

Jambo! Kenya Lacrosse

By: Jon Rathauer

On a 90+ degree Nairobi day, Lorna and Cliffe of the fledgling Kenyan Lacrosse program picked me up in their safari truck and drove me and my newly-gifted savannah hat off to the Mukuru (Swahili for “garbage dump”) neighborhood for a pre-arranged lacrosse outing. Sticks For Kids, an Israel Lacrosse initiative which engages and empowers at-risk youth around the world through the sport of lacrosse, had equipped me with a bag of 10 new lacrosse sticks and balls, to which I had added a few antiques from my garage – two pairs of gloves, a helmet, shoulder pads, a goalie stick and two lacrosse heads – but nothing had prepared me in advance for the stench and squalor I encountered in this approximately one square mile area containing an estimated 700,000 people which even local authorities had labeled “unfit for permanent construction.”

Suddenly, within the midst of Mukuru, we arrived at the fenced-in Micato AmericaShare Community Center, an impressive, well-maintained compound which includes a library, computer laboratory, clean lavatory and classrooms which daily gives hope to 500 locals. Continuing through the grounds, we came upon two lacrosse nets on a back-corner field that was more dirt than grass. As we approached, you could hear and then see the 200 boys and girls waiting to play lacrosse. Some wore school uniforms, others tank tops; some walked around in shoes or socks, others were barefoot.

The equipment available was limited: sticks, balls, shoulder pads and cleats for two full teams, but only a few pairs of gloves, elbow pads and helmets. As someone with a history of concussions, the absence of helmets stood out to me as an unsustainable aspect of the program. The hard work of so many and the advantages of the sport could all disappear overnight with a single wild stick, stray shot or pass. Still, I was about to play lacrosse in Kenya, so any safety concerns I might have had needed to wait!

Two teams battled, I among them, for close to an hour in the hot sun. Thankfully (for me), the whistle finally blew and allowed me to catch my breath (the only apparent one on the field exhibiting signs of fatigue). At this break, observing the dark plumes of smoke that continuously rose from burning trash just over the tree line at the far end of the field, it struck me that this facility and program were truly a haven in an area otherwise characterized by lack of hope.

There wasn't much time to bask in the glory of my first lacrosse game in Africa because the girls were suiting-up and taking the field for the next game. The boys quickly slipped out of the cleats and shoulder pads they were wearing, passing them to the girls who used the same deep-pocketed sticks and shoulder pads. The equipment constraints necessitated that boys and girls lacrosse be played in essentially the same limited-checking fashion. Later, the kids sat under a shady tree as I stood to teach the fundamentals of stick protection, ground balls, basic one-on-

one then team defense, and the three most basic offensive dodges. The kids listened and asked insightful questions. Finally, our on-field time was wrapped-up with a photo shoot in which I was made to feel as an honored guest when, in fact, the privilege and gratitude was mine toward them.

In reflection, it was apparent to me from watching and speaking with the kids that they are not soccer players without access to their chosen-sport; they are lacrosse players and enthusiasts through their bones. Most impressive to me, the kids exhibited unselfish play, admirable sportsmanship and support for their teammates/friends/opponents while some played and most watched. These characteristics do not come easily or naturally. The impressive athleticism and team-play I witnessed in a program in existence for a mere six months is certainly a result of the efforts of Coach Yussuf who, while never having played the game himself, taught the skills he acquired by watching YouTube instructional videos.

Aside from improving on-field skills, my goal was to leave the kids with a message of hope – that lacrosse can improve an individual or his situation, and that from lacrosse amazing opportunities emerge. I told the kids to be proud of being the first lacrosse players in Kenya and that they will create a legacy for their country. Finally, I expressed to them that the global lacrosse community is quite small and is, more accurately, a large family. Parting hugs confirmed the fraternity I had described.

My time in Mukuru demonstrated to me the principal reason why we play sport and compete. I observed the sincere happiness lacrosse brought to the faces of 200 children in the back corner of the most marginalized community I have ever witnessed. I am forever changed by this experience and I look forward to sharing it with family, friends and the greater lacrosse community with the hope that this great program will continue to receive support in all its forms.

A big thank you to Lorna, Ian, Cliffe, Ken, Scott at Israel Lacrosse and Sticks For Kids for supporting, enabling and allowing me to join or represent their organizations as I've sought to share my passion for lacrosse. Sharing the game with those who are hungry for its secrets has been amongst my life's most fulfilling engagements. Lacrosse, today, is truly everywhere including in the back corner of a Nairobi slum. When you travel, bring a stick, or an entire bag of them; share an afternoon, share your knowledge and you will find fulfillment in surprising places.