

IN DEPTH

# More than a Game. Sport and Conflict Resolution

**Tom Woodhouse**

Emeritus Professor at the University of Bradford and visiting Researcher at Universitat Ramon Llull

After a long career as an academic concerned with peace and conflict research, I have become convinced more recently that we in the academic and policy communities, who are working on peace and conflict issues, need to reach out beyond our normal and somewhat comfortable academic niche to develop new sources of creativity and renewal. For me, the perfect way to do this was to unite two passions which are often not connected – even by some people seen as contradictory – that is a love of sport as a leisure interest combined with a professional and public-political interest in conflict resolution and peace building. In this article I explain why I am excited by this potential to link conflict resolution with sport. But first, let me acknowledge some of the problems in linking the two.

Clearly we must recognize that there are aspects of sport as a global commercial enterprise that do not fit comfortably with the values of conflict resolution. In the first place, it is often sustained by and associated with the marketing and advertising strategies of powerful multinational companies. Increasingly and more recently in football especially, it has become a way of wealthy individuals and even states paying breath-taking amounts of money, to sponsor or even to buy premier clubs in England France and Spain. The total global revenues from sport in 2015 exceeded \$145 billion<sup>1</sup>. This is also an exercise in ‘football diplomacy’, a way of using soft power, sporting and cultural, to buy into the political and security architectures of Europe and North America, and for developing countries in Asia, Africa and Central Asia to bolster their

image and to establish regional hegemony<sup>2</sup>. It is also well known that a football match sparked off a war between Honduras and El Salvador in 1969<sup>3</sup> and, indeed, the rivalries between many big city clubs across the world are often regarded as a form of symbolic civil war, as rival fans clash. In Italy, Roma and Lazio; in Scotland, Glasgow Celtic and Glasgow Rangers; in Turkey, Fenerbache and Galatasaray; in Serbia, Red Star Belgrade and Partizan Belgrade; in Argentina, Boca Juniors and River Plate; in Colombia, Independiente Santa Fe and CD Los Millonarios. These rivalries are created and sustained by a history of social division based variously on religion, class and status differences, ethnic group affiliation and geographical separation. Sometimes, and in the case of perhaps the biggest club rivalry of all, *El Clasico* in Spain, the games between Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, the divisions are directly based on political differences. FC Barcelona represents Catalan pride and identity against the centralist control of the Spanish state based in Madrid, from where the dictator Franco repressed Catalan aspirations for political, cultural and linguistic autonomy. This political competition has become ritually embedded in the annual matches between the two clubs, so much so that *El Clasico* has been described as a re-enactment of the Spanish Civil War<sup>4</sup>.

**“ We must recognize that there are aspects of sport that do not fit comfortably with the values of conflict resolution ”**

Clearly sport, and particularly football, the world's most popular game, can be an exercise in big power politics and a drive for aggression and competitive division, rather than anything we would recognise as peacebuilding or conflict resolution. Other negative features frequently associated with many sports include the use of drugs to enhance performance and the emergence of corruption and match fixing, especially related to gambling syndicates. A new report by Transparency International, *Global Corruption: Sport*<sup>5</sup>, claims that over 1,000 sporting events over the last five years, including the Olympics and the football World Cup, have been fixed, fatally undermining the fundamental value of sport, the belief in fair play. Transparency International calls

for a series of reforms to put sport back under the control of the communities to which it has belonged historically, with participation as the driving principle.

So why the passion? These negative aspects are well known and well reported in the mass media. What is perhaps less well known, or at least less well reported, is the power of sport to unite, to build bridges between divided communities, to motivate marginalized young people who might otherwise join violent gangs or engage in criminal activity, and generally to inspire people to use the convening power of sport to strive for the higher goals of conflict resolution and peacemaking. Some more positive examples and case studies might help explain how it does this.

Sport as conflict resolution has some eminent advocates in the world of nonviolent conflict resolution. The book by Charles Korr and Marvin Close <sup>6</sup>, tells the story of how the leaders of the African National Congress, imprisoned on the notorious Robben Island, formed their own football league, the Makana Football Association, and ran it under FIFA rules, using the game and its discipline to enable them to survive the severe environment of the prison and to create a space in which they could claim dignity and even a form of basic democratic organization. Through this experience, Nelson Mandela became aware of the power of sport to motivate and inspire, and in the early years as President of the newly liberated South Africa he used it as part of the process of promoting reconciliation between the sport-obsessed Afrikaners and the equally passionate black people of the townships. When South Africa staged the Rugby World Cup in 1995, Mandela, in a powerfully symbolic act, wore the shirt of the team's white captain Francois Pienaar. The story was subsequently the subject of a major film, *Invictus*, based on the book by John Carlin <sup>7</sup>.

**“ Sport has the power to unite, to build bridges between divided communities and to motivate marginalized young people ”**

There are many contemporary examples, too numerous to mention in detail, but a few will serve to demonstrate the power of sport to bond and bridge within and between groups<sup>8</sup>. The Foundation of Football Club Barcelona launched its FutbolNet programme to teach dialogue and conflict resolution skills. FutbolNet is a project that attempts to educate children and young people via the promotion of the positive values that come from playing sport, in this particular case, football. During the season 2011/12, the FC Barcelona Foundation developed this social action programme in five areas of Catalonia: Banyoles, Olot, Salt, Santa Coloma de Gramanet and the neighbourhood of Carmel in Barcelona. FutbolNet was inspired and developed from experiences in Colombia and also via the organization streetfootballworld, which developed the original methodology based on the football3 approach, which is based on the principles of dialogue and mediation. In the English League similarly, most clubs have close relationships with the communities in which they are based, conducting a wide variety of often unheralded education activities which enrich community life and contribute to conflict resolution locally. Many also have outreach programmes abroad. These activities rarely get the publicity awarded to the big star names of the game<sup>9</sup>.

**“ The case of footballer Drogba illustrates the potential of football to contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliation at the highest level**

”

Moving from grass roots level to the level of regional and continental security, one remarkable case study which illustrates the potential of football to contribute to conflict resolution and reconciliation at the highest level in Africa is that of the Ivorian footballer Didier Drogba and his intervention in the civil war in the Ivory Coast. In September 2002, following a mutiny of elements of the army, tensions between Muslims in the north of the country and the government-controlled south, erupted into full-scale civil war in which thousands were killed. Drogba is a professional footballer who has played most of his football in England and France, but he also represents the

Ivory Coast in international tournaments. He is a Catholic, but his wife is a Muslim from neighbouring Mali. In April 2010 Drogba was listed by *Time* magazine in the USA as amongst the world's 100 most influential people, because of his call, made after the Ivory Coast team qualified for the 2006 World Cup, to halt the continuing fighting in the country, a call which led to a five-year ceasefire agreement. Drogba was also instrumental in moving the venue for a high-profile qualifying match in the African Nations Cup to the city of Bouake, a rebel stronghold in the centre of the Ivory Coast, a move that strengthened sentiments of national unity and reinforced support for the peace process. Drogba continues his peace and humanitarian work through the Didier Drogba Foundation<sup>10</sup>. Stability was restored and a peace process initiated, monitored and supported by the United Nations Operation in Cote d'Ivoire (UNOCI) a peacekeeping mission deployed in April 2004. In 2006, the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, the UN Office on Sport Development and Peace and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) formed a partnership to use sport in the peacemaking framework of UN peacekeeping operations.

In the early years of the 21st century, the role of sport in peacemaking has evolved so much that it can now be labelled as a distinctive sector for peacemaking, as many organizations, from the United Nations through to a wide variety of local grass roots projects have used sport as a conflict resolution tool. This range of activity is now commonly referred to as the Sport Development and Peace (SDP) sector. Engagement with this sector, now developed as a vital global network involving thousands of civil society organisations and hundreds of thousands of young people, is a vibrant opportunity to re-energise and innovate in the work of peacebuilding and conflict resolution<sup>11</sup>.

1. This figure is an estimate by PriceWaterhouse Coopers, quoted in the *Globalist*, '[FIFA and CO. The New Mafia?](#)' 28 February 2016.

2. Grix, J. Lee, D. 'Soft Power, Sports Mega-Events and Emerging States: The Lure of the Politics of Attraction', *Global Society*, 27:4, 521-536 September 2013.

3. Goldblatt, D. *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Football*, London: Viking, 2007, 533-534.

4. Ball, P. *Morbo: The Story of Spanish Football*, WSC Books: Web publishers, 2011.

5. See '[Global Corruption Report: Sport](#)', *Transparency International*, 23 February 2016.
6. Korr, C., Close, M., *More than Just a Game: Football vs Apartheid*. London: Collins, 2009.
7. Carlin, J. *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game That Made a Nation*. London: Atlantic Books, 2010.
8. I have written in more detail about this in Ramsbotham, O. Woodhouse, T. and Miall, H. 2016 *Contemporary Conflict Resolution*.
9. On Barcelona see *Fundacio FC Barcelona, FutbolNet: Que te Valors Guanya: Programa Educatiu Per a Infants I Joves*, Barcelona: Foundation FC Barcelona, 2013. On English football see Woodhouse, T. *More than a Game: A Case Study of Football in the Community Initiatives in England*, in *Deporte y Resolucion de Conflictos*, Barcelona: Open University of Catalunya: epublication 2014, no longer available online. Available from author.
10. See Drogba, D. *Didier Drogba: The Autobiography*. London: Aurum Press, 2008, and the [Didier Drogba Foundation](#).
11. To find out more about this network and how to become involved see [The International Platform on Sport and Development](#).

[Photography \(CC\)](#) : G D

© Generalitat de Catalunya