



LEFT: Fiza, 23 years old, plays defense for the Darfur United women's team.



RIGHT: There are currently 20 players in the first-ever Darfur United women's team. The 18 players pictured are (back row): Omkal, Halime, Rachida, Isma, Fiza, Soumiya, Nouha, Fatna J., Sadia, Aida and Kobra; (front row) Fatna A., Jawahir, Siema, Ache, Souhaila, Leila, Fatna Sabir.

FROM SWEDEN WITH LOVE

Darfur United makes film debut, supports assembly of women's Darfuri soccer team

By Kim Diggs

From the hot sands of eastern Chad to the biting winters of Östersund, Sweden, the men of Darfur United have come a long way. After years of seeking sanctuary from genocide, they are able to use their platform as the world's first soccer team of former refugees to tell their stories.

That is thanks, in part, to Alexandra Nuttall-Smith, MPT, ATC, athletic trainer for Darfur United and director of health and wellness of iACT, a nonprofit organization aiming to help those impacted by mass atrocities.

Previous *NATA News* articles, "Playing for Peace and Hope," from the February 2017 issue, and "I'm Here as a Humanitarian," from the October 2012 issue, chronicle her involvement with Darfur United.

Her journey to take players from malnourished and frail to strong enough to compete on a world stage has been a winding road, one she is still treading to this day.

"I had to do a lot of research and learn all about their dire situation," Nuttall-Smith said. "I had to know about their living conditions in the camps, their nutrition, their lack of water and hygiene ... [their] religion and culture. ... I had to be educated on trauma-informed care."

Though her time as an AT for Darfur United has not been easy, there is hope for more assistance and financial backing to come down the pike. That hope comes in the form of a documentary she appeared in about Darfur United, titled "Not Just Football."

In 2015, film director Paolo Casalis asked Gabriel Stauring, cofounder of iACT, if he could make a documentary about the players. Stauring released more than 500 hours of footage that he'd captured in the refugee camps since 2005.

Stauring soon discovered that what he had been capturing on film was the foundation for "Not Just Football," a film that made its world premiere Oct. 17, 2018, in Mexico City.

"This film was in the making from my very first trip to Darfuri refugee camps on the Chad-Sudan border in 2005," Stauring said. "We didn't know we were making a film, but football ... was a part of every journey to that remote, dangerous place, and we knew that this beautiful game would be a great vehicle for positive change for a group of people [who] had experienced the horrors of genocide."

James Thacher, digital director of iACT, was tasked with shooting a good portion of the footage once the team was chosen. He chronicled the major moments, including soccer matches, as well as the details that inform their views on their new lives, such as their training with Nuttall-Smith and their first time on a plane.

“We [hadn’t] seen a plane before or [flown] before ... everybody was happy,” said Moubark Abdallah, captain of Darfur United. “At first, I was a little scared. But it started to [feel] a little normal.”

Some of these new experiences were captured on film, but what was not always captured was the care Nuttall-Smith provided the players when they were having a hard time adjusting.

“They had never ... stayed in a hotel, eaten a variety of food,” she said, explaining that they mostly ate sorghum in the camps. “They had trouble sleeping due to the reminder of the traumatic events.”

The title of the movie, “Not Just Football,” is apt. They’re playing the game of soccer, but they’re also discovering an entirely new world, being introduced to professional standards by Nuttall-Smith that they couldn’t even fathom.

“I started up yoga with them last year,” she said. “We’re working with mindfulness apps. ... We’ve incorporated a lot of mental healing. They’ve been through a lot of trauma and some are dealing with some mental health issues. So, we’re working through that. I think [meditation] is [becoming] a lot more [popular] in [professional American] teams, too.”

Today, many of the athletes are healthy and working on strength training and agility, some even competing in marathons.

But, the biggest change for the men was what was happening beyond the soccer field.

“‘Not Just Football’ follows the journey of Darfur United players ... along the complex path of going from being refugees to becoming citizens,” Stauring said.

After competing in the Confederation of Independent Football Associations (CONIFA) World Cup in Östersund, Sweden, players were granted asylum there, provided they learn Swedish and English and complete a series of steps.

Many of them now work various jobs, practice soccer on the weekends and use some of their income to provide aid to friends and family still in the camps.

“My normal day is like a holiday,” said Sadam Hissein, left stringer for Darfur United.



Darfur United athletic trainer Alexandra Nuttall-Smith, MPT, ATC, has a conversation with Moka, a Darfur United soccer player.

“Sundays you have to relax and walk with friends. We play football matches on weekends. Sunday, we try to play games. Saturdays, we sometimes watch Swedish matches. We take deep breaths. ... Monday I have dance [classes]. Thursday, Wednesday, Tuesday and Friday, I serve in a cafeteria. Monday, we dance [in] a group, hip-hop. We dance [to] some group songs.”

Hip-hop is now his favorite genre of music, he said, adding that he mostly listens to Tupac and Lil Wayne.

Though they are grateful for the new lives that iACT has afforded them, Hissein and Abdallah both expressed that they feel a lot of sorrow being away from their loved ones and are concerned for their health and safety.

Abdallah, equipment manager of Östersund FK, one of many professional soccer teams in Sweden, sends excess equipment from the soccer team to the camps.

“I try to collect some stuff from the big team, like some shoes and some clothes and everything, to send back to the camp,” Abdallah said. “I know how the situation is for them. All [the] time, I spend all of my day thinking about doing something for my friends and people back home.”

As of October 2018, Abdallah and Hissein have an additional reason to assist with the

collection and donation of equipment: iACT assembled the first-ever Darfur United women’s soccer team, a bold move that has been in the making since the creation of the Refugees United Soccer Academy in 2012.

The people of Darfur are largely Muslim and conservative. Men are encouraged to take leadership roles and are free to play sports while women are encouraged to tend to the home and collect food.

However, iACT has allow women to take their place as leaders in these communities, as well, by establishing the Refugees United Soccer Academy and choosing two women and two men in eight of the 12 Darfuri camps along the Chad-Sudan border to coach those who would like soccer training.

The coaches are paid a salary and equipped with first aid kits assembled and sent by Nuttall-Smith, in case of injuries.

Tryouts for the first women’s team were held at the end of October 2018. The goal was to offer the female coaches an opportunity to try out for the team. Twenty women were chosen.

“We are so thankful for the help,” said Amina Abdrahman, a 20-year-old Refugee United coach and, now, member of the Darfur United women’s team. “I am excited

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TOP LEFT: Athletic trainer for Darfur United, Alexandra Nuttall-Smith, MPT, ATC, takes soccer team (pictured top right) through their stretch routine.



BOTTOM RIGHT: Isma, Halime and Tayba have a conversation during a break before practice.

for this opportunity, and I know that it will change my community, but, hopefully, one day it will change my country, too.”

Since Abdallah and Hissein know firsthand the impact of Darfur United, they are excited about the opportunity to have a women’s team and are working to bolster support, hoping this may affect more change and alter the mindsets of some.

“It’s so difficult for the women who are playing football,” Abdallah said. “It’s so hard for them, but we hope for them to know how important it is. . . . In our country, the man kind of decide[s] everything, but the woman cannot have any sound. So, we hope that this will change things in our society.”

Nuttall-Smith is already aware of a positive shift in the attitudes of the women coaching the academies and practicing as new Darfur United players.

“The refugee players on the DU team and [in the] communities say, ‘We are now part of the world,’” Nuttall-Smith said. “Sports, and, in this case, soccer, gives the women the opportunity to train, compete and represent Darfur. They represent so many girls and women in the camps, their country and all refugees in the world.”

Though this additional team has the opportunity to inspire change, Nuttall-Smith does have some concerns.

“There will be the same dilemmas [that we faced with the men],” she said. “However, with the food rations cut even more in the refugee camps [now], I am sadly preparing for even more malnutrition. The woman refugee athlete has menstrual, hormonal and post-childbirth aspects to think of, as well.”

Their lack of nourishment is one of the biggest issues Nuttall-Smith will have to address, as these women fast every year for Ramadan and will be fasting from May 5 to June 4 in observance.

In keeping with their religious followings, the women will have additional components to their jerseys that the men don’t, which must be paid for. The women will wear leggings, full sleeves and hijabs.

iACT hopes the release of “Not Just Football” will inspire viewers to donate to the organization or find out how they can get involved. A portion of the earnings from the purchase of “Not Just Football” will be donated to iACT, and Casalis has granted the organization permission to use the film to bolster more support.

The movie does not have an official release date for the United States, however, Stauring said the production team would like to shoot for a United States release at the beginning of this year. §

GET INVOLVED

In order to earn more points with CONIFA World Cup and shed light on the plight of Darfuri people, Darfur United aims to compete in more matches internationally. The men’s team would like to hold a training camp in the United States. The women’s team’s first match is being organized in N’Djamena, Chad, and the goal is to, eventually, have them compete internationally in the women’s CONIFA World Cup. But, both teams are in need of assistance. ATs who are interested in ways to get involved or donate should email Alex Nuttall-Smith alex@iactivism.com. To purchase “Not Just Football,” visit notjustfootball.org. To learn more about both Darfur United teams, visit darfurunited.com.