

The first Street Child Games has already brought the Olympic spirit to Rio

The Olympians going to Brazil are following a group young athletes from around the world who made their own remarkable journeys to Rio earlier this year

Jo Griffin *The Guardian* Wednesday 27 April 2016

With only 100 days until the world turns its eyes towards the Maracanã for the opening ceremony of the 2016 Olympic Games, serious doubts remain about Brazil's capacity to deliver the event. But Rio de Janeiro has already hosted an alternative Olympics this year. The inaugural Street Child Games gave former homeless children the chance to become medal winners last month, offering an inspiring example of how grassroots sport can elevate the most marginalised groups and give them the opportunity to show their potential.

Take the cases of 14-year-old Hepsiba and 20-year-old Innocent, who were both among the medal winners. Hepsiba, who lives with her mother in a night shelter in Chennai on the Bay of Bengal, picked up gold, silver and bronze medals for India in the 100m, 400m and 100m hurdles, giving her the confidence to continue training and pursue her dream of becoming a professional athlete.

“It was very difficult at home in India,” she says. “I live in a night shelter and many other children are struggling like me. On the streets we could not have a bath or eat properly. I wanted to win gold in the 100m and my determination overtook my fear which made me achieve my goal. It took me a while to realise that I was not only representing street children from India but the country itself – which gave me an extra push. Now, I have won, I know I too can achieve.”



Hepsiba winning 100m gold.

Photograph: Gustavo Oliveira/WBR/Street Child United

Innocent, who coaches children at a centre for the homeless in Bujumbura after being helped off the streets where he fled during war and genocide in Burundi, collected two golds in the 100m hurdles and long jump. “I am very excited that I won” he says. “I want to tell everyone that sport is important and they should not give up.”

The sight of former street children pushing themselves to the limit and then climbing on to the podium to collect their medals was truly inspirational for volunteers at the Street Child Games like me. But in an era when the problems facing international sport are so evident, from doping and excessive spending to corruption, it also provided a chance to look again at sport’s potential to create a level playing field for marginalised groups – not just on the track but by educating a wider audience about the challenges facing certain groups.

The run-up to the Olympics has been far from smooth, with the collapse of the cycle path fuelling fears that Brazil is not ready for another “mega-event” so soon after the World Cup. But it’s much harder to dwell on the problems when you see sport’s transformative power in action. Teams of teenagers from Argentina, Brazil, Great Britain, Burundi, Egypt, India, Mozambique, Pakistan and the Philippines took part in the Games, which included seven days of sports and a UN-style congress to discuss children’s rights.



Medal winners celebrate.

Photograph: Malachy McCrudden Street Child United

All the teams were organised by NGOs, many of which use sport as a tool in their work with young people. Meninos da Mocambique in Maputo, for example, uses sport to help girls break free of restrictive gender roles, such as domestic servants. Team member Racquelina, who won silver in the long jump and bronze in the 400m, said: “For me, sports means companionship. Sport is something I use to take my mind off things. Sometimes when I am at home I feel so lonely, I prefer to go out and play.”

Street Child United, the organisation behind the Games and its flagship event, the Street Child World Cup, supports a sports project in a tough favela in Rio, encouraging children to play football as an alternative to the violent drugs trade and bringing together in one team those from areas run by rival factions. Coach Jessica, who escaped the drugs trade by joining a football programme, described sport as “the basis of my whole life”.



The long jump.

Photograph: Malachy McCrudden/Street Child United

The youths who took part in the Games are the ultimate underdogs, in sport and in life; many are born into wars, violence or abuse and often risk their lives by fleeing their homes or working in dangerous jobs. Giving them the chance to shine at sports changes perspectives and provides a chance for a continued platform back home.

Manoel Torquato, from the project behind Team Brazil at the 2014 Street Child World Cup, said: “After the Street Child World Cup there was a big change in the government’s perspective because they saw that the whole world was looking at Brazil. We were invited to join a working group to discuss solutions for children who work on the streets.”



The hurdles.

Photograph: Gustavo Oliveira/WBR

Mehar, from Pakistan, who won gold in the long jump, silver in the 100m and 400m, and bronze in the hurdles, told the congress how he had seen many other children die during his years working as a child on fishing boats. “There were dangers for us as we used to go too far out to sea,” he said. “It’s a terrible position to be in and other kids died. I had never been to school as my family had no money to send us. My family used to tell me not to play but to go to work, but one day a coach saw me play football and said I was really good. But I don’t want to just play sports. I want to help other children so they don’t have to go through what I have.”

A key reason why sport can help such marginalised youths is that it is universal, in this case transcending language as young people from nine countries made friendships despite their cultural differences. It is this global language that explains why sport can offer unique opportunities to the most socially excluded everywhere. As Hepsiba put it: “Even street dwellers have talents.”

For more information visit streetchildunited.org