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Have a story you think we should include in our next edition? Please get in touch info@homelessworldcup.org
Mel Young co-founded the Homeless World Cup in 2003. Coming into it’s 19th year, Mel is as excited by its potential now as he was when it started.

[Photo: Paul Bence]
Teamwork is pitch perfect for

WELSH WONDER SHARIE

Isobel Irvine spoke to Sharie Messer about football and how playing with Street Football Wales saved her soul.

With a smile as wide as Carmarthen Bay and displaying limitless energy to compete for every pass as she represents Wales Women at the Four Nations Challenge in Edinburgh, it’s easy to believe Sharie Messer as she says, “When I’m at my happiest is when I’m on the pitch playing football.”

But life wasn’t always like this for the 26-year-old from Swansea who lauds the sport and her involvement with Street Football Wales for saving her soul.

“I was picked on in school when I was younger and just felt everything was pointless,” she quietly relates. “So many times I’ve gone downhill. Then I really went downhill when I lost my granddad.

“He was a big presence in my life, a big support for me. I can’t really think what my lowest point has been – most of my life has been my lowest point – but my granddad passing away was the one that really pushed me downhill. He fostered me when I was younger so he was like a dad to me.”

Sharie became involved with Street Football Wales (SFW) through an organisation called SYSHP (Swansea Young Single Homeless Project) while battling the worst of anxiety and depression.

“I was so low, I didn’t think I was worth anything, to be honest,” she says. “There was a football team called Tigers and some of the people at the project were trying to persuade me to play for them. I’d never played football before – I was constantly inside because of my anxiety and depression, I felt I didn’t belong anywhere, so didn’t get involved or play anything.

“But once I’d taken that first step, I was on that pitch playing. It makes me nervous, still, when I first go on the pitch but once you’ve started kicking the ball, everything just focuses on that ball and not the people around you. The adrenalin kicks in so you don’t think of other stuff that’s going on in your life – you just think of the pitch, the ball and those goals.”

Having now been involved with SFW for going on five years, she is confident football is, to a major extent, an antidote for her feelings of anxiety and depression.

“When I have a low day I’ll ask my brothers to come for a kick about, or I’ll ask my support worker if we can go and just boot about the ball and the feelings just lift away.

“If it wasn’t for Street Football Wales I wouldn’t be working either – now I work in a care home. I’ve been involved with Street Football Wales for over four years but I never thought I’d get this far. But with the support I’ve had from Caitlin and Scott [SFW coaches] I’m here and it has been marvellous.”

Though she has plenty of support on the ground, Sharie is in no doubt she has that extra bit of encouragement coming from higher sources.

“My granddad is always watching me and he’d be so proud of me.”

She reaches into the neck of her bright red Wales shirt and unwraps her fingers to reveal a tiny object glistening in Edinburgh’s afternoon sunlight. “I carry this cross with me so he’s always with me and that’s how I cope with the depression and anxiety. And you just try to find those friends, like I have with the girls here, and that’s how you cope and keep going with that support around you.

“I do feel more positive and then at odd times I don’t – there’s some pros and some cons but you’ve just got to work with the team. We’ve got the support, we’re sorted, so we’ll be just fine.”

Sharie played for Wales at the Four Nations Challenge Cup in Edinburgh in September 2021.
More than a game

Football with heart transforming communities in Colombia.
UTBOL CON CORAZON (FCC) – Football with Heart is our partner in Colombia. Since 2007, they have been working with young people and children to develop life skills through football.

We spoke to Carlos Perez, Executive Director for Colombia, and Digital Director Juan Camilo Cifuentes about how football is creating social change in Colombia.

Starting in La Paz, a community in Barranquilla, with 300 children and young people, Futbol Con Corazon have expanded across the country and have now supported more than 20,000 children and young people. In 2021 they trained 200 new young leaders, former participants who are now inspiring the next generation.

"Young people have the power to change our communities if you give them the right tools", this is the lasting legacy of one of their young leaders, Yecid Bolaño. He was tragically killed in the middle of the night by someone who had broken in to steal his motorbike.

He first joined the programme as a participant aged 13 and after 6 years became a young leader. Juan and Carlos are determined his legacy will live on.

Violence is common in the communities where FCC work. 30-40% of their participants and their families don’t have a fixed address. They are forced to move from relative to relative because of protection money demanded by gangs or armed groups in control of the area. If they don’t move, they could be killed.

Internal displacement is a major issue in Colombia, nearly 5 million people are displaced because of violence and conflict according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre. This equates to nearly 10% of the 50.3 million population. Despite the Peace Agreement signed between the FARC and the government in 2016, illegal armed groups are still active across the country.

Juan explains that at FCC they “create a protected environment” where young people can feel safe and learn new skills and gain experience while having the chance to play football. Their main programmes run after school, aiming to reduce the opportunities gangs have to recruit new members and remove the temptation of young people being drawn into drugs and alcohol.

Carlos told us, that it’s not a lack of wanting that has left young people struggling to succeed; “I see it in their eyes, this hunger to be a better person. They are screaming for opportunities.”

Our work besides working with young people is empowering communities and creating systematic change. Creating capacity in the community, promoting leadership, improving everyday despite the problems.” One of the major problems is unemployment. Corruption, bribery and poor management of resources are some of the causes. Statistics from the CIA World Factbook found that a quarter of the youth population (14-25) are unemployed.

In Barranquilla, an industrial city on the Caribbean coast where FCC started, the figures are even more stark. The most recent government figures are from 2015. They found 77% of young people weren’t studying, only 20% completed elementary school and only 1 in 5 young people graduated from high school. Juan says since then it has only got worse. He explains, “a local partner says a good day is when they have rice to give the children and young people.”

Poverty is a major problem for many of the young people and their families. Struggling to have enough money for food, water and electricity, it’s unsurprising that young people often turn to a quick solution to make money. According to Juan, in many communities the easiest way to earn money is through drugs. The average annual salary in Colombia is $5,780. A young person can get $8-10 each time they transport drugs. With a few transports a day, this can quickly add up to a substantial amount of money for them.

In addition to the corruption in the country, people are still recovering from more than 60 years of war over the drugs and arms trade, which despite best efforts, haven’t been resolved.

Housing is an additional problem. While it’s possible to get loans, job shortages leave people unable to keep up with loan payments. Interest levels are very high, resulting in people ending up in high levels of debt.

The government has brought in a new programme to help young people aged 18-25 access a low interest loan to help them to buy a house. Despite this, the lack of jobs in the communities where FCC work makes it impossible for young people to be able to keep up with payments.

Colombia’s women’s team came second at the Homeless World Cup in Mexico in 2018. [Photo: Daniel Lipinski]
Juan asks the question: “If you don’t have a job, how will you be able to keep up with the loan payments?” Juan said young people in the communities feel lost: “It’s really tough, they are hopeless. They don’t see a clear future and feel like no one is listening to them.” This, he explains, is why a lot of them take “a bad way.” Instead, he explains: “they prefer to make $20 and receive something in the short term, rather than planning for the future.”

One solution they’ve found is to create an “army of social entrepreneurs” who will help transform their communities. Their programme Football for Entrepreneurs gives young people between 18-25 the skills and tools to be able to set up their own football academies. 15 academies have already been established by previous participants. They operate as franchises, charging players a small fee, less than $1, to take part.

But what more needs to be done? Juan says they need access to training, low-cost programmes and an opportunity to develop their skills for the future. Young people also need to look beyond their neighbourhoods and gain a global perspective.

“We have a really big vision. The main challenge is how we make the power of football more accessible to more people. We are working hard to position football as a force of social change.”

Their focus, as well as working with young people, is empowering the communities to create systemic change. In spite of the problems they face, Juan and Carlos are determined to continue to work together to improve the everyday life for their participants.

Carlos explains: “If we work together, we can change a lot of communities. If we work as a team, we can climb the mountains.”

For the young participants, the focus is clear; to create a safe environment for their family and friends, both on and off the pitch.
Tino Nombro was the co-founder and CEO of Ambergreen, an Edinburgh-based digital marketing agency and now runs a consultancy business helping organisations grow and transform. Tino has been on the Homeless World Cup Foundation Board since 2019. We sat down with him to find out more.

"All of the small actions by many many people to help and support will collectively make the difference."

Home is a place to pause for thought and breath. To recharge and gather energy for tomorrow.

I grew up in a small town just outside Edinburgh in Scotland.

My first sporting memory is mostly playing sport of all types, from Squash to Football, Rugby, Basketball and generally being outside in the countryside fishing and hillwalking. One of my earliest memories of a sporting event is going to see Paris Saint Germain play in Paris with my uncle who lived there.

Saturday morning has always been a time for sport, over the years it has been transformed from playing rugby into golf, and wakeboarding amongst others. These days I enjoy taking my daughter to her dancing class!

In my opinion there is not one magic solution to ending homelessness. All of the small actions by many many people to help and support will collectively make the difference. The big thing is that we all need to care and make active decisions to support in whatever way we can. It has been amazing to see the impact all our supporters, partners, and ambassadors to the Homeless World Cup make all the time.

Football has such a special place in society and communities. It is fans and supporters that make it more than a game and in return it gives back a sense of belonging and positive connections. Using football as the language to address homeless through the Homeless World cup has demonstrated this already.

My role models are not famous people, film stars or sportsmen or women but people that I meet in business and in life that hold true to their values understand purpose and are fun and energising to be around.

I like to keep fit by playing sports of all types but I know it is not enough so I do get to the gym and try to eat as healthily as I can.

The advice I would give to my younger self is dream big, look after your health, and get out in the world and meet people.

VAR or not? Always better and fairer to get decisions right – so better with VAR.
We spoke to anti-apartheid campaigner Reverend Iain Whyte about his experience at the Homeless World Cup in Cape Town.

In 2006, Cape Town hosted the fourth Homeless World Cup. 48 nations competed for the title, with 496 players representing their countries. Russia lifted the cup. In 6th place was Cameroon, coached by Aaron Agien Nyangkwe and supported by Scottish reverend, anti-apartheid campaigner and newly qualified football coach, Iain Whyte.

He jokes when asked about his impact as a coach, “I think they would have done better without me!” The one thing he’s proud of is that he convinced the coach to give the reserve goalkeeper some game time. “He will always be able to remember that, I’m pleased I was able to give that to him.”

That wasn’t the only thing that he gave to the Homeless World Cup in Cape Town, he also invited Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu to visit the tournament. Describing Desmond Tutu, Iain mentioned his “fantastic sense of humour”; “he heard that one of the Scottish lads had fallen in love with a South African girl so made a joke about it.”

As well as his sense of humour, he knew when to be serious. In Cape Town, Desmond Tutu made a rallying call: “Everyone should have a home. It is a right, not a privilege. People treat the homeless as if they’re sub-human. In order to overcome this discrimination, we have to unite against homelessness as we did when we fought apartheid.”

The impact of the Homeless World Cup in Cape Town was also felt by the Chief of Police who said crime levels in the city had fallen during the ten-day tournament. According to him, gang leaders told their members that the people at the tournament were helping the homeless and to leave them alone. For those ten days, the Homeless World Cup offered everyone protection, as well as hope.

The most memorable moment for Iain was a phone call, shortly after he had landed in Cape Town. A simple question of what he was doing tonight, led to a peculiar demand. “Please could you pick up Eusebio from the airport?” Iain has the photo of him and the 1965 Ballon d’Or winner on his wall; “he’s kind-of smiling”, he jokes. A surreal memory from a remarkable week.

But the lasting memory Iain took away from Cape Town was an experience of “common humanity”. He explains, it was a tournament with “huge humour which broke down barriers.” From Desmond Tutu to Eusebio to the reserve goalkeeper from Cameroon, there was a sense of togetherness. For ten days in Cape Town, everyone was united, and laughing.
Edinburgh hosted the inaugural Four Nations Challenge Cup in September 2021. England, Northern Ireland, and Wales travelled to meet their Scottish hosts for the two-day tournament.

For many of the players it was their first chance to represent their country and offered players who had previously played at the Homeless World Cup an unexpected chance to put on their national shirt again. (Players are only allowed to play at the Homeless World Cup once to make the opportunity available to as many people as possible.)

The two-day tournament was opened by the Lord Provost Frank Ross and as national anthems played out across Princes’ Street players looked to each other with a mix of pride and disbelief. Yes, they really were here representing their countries and singing the national anthem. It was finally happening.

After 18 months since the global pandemic started and regular lockdowns had impacted all four nations, the chance to play in a competitive football tournament was welcomed with open arms.

The first day was a round robin, offering all the teams the opportunity to scope each other out. With largely new teams coming into the tournament there were no favourites going in. Day one offered the chance to finally suss out the opposition. The second day was the semi-finals to see which teams would be playing for a chance to get their hands on the inaugural Four Nations Challenge Cup title. A trophy awaiting the winner of the men’s and women’s competitions.

The final was a battle between England and Northern Ireland in both the men and women’s competitions. The women’s game took place first with England making up for their defeat the day before against Northern Ireland. Winning 7-3 they were crowned champions of the Four Nations Challenge Cup.

Despite taking the title, England women’s player Zainab El Mouden said her favourite match was the tight semi-final clash between England and Wales. At half time they were trailing 0-1 to the Welsh Dragons but it turned around after Zainab had a dream start to the second half.

“I got past one player and I just shot – and it went in the goal straight away; and I was like oh my gosh, oh my days. And it kept going: 2-1, 3-1, and then they scored and then we scored, and we finished 5-3.”

“We could’ve just dropped our heads and been like ‘Well, we’re gonna lose’ but we didn’t.”

In the men’s competition, Northern Ireland beat England 7-2. It was a low scoring second half as Northern Ireland were 6-2 ahead at half time. Both teams weren’t short of opportunities with strong performances from both keepers helping to keep the score down.

A Celtic clash took place between hosts Scotland and Wales in both the men’s and women’s competition for third and fourth place. The women’s game between Scotland and Wales saw a heavy defeat for the hosts. Wales beating Scotland 10-1, with Sarah the Scottish goalkeeper surprising the visitors and delighting the crowd by sending a goal past her opposite number in the Welsh goal.

The match between the Scottish men and the Welsh men was tight, ending 7-6 to Wales. Not quite the 21-goal thriller from the day before, but a fantastic spectacle for the crowds gathered on the Mound Precinct.

However it was evident for the players that the tournament was about much more than their final finishing positions.

Being back together on the football pitch again was all that mattered to these inspiring players. Together they were representing their countries and showcasing the impact that football can have on people’s lives.

You can read players & coaches stories and watch highlights from the Four Nations Challenge Cup on our website.
There are lots of exciting things planned for 2022 at the Homeless World Cup Foundation. Post-production is underway for The Beautiful Game, which will be released later this year.

The Homeless World Cup will be heading to the USA for the first time since the Homeless World Cup was founded in 2003. The tournament is expected to take place in New York in September with more details following soon.

Laurence Cann, Founder and CEO of our American partner, Street Soccer USA said: “If any city is built to demonstrate the leadership and resilience required to host the return of the Homeless World Cup, it is New York City.”

We couldn’t agree more and will have more information with you soon about how you can get involved.

In the short term, we will be publishing a special International Women’s Day edition of our newsletter. Please let us know if you know an inspirational woman that you would like us to feature.

After the difficulties and challenges of 2020 and 2021, we are delighted to have some positive news for 2022 and can’t wait to share it with you all.

If you are interested in volunteering at the Homeless World Cup in 2022 or would like to tell us about an inspirational woman we should feature, please get in touch with us info@homelessworldcup.org
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