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# NATA NEWS

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DONATING TO DARFUR:  
SPORTS MEDICINE  
FOR REFUGEE ATHLETES

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# “I’m here as a humanitarian”

## *Athletic trainer donates time to care for refugee soccer team during a tournament in Iraq*

*Alexandra Nuttall Smith, MPT, ATC, contacted NATA in June to tell us about her experience as the athletic trainer for Darfur United, a soccer team made up entirely of Darfuri refugees living in camps in Eastern Chad. She wrote to us from Kurdistan, Iraq, where Darfur United was preparing to be the first ever all-refugee team to compete in the Viva World Cup.*

*“I am here as a humanitarian,” she wrote in her email to us. “I hope this story can inspire other athletic trainers to seek out amazing opportunities to make a difference.”*

*This is her story:*

Text **Alexandra Nuttall Smith, MPT, ATC**

Images **i-ACT (iactivism.org)**

**M**y family started donating soccer balls and jerseys about 18 months ago to children from Darfur whose families had fled the unrest in Sudan. Little did I know that this simple gesture would lead me to Iraq a year later, where I was the athletic trainer for an unlikely group of competitors.

The donations were organized by a group called i-ACT (interactive-activism), a South Bay, Calif.-based nonprofit working on behalf of those affected by genocide, mass atrocities and crimes against humanity. The group’s founders, Gabriel Stauring and Katie-Jay Scott Stauring, have been travelling to Chad since 2005, visiting the 12 camps that support almost 300,000 displaced people from Darfur.



Soccer is part of the Darfurian culture. They don’t have shoes, and the balls are made of cloth scraps tied up with string, but Gabriel and Katie-Jay brought them hope that a Darfur United team could compete in the Viva World Cup, a soccer competition for nations unaffiliated with FIFA.

In January 2012, I put together a medical kit to be sent to Chad for the Darfur United soccer tryouts. In March, the team was selected. In

May, I found myself on my way to Kurdistan, Iraq as the team’s athletic trainer.

As I made some of my last preparations before our departure, I fell upon a quote from Nelson Mandela (fitting, as Viva World Cup teams compete for the Nelson Mandela trophy): “We must use the time wisely and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right.”

I tried to use my time wisely, packing medical necessities for the team, including



supplies donated by Brian Lee, MS, ATC, CSCS, head athletic trainer of Chivas USA, and the Chivas USA players. My main concerns were acclimatization, hydration, blisters (the players had never played in shoes before), gastrointestinal issues and creating an emergency medical plan in a developing country with unknown medical support.

We landed in Iraq at 3 a.m. The Darfur United team arrived shortly thereafter with faces of amazement. The players were encountering many “firsts,” including first time on an airplane, first time staying at a hotel and first time eating from a food buffer. Within an hour of their arrival, we had our first team meeting.

With the tireless assistance of Adam, a refugee teacher from the camps who acted as our translator (the players speak Arabic), I taught the team about my role. Unlike their opponents (who were mostly from Europe), the Darfur United players had no knowledge of how athletic performance relates to good hydration and food intake.

I told them that hydration was especially important. Water is scarce in the refugee camps, and the women line up twice a day at

watering stations. I showed them the color urinalysis chart and taped a copy to each of their hotel bathrooms, receiving a few awkward stares and giggles.

The players quickly labeled my hotel room “the hospital.” I treated them as high-level, international soccer players. Though the first few days of practice caused some minor injuries and illness – mostly the result of international travel, playing on non-sand fields and wearing brand new soccer cleats– the mood in “the hospital” was always positive. The air filled with playful discussions and encouragement among teammates. Each player emphasized how important the week was to them, Darfur, their families and the world. A twisted ankle, cleated shin or upset stomach wasn’t going to keep them off the field.

Treatment techniques were new to them, and so was taping. One player came in complaining of sore toes. He had been practicing for two days in cleats one or two sizes too small! He was given larger cleats. As natural athletes, they responded well and healed very quickly. The first game was approaching quickly, but there wasn’t a lot of time to explain

the reasoning behind each treatment – why I put ice on a swollen lip from a ball in the face or why I taped an ankle a certain way to prevent inversion sprains. But they trusted me.

The first game was against Northern Cyprus. Our driver got lost en route to the stadium. We arrived half an hour before kickoff. All of my taping and pregame treatments were completed on the cramped, bumpy bus. Darfur United lost that first game, 15-0.

The next game was against Provence. It was the first time the team had played at night, under bright lights. (There is no electricity in the refugee camps.) At lunch that day, I guarded the dessert buffet table. I emphasized the importance of pregame nutrition and explained that plates laden with spongy sweet cakes would not provide them the energy required for the coming game.

A person from the hotel approached and asked why I was limiting food for the refugees. I explained: “Today, they are not refugees. They are Darfur United soccer players gearing up for their first international night game.”



They enjoyed their cakes after the game, an 18-0 loss.

Like all athletes, they were sad to lose. But they all understood they were at the tournament for a greater purpose.

As the tournament progressed, the door to “the hospital” always remained open, whether it be for treatment, to use the nail clippers, try lip balm, grab “medicine water” (Gatorade), or simply take a break, hang out and chat. As

they received treatment, they told me about their families, schools, camps, their extreme hardships and especially their dreams. Every day at the tournament was a new experience that they needed to remember to pass along.

Medically, they were all in great shape. They had “bone pain” (muscle soreness), wounds from the games and sprained ankles. They never complained. They came in for treatment, and then they were off to another practice, game or meeting. They even grew accustomed to having their ankles taped.

The final match was a hot midday game against Western Sahara. A pending sandstorm added to the challenges, and so did having to fight back for my water coolers that were taken by the opposing team! (I believe the other team traveled with their Prince instead of medical personnel.)

This was the day that history was made – Mubarak Haggag Dougoum scored the very first goal in international competition in Darfur United’s history! Darfur United lost 5-1, but the mood was victorious. As I distributed water and Gatorade on the bus back to the hotel (an AT’s work is never done), I sighed with relief. Every player was able to play, illnesses were averted and injuries were successfully treated.

These men I cared for are heroes. Back in the refugee camps, they will act as coaches and educators.

The i-ACT organization is planning and raising money for a Darfur United Academy in each of the 12 refugee camps and hopefully for a women’s soccer team. I will continue to help any way I can – donating athletic training kits, sending information on injury prevention/first aid and collecting soccer balls and jerseys.

I encourage all athletic trainers to use their invaluable skills and professional education to serve charitable causes. As Adlai Stevenson said: “The journey of a thousand leagues begins with a single step. So, we must never neglect any work of peace within our reach, however small.”

*Nuttall Smith is collecting athletic training supplies for 12 soccer camps i-ACT is organizing in January 2013. If you’re interested in donating supplies, please mail them to:*

*iACT  
1732 Aviation Blvd. #138  
Redondo Beach, CA 90278*

