

HAWKS 4 HAITI



In this impoverished Caribbean nation, Iowa women's soccer players bring the joy of the world's favorite sport—fútbol.

PHOTO: BILL ADAMS

The lights beam down on the soccer pitch. Two thousand emotional spectators form a circle around the goal, pushing and craning for a better view. The night wind swirls dust as everyone waits in anticipation for the penalty kick in a shootout to determine the championship game.

For a few glorious moments, these talented teenage players—with soccer skills equal to any U.S. collegiate athlete—no longer feel the brutal sting of poverty. Tonight, beneath waving American and Haitian flags, they feel like their country’s rising stars.

As for me, I realize I’m witnessing one of the most extraordinary memories of my life.



“Blan, blan, blan!” squeal Haitian children at the small truck full of white people winding through the village of La Digue. Shouts of blan—the Creole term for white or foreigner—draw several more families from their mud-brick homes. Several youngsters chase the dilapidated pickup, waving and smiling as it slowly drives along the dusty gravel road. In broken English, they yell: “How are you, blan? How are you?!”

The seven of us from the UI women’s soccer program didn’t know what reception to expect, and this warmth and friendliness immediately puts us at ease. Soon, we’ll fall in love with Haiti and its people.

The truck continues to the rural Haitian community of Do Digue, where the Community Health Initiative (CHI), a nonprofit organization founded in 2012 by UI alumni **Chris Buresh**, 01MD, 06R, 12MPH, and **Josh White**, 01MD, holds tri-monthly medical clinics. In a country the World Bank considers poorest of all, 80 percent of the 9.8 million Haitians live below the absolute poverty line without electricity, clean water, sewage



Previous page: Excitement fills the air at the soccer tournament organized in Haiti by UI athletes. Right: Dana Dalrymple*, 13BA, and Caitlin Foley, 13BA, escort Oliewne Midroin to a hospital, where she will undergo a C-section.



PHOTO: ALLIE ADAM

Providing a rare opportunity for the camaraderie and competition of organized sports, the soccer tournament boosts the spirits of local children and their families.

treatment, medical care, or education. A mere 692 miles from the glamour and glitz of Miami Beach, Haiti's majority lives on less than \$2 per day.

CHI volunteers address the needs of people with no access to care, and they do so in a sensitive way that believes Haitians themselves can best identify and find solutions to their pressing problems. These volunteers also realize that fulfilling human potential is far more than just the absence of disease; a healthy, productive

life features many elements—including the carefree pursuit of fun and recreation.

My fellow Iowa athletes and I bump along the road in this truck in hopes we can enrich Haitians' lives through soccer. As members of CHI's first annual Hawks4Haiti program, we intend to bring Haitian children the confidence-building power and camaraderie of sport.



The inspiration for Hawks4Haiti emerged in January 2013, when Iowa soccer alumna **Allie Adam**, 13BA, traveled to Haiti as a volunteer on a CHI medical

mission. During her stay, she played a rousing pickup game of soccer with some locals and was moved by their energy, talent, and enthusiasm. When she returned home, she gathered several teammates to discuss an idea: what if they shared their love of soccer with Haitians through an organized tournament?

With approval from Buresh and White, Hawks4Haiti became an official branch of CHI—one focused on developing the minds, bodies, and spirits of locals through the leadership, motivation, and teamwork that lie at the heart of soccer. Allie hoped Hawks4Haiti would establish trusting relationships with Haitians outside the medical realm, give women and girls the confidence to participate at the same level as men, and provide a nurturing environment solely focused on fun. She thought the tournament could bring together people from very different backgrounds to learn from each other and share a common passion.

After Hawks4Haiti received nonprofit status last year, the team members embarked on a fundraising campaign that collected enough money to break ground for soccer fields in two locations: Arcahaie and Do Digue. Allie returned to Haiti in August 2013 to supervise the construction and preparations until the tournament's debut in CHI's medical mission this past January. Workers leveled fields, constructed bleachers, and welded goalposts. Three people spent four days trimming the grass field in Arcahaie with machetes and the grazing assistance of a vagrant goat. In Do Digue, villagers neglected their own vegetable gardens to labor under the merciless sun. Allie had planned to pay them for their efforts, but they declined.

"You're not going to take this field and put it on your back when you leave, so it is a gift to us," the committee leader protested. "We refuse to let you pay us for it."

Hands Up for Haiti

Jean Gabin lives in a 12-by-12-foot house with his wife, Minoushe, two sons, Jeansley and Eve, and three adopted daughters, Bellie, Vidlyne, and Djyeline. He was still a child himself—only 15 years old—when he adopted Vidlyne. Djyeline came into his life during the Community Health Initiative’s January 2013 medical clinic.

When Djyeline’s biological parents brought her to the clinic, she was severely malnourished. They didn’t have the means to care for the 4-year-old, and doctors predicted she would die. Gabin wanted so badly to help her that he raced home to ask Minoushe if the little girl could join their family. The very next day, he signed the adoption papers. He brought her home and kept vigil all night, watching her tiny chest move up and down. Today, Djyeline is happy and healthy, with sparkling eyes and a bright smile.

Haiti has more starving children than any other country in the Western hemisphere. Here, the infant mortality rate is 51 out of 1,000 births (compared to the U.S. rate of 5.9). Fifteen percent of all Haitian children are either orphaned or abandoned, and, since the devastating earthquake of January 2010, it’s estimated that Haiti is home to some 750,000 orphans.

Gabin (pictured here with his

daughter Djyeline) dreams of building an orphanage for the children of Haiti, a wish he tries to make a reality by interpreting for CHI volunteers during their medical missions and carving pens out of bamboo to sell to visiting Americans.

Each pen bears the phrase: “Hands up for the children of Haiti!” It’s a slogan he created for his future orphanage—words that speak to the heart of a man who, despite his own hardships, saved the lives of three children. And someday, he hopes, many more.



PHOTO: ALLIE ADAM



PHOTOS: DANA DALRYMPLE

As the UI soccer players discovered, Haitians are fútbol-crazy—and often extremely talented at their favorite sport.



From day one, we learn that Haiti is a land of contrasts—poor in material possessions but rich in human spirit.

Hanging over everything is a nauseating smoky smell from the charbon—a kind of charcoal—used by street vendors and in homes to cook food. Seen from the air, Haiti’s landscape is pale brown, compared to the lush green of the Dominican Republic, which makes up the eastern part of the island of Hispaniola. This stark difference is due to the fact that only one percent of Haiti remains forested. The country’s poverty forced its people to remain dependent on charcoal for fuel, which accelerated the destruction of its forests and set off a chain of negative environmental consequences.

People here treat us like rock stars. Children squeal at my blond hair and follow us around. Unconcerned by style or fashion, many impoverished locals look like they’re wearing 10-year-old clothing from Goodwill. It’s humorous to see people in shirts with English words that they probably don’t understand. Our interpreter Jean Gabin wears a shirt that says, “Let’s get loco! Spring break 2010.” A little boy named Widmok runs

around in a shirt proclaiming him “Mommy’s little princess.” A toddler named Fanol flaunts one that announces, “I may be small, but I’m a HUGE Elvis fan!”

Before the tournament kicks off, we have another job to do. We spend our first week volunteering with the CHI medical clinic. Familiar with media images of destruction and despair, we discover people of incredible strength, resilience, courage, loyalty, and optimism. On a two-hour hike to a remote mountain town to provide care for rural residents, we meet a family from another village. They’ve carried their sick 19-year-old son down the mountain on a bed frame, hoping to find the medical team. He suffers from organ failure and the doctors send him to the hospital for dialysis treatment. Even if they walk for countless miles or wait hours to be seen for infection, dehydration, malnutrition, or an open wound, Haitians express immense gratitude for the care. And despite the severity of many of the patients’ ailments, CHI’s efforts often succeed.

Says Buresh, “Many times, I thought someone was really dwindling and might die. We give them meds and our community health workers follow up, and at the next clinic visit, they look awesome.”

As the medical mission winds down to its final days, excitement for the soccer tournament soars. Haiti boasts one of the longest “fútbol” traditions in the Caribbean, and the nation developed a strong reputation for its soccer prowess in the 1960s and ’70s. Then, the 2010 earthquake flattened the football federation headquarters, destroyed soccer fields, and turned the national stadium in Port-au-Prince into a refugee camp. Of the quarter million people who died, at least 30 had ties to Haitian national soccer, including the coach and several star players.

Despite such tragic losses, Haitians’ love for soccer remains strong, and the game contributes greatly to their positive spirit. People play pickup anywhere, and along the dusty roads, children kick around tin cans or anything else that remotely resembles a ball. No organized youth programs exist for these children, so participating in a real tournament is almost too much for them to comprehend.



The weeklong tournament hosts 10 schools in two age groups: primary (ages 11-15) and secondary (16-20). Before it begins, in the midst of our various jobs with

the medical mission, we visit schools to deliver team uniforms and equipment donated mainly by soccer clubs and schools in our Midwestern hometowns. Although the uniforms are used, the Haitian children react as if they've just received professional jerseys from the English Premier League. Unlike many American children who may take for granted their ability to register for any sport imaginable, Haitian youngsters hungrily seize this opportunity to play in an organized athletic event.

"You have no idea how much this means to the community," Menard, the field's groundskeeper, tells us. "May God bless, bless, and bless you more. It's a great thing that you've done, and this field will be here forever."

We set up nets and position portable generator-powered lights delivered from Port-au-Prince so we can hold games at night—an incredible concept to many Haitians who lack lights in their own homes. We drive to each school to bring players to the field, and they sing and chant the entire way to the new pitches.

For matches during the day and night, hundreds of people crowd the fields to watch the action. They eat hot dogs and drink ice-cold Prestige beer from street vendors, listen to tunes from the resident DJ, and socialize in the Haitian version of American "Friday night lights." Parents, elated at the chance to finally watch their children play on a real team, constantly thank us for making a dream come true.

Sometimes, the intensity of the players, coaches, and school principals creates problems that we fail to foresee. Coaches hurl accusations at each other, charging that certain players are above the age limits or aren't even students of the schools. They threaten to forfeit games

and then recant so that play stops and starts and stops again. The chaos is worsened by the wild dogs, goats, and small children running across the field.

Despite such glitches in game etiquette, the matches continue. Nothing can dampen spirits—until a riot breaks out the night of the semifinal primary game.

An unruly coach argues with a spectator and, at the throw of the first punch, the whole crowd erupts to yell and throw rocks. No one sustains severe injuries—but, the next day, police officers watch over the championship game. Many villagers feel embarrassed and apologize profusely for

the poor behavior, fearing that we will forever hold a negative opinion of Haiti.

That would be impossible. We arrived in Haiti eager to impact lives, but we return home more moved. We wanted to build a collective spirit and instill hope, yet we find our own spirits emboldened. We realize even more the common ground that human beings share: whether in Do Digue or Iowa City, we all hope for good health, prosperity, and a better life for ourselves and future generations. We also receive a lesson in what really matters. Haitians don't sweat the small stuff, they make the most of their meager meals and tiny huts, and they seem to possess the qualities that money can never buy: happiness, inner peace, friendship, and love.

Over the course of the games that highlight pure, unbridled talent, we're staggered by the amount of untapped potential in Haiti—the fact that many smart and talented people never get the opportunity to pursue their dreams, both on and off the soccer field.

As Chris Buresh points out: "What if in this country,

in one of these minds, is the cure for cancer, but that person doesn't have the opportunity to pursue an education? In a world so full of resources, it's unjust for anyone to live in conditions that stunt emotional, intellectual, and physical growth."



Engulfed in an electric atmosphere, I squint my eyes against the lights as the championship teams—Emeraude and La Ballade—stand as a unified front facing the goal, locking arms. The next La Ballade player strides to the penalty spot. He places the ball, steps back, and takes a deep breath. The referee blows his whistle and the entire crowd freezes. The player takes a couple of short steps before shooting the ball straight ahead—and the goalkeeper makes an effortless save. Instantly, the crowd explodes and all the Emeraude players throw up their hands and rush the goal. They grab their heroic goalie and hoist him in jubilant celebration. As they carry him through the crowd, they wave their jerseys wildly in the air.

At the award presentations, Emeraude players pass around their four-inch trophy, taking turns to kiss it and raise it above their heads. Their utter joy makes me reflect on my own soccer career. I've played in some of the best venues and against the best athletes. But watching these players and spectators chant and cheer in the middle of this humble field, in one of the world's poorest nations, somehow transcends those experiences in a way I'm still trying to understand.

For more information about Community Health Initiative's work in Haiti, visit www.chihaiti.org.

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