



Photo by: Efrat Saar

Playing 'footy' for peace

By CARL HOFFMAN
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A team of Israelis and Palestinians – with a difference – will head again to Sydney and Melbourne to compete in the 2011 AFL International Cup next month.

Sometime back in 1988, a couple of American entrepreneurs with business interests in Jamaica found themselves watching a pushcart derby while on a visit to the Caribbean nation.

It might have been the heat, the sun, or a bit too much Jamaican rum, but the two somehow decided that pushcart racing reminded them of bobsledding, a northern winter sport in which a four-man team rides a

high-speed sleigh through a track carved out of snow and ice.

Without much further ado, a sleigh was put together, a team was recruited and trained, and – to the world’s utter disbelief – a bobsledding team from the tropical island nation of Jamaica made its debut at the 1988 Winter Olympics in Calgary, Canada.

Sometime back in 2008, Tanya Oziel, executive director of the Australian Friends of the Peres Center for Peace, came up with the equally creative idea of using Australian Rules football as a way to build bridges between Israeli and Palestinian youth. This decision was made despite the fact that Australian football, the most popular spectator sport Down Under – typically drawing crowds of 40,000 or more – is virtually unknown almost everywhere else on earth.

And yet, without much further ado, a mixed team of Israelis and Palestinians was recruited, taught how to play the game, trained, and sent to compete in the 2008 Australian Football League (AFL) International Cup.

Like the now-legendary Jamaican bobsled team, the 2008 Israel-Palestinian Territories Peace Team did not perform particularly well in its first outing. The Jamaicans had had little experience going down an actual bobsled track before they arrived in Calgary, while the Israelis and Palestinians were competing in a game they hadn’t known existed just seven months before.

Also, the Jamaicans had never experienced winter temperatures before, and the Israelis and Palestinians were playing together on a team that had to be trained in three languages at the same time – English from Australian coach Robert “Dipper” DiPierdomenico, translated into Hebrew and Arabic by Israeli and Palestinian players.

In both cases, however, the teams easily won the hearts of their respective audiences – the Jamaicans through sheer chutzpa, and the Peace Team by presenting a picture of brotherhood and teamwork between Palestinians and Israelis.

The Jamaican bobsled team is now just a memory, after finally finishing a quite respectable 14th in the 1994 Olympics – ahead of Russia, the United States and France. The Peace Team, however, is heading to Australia yet again, to compete in the 2011 AFL International Cup, August 12-27, in

Sydney and Melbourne.

THE PEACE Team initiative is a joint project of the Peres Center for Peace and the Ramallah-based Al Quds Association for Democracy and Dialogue. One of several sports projects run jointly by the two organizations, the Peace Team's major goal is to build bridges between the two groups by bringing Jews and Arabs together, by breaking down each group's stereotypes of the "other," by enhancing mutual understanding and, hopefully, by creating lasting friendships.

A lot of what actually brings the players together is the sheer challenge of learning and mastering this somewhat unusual game.

Played between two teams of 18 players on a large oval-shaped field of grass, Australian football – or "footy," as it is called by its devotees – is a lot more like rugby than soccer.

Watching a recent practice game between the team and some local Australian ex-pats, this writer found it vaguely reminiscent of American football, but without either the body armor or the sexy cheerleaders dancing on the sidelines.

Australian football is a contact sport, with tackling and full body obstruction, in which dangerous physical contact is "discouraged" largely by awarding the victim a free kick.

"You have to kill someone to get chucked off the field," says team doctor Harvey Belik.

In weekly training sessions and practice games, the Peace Team players have had to learn the ins and outs of moving the ball, tackling and scoring that are unique to this game.

Some players, like Kamal Abu Althom, a soccer coach from Hebron and a veteran of the 2008 team, felt that learning this new game was the most challenging adjustment they have had to make.

"It was very difficult," says Abu Althom, 27.

"This game is not found in the West Bank."

The second means by which the two groups are pulled together is a series of moderated dialogue sessions, at which no holds are barred.

Says Peres Center staff Elysa Rapoport, 27, “This is the second time the project has been run. Last time, in 2008, it was just about playing football and the players kind of inadvertently got to know each other. The feedback we received last time was that they felt that as wonderful as it was getting to know each other just through the training and games, something was missing.

“Dialogue is an important part of all of our projects, and this time we have incorporated dialogue and have had quite a number of moderated dialogue sessions with professional Israel and Palestinian dialogue experts.

“That has been very meaningful, and the players have had really challenging and confronting discussions. But they still always come out better informed, and I think it’s been very strengthening for them.”

It has certainly been “challenging and confronting,” if we are to believe the players themselves.

Says Daniel Belik, 19: “Everything is pretty much on the table. We can say whatever we want. We have facilitators to help us, and translators. It’s really important that everyone can hear what’s being said. And some of the things that they say are very hard to listen to. You wonder how they can say things like that. A lot of things contradict what we believe in, things that we’ve been taught since very early childhood.”

“The moment I started interacting with Palestinians in a personal kind of way, I realized that the generalizations aren’t true, the way Israelis conceive of Arabs. When you say ‘Arabs,’ Israelis generally think about terrorists.

Since I’ve had this experience, I’ve started to read books about the Palestinians, and learn Arabic.”

At this writing, Belik is spending a few days at the home of Arab teammate Saheed Mohamed Barhom, along with other Arab teammates, in the village of Ein Rafa, not far from Abu Ghosh. “I’m going to spend a few days with them, see how they live, and try to understand how they think, how they behave, in order to make it a deeper experience,” Belik explains.

For Hebron soccer coach Abu Althom, it is all about getting to know people as individuals, rather than members of a group.

“Look, you know about the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and the whole situation. Everyone here on the West Bank thinks of Israelis as our enemies.

And the only thing I knew about Israelis was what people said about them, what I read in newspapers, and what I heard on the radio all my life. They are killing us, they are destroying our houses, and so on. Then I came to play on the Peace Team and met Israelis for the first time face-to-face, as individuals.

Before, they were ‘the enemy.’ “But when I talk with the Israelis, I’m talking with a human being like us. And when you come to talk with a human being – not an ‘Israeli’ or whatever – you will surely change your mind. Today, I have changed my mind totally about the Israelis.”

Rapoport acknowledges that many of the players on each side began the program with overtly negative opinions about the other group.

About the Israelis, she says, “Not all of the guys came into this as left-wingers or peaceniks. They didn’t come from a place where they thought that this was something that they would ever be involved in.”

WHY, THEN, did they join? “Two reasons, really,” says Australian native Doron Zauer, 31. “I love Australian football, and this is my last chance to fulfill a football career dream. As for the other, I’ve never been what one might call a ‘peace fanatic,’ but I think the idea is very interesting, very intriguing, going through this experience with Palestinians and Arab Israelis and all sorts of people I never come into contact with in my daily life.

“My only experience with Palestinians has been while in the army, at checkpoints. And that’s not a particularly comfortable experience for anybody.

“Being on the team together with Palestinians and Arab Israelis, and going through the experience of playing with teammates, and training, and particularly the arranged dialogue sessions where Jews and the Arabs talk through different issues, has made me feel a little more optimistic to see that people can get along on a one-to-one level.”

Belik explains, “This isn’t the first time I’ve been involved with some kind of group of Israelis and Palestinians. I felt like I really wanted to have

a long and meaningful experience with them – and not just, like, a day, which is what I've had previously.

“This opportunity has given me more than six months of the experience of building a team together and building relationships with Palestinians, whom I really didn't know, and most of my friends around the country didn't know.

So I feel like it's a very important experience, and something I really wanted to do.”

Belik, “almost 20,” is a recent graduate of a pre-military academy, whose army service was postponed by the IDF to enable him to participate in the Peace Team.

Both the Peres Center and the Al Quds Association were determined to use the weeks of training as time for team building, both on and off the playing field. Often, daunting logistical problems had to be surmounted to make the project work.

Says Rapoport of the Peres Center, “Unfortunately, the reality of the conflict always comes in with projects like this one.

There's no real way of escaping it. But things still run, and we have ways of making things run, despite the difficulties.

“The Peres Center has very well-established relations with the civil administration, so we're able to get permits for all of our participants in all of our programs, to come and participate inside Israel.”

Not all of the team building activities occurred, in Rapoport's term, “inside Israel.” Project organizers were able to arrange one team building activity in the West Bank.

Rapoport recalls, “About two weeks ago, the Israeli players went on a tour with the Palestinian players to Bethlehem. That was the first activity that we've done on the Palestinian side. It was a hugely beneficial experience for them.

“It was particularly interesting for the Israelis to see the Palestinians on their home turf, because it's always the other way around, unfortunately. The Palestinians come once or twice a week for training and a game here. The Israelis turn up in their cars, and the Palestinians have to come across

the border, when we arrange their transport.

“So it was really nice for the balance to be on the other side. I think they all found it very meaningful.”

ASSUMING THEY did find it meaningful, and that the Peace Team experiment did break down barriers and create greater understanding among the players, the question is: So what? How is making an Australian Rules football team for a handful of young men likely to solve the intractable conflict between Palestinians and Israelis? “It might just be a drop in the ocean, but even if it’s just a drop in the ocean, it will help,” says player Zauer.

“Obviously, if this is the only exercise in mutual understanding and coexistence, then nothing is going to come out of it except that it might change the lives of the people who are involved. If these kinds of things are being done all over, I think it will have an impact.

“This Peace Team experience is not going to further the peace process or lead to any kind of permanent solution, but the effect it’s had on 24 lives might definitely have some kind of impact.”

Project organizers are already planning ways to maintain continuity and carry on the connections the players have made with one another after the team returns from the International Cup in Australia. The players themselves are more than receptive to this idea.

Says player Mohamed Za’arer, 21, a computer science student at the Palestine Polytechnic University in Hebron, “I’ve made friends from the Israeli players.

When you’re with someone for six months, you get to know him and become friends. I will be very happy to see these friends after the International Cup.”

And finally, speaking of the International Cup, what are the Peace Team’s chances this year? “Pretty good, I think,” says head coach Kevin Nafte, 28. “This year, we’re competing in a second division composed of teams from developing countries, and from countries that are only just beginning to play Australian football.”

These countries, says Nafte, include China, India, East Timor, Fiji and France.

The fabled Jamaican bobsled team was immortalized in the 1993 Hollywood movie *Cool Runnings*, a fictionalized account of the team's creation, training and performance at the 1988 Winter Olympics. Thus far, the 2008 Peace Team has been the subject of a highly acclaimed Australian feature-length documentary, called *Tackling Peace*. We can no doubt expect to find ourselves standing in line to see a feature film about the current Peace Team some day in the near future.

For further information about the Peace Team, visit www.peaceteam.com.au. For further information about the Peres Center for Peace, visit www.peres-center.org and to learn more about the Al Quds Association for Democracy and Dialogue, visit www.afdd-pal.org