

GOALS

The world comes together once every four years for the FIFA World Cup. It also comes together once a week when the Collingwood All Stars do their thing.

BY VANESSA MURRAY



Ruyad and Fasile are brothers, 11 and 12 years old. When I ask where they're from, I can tell it's a question they get all the time: they're ready. "Our family is from Ethiopia, but we were born in Australia," Fasile says all matter-of-fact. They're smiling, cheeky boys. They shout things at me from the field, playing up for my camera. *Hey lady, watch this!*

They've never been to the country their parents call home. The Collingwood Housing Estate in inner-eastern Melbourne ... this is home. Three industrial-era highrises stand sentinel at either end of a large city block, an eight-lane river of traffic flows up and down Hoddle Street on one side, Wellington Street reins it in on the other. Each of the highrises is 20 stories high and each storey holds ten flats: that's 200 flats per building. Then there are the 350 or so walk-up flats packed into the land in between, each housing one-to-eight people: all up, the estate is home to around 3000 residents. Most are of an ethnicity other than Anglo-Celtic. Many are of refugee or asylum-speaker origin. Vietnamese, Turkish, Chinese, Ethiopian, Somalian, Sudanese, Irani, Koorie.

Beautiful skin of every colour, languages I don't understand flying everywhere. But the town planners have left some grass. Well, dirt: the Collingwood College's pitch is threadbare. But there's a piece of land the size of two football fields here. Most of the time it's locked; the local kids aren't allowed in unless they're supervised. It's not that they're bad – it's just that sometimes they don't know how to behave.

But come 4pm every Monday afternoon during term time, it's game on. Fifty kids tumble through the gate, flinging their schoolbags on the ground and collecting their name tags from the community workers at the desk. They greet each other with shouts and gangster-style flicks of the head before high-fiving the coach and getting busy with the ball. They're the Collingwood Soccer All Stars, and they're here to shine.

Ruyad generously concedes that, of the two of them, Fasile is the better player. Fasile is a midfielder and has been playing soccer for four years; Ruyad, a winger, nearly two. Cristiano Ronaldo is their favourite player. "When I grow up I want to become famous like him," says Fasile, deftly juggling the ball.

The brothers are unusual in being born here in Australia; most of the All Stars were born into chaos in countries like Sudan and Liberia, where decades of civil war, cruelty and corruption have painted a bullet-riddled landscape of destruction and despair.

Gaydu is 16, one of a handful of girls on the field. She's new to the All Stars and a little shy, but over the weeks I see her growing in confidence. She welcomes me with a smile, she teaches me to pass the ball. The coach is smart: he makes her captain. "My family is from Liberia. I speak French and English. At home I speak English. I don't speak Soso, my language, fluently. I want to learn it, but my Mum says I should speak English here. I go to Collingwood English

Esfahan, Iran. Until he got assassinated by the government. "We came here for a better life. When I came to Melbourne six years ago I had no English; I didn't know anything. I came here by ship; I went to that camp place, on the island. It was me, my Mum, my Uncle and his wife and kids. We were there for a couple of months, we had a small room.

"In Esfahan I used to hang around with my cousins; we lived really close together. My family occupied a whole street. We could see the soccer stadium from our roof. My grandfather had an argument with the government because the government owed him a lot of money and they couldn't pay him back. They took his life, that's what I heard, yeah? My family and the government, they don't get along."

Run by an Irishman, a Scotsman and an Australian, the Collingwood Soccer All Stars program had the beginnings of a bad joke. The Victorian Police and the Jesuit Social Services kicked it off four years ago, youth resource officer Christopher McGeachan (commonly known as Geeks – the Australian) tells me. "It was just two of us – me and another officer – kicking a ball around. The kids picked up on the program, then we built it up. It started off as somewhere for the kids to have some time away from family and bad influences here on the estate. Now, we've got sponsors, volunteers and community support. The kids can progress with their skills and play.

"The fact they live on the estate is a risk in itself," he continues. "They're sharing lifts and hallways with people from other walks of life. The new arrivals know nothing about criminal behaviour in

Australia, but they're sitting in the park with people who know quite a lot. They get led astray. Drugs are a problem on the estate. Always have been, always will be."

Then community worker Paraic Grogan (the Irishman) got involved. He started off volunteering, but two weeks in was offered a job on the estate. The kids were fighting a lot. Vicious fights, he reckons – the kind you'd expect adults to have. ▶



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Language School, and next term I'll go to Collingwood College. I learned English in Liberia, but I needed to practise my reading and writing. School here is much better than Africa: it was hard to go to school in Africa because my parents didn't have money. I'm going to play soccer for the Australian women's team and I want to be a doctor."

Soccer is big in Liberia. In fact, soccer is big everywhere these kids are from. Fifteen-year-old Ali is a smart kid on a scholarship to one of Melbourne's most exclusive boys' schools, Xavier College. His grandfather was a big fan at home in

"A lot of these kids lack strong, male role models to say, 'This is the way it is; if you behave that way I'm going to treat you this way. This is the way a man behaves.' We try to provide that. Eventually we got the kids to understand that if they didn't behave themselves, there wasn't going to be a soccer program, and they'd be responsible."

Grogan's typically Irish gift of the gab stands him in good stead with these mouthy kids – there's a lot of banter going on. "I let them know there's a line, but I try to keep it light-hearted. I joke with them. It doesn't necessarily mean it's funny, but I'll give it a go! We treat all the kids the same. They can see that we don't have favourites."

"Paraic is nice," giggle best friends Faith and Achai. "His name is Paraic, but we call him Porridge." They're a package deal: talk to one and you get the other. They're ten with big hair, big teeth and big voices. They pull some dance moves for me, collapsing into laughter.

Faith lives with her Mum and her sister in the highrise. When she and her mother and sister arrived in Sydney from Nigeria, her mother had to beg in the streets. "Soccer is fun; I'm proud when I get a goal. It makes me want to come back and play more. But you have to be tough to play with all these boys!"

"If I'm not going to be a superstar when I grow up, I want to be a doctor, to help people. Some people, in some countries, they don't have much food. So I'll send them food," says Achai. She was born in Sudan, but Australia is all she remembers.

Frank McGrellis (the Scotsman) has been coaching the kids for the past 12 months or so. A former professional who played for Coventry City and Hereford United in the UK, then Brunswick Juventus in Australia's then-National Soccer League, McGrellis coaches an Under 21 team in the Victorian Premier League, and at a private school. With the All Stars, he's in it for the love. "The All Star kids are so full of enthusiasm; it's a breath of fresh air. They're unbelievable, they really commit themselves to their soccer," he says. "I think there's a fair bit of talent in some of the kids, and I'd like to think that,

with a bit of guidance and encouragement, some of these kids could play at a high level in Victoria, hopefully higher."

The older kids come and go. Most of them have been in trouble with the police. "They get judged all the time," says Grogan. "No matter what they say, we keep a straight face. They know that no matter how badly they behave – provided they can acknowledge their bad behaviour and apologise – we'll always welcome them back."

He tells me the story of a kid who was red-carded for punching one of the coaches, an angry kid who was into drugs, who didn't like being told what to do. It took him four weeks to man up

"It was a bitter experience for them, it's put them off joining mainstream clubs."

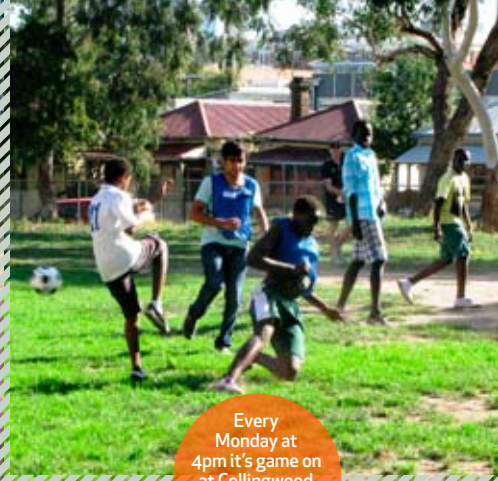
But there are opportunities out there for the All Stars. Grogan has worked hard to connect with scholarship programs like the one being offered by the Yarra Jets Football Club. Up and running since 2008, the Yarra Jets are a parent-and-community-driven club with a focus on player development and participation. "Around ten per cent of our 320 players are on full financial scholarships," says club secretary Susan Rogers. "Half of those children come from the Collingwood All Stars."

"We don't put kids forward on ability alone," says Grogan. "We select them on behaviour, too. If they show us they can behave in a manner that's acceptable, then we'll put them forward." The Jets are doing *something* right: in 2008 a Yarra Jets team with seven All Stars players on side won the Northern Division's under 12 championships – undefeated.

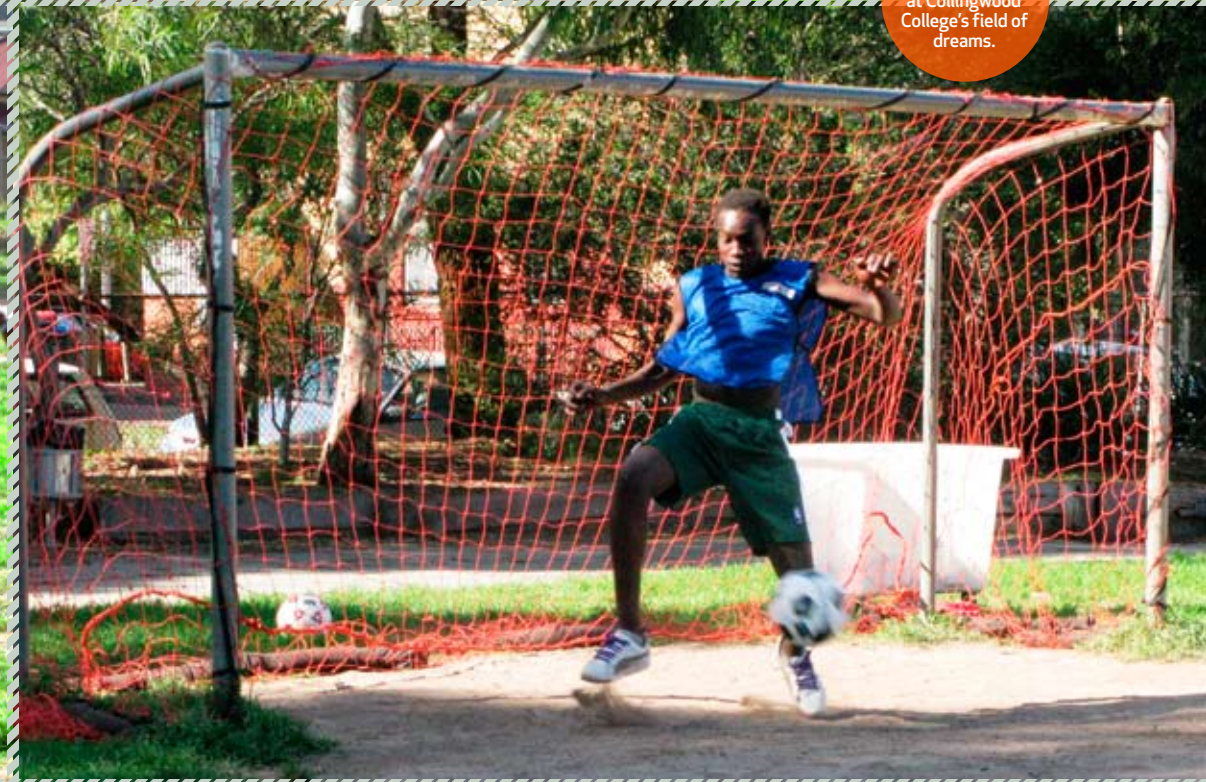
The impact of programs like the All Stars is hard to measure, but so far it seems like everyone's winning. Teachers and other social workers are reporting significant improvements in the kids' behaviour. Youth gangs are practically a non-event on the Collingwood Estate. Usually, they're an issue, says Grogan. "On most of the big estates it's Aussie versus African, and African versus Asian, and Asian versus Aussie. Here, we don't run programs for specific ethnic groups. The kids mix. It's hard to play sport with someone on Monday, then beat them up on Tuesday because you don't like the colour of their skin."

Sixteen-year-old Wol is Sudanese. He's one of the older kids that comes and goes, but it's not crime that keeps him away, it's basketball. Wol plays with the Coburg Giants, and he's good. He's planning on turning pro. When he's here he's the All Stars' goalkeeper, and he's on board with what the All Stars are all about. "The kids want to have fun, but they don't know how to," he says. "The program keeps us out of trouble. It gives us something to do, so we're not just sitting around in the park and being lazy. It encourages kids to come down instead of doing bad things. Sometimes the kids have punch-ups; we fight a lot. But when we have soccer on Mondays, we don't think about fighting." ■

"If they didn't behave, there wasn't going to be a soccer program, and they'd be responsible."



Every Monday at 4pm it's game on at Collingwood College's field of dreams.



Youth gangs don't exist on the Estate – soccer's taking up too much time.

