

Football camp for Roma children in Skopje

On February 17th 2014 we were starting our trip to Macedonia and heading to *Suto Orizari*, a municipality of Skopje. We, Markus and Manuel are two Physical Education students based in Freiburg and volunteers of the non-profit organisation *Football and Roma*. We had the objective to run a 3-week football camp with Roma children in *Suto Orizari*. Previously, in August 2010, Ines Österle and Saskia Koger of *Football and Roma* visited the town in order to establish a collaboration with the local non-profit organisation *Ambrela*. The reasons for our trip were to refresh this collaboration and to explore further possibilities. Although we had a good understanding of what we were in for (due to a lot of preparation, defined objectives and decisions about the training procedures to perform) we were still excited about what would happen on the trip.

After a smooth flight from Stuttgart with a stopover in Belgrade, *Ambrela* staff members welcomed us at the airport in Skopje. When arriving in *Suto Orizari*, we could not believe our eyes: a huge welcoming committee awaited us and even cheered when we climbed out of the car. It was unbelievable; we had not expected such a warm welcome!

The first meeting with *Ambrela* was scheduled for the next day in order to define our daily routine for the next three weeks. We decided that we would help in the preschool, which is run by *Ambrela*, daily from 9 am to 3 pm and thereafter we would offer football training from 4 pm to 6 pm.



The first day helping in the preschool went very well. Linguistic problems between the children and us were overcome by great communication skills on both sides using gestures and mimes. It was during the first football training, however, that we encountered our first

difficulties. Together with Muarem, a local who was a helping hand for us during our stay, and equipped with only three balls we had the challenging task of setting up a training session for 110 children. That's correct, at the first training session 110 girls and boys were participating! To make matters worse, there was also no proper football field that we could train on. Well, we had to improvise. We separated the children into three groups according to their age and gender and organised a tournament within each group. This enabled the coaches to get an idea about their football skills while the kids were able to obtain a high number of contacts with the ball.

The conditions that we encountered during this first training session made us think. To organise an effective training session, it was necessary to find a suitable football field and to manage the huge number of children. On the other hand, the first training encouraged us: It was amazing how many children in *Suto Orizari* were enthusiastic about football and it demonstrated their desire to participate in activities with peers.



Slowly, the first signs of success became apparent. We decided to divide the children into training groups that trained at different times and *Ambrela* managed to obtain the permission to train on the local football field. Furthermore, we were able to involve a staff member of the local non-profit organisation *Nadez* and two French volunteers who supported us with the football activities.

For us coaches it was great to observe the children's enthusiasm and enormous ability to learn. While initially everybody tried to get the ball and to trick the others, they realised quickly that football is a team sport and that it is more effective to play together. Also, the children showed good discipline. From the very beginning, we had introduced clear rules. For example, anybody who could not make it in time to a training session was required to inform the coaches one day ahead. Those who misbehaved repeatedly were told that they would be

disciplined by being excluded from the training session (fortunately, we never had to enforce this rule).

The highlight of the football camp was the final tournament. We coaches were so proud of the achievements of the children. In fact, we could hardly believe how well they understood the importance of letting the ball do the work and to score goals after a series of effective passes.

In the end, the three weeks in *Suto Orizari* passed in a flash. It was very informative and a beautiful time for both of us. However, our work with *Suto Orizari* is not finished yet. With the help of local contacts, *Football and Roma* aims to establish a long-term football project for the children of *Suto Orizari*.

Manuel Gacpar

Markus Hartmann