

Name: _____ Class: _____

Soccer Speaks Many Languages

By Dianna Geers
2008

Innocent Ndayizeye is a refugee, meaning that he was forced to leave his home country because it was no longer safe to live there. In this informational text, Dianna Geers discusses Innocent's love for playing soccer while living in a refugee camp and after he relocates to America. As you read, take notes on how soccer helped Innocent make friends, no matter where he was.

- [1] Innocent Ndayizeye scrunched an old plastic bag into a tiny clump, tied it with string, and stuffed it into another plastic bag. He continued doing this until the crumpled bags became large enough to be the ball for a football¹ game with his friends. For goalposts, the boys took off their shirts and laid them on the parched land.



"Playing football" by Oxfam East Africa is licensed under CC BY-NC 2.0.

A Sport for Everyone

Innocent and his friends lived in the Mkugwa refugee camp in Tanzania.² The children formed football teams, had competitions, and played at every chance.

The refugee families in the camp were separated based on ethnicity³ — the Tutsis in one section, the Hutus in another, and the families with both Tutsis and Hutus in their own section. This was because the Tutsis and Hutus were fighting each other in a civil war. Despite this, all of the children played together.

"We didn't worry if the other kids were Tutsis or Hutus," recalls Innocent. "We just thought of them as our friends." Playing football gave all the children a common bond.

Life in a Refugee Camp

- [5] Refugee camps such as Mkugwa exist around the world. They are places where groups of people live when their homeland is unsafe because of natural disaster, famine,⁴ or war. When people flee their country to escape persecution⁵ or violence, they are called refugees. International laws protect them.

1. The author is referring to soccer, as soccer is called football in many other parts of the world.
 2. an East African country
 3. **Ethnicity (noun):** a state of belonging to a group that has a common national or cultural tradition
 4. **Famine (noun):** extreme shortage of food
 5. **Persecution (noun):** cruel or unfair treatment, especially because of race or political or religious beliefs

When Innocent was four years old, he and his family left their home country of Burundi.⁶ The civil war had made it too dangerous to stay there. They walked until they reached the Mkugwa refugee camp. Innocent's dad built a two-room house for his family out of mud and sticks that they gathered.

Since Innocent's family had left many of their belongings behind, they needed food and clothing. People from around the world donated these items to the refugee camp. If it weren't for such help from others, "I would probably not be alive today," Innocent says.

Innocent's parents lined up once a month to receive food and clothing for the family. They cooked their food on a wood fire outside of their house. Most of the time, all they had was rice.

While living in the camp, Innocent's dad fixed radios and helped build mud homes for other refugees. Innocent's mother worked as a nurse, helping to care for the sick. Innocent went to school in the camp. His favorite part was recess, when he would play football.

Moving to America

- [10] After five years of living in the refugee camp, Innocent's family moved to the United States with the help of a charitable organization. When they reached the United States, Innocent's family went first to Kentucky and then to Iowa.

Everyone in Innocent's family spoke Kirundi and French, but not English. A church group was helping them, and a few of its members began to teach them English. They also helped Innocent's family set up an apartment, buy groceries, and enroll the children in school.

Friendship Through Soccer

Innocent was nine when he began school in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. He knew none of the other kids, and he didn't speak the language of his classmates very well. At recess, though, there was something he understood. Kids played his favorite game, but in the United States they called it soccer instead of football. Through soccer, Innocent made friends. They helped him learn English words and American games. Innocent found that people everywhere can be friendly and helpful. It didn't matter if they spoke a different language or were from a different place.

A Bright Future

Over the years, Innocent's family has adjusted to life in America. Now an American citizen and a freshman at Iowa State University, Innocent gets good grades and speaks English fluently.⁷ He earned a scholarship,⁸ and he is majoring in construction engineering so that he can learn to build houses, as his father did. He plays American football, basketball, and — you guessed it — soccer.

6. a country in East Africa that suffered a civil war from 1993 to 2006

7. able to speak or write easily

8. a payment made to support a student's education

Innocent has played soccer for as long as he can remember, and it has helped him in many ways. The game brought him together with children from different backgrounds while he lived in a refugee camp. It helped him feel at home when he was a new arrival in America. And through the opportunities it has created for him, it is helping him to fulfill his dreams.

Copyright © Highlights for Children, Inc., Columbus, Ohio. All rights reserved.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which statement identifies the central idea of the text?
 - A. Playing sports can help people develop necessary life skills.
 - B. No matter where you go in the world, all sports are the same.
 - C. Sports can bring people together, despite all of their differences.
 - D. Remaining physically active is important to being happy and healthy.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Innocent Ndayizeye scrunched an old plastic bag into a tiny clump, tied it with string, and stuffed it into another plastic bag." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "Innocent went to school in the camp. His favorite part was recess, when he would play football." (Paragraph 9)
 - C. "Through soccer, Innocent made friends. They helped him learn English words and American games. Innocent found that people everywhere can be friendly and helpful." (Paragraph 12)
 - D. "And through the opportunities it has created for him, it is helping him to fulfill his dreams." (Paragraph 14)

3. PART A: Which of the following describes the kids at the Mkugwa refugee camp?
 - A. They are accepting and supportive of one another.
 - B. They are discouraged from their experiences as refugees.
 - C. They are cold and exclusive towards one another.
 - D. They are unable to relax and have fun like other kids.

4. PART B: Which quote from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "He continued doing this until the crumpled bags became large enough to be the ball for a football game with his friends." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "The children formed football teams, had competitions, and played at every chance." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "The refugee families in the camp were separated based on ethnicity — the Tutsis in one section, the Hutus in another" (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "'We didn't worry if the other kids were Tutsis or Hutus,' recalls Innocent. 'We just thought of them as our friends.'" (Paragraph 4)

5. What is the relationship between Innocent's love for soccer and his later success in America?

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Innocent didn't care who his teammates were or where they were from when he played soccer. Have you ever had the opportunity to work with people who are different than you are? What was it like to work with people from different backgrounds or with different opinions?
2. How do you think Innocent was able to make friends at the refugee camp and in America, despite the differences between him and the other kids? Do you think there are some things that people need to have in common, in order to be good friends? Why or why not?
3. How was soccer an important part of maintaining peace and happiness in Innocent's life? Do you think sports could help bring peace in other situations? If so, how?
4. Innocent encountered many obstacles as a refugee and moving to a new country. How do you think playing soccer helped him overcome these obstacles? What is something that has helped you get through difficult times?