

The Homeless World Cup isn't immune to Ebola fear-mongering

October 23 2014, by Fiona Crawford



The Namibian team was tested for Ebola, despite the country being free of the disease. Credit: Fiona Crawford, Author provided

Convenience stores in Santiago, Chile still stock Coca-Cola bottles adorned with 2014 FIFA World Cup Brazil branding. It's a small reminder of the ubiquity and overhang of the world's largest football event, which played out [under some controversy](#) on the eastern side of the continent three months ago.

Taking place amid less fanfare and with far, far less budget and branding, the Homeless World Cup ([HWC](#)) kicked off on the other side of the South American continent on Sunday.

But the competition, which runs until October 26, started on a bit of a sour note, with the Namibian team arriving to a media frenzy after being accused by the Chilean Minister for Health of bring Ebola into the country – despite Namibia being Ebola-free.

Team spirit

A football event for homeless and marginalised people, about which I've written previously, the HWC [uses football](#) to help people:

- reconnect with others
- gain fitness and confidence
- navigate their way out of poverty.

The [UEFA-backed](#) HWC was devised as a conference of sorts by street paper journalists and avid football fans Mel Young and Harald Schmied. Its edict is that instead of talking about homeless and marginalised people, the HWC gave them the platform from which they could do the talking themselves.

Now in its 12th iteration, the event also [raises awareness](#) about the entwined, multi-faceted and largely misunderstood aspects of homelessness.

There are 42 men's teams and 12 women's teams from 30 countries contesting the 2014 HWC, including reigning champions Brazil in the men's comp and Mexico in the women's. Unfortunately Australia's not represented this year, despite Melbourne hosting the HWC in 2008.

The 2013 Brazil captain, player of the tournament and fan favourite [Darlan Martins](#) is one of the event's highest profile success stories, having been scouted for a professional contract as a result of his HWC performance. This is all the more remarkable given that Brazil was so

short on funds they could only afford to bring the exact number of players to take the pitch – they played the entire tournament without a single substitution.

There are [surveys](#) that show that HWC's power to re-engage participants in society. More than 90% of players [surveyed](#) report a new motivation for life and almost 80% have changed their lives:

- 45% gained full-time employment
- 43% found steady housing
- 40% went into full-time study
- 56% of those who had drug or alcohol dependency issues successfully addressed those problems.

In 2008, they [stopped conducting those surveys](#) because the results were so consistent.

Perhaps, then, it's the stories that emerge from the HWC that best allow us to understand it – and our world – in all its complexity.

When HWC co-founder Mel Young opened the 2014 event in Santiago, Chile, he told the players:

You are all fantastic. You are standing proud representing your country and I salute you. But you are doing much more than that. You are showing the world how we as human beings should behave.

This year, perhaps more than most, such an event is required as the tales of what the players have experienced to arrive at the HWC beginning to emerge.

Ignorance and fear

When the Namibian team landed in Santiago, they were told they needed to remain on the aircraft to undergo Ebola testing. Although Namibia is situated in southern Africa, geographically distant from the West African countries currently under threat from Ebola, and currently free from the disease, the team understood the nervousness and complied with the testing.

Negative Ebola tests returned, the team was allowed to proceed. They thought the worst was over. Instead, a media frenzy awaited them in the arrivals hall. The Minister for Health – that's minister, not ministry – reportedly tipped off the media that the Namibian HWC was bringing Ebola into Chile.

For many of the Namibian players, it was their first ever trip overseas. They had no idea what to expect. Team coach and manager Bethuel Uirab initially thought the media contingent was there to greet them – a not-unusual occurrence for the HWC.

Instead, the media asked him about – and reported widely on prime-time television – the Namibian team bringing Ebola into the country. (This fear mongering is characteristic of media coverage that business magazine [Fast Company](#) says "has swung from inadequate to incoherent".)

The team was jostled by media, photographed and recorded by them and the general public – people even stood on chairs to catch a glimpse of the apparently Ebola-carrying team. Simultaneously, some members of the crowd hooted at the players as if they were monkeys.

"The world today for many, many people is not a good place," Young said in his opening speech. "We have to end homelessness and poverty. We have created a cruel world where many people are excluded. This is not sustainable."

For the Namibian team feeling definitively unwelcome in Chile, the words likely rang particularly true.

Tenacity and triumph

While funding is the perpetual plague of all HWC teams, it's a greater burden on some countries more than others. Cambodia is one said country – an acute irony of which many of us are aware given that Australia's cogs are in motion to banish their people seeking asylum on our shores.

The cash-strapped Cambodian team, which is largely funded through the fundraising graft of Melbourne-based Irishman Paraic Grogan (the HWC and the efforts to see it through are nothing but global), could only afford to bring three players to the event. Rather than folding, they've come anyway and are using a goalkeeper supplied by the Chilean reserve team to make up the numbers.

That means their three outfield players will have to play every single minute of every single match. This includes 17-year-old Langeng Taeng, whose malnourished formative years spent living on a Cambodian rubbish dump stunted his growth so significantly even the Cambodian passport authorities were convinced he could only be 12 years old, and not 17.

"Everyone is constantly commenting on how small he is," Grogan told me. "They're just shocked. I suppose he is the perfect example of what happens when you have malnutrition."

This no-substitutions issue has hallmarks of Brazil's 2013 experience, albeit with one difference: Cambodia is not an entrenched footballing nation and the Cambodia team are far, far smaller than the larger, more physical rivals they will encounter. Yet the team will, as Grogan told me,

walk when they can no longer run, and crawl when they can no longer walk.

"For us, the most important thing was for us to be here," Grogan said. "Because for us, we believe the HWC for Cambodia is like the Olympics – you mightn't ever win a gold, but it's all about being there. It's all about taking part."

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