

Festival's final day lives up to hopes

Johannesburg, 10.07.2010 – It was a day of tears and joy in Johannesburg as the Football for Hope Festival 2010 ended in a chorus of drums. Playing as one were almost 300 youngsters representing 32 teams, a mixture of boys and girls from disadvantaged communities in over three dozen nations around the world. The raucous closing concert was a 'celebration of thanks' to the people of the township of Alexandra, who came out to support them in large numbers over the course of the week-long tournament.

With the Final of the 2010 FIFA World Cup™ the following day across town at Soccer City, the poverty-stricken region known as 'Alex' hosted two finals of its own: of the Alexandra Cup and the Football for Hope Festival. The culmination of the event – a five-a-side competition organised by FIFA, streetfootballworld, the 2010 World Cup Organising Committee and the City of Johannesburg – also included much singing, dancing and award giving, and it was played out in front of a packed house at 3 Square Stadium, which has hosted over 19,000 mostly local residents for the 174 matches played.

A spirit of togetherness

But the results on the pitch were secondary for the teams, which are made up of youths selected for their commitment to tackling social issues in their communities. It was telling that the biggest cheer of the day was reserved for the FIFA Fair Play Award winners – Spirit of Soccer, who promote landmine awareness in Cambodia – which was awarded based on a vote by the attendees. Fair play was a consistent theme, and there was a real spirit of togetherness on display. In the Football for Hope Festival final, there was a moment when the two sides – Search and Groom from Nigeria and MYSA from Kenya – had contradictory thoughts about whether a shot had crossed the goal-line. Since there were no referees at any of the matches, the teams came together in the middle of the pitch and decided between themselves how to resolve the situation. It was an excellent example of what the participants had learned over two weeks of workshops, forums and training.

"You saw the spirit there," said Juergen Griesbeck, the Managing Director of streetfootballworld. "It was the final, both teams wanted to win badly, maybe they had pressure from back home to do well, there were 3,000 people in the stadium, and still they showed the maturity to decide together without problems. Was it in? Was

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it out? They decided it was not in and played on, and they get all my respect for the way they handled it."

MYSA won the match on penalty-kicks, but just as Search and Groom had beaten Team Zambia in a shoot-out in the semi-final and then helped to dry the eyes of their rivals, the east Africans comforted their west African opponents after the match. Esperance of Rwanda beat South Africa's Grassroot Soccer in the final of the cup, which was contested by teams knocked out earlier in the festival. Although the youth were all focused on the work they were doing off the pitch, the matches were also taken very seriously. "The main purpose is to have fun and learn from other peoples," said Search and Groom captain Suliat Yusuf, a 15-year-old girl from Lagos, who was displaced with her grandmother after their house was destroyed to build a motorway. The organisation she represents is dedicated to fighting corruption and poverty, and she said she would like to become a lawyer in order to help people that grew up like her. But first, she wanted the team in South Africa to draw attention to their cause. "No one cares about us in Nigeria, but we wanted to do well so people would have to recognise us. They believe we are homeless and helpless – we wanted show them different."

But most were just happy to have had the opportunity to meet others dedicated like themselves and be a part of South Africa 2010. "It's amazing to be able to participate in a World Cup, and to see the other people from around the world has been unbelievable," said Football United's Mekhaled Alanezi, known as 'MD', with a big smile. He was born in Iraq, but lived in Kuwait, Jordan and Syria before settling in Australia as a refugee. He said the only thrill bigger than going to a World Cup match – he saw Spain defeat Paraguay – was getting to know the other participants. "It's so cool to have made new friends, and I've even learned a little bit of new languages. Really just being with people of other backgrounds is so nice. For instance the team from Lesotho [Kick4Life], I love them. Every night we dance together."

Griesbeck said it was an emotional day for everyone, but that it was "point zero" for the community. "I hope all of you will remember this moment," he said to the gathered youth before the final drumming salute to Alex. "This is just a festival, an event. All of you will go home now, and you will carry this experience back with you, and you will have the responsibility to help change lives in your community."

streetfootballworld is a social profit organisation that promotes positive change through football. Founded in 2002, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) is a leading contributor to the field of Development through Football and continues to work toward social change on a global scale. At the core of streetfootballworld's work is the streetfootball-world network, which connects with over 80 organisations worldwide that use the world's most popular sport to address social issues.