

Promoting active citizenship through sport

Involving volunteers in projects can be the best way to create a culture of playing sport.

When we talk about volunteerism, images of an after school tuition class might come to your mind, with a group of high school students helping their younger peers in their daily homework.

Today, the International Day of Volunteerism, a special day celebrated to recognise and acknowledge the gestures and acts of millions of volunteers around the world, we should remember these examples of community service.

It is also a time to reflect and think about other forms of service that are far less spoken about.

Undoubtedly, one of them happens thanks to the contributions of persons of all ages who spend time volunteering to coach sport teams or organise sport based fundraising for a just cause.

I myself grew up playing football seven in my parish youth club and I was always coached by university students who were given their time to ensure that we children could have the chance to play good football while learning some important values such as team playing, fairness, sacrifice and commitment.

I remember in particular our coach Fabio who was a young gentleman who was really passionate about young kids learning football values and sticking by the rules.

No matter the sports you love, practice and watch on TV, there are thousands people like Fabio who do not simply coach because they love the sport but because are genuinely interested in “learning and sharing” of it, somehow contributing to shaping the character of the youngsters they are coaching.

Fast forward, I have another example of volunteer through sport, Michael Rosenkrantz, a dear friend of mine and a Senior Partner at ENGAGE who was a passionate wheelchair basketball coach in South Asia and now is an Assistant Coach University of Arizona Women’s Wheelchair Basketball Team.

Mike is crazy about basketball and while volunteering in South Asia, he ended up coaching several wheelchair basketball teams, including the National Army team in Nepal.

Later on Mike was an inspiration to set up our volunteering based wheelchair basketball coaching program where local youths are trained to coach local teams.

As I said before, today is a day of celebration and recognition of all those active citizens serving their communities through sports but it is also a time to think and come up with some sort of global strategy to better harness the power of sports as a tool for harmony, peace and development.

Those volunteers involved in sports are our ambassadors to spread sports for development and make it fully part of the development agenda.

We need to get out of this wonderful “niche” we ended up creating and really mainstream sports in the communities and we need to acknowledge and support all those actors changing the world community by community, all through playing sport.

To do this we need more Fabios and Mikes from all over the world.

We know that involving and engaging more people like them, especially in developing countries, can be the best way to create a real sport culture because far too few children and adolescents living in these places have a real chance to practice sports.

We should not forget that sport for development and peace is also about competing and winning.

While this latter dimension is not less important, we should remind the words of Coach Wooden, the greatest collegiate basketball coach who defined success as *“a peace of mind which is a direct result of self satisfaction in knowing you made the effort to become the best of which you are capable.”*

I sincerely hope that new coalitions and collaborative efforts around the world will be forged in the days ahead to promote active citizenship and service through sport playing.

It is about resources and sharing of practices and expertise and effective coordination but it is also about effective volunteering management that neither is free of cost nor a result of improvisation.

With the scope and ambition of the sport for development and peace movement, it would be a pity not even giving it a try.

Happy international day of volunteers 2016!