

A PERFECT PITCH

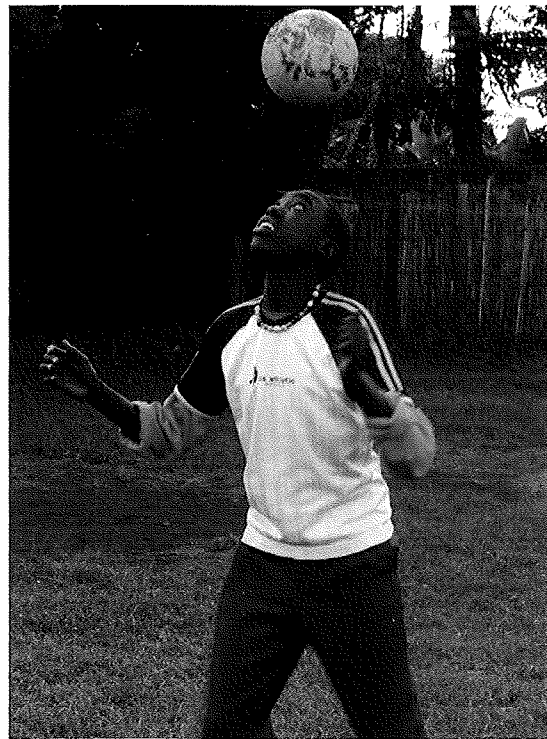
By Rachelle Strawther

The tension is palpable as six girls bite their fingernails and nervously kick at the dirt, wondering if they have walked an hour in vain for a match that will never take place. This is the nature of the Kisumu Youth Football Association (KYFA) girls' leagues – a team is usually one player short of the required seven needed for the match to begin. Too many of their teammates are kept at home, washing mounds of their siblings' clothes because their mothers and aunties have reminded them that football is for boys. Killing time, a 13 year-old girl (maybe 14, maybe 15; probably too old for this age category, but without birth certificates, who really knows?) juggles a ball with such *Messi*-like ease that even *boda-boda* drivers halt their bicycles to observe. When she arrives home later that afternoon, her granny will ask her what she was really doing with her time that day and what boy she was meeting because, surely, girls don't play football.

At the last possible minute afforded by the competition manual, just as a heavy-set center referee has raised the whistle to his mouth, a player cuts through the open fence (luckily, thieves persist in stealing the cedar fence posts, providing easy access to the venue) and dashes towards the center, which prompts visible sighs of relief among her teammates. Even their opponents, who stand to gain three points from a walkover, are pleased; they would rather play a full game and lose than never touch the ball and win.

For 40 minutes, the mostly-barefoot girls race up and down what is deemed one of Kisumu's best football fields, which, ironically, has a pebble-to-grass ratio of 20:1, but is conveniently devoid of trees, termite hills, boulders and graves, and only partially floods during the rainy season. Even the toughest soles are not invincible to jagged stones, responsible for no less than three bloody feet per match and a significant amount of limping. A typical team uniform consists of a conglomeration of mismatched skirts, ill-fitting shorts and faded t-shirts of approximately the same shade; a few girls have been lucky enough to inherit second-hand boots (cleats to the American) from an older brother. With the field a medley of color, one wonders how the players can

distinguish their teammates from opponents. Meanwhile, a keen spectator can always point out the newest players on each team – the rookies whose sole strategy is to indiscriminately punt the ball as hard as possible in the opposite direction, much to the frustration of the Ronaldo-idolizing veteran players. Earnest coaches donning KYFA-issued polo shirts pace the barren sideline, sweat beading at their temples. There are no clipboards, no benches, no mothers waiting to distribute orange slices during half-time – just younger siblings with runny noses and a handful of adults curious enough to watch but reserving their enthusiasm for the boys' league matches.



An unexpected steal prompts the coach to wave his arms wildly and yell: *Songa mbele! Sukuma!* (Move forward! Push!) Suddenly, the field is a fury of clashing, high-pitched voices: *Leta hapa!* (Bring it here!) *Songa nyuma!* (Move back!) *Haraka!* (Fast!) In classic soccer fashion, the balance of power is once again tipped as a defender swiftly intercepts the ball, prompting a disgusted *Ay, yawa!* (the local equivalent of "Oh, c'mon!") from the striker, a Class 8 student with plaited hair and impressive upper arm muscles (years of washing her brother's trousers and carrying jugs of water). Studying the field, the defender dribbles briefly, then expertly launches the ball to her right

forward, who neatly chest-traps the ball and, in an act of God, pure brilliance or both, chips it perfectly over the head of the unfortunate goalkeeper. It is a simple, unremarkable, and yet glorious moment as her teammates run towards her, shrieking, arms extended wide as if gliding, sailing, over the field. There is no victory dance, no choreographed display of triumph at the corner flag – only embraces and faces beaming with satisfaction. Their coach still clapping, the girls trot back to the midfield line, ready to try again.

One could never guess from a football match that most African girls are intensely shy. I first observe their introversion during my year as an English teacher in rural Ethiopia, where girls who have voraciously studied the language duck their heads and

Photo by Lindsey Hand

cover their mouths in embarrassment when asked to speak, in contrast to Ethiopian boys who stutter broken, unintelligible English phrases with unabashed pride. This same paradigm carries over to Kenya, where, over the course of nearly eight years, I note the same propensity towards bashfulness amongst young Kenyan females – a reluctance to call attention to themselves, particularly before their elders. This shyness is not inherent, but conditioned. In the brief span of her life, a Kenyan girl has learned to greet household visitors silently with a limp handshake and a hand respectfully placed over her forearm, to pour warm water over their hands for washing, serve them milky tea and margarine-covered bread, and return quietly to the kitchen. She has learned not to protest when her teacher lines up the class for caning after poor performance on an exam. When her oldest sibling, who pays her school fees, demands to know why her performance is dropping, she knows better than to bring up the fact that she has no textbooks.

A transformation takes place on the football field, however; shyness is pulled aside like a curtain and assertiveness comes into full view. For those 40 minutes, the football pitch is the girls' domain, granting an exhibition of power that is rarely encouraged outside that rough patch of dirt. In the nearly 150 girls' football matches that I have watched, I have never witnessed a fight. The girls simply come to play without hesitation

or fear of judgment. It is the beauty of sport, the reason that organizations like KYFA use football to help young African women build their self-esteem and find their voice in a society that has traditionally preferred their silence.

When the center referee signals the end of the match with three consecutive whistle blows, the exhausted players slowly exit the field with their feet still stinging from impact with the ball, their soles tender from the pebbled, sun-baked ground. Crossing over the sideline, they pass around jugs of untreated water and take turns lifting them over their mouths. There are no parents waiting to give the girls congratulatory high-fives or consolatory pats on the back; only household chores await them. As they slip on flip-flops that have been mended several times, the girls know that they will be up late that night, most of them studying next to a dim kerosene lantern in preparation for a 6am class. Still, there is always the memory of a game well played – the remembrance of that sweet ecstasy felt upon the ball sailing into the inside corner of the net. With dusty ankles and bruised shins, the girls cross through the non-existent fence to begin a long walk home, leaving behind the distant echo of their coach's voice: *Move forward. Push.*



Photo by Rachelle Strawther