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Resilience and the Homeless World Cup

As the dust settles on the 2015 Homeless World Cup in Amsterdam, our contributors Dr Dan Parnell, Dr Kathryn Curran and Nicolás Miranda consider the impact of the event.

“We are already champions for just being here. The result is not important. Because we have overcome problems much worse than losing a football match.”

Horacio Garcia, the captain of Team Argentina is talking about his experiences and reflections at the most recent Homeless World Cup, staged in Amsterdam. He explains the comparisons between wins and losses in life and in football.

“When you lose in life, you have to fight so hard to be able to pick yourself up for the next day, and that’s worth much more than just winning or losing a game.”

We were fortunate enough to spend time at the Homeless World Cup in Amsterdam, and it is apparent that there are many more stories and philosophies similar to Horacio’s which echo the resounding resilience of the players. They are abundant, compelling and powerful.

NURTURE

This notion of resilience can be defined as an individual’s ability to cope with adverse events in life, and having the ability to overcome his or her difficulties. In football, the term ‘bouncebackability’ has been coined – but maybe there is more to it than just bouncing back.

In 2014 the Indonesia team arrived at the Homeless World Cup with only eight players, selected from the streets of different parts of the nation, but who were all HIV positive. It was a similar situation for them this year. For what, to many, could be a reason for hopelessness and despair, for them is a reason to reinvent themselves constantly and nurture their hope on the small triumphs that they witness each day.

Yudah Purnama was one of the best goalkeepers of this year’s World Cup in Amsterdam, leading his team to first place in their category. However you could see him smiling after every goal scored against him. When asked why he did this, he explained: “Many times in my life, joy is scarce – that is why. If I can find happiness on other people’s achievements, that means I will also find a little bit of joy for myself.”

He left the pitch proud and strong after each win but more importantly, regardless what the final score showed, he walked away happier and taller than before.

The best female player of the 2015 Homeless World Cup, wasn't Brazilian, Dutch or Argentinian player; she was the India captain, Reena Panchal.

DEVELOPMENT

Reena joined the street football team from her neighbourhood without telling her family, because she knew she would not have their permission. After being selected for the national team, she had to talk to them and, after much discussion, she finally got their blessing, albeit with the following advice: "She is a girl. If something happens to her, it will be an insult to all of the family."

Girls from the slums in India have little or no chance of development; their goal is to help their families get enough food and shelter until the next week.

However in Amsterdam, Reena enjoyed every game. She cheered her adversaries and danced with her team-mates. She scored 15 goals in total and was selected as the best female player.

When asked about her plans for when she returned home, she replied: "I want to make everyone proud of my strength. So that people can realise that I overcame my circumstances and I made it. I want to create a team of my own and help others play for India and for themselves too."

Life stories of strength, effort and courage demonstrate that when living in adverse situations, adaptive flexibility becomes an integral part of people's coping mechanisms and ultimately, their way of living.

Resilience is the stuff that allows people like Reena and Yudah to be knocked down by life and come back stronger than ever. Failure could overcome and drain the resolve of these people, they could throw the towel in, but somehow they find a way to rise again. From our experience within the Homeless World Cup, this extends beyond keeping a positive attitude, being optimistic, managing emotions and using failure to develop.

AMBITIOUS

Nicolás Miranda supported the organisation and management of the Homeless World Cup 2014 in Chile. Since then he has joined the English Homeless FA in their ambitious endeavours with people experiencing homelessness in the UK.

Reflecting on his time with the organisation, he said: “I have seen how resilience for Homeless World Cup players can be achieved under four principles:

a) observing life as a continuum: they are experiencing homelessness, yet homelessness does not define them.

b) having a sense of perspective: the situations they come across can be perceived as defeats and setbacks, or as empowering challenges, and this is dependent solely on their individual viewpoint from which they analyse their life events.

c) moving forward: they are able to use their inner voice to help them keep pushing forward under the toughest of moments.

d) social support: networks of social support provide the necessary feedback as well as a different perception of failures versus achievements. This feedback that their peers and supporters can offer, often serves as an encouraging boost that helps them continue moving forward after difficult situations.”

Dr Kathryn Curran is leading an innovative research project exploring the Public Health impact of the English Homeless FA programme and the Homeless World Cup.

EXCLUDED

Kathryn revealed: “Homeless men are amongst the most excluded groups in society and consistently identify stigma, discrimination and exclusion as major barriers to health and quality of life. The Homeless World Cup was established in 2001 as a tool to energise homeless people to change their lives. Through this, resilience has emerged during the initial observations as a contributing factor to behaviour change.”

It is worth framing homelessness in its current context in Britain. Dr Dan Parnell said: “Homelessness is a major national and local issue. We have observed the result of the unstable economic climate and subsequent policy measures that have reduced funding for key services.

“Indeed, for those experiencing homelessness austerity measures have not simply been meaningless changes to a spreadsheet in Westminster, it has been real, observable and experienced.

“Those people experiencing homelessness are facing further inequalities, as a result of the withdrawal of funding for those charities and public sector services at the forefront of providing care and support.”

So as the Homeless World Cup ends, as attendees return to their home countries, the journey continues for the participants. They will continue their match, striving for their personal success, but now knowing they are not alone. They will be with their experiences and with their team, who – in their words – are their family.