

Shared goals

Both football and photography have the power to change lives and unite the population, as

Peter Dench discovers

The shortfall for the assignment is down to two photographers and there is one question left. 'Do you shoot digital?' I don't, but say yes. My colleague and competitor says no. After being informed in 2007 that I had won the commission, I bought myself my first professional digital camera, two Canon EOS 5Ds. I put the batteries in and dialled the phone number of renowned photographer Marcus Bleasdale. 'Hello! What settings should I use?'

I had an inkling at the time it was going to be one of those jobs you remember for a lifetime. It's taken me 12 years to fully appreciate just how phenomenal it turned out to be. Football's Hidden Story (FHS) was a Federation Internationale de Football Association (FIFA) funded initiative: 26 photo-stories in 20 countries across the globe: from Colombia to Brazil, Thailand, Nepal, Norway, South Africa, Senegal, Haiti and many places in between. A series of emotive human interest images, showing the positive impact that football has had at grassroots level.

Stories of hope

In Banda Aceh, Indonesia, I photographed Martinus at home-stood under a newspaper clipping of him with the then Portuguese national football team manager Luiz Felipe Scolari. Martinus was seven when the 2004 Tsunami struck. He was found 19 days later wandering the beach wearing the Portuguese football shirt and he became a symbol of hope. Visits were subsequently made by players including Cristiano Ronaldo. Martinus was reunited with his father; his mother and sister were never found.

In east Africa I documented the Amputee Football Federation of Liberia, an answer to one of the most intractable questions in the post-war nation: what to do with around 100,000 former militiamen, many of whom started fighting as boys and grew up thinking that the unspeakable was acceptable. After over a decade of civil war, Liberians still grapple with the aftermath. Football and amputee football in particular, is as much about reconciliation as competition. Former fighters from enemy militias now play in the same

team. Mixed among them are civilians who got caught in the violence. Together they share, sing victory songs and play the beautiful game. I captured Alessandro in Italy during a football therapy match in Rome. Before he got into football he was very sick, suffering wild hallucinations and hearing multiple voices. Most of these symptoms were ameliorated by football. There was 16-year-old Laura, practising her football skills against a brick wall near her home near Birmingham, UK. She admitted to having once been a bit of a tearaway. After being told by a teacher that if she didn't work harder, playing football would be forbidden, she turned her life around. Laura achieved at school and studied for her coaching and refereeing badges. There were Gypsy children in Bucharest clutching posters of Romanian soccer star Banel Nicolău at an anti-racism football game and I'll never forget a historic football match between a Syrian team of Druze from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and Arab-Israelis, the first ever Syrian-born team to play in Israel.

Special access

Many times during the 15-month campaign, I took a deliberate step back to absorb and appreciate the situations that having a camera allowed me to access. I understood that photography can help keep humanity alive. It can bring nations together and promote unity. It has the power to heal and to help, to motivate and give freedom to dreams. I learnt a lot and created memories I'll never forget. It's the assignment I refer back to when times are tough. I remember just how beautiful, inspiring, rewarding and diverse the profession can be. There are songs from the trip I can't listen to as the memories associated with them are too intense. I can recall the voices of people I met that lift the darkest of moods and I have photographs that I'll be proud of for a lifetime. There are millions of us using photography, we can use it to bring a positive dimension to our lives and those of others.

If I can leave you with one valuable piece of advice I picked up when shooting the FHS story on landmine clearance in Iraq, never run into an uncleared field if you can't find a toilet.



Left: The goalkeeper makes a save during an amputee football match in Monrovia

Below left: Martinus at home in Banda Aceh

Below: Children at the Future Hope school in Kolkata practise their football skills



Peter Dench

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Left: A player from the Liberia national amputee football team warms up before a match in the capital Monrovia

Left: A team singing inspirational songs on the terraces before a football match at the Antoinette Tubman Stadium – the headquarters of the Liberia Football Association

Below: Training under way at the Colombian football centre in Bogotá, Colombia