

# A UNIFYING SYMBOL OF HOPE

HOW SPORTS CAN EMPOWER EVERY LIFE



## MORE THAN MERE MORTALS

At the age of 10, when kids are running around the streets with a skip in each step and peals of laughter, as they think of life as an adventure, Yiech Pur Biel was running fast and hard to escape the clutches of death.

After 11 years of surviving, he ran again. This time, for the pride of refugees at the 2016 Rio Olympics. Biel is an 800 meter runner, who fled South Sudan in 2005 after a civil war broke out. He stayed and trained in Kukam Camp for 10 years and later was picked up by the IOC as one of the members of the Refugee Olympic Team.

Biel's story is just one of the millions of stories of children who fled from their war torn countries and took up sport as a means to overcome tragedy and grief. And most importantly, belong somewhere with pride.

## WINGS OF HOPE

These refugees don't come in light and easy. They carry with them the story of broken bones and broken dreams. Their struggle is not how to train each day but to fight their inner demons and then focus on the target at hand. The International Olympic committee wanted to let the world know about this struggle. Tell a different tale; the tale of grit, determination and courage through sport- The one global unifier.

The world saw these refugees of human conflict smile, wave, talk, compete and laugh at the biggest coalesce of humanity in the world. In October 2016, IOC announced that 10 refugee athletes would be competing in the Rio Olympics, even if that meant no country to represent and no national anthem to sing. Though the medals were elusive this year, these superheroes probably overshadowed Phelps, Biles and the multiple other medals at the games. They came from lost homes only to find a place in billions of hearts.



## ACCOLADES AND INITIATIVES

The journey from base camps to the biggest stadiums for these athletes is nothing short of an achievement in itself; worthy of multiple medals. Luol Deng who left Sudan at the age of 14 years now represents Great Britain and plays for Miami Heat in NBA. Saïdo Berahino is a Chelsea attacker who is on a loan at West Ham. Berahino, striker, was sent to England after both his parents were killed in a riot in Nigeria. Yusra Mardini, a part of the refugee team in the Rio Olympics, changed the way refugees were perceived around the world. Her story of swimming for three hours while pushing a dingy carrying 20 people from Turkey to reach Lebanon, is one made of goosebumps, inspiration, respect and awe that can only come from believing in a superhuman.

The UNHCR (UN Refugee Agency) recognizes the power and importance of sports, and works with implementing partners and corporate sponsors to ensure sport is integrated into refugee programmes. The Federation Internationale de Volleyball being one of them. It has sponsored annual sport activities in at least two UNHCR-run camps since 1996 and sends hundreds of volleyballs and nets to camps and organizes, national volleyball players to coach refugees.

Apart from the UNHCR, there are a number of stories of sporting solidarity to help the cause of the refugees, wherein various sporting icons and teams have helped in their own ways to improve the lives of refugees around the world. When Europe was struggling with the worst refugee crisis since World War Two, one of the world's biggest football clubs, Bayern Munich demonstrated the power of sport. They pledged €1 million (\$1.1 million) to help refugees in the southern German city. The club's youth academy agreed to set up training camps for kids, as well as offered meals and German language classes for those fleeing war zones in their home countries.

## SPORTING SOLIDARITY

In 2015, Cristiano Ronaldo decided to tell the world that bullies were not welcome through seven-year-old Zaid Mohsen. Zaid and his father were deliberately tripped by a Hungarian camerawoman when they fled a refugee camp at the Hungarian- Serbian border. The Alghadab family finally arrived in Spain with staff at a school for football coaches in the Madrid suburb of Getafe in Spain tracking down the devoted father - and offering to help him rebuild his life by giving him a job and accommodation and to watch Real Madrid play Grenada. Ronaldo made little Zaid his personal mascot, who was elated to be on the pitch with his favorite player, while his father and brother were the guests of honour at the game. The camerawoman was fired and is currently facing criminal charges for obstruction of peace.

Sport around the world has been used in innovative ways for development and peace. One of the biggest constituents of a casualty in conflict or war are children. Unrest, torture, fear, fights, hunger, poverty and all the ingredients that make a war, leave deep mental scars in these children for a lifetime. Sport creates a channel to funnel this angst and the unnerving frustration into a beautiful productive tomorrow. Spirit of Soccer is a charity organization that uses football to educate children living in conflict and post-conflict regions about the dangers of landmines, unexploded ordnance (UXO) and other Explosive Remnants of War (ERW).



## DAWN OF A NEW TOMORROW

Sport is a catalyst in changing perspectives. It has been used to address social issues like disability, immigration, racial discrimination and many others. It is the ray of hope for these refugees who are struggling to be accepted in the society. The hope in these athletes has resonated far and wide, it won't be long before we see more of such compelling stories in not just sport but in the everyday walk of life too.

