



Syria: How sport can change the story

Written by Nour Al Tarsha. Part of our #YoungChangemakers series.

It's not just about politics and war. There is more to Syria than what we see behind a TV screen or what we read in a newspaper.

Throughout history, sport has always been used to symbolise unity and equality between two, or more, opposing parties. As a prime example, the Christmas Truce of WW1 where the two countries, Germany and the UK, came to an agreement to share peace on Christmas day and play football. That simple act of kindness, highlighted the game of football as a way of sharing common values between all the soldiers despite their various differences and contrasting personal perspectives.



German and British soldiers shaking hands during WWI Christmas Truce (Getty Images photo, posted on Flickr by Grant Stantiall on 30th December 2014)

Growing up in Syria for the first few years of my life, there was not much emphasis on the importance of sport and how it can play a massive role in changing and shaping an individual's life. Sport was just seen as a way in which students could just spend quality time together and have a break from revision and exam stress. It's mental impact on the performer was very vague as it only seemed to help you "clear your mind".

However, when I returned to the UK as a teenager, I grew to understand that sport is being used for many purposes such as treating mental illness and a coping mechanism with little to no drawbacks. It has scientifically been proven to help individuals overcome personal and conflict related problems such as mild to moderate depression, anxiety and it helps move out of the immobilisation stress response that characterises PTSD (Post- traumatic stress disorder) and trauma.

I've spent my life alternating between Syria and the UK due to my mum's work, but I have sincerely enjoyed learning about the different cultures in both countries. Moreover, my passion and desire to learn more about sport psychology has only gotten stronger and stronger.

During the current conflict in Syria, I personally believe that sport is vitally important for the Syrian youth as taking part in a group activity and coming together will help heighten their self-esteem and self-confidence. It will reinforce identity, unity and belonging as they feel they are part of one team that is working towards achieving the same goal.

From a personal perspective, I feel that participating in a group activity motivates me to reach my goal as I feel that I am not alone. When I was in Syria, I used to be part of a local basketball team and each and every member would try their best to make it to the training session regardless of all the difficulties and dangers of getting there (i.e.: mortar shells, closed roads and sudden conflict...). The shared desire to succeed and play together was the key motive that pushed us all to attend as we didn't want to let both ourselves and the team as a whole down. Not only did I make new friends and improve my social life, I acquired new skills that made me feel good about myself as they boosted my self-confidence; and so, the sense of achievement allowed me to overcome any stress and anxiety related problems that I was facing.

When I came to the UK, I grew to realise how different but yet so similar teenage life can be in both countries. I also found it hard to concentrate and focus as I sincerely missed all my friends and family in Syria. I joined a local basketball team in order to overcome homesickness. Within a couple of months, I began to adapt to the lifestyle here, as belonging to a team had a massive role in helping me do so. The whole concept of group solidarity allowed me to cope with the mixed emotions I was feeling towards both the conflict in my home country and how I have to adapt to living in the UK. Not only did I tell my teammates about myself, but I also got to listen to their personal experiences and perspectives which helped me gain an understanding about the wider world around me.

I believe it's possible to overcome the so called "civil war" in Syria as it's not just a political game, it's also a mental game that only Syrians can control. The story can be changed if we all come together and work as a team (literally) to overcome the difficulties that rise. We can help the youth in Syria by encouraging them to take part in sport along with educating them about the importance and mental impact sport can have on the performer in order to help them overcome the obstacles they face.

Nour Al Tarsha



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Nour is a student at Liverpool Lifesciences UTC. She pursues a lot of interest in sport and science as her current CREST Award aims to meet three of the total seventeen Sustainable Development Goals set by the UN. Despite being young, she is familiar with the global affairs and debates about gender equality as she represented her school at a feminism conference that took place at UWC Atlantic College. She is passionate to learn about other cultures and try to reflect on her own background as well as learning new things about the world and developing the range of languages that she acquires (Arabic, English and Spanish). Additionally, she aspires to develop her personality and connections as she is a member of the Girls Network and plays basketball for her local team. Nour was a young ambassador at our recent [Project Development Workshop for Early Career Researchers](#).

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