Children's Villages in Kakiri (who would act as our hosts for the first few days) was an education in itself. The sights, the smells, the noise, the roads, the children...it was all so overwhelming; my senses were in meltdown!!you read as many guides as you can lay your hands on, but nothing can really prepare you for Africa laid bare!

The first few days were anxious times: we had arrived safely and on time but our container of 3,000 footballs and netballs, although shipped three months earlier was frustratingly held up at Customs on the Kenya/Uganda



border....Welcome to Africa! However, many phone-calls, faxes and meetings later, with help from our shipping partners Agility, something happened (we are still unsure as to what - our hosts described it as a miracle), and the bureaucratic wheels suddenly turned in our favour....the relief all round was massive and it is probably the first and last time that I will ever kiss a container!!

Thus began our Ugandan adventure and a journey that would take us right across the country from Mbale in the east, right over to Kangando near the Congo border in the west, covering approximately 5,500km in the process.

I guess Uganda is similar to any other country insofar as the different regions are characterised by different customs

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and traditions and this is manifested in language, dress and food. Moreover, the disposition and nature of the indigenous population is understandably shaped and characterised by their collective experiences. As we travelled across Uganda, these differences and nuances were so subtle as to be barely imperceptible; other times, they were extremely noticeable. I vividly remember the difference when leaving the more central Wakiso district to head east to Mbale. In and around Kakiri and it's environs, the people, adults and children alike, were warm, up front, confident, friendly which possibly had something to do with the security that comes from being in relative close proximity to the beating heart of the nation's capital, Kampala. However once we travelled east and away from the centre and into and across the districts of Mbale, Soroti, Kumi and Lira, we detected a noticeable change in the atmosphere. Hostile – definitely not, but certainly we were viewed with more caution and suspicion than we had previously encountered. I can only assume that this was in some way connected to the fact that the people here had lived hard lives through hard times. These were the communities that had been most affected by the legacy of 20 years of civil war and even now, the reminders of war such as the existence of displacement camps acted as a vivid reminder of a turbulent past.

The month was filled with many highlights and if I were to attempt to record the day-to-day experiences in diary form, then this report would easily run to over 20 pages! Therefore for the sake of brevity and in a bid to keep you interested, I

will attempt to provide you with an insight as to what we did and an insight as to how things were.....

Visiting schools was just brilliant.....it probably accounted for more of our active project time than any other activity and understandably accounted for the distribution of the majority of 3,500 footballs and netballs.

I will try to sketch out the scene.....we would randomly pitch up at a school, deliberately unannounced; this was because firstly, we didn't want to disappoint the kids in case events conspired against us and we were unable to get there and secondly, we just wanted to surprise them!



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So there we were, rolling up a dirt track in our 4-wheel drive trying to guess the size of the school given that this would largely determine the numbers of balls that we would give away. The children would invariably be hidden away in their classrooms, all sat studiously and respectfully, learning with a hunger and a passion that we might only imagine. Then we would be noticed..... a buzz would go up.....they sensed something was happening or about to happen but they were unsure as to what.....this was not a typical school day occurrence.....

With our stash of balls well-hidden, we would search out the Head Teacher, whose first act would always be to usher us into his office for the ceremonial 'Signing of the Visitors Book'. We would explain briefly why we were here and what we wanted to do and then ask him/her to assemble the kids at which point the school bell would be vigorously rung.

Seconds later, hundreds of noisy excitable children would stampede out of their classrooms to gather in the school playing field, such that it was. More often than not, the school officials would want to mark the occasion with an 'official' ceremony – chairs would appear and we would frequently be asked to 'present' our gifts to the captain of the school's football and netball team; however we resisted this at every turn as we made it clear that these balls were to give the opportunity to all of the schoolchildren to play, not just those who might excel in sport.



So there we were, a sea of brightly uniformed children gathered in front of us and when I say a sea I mean a sea..... often numbering well over a 1,000....all waiting eagerly, expectantly. Dispensing with chairs, we would say a quick 'Hi' and briefly explain the reason why we had landed on their doorstep; we would then quickly reach into our bag and launch a salvo of a dozen balls or so into the far reaches of the sportfield....

How can I best describe the reaction in terms of what ensued at that particular moment.....volcanic, deafening, chaotic, excitement, shock, disbelief, energetic.....all of the above.....words just cannot do it justice



Visiting schools was so good because it appeared to work at a number of levels.....

Firstly and most importantly, it gave all children of differing abilities the opportunity to kick or throw or play with a decent ball and if that's all that happened on this trip, then we would have done what we set out to do.

Secondly, the majority of these schools had virtually no resources in terms of sports equipment. One ball (invariably in a state of disrepair) was the norm however many of the smaller nursery and primary schools had no balls whatsoever; others would have to borrow a ball from a neighbouring school or village. Footballs in Uganda were high-price commodities costing in the region of approximately 60,000 Ugandan Shillings or £25. Expensive as they might be, schools realised what a valuable resource they were and therefore were inclined to still budget for them; however the balls they did purchase, often turned out to be poor quality imports from China; which all meant that the good quality, hard-wearing balls that we provided (along with pumps & valves) resulting in the schools being able to divert precious funds into other vital resources such as books, pens etc.

Thirdly, because virtually all of the headteachers that we talked to, told us that having these new balls would help draw to draw some of those children who were currently not attending school, into education. How would they do that? Well, many parents decide not

to send their children to school, the main reasons being to keep them behind to help them work the fields or to help to look after younger siblings. The noise levels generated at the schools once we had distributed the balls carried to the adjacent villages and communities and as we drove out, we frequently saw the inquisitive faces of un-uniformed children looking in with longing and envy. The headteachers shared that a number of these children would now be drawn into education purely attracted by the prospect of getting a game of football with a decent ball!! How cool is that?

Do you know what?..... it took me until the second week of our project for one particular penny to drop; that being, whenever we distributed balls to schools, there were normally two reactions; firstly a game or games of football/netball would break out all over the field and secondly, the kids would start to volley the balls as high as they could and boy, could they lather that ball!.....and then it dawned on me.... the balls they previously had, whether their handmade rag balls or the cheap quality and invariably punctured old balls just didn't bounce and here we were with balls that bounced almost as high again once they hit the hard ground!!!.... it was just the most brilliant experience to see something so simple and something that we take for granted i.e. having a ball that bounces, deliver so much fun.

All in all we visited over 200 schools, signed over 200 visitor books, left a trail of utter chaos in our wake and delivered happiness and smiles to around 200,000 children.



Village work was just brilliant.....because this is where you saw Uganda laid bare; this is where you got up front and personal and saw what life was really like for the vast majority of families across the country.

We tended to do a lot of our village work during the weekends given that the majority of schools (apart from the boarding schools) were closed. Our strategy was quite simple, namely we didn't have one! This is where it was essential to make sure that you had packed a sense of adventure and there was nothing more exciting and adventurous than going 'off piste' and letting your instincts, such that they were, kick-in.



Typically we would be cruising down a main road and then randomly veer off down an obscure dirt track with our 4x4s put through their paces above and beyond.....Clarkson, eat your heart out! We would never really know what we were in for or what was around the next corner but you could be sure that each experience and circumstance would be different and that invariably we would find an enthusiastic recipient of a football or netball.

The families we stumbled across were invariably wide-eyed with disbelief and I suspect many of those communities high up in the mountain areas of the East and West of the country had never seen a European before. However, shock and occasionally suspicion was soon replaced by sheer joy and excitement as it became clear that we were only here for one reason, namely to dispense some fun.....and it wasn't just the kids who went wild.....the arrival of a new ball often provided the catalyst to bring entire families together as mums and dads, siblings and one occasion an elderly grandmother, joined in, in impromptu games of catch.

Often a ball thrown out of the back of the land cruiser would start a mass-sprint to the nearest piece of open ground; those games of football just couldn't start quick enough!

On one particular occasion, we invited a local art student (Sam Owori) to come out with us into one of the local villages so that he could see and experience firsthand, the very essence of what the Great Football Giveaway was all about.



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This time, we left the 4x4 behind, bagged up a dozen or so balls and back-packed off into the unknown. Interestingly, when you try explain to somebody exactly what and why we are doing what we do, you get a range of reactions which usually correlates to the degree of comprehension; it's really only when you see firsthand what we do and the reaction of the kids, that the penny drops and an expression that says 'Ah, I get it now!' spreads across one's face. This is exactly what happened with Sam when the reality displaced the theory.

However we did have an ulterior motive for inviting Sam... knowing he was a talented artist (we had been tipped off), we asked if he would draw or paint his interpretation of what the GFG was about...and as you can see on the top right, we were not disappointed. Sam produced for us a



wonderfully stunning and unique piece of art that seems to go to the very heart of what this project was all about. The picture below does not of course do justice to the finished oil-on-canvas interpretation, although a better quality and higher resolution image can be viewed on the GFG website.

Whilst travelling between schools and villages, we would frequently see young kids playing with homemade 'rag balls'. These balls, usually about the size of a grapefruit, were made of tightly compressed bits of plastic bags, tied up and held together with lace or string netting. One thing that struck me very early on in this trip is that Ugandan children are extremely resourceful and a small thing like the lack of a football will not prevent them from actually playing the game!!





As well as schools, villages and stopping by the side of the road, we also had the enormous good fortune to visit and link up with a number of other educational and community institutions and projects, too numerous to mention here, however three stand out in my own mind.....

The Kampala School for the Physically Handicapped was a small school of around 100 pupils situated just within the city limits. It was apparent from the moment that we stepped inside the large imposing gates that there here were children that had both severe mental and physical disabilities.

It's very easy and possibly somewhat patronising to visit a place like this and feel sorry for the kids and understandably your heart naturally goes out to them, particularly if like me you are blessed with fit and healthy children. However I have never been so inspired by a place in all my life.

The majority of children were either on crutches or in wheelchairs and there was a (brief) moment where I felt that maybe the distribution of footballs would only highlight their disabilities relative to more able-bodied children; however I needn't have worried because within seconds of giving out the balls, kids tumbled out of wheelchairs and crutches were dispatched as a game of that could only be described as a cross between floor-football and handball, broke out. As I left the school I reflected on the fact that in all my years, I had never felt so inspired as I did in that moment.



As we travelled across the east of Uganda, we came across the **St. Patrick's School for the Blind** in the district of Soroti. This was a primary and secondary school of around 150 children with about a 50/50 split of those that were partially sighted and those that were fully blind. Again there was a moment's hesitation and reticence when we asked ourselves whether this was such a good idea; however again, contrary to my initial instincts, the teachers and pupils proved us wrong and within minutes, the whole place was buzzing with excitement as those children who were partially sighted played games of catch and football and those who were blind just enjoyed the tactile feel and sensation of handling a new ball.



...and talk about inspiring, if that wasn't enough the children then laid on a demonstration of a game called 'Gold Ball' which was a game played with a ball that had a small audible bell inside that had been specially manufactured for those who were visually impaired or blind. The aim was to score a goal past your opponent, by rolling the ball as hard and as fast as you could. Those kids that were partially sighted were blindfolded to ensure parity with their fellow blind students; the levels of skill both in firing the ball as fast as they could, and their reaction times in detecting the direction and coordinates of the ball as it approached were simply astonishing.....but could it really be that difficult? unfortunately, I could never resist a challenge so yours truly stepped up to the plate, blindfolded, took up position andscored 0.....saved 0!

Both the blind school and the school for the physically handicapped taught me just how much my thinking is shaped and limited by the perception of what people, particularly children are unable to do or achieve, rather than focussing on their potential and actually what they are able to achieve.....one of those defining moments when the light goes on!

We visited a number of orphan centres but one that remains vividly in my mind was the **Kagando Orphan Centre** in the west of the country, not far from the Congo Border. It was run by a fantastic and inspirational lady called Dorothy who effectively, the mother to almost 20-25 children aged between 3 and 8 years. As you might imagine, this was a



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very different place.... the beaming smiles that greeted us around the schools and villages and that we had become accustomed to were largely absent....what these children wanted and needed was something much more than what a simple ball could bring – you could just see it in their eyes. This was obviously not the sort of place where we wanted to just breeze in with a few balls and move on to the next school or village, so we stayed and we played, for probably about an hour; it just felt the right thing given that above all

else, these kids more than anything, just wanted some love and attention.

So there we are...with your help and generosity, we did what we set out to do. The project was a massive success and a fantastic life-affirming experience.....by my back-of-a-fag-packet reckoning, we touched the lives of over a quarter of a million children across Uganda....that's a lot of smiles and you should be rightly proud!

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signed over 200 visitor books,
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Thank you

DUNCAN THOMAS

on behalf of The Great Football Giveaway Team Uganda

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