

CHIAWA Spirit of the Cup 2010



Celebration begins outside Ellis Park in the center of Johannesburg

At long last the day had come! In a few hours we would be jetting off from Lusaka via Zambezi Airlines to attend the FIFA 2010 World Cup tournament in South Africa. A lot had happened since our Chiawa "Spirit of the Cup" tournament two weeks prior yet the days seemed to drag on endlessly despite the innumerable obstacles we still had to overcome to make this dream real. Early on we were told that simple travel permits would suffice to take the boys to South Africa but the rules changed and a week before departure I discovered that all of them needed full passports! This meant yet another round trip to Lusaka (a 6 hour drive one way) and dealing with a tremendously complex system required to secure passports for minors. After a lot of stress, new grey hairs, and many moments of panic, frustration and near despair, our efforts were successful... we got the call that miraculously we had obtained the passports in time.

We were ready to go. The boys piled into the back of the Land Cruiser with their few belongings once again for the long haul to the city. Everyone was wrapped up in blankets to buffer the unusual cold weather in the back of my open vehicle. This was our third trip to Lusaka in two weeks and we were now only two days from departing for Johannesburg. On arrival in Lusaka, we collected the boy's passports and prepared to attend the press conference the next morning as scheduled by Zambezi Airlines. All went well and the boys were extremely excited when Her Royal Highness, Chieftaness Chiyaba, came to bid them farewell and wish them a fantastic trip. TV and newspaper crews interviewed everyone. We spent these last two nights at Eureka Camp on the outskirts of Lusaka where we were generously hosted by the Van Blerk family, our neighbors on the Zambezi River. Everyone got into the World Cup spirit by enjoying some early group games on TV. Complimentary food was supplied by Mzungu braaiing "white man's BBQ." I've no doubt these young lads would be comfortable in Scotland after having survived my less than "cordon bleu" cooking skills.

Sleep did not come easily but the next morning we were ready TO GO. The flight down to SA was uneventful, exactly the way you want it to be especially when traveling with five local lads who had never flown in their lives. Many photos were taken of the grinning young men who were finally realizing that this trip was REAL! I don't think they truly believed they were actually going to the World Cup until they boarded the plane. At Oliver Tambo airport in Johannesburg we waited in a long line filled with Ghanaian fans, singing, chanting and dancing. The boys were starting to get the feel of what it's like to be at the biggest sports event on the planet.

We took a quick taxi ride to pick up the vehicle supplied by my brother and then were on our way to the Monte Casino Fan



Anxiously awaiting the USA vs Slovenia match

Zone in Fourways, Johannesburg. Johannesburg was experiencing one of its coldest winters in history but even that could not detract from the fun everyone was having. The boys were wide eyed on our way to the Fan Park where over 7,000 fans were gathered for pre game reveling, eating, and viewing the games on the big screen TV. It began to dawn on me how much these boys would have to absorb. The World Cup is a far cry from village life. Everything, and I mean everything, was new to them... I remember John commenting on how many overpasses (flyovers as we call them in Africa) there were. At the Fan Park we tucked into a hearty meal and settled down to enjoy the festivities. The incredibly massive BIG screen TV was approximately two stories high. Kazito jokingly asked me if it would be possible to install one in Chiawa for the African Nations Cup. After the game we headed to our hotel, booked in, and went out for supper at a local sports diner. The accommodation at the Courtyard Bruma Lake was fantastic. A big thank you to Bronwen Poulton, the Courtyard manager, who took such great care of us. Four of the five guys had never experienced the luxury of a hot bath and I could barely get them out of the tub (especially popular given the cold weather). That night they were a weary bunch of Chiawa residents who were already saturated with soccer and World Cup fever yet still ready to go to our first game tomorrow: USA v Slovenia.

In the morning I headed off with Isaiah, the Chiawa chaperone, and the boys to buy warm clothes as I was concerned that the cold would take its toll in the stadium. After two hours of bargaining they were kitted out: jackets, scarves, beanies, gloves, socks and armed with the dreaded Vuvuzela (the horn that drives everyone into a frenzy at soccer events). We were now ready to head off to Ellis Park. We hunkered down about a block or two from the stadium to enjoy a traditional African meal. The boys insisted I eat the traditional way with my hands (quite practical and especially palatable when washed down with cold Castle beer). They drank Coke of course. After an hour or so it was time to make our way into the stadium. The absolute joy on their faces when we went through the turnstiles is something I will take to my grave and cannot adequately express in words. Pure, unadulterated joy.

They started dancing and singing and blowing their Vuvuzelas at full blast. I doubt my hearing will ever be the same. It didn't stop until well after the game and a great game it was. America had been held to a 2-2 draw with Slovenia but had been robbed by some dubious refereeing. An exciting game and a fantastic experience! We got back to our hotel quite late in the evening and it was unanimously decided to order out and enjoy the warmth the hotel had to offer. It wasn't long before the boys saw that they had been filmed celebrating at the games! They were literally stunned to see themselves on TV. To top the day off, my son Chaz arrived bearing great gifts for all the boys. He had made a collection from my family and his friends, and brought bags of clothes for them to take home. What a great way to end a fantastic day and an amazing birthday for John who thanked me profusely for "his best birthday ever." Needless to say it was a late night.

After breakfast we headed back to the market once more to buy bags for the boys to use to take their gifts back to Chiawa. Then we were off to Pretoria but not until after I administered stomach medicine to each of the guys. I think



USA vs Slovenia



*Soccer City Stadium in Johannesburg
(inspired by the iconic African pot known as the calabash)*



Cameroon

the richness of the food and the sheer volume of it had unsettled them slightly. We got to Loftus in Pretoria early and surprisingly were able to park within three blocks of the stadium. The Cameroon v Denmark game was at night so we went to the closest fan zone to the stadium and settled down to an enjoyable afternoon of big screen football with enthusiastic Denmark and Cameroonian fans and great food. At 7:00pm we were off once again to the next game, another classic, with Denmark surprisingly beating Cameroon 2 goals to 1. We all hoped for an African victory but it was not to be. We had a very, very late return to the hotel and then off to bed.



Chiawa celebrates at Ellis Park

I woke up early the next day to head to Nelspruit to watch another match before the boy's departure back to Zambia. Their trip was over and they had a few hours to relax before being taken to the airport by my friend Paul. Suddenly it was hard to say goodbye to these guys; I had come to know them well over the last two weeks. It tugged at my heartstrings knowing they were going back to a life of extreme hardship with little to look forward to in the future. I was very happy to be able to give them this experience but hated to think it could well be the highlight of their lives. Things we take for granted are a luxury few village people ever experience but, on a more positive note, I believe it is projects like the Chiawa Spirit of the Cup that can make a huge difference in these lives and positively affect them in the future. Clearly a new world of possibility was opened for these great young guys and something really spectacular happened to them that they never thought possible. Kizito told me this had shown him, a kid who lost both parents at a young age and lived on the streets for years, that virtually anything was possible. He said, "I never thought I was born to be a loser. If this can happen, any dream can come true." I hope these kids will continue to dream their dreams and find that they really can come true.

A big thank you goes to the wonderful generosity of all the individuals who made this possible. Not only to the donors but to those who donated time and effort unselfishly as well, from Francis, the Chiawa Basic School Headmaster, to Charles, director of the Chiawa clinic. Riccardo at Kanyemba Lodge, the Van Blerks, Zambezi Air, the Courtyard Hotel, the Hollwegs, Susan Burns, Trish Doswell, Singer Rankin, so many great donors. Some of whom do not even love soccer but love Africa and the people who live there. We also need to thank our Chieftaness again for lending her support to the project and honoring the boys with her attendance at the media event.

Last but not least, let me express an even bigger thank you to my fellow travelers. Thanks to Isaiah Museto, the chaperone of the boys and a stalwart supporter of his community and one of the most unselfish people I have ever known. Thanks to Kizito, captain of the "German" team and a natural born leader who has overcome many, many hardships but is still determined to make something of his life. Christopher, thank you for your fantastic spirit which is so infectious. I know whenever I am in your company laughter will come my way. John, you are a true team player. Thanks for your modest support. Davison, I only wish my Nyanga was better so that I could understand what you were saying to me. Datenda! I fully intend to meet up with all of you later this year and once again kick the ball around!