

## Football as a healing process for refugees

---

[Bill Shankly](#), the legendary coach of Liverpool FC from 1959 to 1974 always refused that football is one of the most important things in life. He actually thought that it was by far the most important thing in life. Obviously, any person that thinks of football as a socially insulated process, without further significance, where 22 extremely well-paid athletes play with a ball in a clear terrain under flashlights and amidst a multi-billion business, will probably disagree with this. However, Shankly did not have this in mind. It is not that this aspect does not exist. It does exist and it is the aspect of football that is most often presented. Nevertheless, football becomes really important when it offers the possibility to those who saw their childhood end abruptly as a result of war and persecution to become children once again. This happens when it is possible to reappropriate the game within a dystopian landscape of fear and despair. It is then that football can include many others, the weak and persecuted of this planet, from the children of miners in Britain to the teenagers growing up amidst the poverty and trauma of post-war Greece, the children in Latin American favelas, and contemporary refugees. Today refugees are the nomadic, fragmented and eternally persecuted collective subject, which in a certain way encapsulates all the pain associated with our post-humanist era. In their case football become once again what Antonio Gramsci once described as the 'open-air kingdom of human loyalty'

The current refugee crisis is undoubtedly the most important event of our time. Its extent and intensity have radically transformed the way we perceive our world and the very notion of life. It has given new life to images of violence without precedent and misery without end, images that had been repressed to the unreachable depths of our collective memory and brought again to forefront, in the most clear and merciless way, our existential angst. This image of an ongoing humanitarian drama that has as starting point the warzones of Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq and continues into the refugee cities of Jordan and Turkey, the waters of the Mediterranean, the walls along the Balkan Route and into the refugee camps in Europe, has had a deep impact in all aspects of social life and to a certain extent it has stirred the still waters of professional football. Major European football cups, such Bayern and Real have announced campaigns to offer financial assistance to refugees, Barcelona is supporting through its Foundation the campaign to integrate refugees within European Societies and its veterans came last to yeas to express solidarity to the refugees of Ioannina. There are also similar initiatives by Greek football camps, Larissa being the most recent example, which, despite a Super League ordnance to the contrary, chose to play with the phrase 'refugee children are our children' written on players' outfits.

And indeed some football clubs are hesitatingly trying to put in their rosters some talented young football players that come from the refugee population. Among the many thousands of people that were displaced, one can find both professional football players and teenagers that grew up always playing with a ball and invested upon it the dream of a better life. **Ali** is one of the. He was born in an Afghan province in 20012, at the time the first **bombs** started falling transforming the country into a bloody prize in the antagonism between foreign powers and local gangs, in a war that never ended. As an unaccompanied minor he went

into the difficult journey to escape and ended up in Greece. In the beginning he stayed in a squat and then in a special hospitality center for unaccompanied minor refugees. His desire was to become a professional football player. So he went and asked to be tested at the football academies of Olympiakos FC. They decided to accept him and to help him bring out his potential. "My coach encourages me a lot. I think that at first I was not good, but he helped, he gave me opportunities and now I have improved. Now I am happy. I hope that I will make it and succeed. Football is all my life", Ali told us.

Beyond this level, that has a significant economic and symbolic impact, there is another level, at its first stages yet clearly radical and antiracist. Its philosophy is to use football as a means to heal the trauma of loss. It is in this context that some time ago the first football club comprised entirely by refugees was formed. The "Athletic Hope of Refugees" is the outcome of the cooperation between [Organization Earth](#), an NGO, with the Organization for Culture, Sports and Youth of the Municipality of Piraeus, the Council for refugee integration of Piraeus, the League of Football Coaches of Piraeus. The initiative is under the aegis of UEFA. About 18 months ago there was an open call in the large refugee hospitality structures of the greater Athens area, in Skaramangas, Schisto, Eleonas and to individual refugees living in shelters. More than 150 persons expressed their interest, a selection process took place, based upon sporting criteria and a team was formed with players aged 18-31. The team follows a full schedule that includes three practices per week, lunch at the restaurant afterwards, travels and on Sundays it takes part in the enterprises championship.

During such a practice I met them. It was a dark and rainy Friday at the Amorgos Str. Stadium in Kaminia. They started arriving at noon in groups; they entered the premises, put on their outfits and started warming up. Present was also the technical manager of the team, some well known from the 'Pirate trophy' of 2004. The phrase refers to Greece winning the 2004 European Championship and the technical manager is Antonis Nikopolidis, the goalie of the Greece national team of that time. He has never worked with such a vulnerable population. However, when it was asked of him, he accepted without a second thought: "It is the first time I take part in such an effort. However, I am happy to do it. The hardest part was the initial selection. I wish we could take all 150 that came, but this would have created a dysfunctional group and so we ended up with 24", he explains. Football is not just a game. It is a way of life. He has first-hand knowledge of this and he understands how it can be transformed into a starting point for a better life: "These persons must find a way to go on with their lives. Here, they have this opportunity by doing something that they love. The joy of the game creates an uplifting psychology, they escape their worries about what is happening in their countries, the anxiety for their future and even their anger regarding their living conditions in the camps", he stressed.

During our conversation, I was wondering how they reacted when they watched on televisions the fierce fighting that continues to occur sporadically in Syria. I asked myself whether some of the cities of the blood civil war in Syria are being transformed progressively into shadows of their previous form, full of squalid ruins and long lines of displaced persons that look for a way out, still reminded them of something they could call their own. However here they have an opportunity to enter a strange time machine and to be transferred back to their untouched by war childhood. "In Syria we played a lot of football. I played in a

second division team. I wanted to be a professional footballer, but war tore apart our dreams”, says Yusuf. He traveled to Greece alone, using the dangerous crossing of the Aegean. He arrived at the island of Chios and now lives in the Skaramanga camp. Similar is the story of Ibrahim, a Syrian of Kurdish origin who at 23 experiences the deprivation of his family and the nostalgia for the part. “My parents are in Syria and my brother lives in Germany. I have applied for relocation in order to join him. I miss them all a lot and I hope that sometime we will be family again and live in the same place”. Ibrahim is a Barcelona supporter and a fan of Lionel Messi, and he plays in the line of the team, although today he is injured. He sits on the bench and joyfully comments on other players. “Here I forget myself. I like playing. We have become friends and I feel that I am not alone”, he tells me.

The team is evolving like a small community, like all football teams. Players get to know each other and form a special bond. They create their own codes for communication, they develop a spirit of cooperation and mutual assistance, they learn to win and lose. During the game enthusiasm is the spirit and dressing rooms are to make fun of each other. They play without competition, just for the joy of the body and the psychological outflow of tension. They come and go in groups and if they are not all at the table they do not start eating. For these persons that have been deprived in a violent and involuntary manner of their identity and are feeling alone and suspended in a cold tent or a colourless container, this is very important. They become once again members of a broader collectivity and they regain at least an elementary normality that escapes the intolerable boredom of the camps. To this new start they have someone to constantly lead the way. He is their coach and they listen to him with respect and in the field they look for his gesture. “It is the first time that I deal with refugees. I had to stop some other programs I am involved in order to dedicate myself to it. I really like it. I avoid asking them too many questions about their personal histories. I avoid stirring up memories of the difficult times they have passed. The aim is for them to escape all these. During the games we make sure that they all play, we do not care about winning or losing. We are interested in taking part and sharing the experience, that is why we split the time so that they all take part”, says Andreas Sampanis. Besides it is a fluid population with constant changes. For example, recently the main goalie of the team left for Germany through the relocation process. However, despite these difficulties that team manages to find its bearings.

Petros Kokkalis through the Organization Earth is the person that thought of all this and worked towards putting it in practice. “We thought that one of the ways to bring refugees in contact with Greeks was through football. So far, reactions in the Enterprise Championship where Hope competes have been very encouraging. To give an example, the team Lawyers of Athens after the first game with the refugee team offered to take up their legal aid regarding asylum questions. In fact, and besides everything else, the team is an opportunity to build such bonds. Neither can refugees so easily interact with Greeks, nor do Greeks have so many opportunities to see refugees that do not fall into the stereotype of despair. Here at least, such a perspective is being formed”, he notes. Besides the team, the project also includes two football academies that already operating since summer in the Skaramanga and Lavrion structures and deal with small children and teenagers living in the camps. “Their action has been more than positive. These children have few things to do and through the academies they have a motive, they spend some of their time in a constructive way and

build an everyday life that is closer to their desires and needs. In the beginning there was unease, but now they really look forward to the time of practice. The aim is to establish a third academy outside of the camps dealing with refugee children that live in hotels and shelters”, Petros Kokkalis adds. He also explains that at this point refugees cannot be integrated in normal mixed teams because they lack proper documents to have a proper player identity. We have appealed to the Greek Football Federation and UEFA to deal with this, in order to help some players that choose to stay in Greece to go into professional football. “Football is not only about teams that play in Champion League, it is also about thousands of persons around local teams that go into a process of education and socialization”, he stresses.

Refugees Athletic Hope is the most advanced project that incorporates football into a healing multi-prism process in regards to refugees. It offers them a space to take care of themselves again and to have fun, it promotes the interaction of local population with refugees and sends a message against xenophobia and racism. Similar initiatives, more fragmentary and hybrid, are also underway in various areas of Greece. Last Easter we had the initiative of a volunteer farmer from the region of Imathia there was a game between the team Alexander the Great from Trikala and a team of refugees from a nearby camp. The Homeless National Team last October had a game with a team of refugees that stay in the Softex camp. The Micropolis social space also organizes improvised games in the self-made football field that refugees have created at the Derveni hot spot under the catchphrase “We play together, we live together”. In Volos there is a refugee team in the first stages, in order to create a small local championship. In Lesvos we have the activity of the Irish organization “[Football for refugees](#)” which was instrumental in the formation of the Kara Tepe United team of young refugees and the beginning of January it organized the second football tournament in the island, to which an estimated 70 unaccompanied minors take place. “Children that live in camps, such as Kara Tepe, carry a lot of trauma, have been through a painful process to escape war and a dangerous journey to arrive here. Sports unite people and give them self-confidence. We have seen the enthusiasm of these children when they play ball and decided to do whatever possible to ensure this”, says Barry Lysaght from the organization. Also in Athens, a similar football experiment also takes place. Two months ago young refugees living mainly in occupations to offer hospitality to refugees have started on their own, with the help of Greek activists to form their own football team. The practice twice a week and have gone forward with the legal procedures to form a team under the name of “World United. It is a very interesting attempt, since it is a self-managed endeavor where refugees themselves become the subjects of action and demand.

In a Europe that is testing its own democratic limits with the refugee issue and often is proved do less in comparison to the magnitude of the tragedy taking place in its doors against the new misanthropy that targets refugees and attempts to inscribe hate into the souls of people, football has proved to be a valuable and unexpected tool in the hands of those that insist on solidarity. In Germany, that has received the main part of refugees, there are estimate that also among them there were 10.000 refugee football players. The German Football association launched an appeal to its members to enroll refugees in their teams. Hamburg incorporated the 18 year old Bakery Zatta and Werder Bremen the 19 year old Ousman Manneh. At the same time, [we have also seen autonomous teams of refugees](#). The

most well known case is FC Lampedusa that was formed with the help of the St Pauli FC which is known for its antiracist and antifascist action. It is comprised mainly of refugees from Western Africa that went through the camp in Lampedusa, Italy before arriving in Hamburg. During the summer of 2014 the management of SC Babelsberg – a small football team that competes in the Northeast German League and is often called the “St Pauli of the East”, because of its action in social questions – decided to form an affiliate comprised solely by refugees on all levels, from management to caretakers. This is how Welcome Unite 03 was formed. In Frankfurt one can also find FSV Bischofsheim. In Göteborg, Sweden, the [Sandara Team C](#) was formed, comprised of players from the large pool of almost 35000 unaccompanied refugee minors that the country has received. The coach and the person that had the inspiration is a social worker Matilda Brinck Larsen. Similar efforts have been in Athletic de Pinto in Spain, Liberi Nantes in Italy, in United Glasgow FC in Scotland, in Young Caritas Kafig league in Austria. UEFA apart from the programs it supports in Europe is also [operating a big project in Zaatari Camp](#), the huge camp that has evolved into Jordan’s fourth city with over 80.000 refugees that live in squalid conditions that represent a disgrace for human civilization. According to the data of the European Federation in the football program more than 3000 youths from Syria have been involved (2140 boys and 839 girls), 15 football tournaments have been organized, 32 boys’ teams have been formed and 10 girls’ teams and 128 refugees have been trained as coaches. UEFA has stressed the development of women’s football in the camp in order to offer tools of psychological support to these girls that are constantly exposed to the dangers of gender violence, sexual harassment and early marriage.

“There is a lot of activity at this point. At Fare we are trying to locate the initiatives that take place internationally in order to assist and empower refugees through football. Major European clubs have made gestures of support, but they are not enough. The needs for action in regards to the size of the problem are much bigger. The tendency towards creating refugee football teams sooner or later will stir the water. We want to see it evolve into a movement that will bring forward the therapeutic role of football, its contribution to offering deliverance to the soul”, says Antonis Daloukas, the representative in Greece of [Fare](#) (the organization of UEFA that battles against discrimination). Football has a deep social dimension. Perhaps those that deal with it at the top want to get rid of this social dimension by transforming it into a soulless and almost robotic super-entertainment, detached from the passions and desires of simple peoples, by uprooting its deeply popular character and by stripping it from its emotional weight. However, this returns constantly. In the period between the two Great Wars, refugees from Asia Minor build with their hands the fields and organized themselves in refugee football clubs because they needed to declare their existence as equal, worthy of attention and respect. In a similar way, today refugees from Middle East and Africa have begun hesitatingly to outline their own football typologies, founded not upon profit and antagonism but upon the innocent childish fantasy of the game, the need for visibility, cooperation and joy. In these experiments, football acquires once again the poetry that Pasolini saw and the [ethics that Camus was taught](#). It is the form of football that brings together and does not divide. The football we love.

Maria Louka

