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FIFA Cup Footballers Give Back to World

By Zack Gross

While Canadians love hockey and Americans call baseball their national pastime, there is no question that the sport most followed globally is football – what we call soccer. Ruud van Nistelrooy and Wayne Rooney are among football's icons – its version of our Jaromir Jagr or Joe Sakic. Pro hockey players have been judged as the best sports citizens on the planet, giving back to their communities like no other athletes. But, through their football association and various international charities, pro soccer players are also making a strong contribution to youth and communities around the world.

In 2003, FIFA and UNICEF launched the "Sport-in-a Box" program to provide poor countries with equipment needed for children to play football. This coming September, twelve countries will each receive a hundred of these "boxes" to mark FIFA World Cup year and International Day of Peace. The twelve countries are among the world's poorest and most troubled, including Afghanistan, Haiti, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Palestine, Liberia and Sudan.

In Afghanistan, the boxes will be used to introduce young girls to football and to re-integrate former child soldiers into regular society. In Palestine, the boxes are part of a safe playgrounds initiative, to establish recreational programs for youth. Other programs will take place in refugee camps, disadvantaged schools, and through efforts to promote the UN's Declaration on the Rights of the Child.

FIFA has also spoken out on child labour issues. Its web site expresses concern about accusations that some trademarked football products are manufactured in violation of regulations set out by the International Labour Organization (ILO) of the UN and UNICEF. FIFA assures those concerned that it confiscates any footballs found to be in contravention of its regulations and that the FIFA logo appearing on such footballs is done without their consent. It points out that forty million footballs are sold annually around the world and only a small percentage of these are sanctioned by their organization.

Says FIFA: "(Our) efforts to protect the rights of children are perhaps most noteworthy... (We have) a moral obligation to come to the aid of the world's children... The core values of our sport (respect, tolerance and fair-play) should be encouraged at every turn... When it comes to kids, football is a force for change unlike any other."

During the 2006 FIFA World Cup tournament, footballers are working with SOS Children's Villages to raise \$40 million to build and maintain six children's villages for orphaned and abandoned kids in South Africa (site of the 2010 FIFA World Cup), Brazil,

Mexico, Nigeria, Ukraine and Vietnam. This initiative will directly aid 800 children while impacting on 5000 other children and 1000 families over a five-year period. Donations are also being solicited at all tournament matches in Germany right now through billboards, information booths and the t-shirts worn by children who accompany the players onto the field at the start of each game. Donations can also be made by fans on-line at www.6villagesfor2006.org.

Wayne Rooney, Professional Football Association Young Player of the Year in 2005 and a key participant in this year's World Cup, was recently named a "FIFA for SOS Children's Villages" ambassador. He is hoping to use his reputation as a young superstar to raise funds for kids' charities. "These kids have no families to help them. I know how much it means to have a family to support you."

Ruud van Nistelrooy, star of the Netherlands national football team, also an SOS ambassador, says he makes time for this charity despite his very busy life. He visited a Rumanian Children's Village and was impressed by the "happy children playing in spite of their difficult pasts."

South Africans are excited about hosting the FIFA World Cup in 2010. The four-week tourney is the world's largest sporting event outside of the Olympics, but is actually watched by more people than the Olympics on television worldwide. Ten stadiums are being built or renovated for the tournament, while airports, roads and railways are being upgraded.

Planners estimate that South Africa will profit greatly from its investment in new sports facilities and infrastructure and that as many as 159,000 new jobs will be created directly by the tournament. Three million foreign spectators are expected to visit South Africa for the event. South African charities are already gearing up for the humanitarian side of the World Cup, in the hope that on-going FIFA and UN programs will benefit the very poor children in their country.

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