



Kick START

THIS YEAR'S **HOMELESS WORLD CUP** IN PARIS GAVE HUNDREDS OF MEN AND WOMEN A BRIGHTER OUTLOOK ON LIFE, WRITES SUNSHINE LICHAUCO DE LEON

THE EIFFEL TOWER looms large behind them as the eight men representing the Hong Kong football team walk onto the pitch at Paris' Champ de Mars public park. Their confidence grows with each step as the spectators cheer loudly from the sidelines and the team readies itself for its opening match. But all this excitement and attention is unfamiliar to the tenacious competitors who have travelled halfway around the world to compete in the Homeless World Cup (HWC) football tournament. Indeed, it could hardly be more different from their daily existence in Hong Kong, where life on the street has made them feel almost invisible.

For this team, kicking a ball around is more than just sport. Each member, aged between 25 and 40, is a recovering addict in treatment, and all have been living in shelters or institutions. Football has opened the door to a new world, one

in which they have purpose and self worth. It has changed their lives by restoring their self-esteem.

"Everybody needs to wake up in the morning with a goal," says former France and Manchester United striker Eric Cantona, the HWC global ambassador. "The Homeless World Cup brings this opportunity – to go into training, to change your life."

The annual Homeless World Cup is an international football tournament that brings together people who are homeless, marginally homeless, addicts in a rehabilitation programme or those who earn a living as vendors of street papers. Each participating country sends its own team, which plays rounds of four-a-side street soccer in a series of fast-paced, 14-minute matches. The first tournament was held in Graz, Austria in 2003 and brought together 18 teams. The latest edition, held on August 21-28 and won by Scotland, attracted 600 players on 64 teams (including 16 women's teams) from 53 countries.

The goal of the HWC is to end homelessness by bringing international attention to this worldwide issue and by empowering those who



ON THE BALL

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Hong Kong battle it out against Kenya; Hong Kong players pose for a photo with the Estonian team; Brazilian players show off their skills; the Eiffel Tower provides a grand backdrop to the matches; cheering on Hong Kong

live rough. So far, the event has had a profound impact: studies suggest that more than 70 per cent of the 100,000 people involved since

the project started have returned home to change their lives for the better. Regardless of whether this means coming off drugs and alcohol, securing a job, going back to school, finding a home, or reuniting with family, a cycle of positive change has begun.

Mel Young, president and co-founder of the HWC says, "You have three wins when it comes to change. The players change beyond recognition, and the people who come to watch us never look at homeless people the same way again. The media, too, as they often represent the homeless as a problem, but now we are changing the stereotype and getting positive stories."

It was a belief in the possibilities this tournament offered that allowed Hong Kong to join in the fight to be heard. Ng Wai-tung, a co-ordinator

with human rights NGO the Society for Community Organisation, has been working with the homeless for more than a decade. His experience taught him that helping people restore hope and regain confidence was the best way to break out of the negative cycle in which they are trapped. When he heard about the HWC, he knew it was the vehicle that would make this possible for many people. "Ninety-eight per cent of homeless in Hong Kong are male," says Ng. "Most of them lose hope. We need to rebuild that hope through the game. In football, they need to face losing and winning. But most of all, they learn not to give up."

Luckily, businessman and football fan Alex Chan also believed in the HWC dream. When he read about Ng's attempts to assemble a team, he immediately offered to help fundraise. Within three days there was enough money to send the team to Edinburgh, Scotland, to compete in the 2005 tournament and the Hong Kong team was born. A new team has been formed each year, and Hong Kong has participated in every cup since.

The Hong Kong team is recruited through an

annual selection tournament, where 12-16 teams are invited from social rehabilitation institutions. The chosen players attend weekly football practice and training for three months, during which they begin to develop the physical, mental and emotional qualities needed to be an effective player.

Team manager Ho Wai-chi says, "Football teaches them life skills – discipline and persistence – and how to be brave in the face of a strong enemy. And not to give up." Players also attend a training camp, where the focus is on team building more than skills.

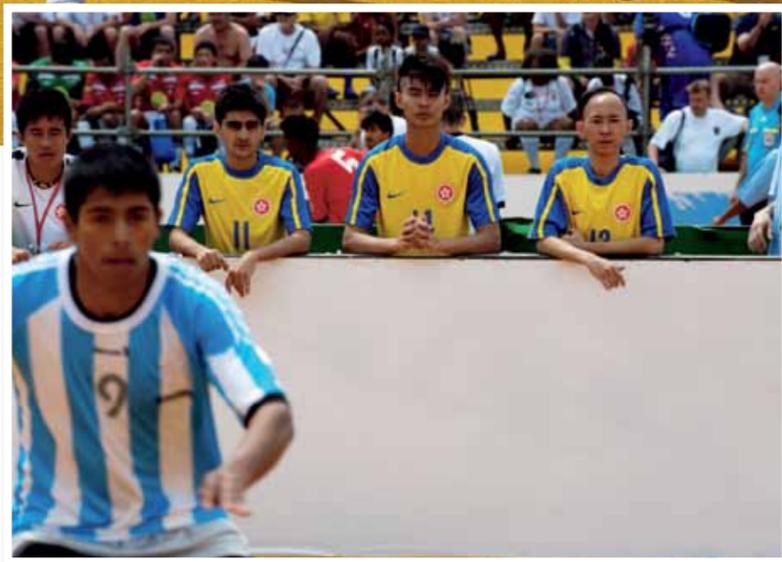
Although the Hong Kong team ranked 40th and won just two matches out of 13 in Paris (against Sweden and Canada), the stats are of little importance. Ho says, "Since these players have already experienced a lot of difficulties in their lives, we don't want to put them under

unnecessary pressure. We just want them to enjoy the game."

Before joining the team, Ying Ho was the big boss of the gang with whom he lived. Known for his hot temper, he lived a life in which no one told him what to do. During the tournament, he surprised everyone with his change in attitude. When he came close to getting angry, he instead thought about the consequences and calmed down. Ho explains: "We are the only Chinese team in the whole tournament. How could I yell at them? It would be an insult to the team and to the badge we are wearing."

The realisation that the good of the team was more important than his own needs was a new experience, and a good feeling. Team manager Ho explains: "He feels a bit of self-respect if he can obey what the coach says and by listening to

"People who come to watch us never look at homeless people the same way again"



“Being poor in Scotland is nothing compared to being poor in a country like Cambodia”

able. Says Ho: “I keep saying to them that the real fight is not in Paris, but in Hong Kong. You have to use what you learn here to turn a new page in your life. We will keep pushing them to understand what they have learned.”

The HWC also helps by showing the players of each nation that they are not alone. The Paris event was the first to hold a conference on homelessness, where each team gave a presentation about the situation in their country. It’s an opportunity for the poorer nations of the world to learn that even developed countries have similar problems, and a chance for the homeless in more developed nations to learn that there are many people worse off than they are.

And sometimes, these experiences inspire players to discover their own humanity. At the Milan HWC in 2009, the Scottish team captain explained how each year the team “adopted” a team from a developing country. They would give them any extra food allowance they had or gifts such as jerseys and toiletries. When asked why, his reply captured the spirit of the game: “Because we realise

that to be poor in Scotland is nothing compared to being poor in a country like Cambodia.”

Ho’s presentation on Hong Kong explained that, technically, the city’s basic social security system ensures that nobody will starve to death, but the conditions under which many people live are inhumane. Ho says: “Absolute poverty by definition may not exist [in Hong Kong]. But the gap between rich and poor, and the price of land, are so high that even if you have a job, you can still live in poverty. Some people live in homes which are no larger than a coffin.”

There is still a long way to go, but until then it will be stories such as Ah Cheung’s that inspire hope. Once a professional soccer player, when social workers found Cheung, his gambling addiction had left him destitute and sleeping rough. After joining the Hong Kong team for the Edinburgh tournament, he never looked back. Within six years, Cheung started his own business, was married, became a father and coached the Hong Kong team in South Africa. He remains a keen volunteer and helps the team with fundraising and training. Team manager Ho recalls, “The day he got married, he invited us and his mother came to me almost in tears, saying that it was because of what he experienced at the HWC that she found her son again.”

It is this type of tale that makes the tournament such a potent catalyst for change. Returning home armed with a renewed sense of self, these men and women have found a goal, and they know how to achieve it: one kick at a time. ■

IMAGES: MATTHEW JORDAAN, ESMÉ DEACON, MANDLA MNYAKAMA, BETHAN MOBEY, BENJAMIN MOLDENHAUER, KRISTHOS TAGUPA

others. It gives him a feeling of professionalism.”

For Chung Man, whose severe lack of self-confidence made him very shy, the trip to Paris was an opportunity to find his own voice and to realise he had something to contribute: he had the best English skills on the team. “I was pushed to test myself physically and socially because, when you are in a foreign country, if you don’t speak to express yourself, you won’t be able to do anything, not even eat. In Hong Kong I would never speak English,” says Chung. With each word spoken his confidence grew and soon other players were asking for his help in communicating.

The HWC may be a once-a-year event, but the benefits are long lasting. Once the players return home, follow-up programmes created by the organisers ensure that the whole effort is sustain-

ONE VISION CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

Hong Kong on the charge against Palestine; the tournament fosters a spirit of camaraderie among fans and participants; the Kenyan women’s team celebrates victory over Mexico in Paris; Hong Kong squad members watch from the sidelines

PAY IT FORWARD

Raising the funds to send the Hong Kong team to the Homeless World Cup each year is achieved in particularly fitting fashion: they use football to raise money for football. Each year, a four-a-side charity tournament is organised in which corporations or institutions contribute HK\$15,000 to form a team. With 12 to 16 sides, the money raised pays for transport, promotion and training costs, and is enough to support the team, a coach and a social worker. In-kind sponsorships are also available for uniforms, refreshments, souvenir T-shirts, signage, and more. Says team manager Ho Wai-chi: “The beauty of fundraising is that we bring some very different sectors together, from banking, watchmaking and jewellery, printing and industrial production. I think the attraction is the nature of the whole game and those players in the past who have demonstrated what impact the game had on their personal lives. It’s those successful stories that sell the idea. See soco-wofoo-homelessoccer.hk for more information.