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TEACHING PEACE THROUGH SPORT THE ELMAN SPORTS CLUB SOMALIA





In Memory of Valerie Place

The flag of the ELMAN SPORTS CLUB waves as a peace and unity beacon above a sadly divided Somalia. In the story of the club Robert Williams tells of the origins and development of this marvelous peace initiative supported by Concern.

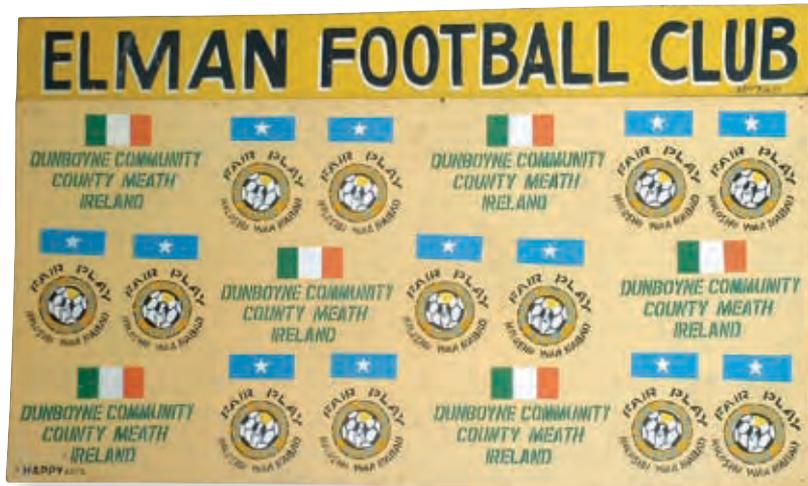
Political systems in Somalia broke down in 1990 and the country splintered along tribal lines. This led to horrific famine in 1992. Concern mounted a dramatic emergency operation. Thirty two volunteers, most of whom had previously served in overseas emergencies, were assigned to Somalia and 1,000 staff were recruited locally.

Valerie Place, a 23 year old Irish nurse was among the field volunteers. Her name has been written in letters of gold in the annals of that period. On February 23rd 1993 Valerie had already been in Somalia for a few months. She had wonderfully overseen the development of a large center in Mogadishu, the capital. That day Valerie was to go on transfer to Baidoa, a town where worsening conditions needed her skills. I watched from some distance as Valerie said her farewells to staff who clearly loved her. I recall wishing I had a camera with a telescopic lens to capture the picture of Valerie warmly embracing a child who had run to greet her. Much of what makes Concern worthy of its name was played out before my eyes.

Then we left in two vehicles to make our way to Baidoa, a few hours drive away. I traveled in the first vehicle maintaining contact by radio with the vehicle in which Valerie and her good friend, Wendy Murphy, a Canadian Concern volunteer followed. Our journey came to an abrupt and tragic end when gunmen ambushed their vehicle. Valerie received a fatal gunshot wound. She had paid the ultimate price of loving and caring in a situation of conflict fraught with risk.

In memory of Valerie Place, the Irish government established a scholarship to support students from developing countries in development studies. One of the first to receive this scholarship, first for Diploma Studies and later to study for his Masters, was Abdi Rashid, now chairman of the Elman Sports Club and Country Director for Concern in Somalia. The Elman Sports Club you will read about in the following pages can truly be seen as a living memorial to Valerie Place and a bright Beacon of Peace beckoning to a troubled Somalia.

**Fr. Aengus Finucane, Honorary President,
Concern Worldwide US**



THE SOMALI SOCCER CHAMPIONS, ELMAN FC, are only thirty kilometers from Mogadishu, their home base, when they come upon the first checkpoint. Their bus and the team Land Rover pull up behind sixty or so dusty vehicles stretched across the bridge leading into Balcad, a town of twenty thousand in southern Somalia. On the other side of the river are two Toyota pick-up trucks with machine guns mounted in the beds. The line inches forward.

In the back of the bus, Aweys Winkey, a twenty-three year old striker, is heading a ball with the player next to him. As they approach the checkpoint, Aweys looks out at the brown expanse of countryside and says, "Why is there fighting when the land is so much more than us?"

Kids with AK-47s stand in front of a large utility pole blocking the road. The bus quiets as one of them approaches. Qaasim Hammaro, the driver, slides open the window. A teenager barely tall enough to see into the bus demands four-hundred-thousand Somali Shillings (roughly twenty US dollars).

Qaasim explains that he is carrying the famous Elman squad on the country's first soccer tour since the outbreak of civil war in '91. "It has all been arranged with the town elders," he says. "This is our first stop. Surely you have been told."

The barrel of the AK-47 now rests on the base of the open window. "Four-hundred-thousand," the kid says again.

Haji Abdulle, one of the team chaperones, is sitting behind Qaasim, watching. At sixty-three, he has already outlived the average Somali by fifteen years. Before the war he was a member of the regional Olympic committee. Now Haji rises from his seat, exiting the bus slowly, his weathered hands held high so the guards can clearly see them. He steps toward the child soldier. "Look at this," he says, handing over a photo he has brought for just such an occasion. "It is of your leader."

In the pre-war photo, Muse Sudi, the powerful warlord of the Abgaal clan, is presenting a trophy to the Olympic team.

“That’s me,” Haji says, pointing to a much younger version of himself next to the warlord, who controls much of the area around Balcad.

The boy grabs the faded photo and returns to the contingent of guards. They argue, light fresh cigarettes. The kid who appears to be in charge shouts. He is chewing qat, a popular leafy narcotic, and a trail of greenish splotches marks the hard clay around him.

The boy hands the photo back to Haji. Dust rises from the road as the other guards watch from a distance. Suddenly the boy says, “Away.”

Haji hustles back to the bus, and Qaasim fires up the ignition.

After the collapse of Siad Barre’s regime in 1991, Somalia fractured into clan-based fiefdoms run by warlords. The so-called 1993 humanitarian mission of the US and UN culminated in the Black Hawk Down incident that left eighteen Americans dead, seventy-three wounded, and estimates of over a thousand Somali casualties.

The subsequent US and UN troop withdrawal allowed conditions to deteriorate further despite local efforts to re-establish a government. By 2003, clan antagonisms and territorial borders like the one in Balcad made travel within Somalia difficult and treacherous, and yet in the summer of that year Elman FC set out to play soccer across the country as a way to promote peace.



THE BALCAD TOWN AUTHORITIES ARE WAITING AT THE HOTEL FOR the team’s arrival. Haji knows better than to mention the checkpoint incident. The squad is given buckets of water to wash the dust from their bodies. They are served a hot meal of goat meat, rice, and camel milk.

After lunch several players take the team’s beat-up Land Rover around town to promote the afternoon game. The vehicle is taxi-yellow, matching the color of the Elman uniform. Several English phrases are scrawled across its bright body: Work Yes/Begging No, Respect Human Rights. Loudspeakers are attached to the hood, like horns, to attract attention with Somali music. From a rear window the white flag of peace flaps in the wind.

As they cruise Balcad, Aweys sings Somali karaoke over the loudspeakers, and in between songs he talks up the game. They pass the old textile factory that once produced Somalia’s school and military uniforms; donkeys and cattle graze beside the abandoned building. The Land Rover stops near a collection of thatched huts where fruits and vegetables are sold. A crowd soon gathers. The kids are curious and playful, but many of the adults keep their distance.

“We are a team made up of many clans,” Aweys says, “and we have learned to play together. We are the champions of Somalia. If we can do this, anything is possible.”

Other players hand out T-shirts featuring the Elman logo and the words Fair Play in English, and in Somali Noloshu Waa Nabad (Life Is About Peace). On the back is printed Child Soldiers – Say No. When the adults realize the T-shirts are free, they too gather around.

By mid-afternoon a quarter of the town has converged on the football pitch. There are no concession stalls, no grandstands, no scoreboard, but by game time close to five thousand people surround the dirt field.

Although Muse Sudi is in Nairobi for a Somali reconciliation conference, many of his advisors are here, sitting in a special midfield section with town elders and other clan officials. Anxious guards stand behind them with AK-47s. Children climb fan-shaped acacia trees to get above the crowds, and trucks parked around the field are crammed with people hoping for a better view.

The yellow Land Rover is behind the Elman bench, and the loudspeakers are used to announce the players. The 2003 Elman tour of Somalia is now officially underway. The crowd is raucous; it's the biggest gathering in town since the start of the war. Once the players are introduced, people settle down to listen to Aweys talk about the team's mission of peace, harmony, and integration. When he is finished, the referee blows the whistle and play begins.

Both sides are tentative. Balcad's sloppy play is understandable – they are up against the Somali champs – but the Elman players are even more nervous. Although the team has journeyed to Tanzania and Kenya for international competition, civil war has kept them from traveling in their own country; this is their first domestic trip.

The crowd claps and cheers whenever either side moves the ball, but even in the second half Elman is out of synch. Both sides have chances, but nobody can capitalize. In the eighty-fifth minute, a mistake by an Elman defender allows Balcad to score, and the game ends 1-0.

The Elman players mill around after the game speaking to whoever will listen. Music blares from the Land Rover's speakers. Guards with guns mingle in the crowd, some carrying Elman T-shirts.

Mahad Mahamud, the Balcad forward who kicked the game's only goal, became a local hero. "The match drew a lot of interest in town and everyone was happy that I scored," he said during a series of phone and email interviews I conducted in 2004. "It was amazing to beat the Somali champions. Before the match, people wondered how many goals Elman would beat us by, five, nine, maybe ten. No one expected it."

"Sure we wanted to win," Aweys said, "but I was just so happy to be somewhere else. It was amazing because I'd never been anywhere in my country except Mogadishu. I didn't think I could ever see the rest of Somalia. The people of Mogadishu believe it is not open, not safe. But I believe if you want to spread the word of peace, you can go anywhere."





LIKE EUROPEANS, AFRICANS ARE SOCCER-MAD. Their style of play is high-octane and flamboyant, the players are quick dribblers who love forward attacks. Africa's top national teams are government-sponsored and amply funded, and the best African players, when not representing their own countries, play in European leagues.

Despite the lack of government in Somalia, soccer thrives. There are lots of local teams, but they must compete close to home because of the war. Mogadishu, the country's largest city with a population of about 1,200,000, hosts several tournaments, and Elman has been the reigning champ since 1997, earning the right to represent Somalia at the annual Confederation of East and Central Africa Football Association tournament (CECAFA).

The Elman Football Club was founded by Mohamud Ali Ahmed – Elman, as friends called him – a Somali business man turned peace activist and human rights campaigner. In 1992, using profits from his vehicle repair business and his electrical generator network, Elman created the Organization for Training and Technical Institute (OTTI), a vocational school for displaced children. Once the kids finished classes, most had nowhere to go, so they kicked a ball around in the courtyard, and that's how the first Elman squad was formed.

The OTTI replaced guns with pens, books, and training, but it could only handle a couple of hundred displaced children a year, and the war had created thousands. Many ended up in militias as front-line fodder. These kids couldn't read or write, they had no shoes, most were malnourished. The militias enticed them with money, guns, protection, and food.

The children at Elman's school were expected to study hard and obey strict rules: no guns, no violence, no smoking, no tardiness, no qat. Fifty percent dropped out. Today the retention rate is much higher because the Elman players act as mentors. One such mentor is a young man I will call Ali (he didn't want me to use his real name because he still fears for the safety of himself and his family). In 1995 Ali was one of the many kids who hung out at K4, the once fashionable crossroads at the heart of the city that devolved into a collection of shacks selling drugs and guns. Back then he was illiterate, his father had died due to lack of medical attention and his brothers went missing during the initial fighting (they would later resurface in Yemen).

Before the war, it didn't matter that most of Ali's friends were Abgaal clan and he Hawiye. But once the fighting broke out, it was all that mattered. Many of his friends joined Muse Sudi's Abgaal militia, and Ali became an outcast. He and what was left of his family were forced to abandon their home to take up residence in a two room concrete shell in a dilapidated part of Mogadishu.

Most of Ali's friends died in meaningless skirmishes, and if not for the vocational school, Ali would most likely be dead too. At OTTI, he worked hard, and now he reads and writes both Somali and English. He was invited to try out for the junior squad, quickly became a standout, and was on the senior team a year later, at the age of fifteen, the youngest on the squad. "The clan militia tried to recruit me," Ali said, "but I couldn't do it, to fire upon friends, they were like brothers."

AFTER THE BALCAD GAME, the team takes the only road out of town, the Wadada Shiinaha, or Chinese Road, so called because it was built by a Chinese company. It's Somalia's longest paved road, linking Mogadishu to central and northern regions, but it hasn't seen a repair crew since 1991. In places it looks abandoned, with massive pot holes and encroaching scrub.

Jowhar, the next stop, is only sixty kilometers from Balcad. It's another Abgaal clan town, but it's controlled by Mohamed Dhere, a sworn enemy of Muse Sudi. A roadblock between the towns divides the territory. About twenty militia members, all armed, are on duty when the Elman vehicles arrive.

The guards are expecting them and already know that Balcad has won. They board the bus with guns strapped to their shoulders. The team grows anxious and avoids eye contact.

"Who is in charge?" one of the boys asks. He has a scar across his cheek, a knife slash.

Haji stands. "We have been invited by..."

"We know who you are. We want you off the bus, now."

"But –"

The boy raises his hand, smiling. "We want to kick a ball around."

The tension lifts. Eleven guards put their guns down, confident of their chances since Elman dropped the Balcad game. An impromptu match begins. The other guards, still toting AK-47s, laugh as Elman puts on a clinic, dribbling and showing off with precision passing. The handful of vehicles stopped at the checkpoint must wait until the guards grow tired.

At midday the game wraps up. Now it's time for prayer. Almost everyone in Somalia is Muslim, and the team stops five times daily to worship. At the Jowhar checkpoint, some of the guards pray too, but in shifts, with guns close at hand. Their interpretation of their faith is different from Elman's. "The message we give our players and supporters," says Abdi-Rashid Haju Nur, chairman of Elman FC, "is that if you're Muslim, you can't injure someone or destroy property. Those that do are not loyal to their religion, they are only loyal to their clan and money."



AS 1992 WORE ON, Elman Ali Ahmed was increasingly appalled by the political stalemate in Somalia and the random killing taking place all over Mogadishu. He grew bolder in his criticism of the warlords, and in '92, he let his hair grow in protest, saying he would not cut it until there was peace. As his programs became more successful, his profile in the international community rose. He was welcomed across the city in that same bright yellow Land Rover used by the team today. But the warlords had soon had enough. Unknown gunmen put two bullets in the back of his head on March 9, 1996.

Thousands mourned the assassination, and letters arrived from around the world. Amnesty International said at the time, “Elman Ali Ahmed’s murder has sent a chilling message to Somalis desirous of peace and normality – that no one is safe.”

With Elman gone, the school and the football club were in jeopardy, Nur assumed the role of chairman only six weeks after Elman’s death, and has stayed on even though the position is unpaid. “I knew some of those kids,” he says. “Where would they go?”

The OTTI’s name was changed to the Elman Human Rights and Peace Foundation to ensure that his legacy would continue. Many of the kids Elman recruited are still affiliated with the team. “Elman found me in the streets ten years ago,” says Aweys, the singing striker. “I must continue his work. He helped many children and so I will too.”



AFTER THE TEAM’S TENTATIVE PLAY IN BALCAD, their coach, Abdi-Farah Ali (nicknamed Geela, meaning “Camel” for his gawky six-foot-four frame) wonders how to settle things down, but the impromptu game with the checkpoint guards has eased the tension, so he says nothing before the Jowhar match. His hunch is right, Elman returns to their championship form with a 4-1 victory.

As the bus heads to Bulo-Burde for the next game, kids sing and head the ball in back while others listen to Somali music on walkmans. A few take photos with digital cameras. The adults try to sleep.

They make good time until they come upon two mini-vans stretched across the asphalt. The bus stops. Bandits, Qaasim thinks, but it’s only the sports committee from the neighboring town of Jalalaqsi, blocking the road because they want to play Elman before Bulo-Burde, their larger neighbor and rival. The sports committee refuses to move the mini-vans until Elman says yes, and so they must agree to play. “We had contacted Jalalaqsi months before the tour, and they said no,” says Hassan-Ahmed Abdi, the Elman club secretary, “but once they heard we were coming to Bulo-Burde, it was a loss of face for them. There was no way they were going to let us go without first visiting them. We had no choice.”

Two thousand people are already waiting in Jalalaqsi to see the match. The pitch is sandy, it’s like playing on a beach, but Elman has little trouble with the locals, dispensing with them 5-0. The team politely declines offers of food and lodging, still hoping to arrive in Bulo-Burde in time for their game, but the dirt road has lots of pot holes and the bus breaks down.

Fortunately, Qaasim is also a mechanic, but it takes him several hours to make the repair. The team arrives after dark and the Bulo-Burde sports committee is furious. Abdi and Geela meet with town elders in the morning and decide that the match will be played on their return in two weeks, but logistics prevent the game from taking place.

When the Elman squad leaves Bulo-Burde, their next scheduled match, in Beled-Weyne, is being held hostage over a fee for the football pitch. The woman who controls the field wants a thousand US dollars because she recently received five hundred from a relief organization that used the field to sponsor a local football exhibition promoting an immunization program. The woman assumes that the Somali football champions can afford to pay twice that amount.

“Once war broke out,” Nur says, “public land across the country was up for grabs. This woman lived adjacent to the field and was backed by the local clan militia.”

A thousand US dollars represents two-thirds of the entire cost of Elman’s month-long tour. The team refuses to negotiate, relying on a group of local delegates to appeal to the owner. “There was a lot of interest in us playing there,” Nur says. “We assumed that enough pressure would eventually change her mind.” As the team drives north, they are optimistic that the game will take place.

Beled-Weyne is the largest town near the Ethiopian border, with 150,000 people. During Somalia’s conflict with Ethiopia in the late 1970s, the city was home to huge refugee camps; what remains is rubble and abandoned fields.

A welcoming committee escorts Elman into town. At their hotel, they learn that negotiations are at a stalemate, but word spreads that the team has arrived, and local players and fans show up at the hotel to swap football stories. Some of the Elman squad drive around town in the Land Rover. They speak to several hundred people that afternoon.

The next day a final appeal is made to the owner of the field, but to no avail. The team holds out hope of playing the game on the way back to Mogadishu, but the local militia has no interest in expending political capital on Elman’s behalf. No game takes place in Beled-Weyne.

The next stretch of road is in good condition and the team travels ninety kilometers in four hours. There are no road signs along the way, only the occasional kilometer marker stating the distance from Mogadishu. “You have to know the roads,” Qaasim said.

Another directional aid is the telecom towers that dot the countryside. Often they can be spotted from twenty kilometers away. There’s one in the tiny village of Guri-heel, population one thousand. The team stops to refuel and get something to eat in the thatched huts by the roadside. Although there is no electricity or running water, NationLink, an African telecommunication conglomerate and Elman tour sponsor, runs its own generator to power the dishes that sit atop the tower in this village. While the team takes a welcome break, Abdi and Geela pop into the concrete building that serves as the NationLink office. There they meet the manager and several town elders. Geela tells them about the tour and where they are headed and asks if they’d like to play a game.”

One of the elders hesitates, unsure how to tell Geela that the children have no shoes, not even a soccer ball. Geela decides to give the village Elman’s spare set of uniforms, and that afternoon the tiny town of Guri-heel plays the Somali



champions. Everyone gathers around the open field. Sticks from a fallen acacia tree are used to mark the goals. Sideline boundaries are implied. The team takes it easy on the village and only beats them two nil. Elman leaves the game ball, and as they drive off, the kids are still kicking it around.



AFTER ELMAN'S MURDER, the team continued to dominate the Mogadishu tournaments, but without government infrastructure and sponsorship, they were at a disadvantage on the international stage. After Elman was trounced in the 2001 CECAFA Club Championships for a third year in a row, Nur realized they needed a coach with international experience. "But no foreigner would come to Somalia," he says. "So we had to find a qualified countryman."

Geela's name kept coming up, although he'd fled the country years ago. But because there were no other viable candidates, Nur kept asking about Geela's whereabouts.

Before the war, Geela had been a star for Dowladda House, one of Mogadishu's best teams. He was also on the national squad, and once his playing days were over, he became assistant national coach.

With the outbreak of civil war Geela sent his wife and kids to his hometown of Baidoa to avoid the fighting, while he remained in Mogadishu to make money as a passport broker. When the fighting got worse he fled too.

In 1992 drought hit Baidoa and soon hundreds of people were dying on the streets daily. The mass exodus included Geela and his family. "All we took was the clothes on our back," he says.

They ended up in a Kenyan refugee camp where they spent two years sharing a ten-foot-by-ten-foot tent with six people. When the situation improved in 1995, they returned to Baidoa, but the fighting reignited and they left yet again, eventually moving to Eastleigh, a ghetto of Somali refugees on the outskirts of Nairobi. There was no sanitation or fresh water in Eastleigh, but compared to the refugee camp, it was luxury.

One night in 1998 the police broke down the door of Geela's shack and dragged him to Bangani Police Station, where he was interrogated for several days on charges of illegally entering the country. He was taken to a disease-ridden prison, fed gruel, and abused. It took almost a month for his friends to sort out his paperwork.

Nur spent a year searching for Geela, and yet when he finally tracked him down in late 2001 to offer him the job, Geela said no. "I didn't want to live in fear despite the difficulties in Nairobi." Nur told him that all clans were welcome at the Elman center and that within reason his safety could be assured. The position also came with a monthly salary and access to running water and fresh food. Geela was still hesitant, but after much arm-twisting, he agreed to try it.

When word got out that Geela was back in the country, many of his former teammates appeared at the Elman grounds, all with similar tales of struggle. Geela wasted no time putting them to work. He focused on conditioning, and for a month they didn't even touch a ball. "The team had talent," Geela says, "but they could only last a half. We needed to play a full ninety minutes. I had them run and run and run."

He soon had them moving like gazelles and mastering fundamentals like ball control and passing. Six months later the team went to Zanzibar for the 2002 CECAFA Club Championship and against strong competition came away with one victory, two ties, and a single defeat. It was the best showing by a Somali team in international competition in fifteen years.

At the next Club Championship, in Uganda, the team got off to a great start. Playing in front of 15,000 people at Nyambole Stadium in Kampala, they beat the 1997 champions, Ryon of Rwanda. Although Elman dropped the next two games against tougher clubs, thousands of Somalis supported them, proudly waving their country's flag, regardless of clan affiliation.

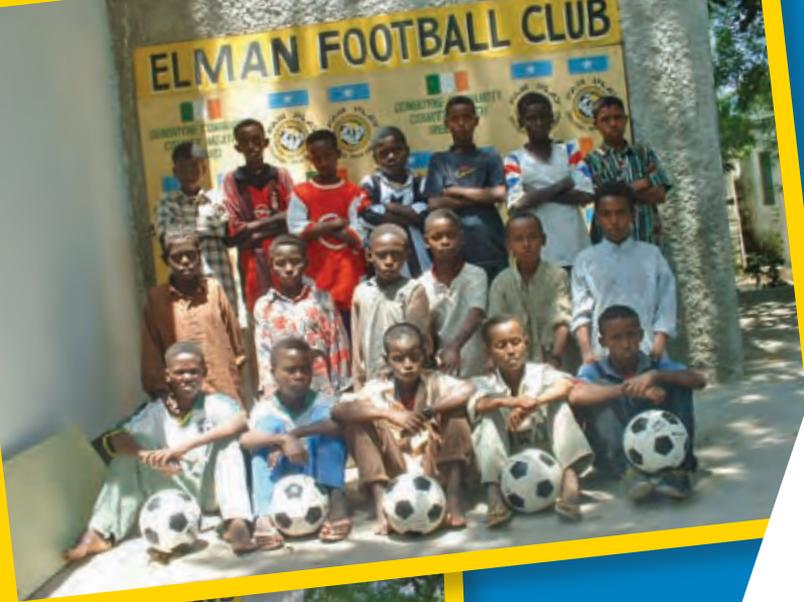
"The game is important," Nur says, "but the players understand there is a much greater urgency. Wherever we go we carry the name of Somalia. We carry the flag, we carry dignity. We are not refugees. We are not asylum seekers. We represent our country and look to build relationships that can help return Somalia to what it once was."

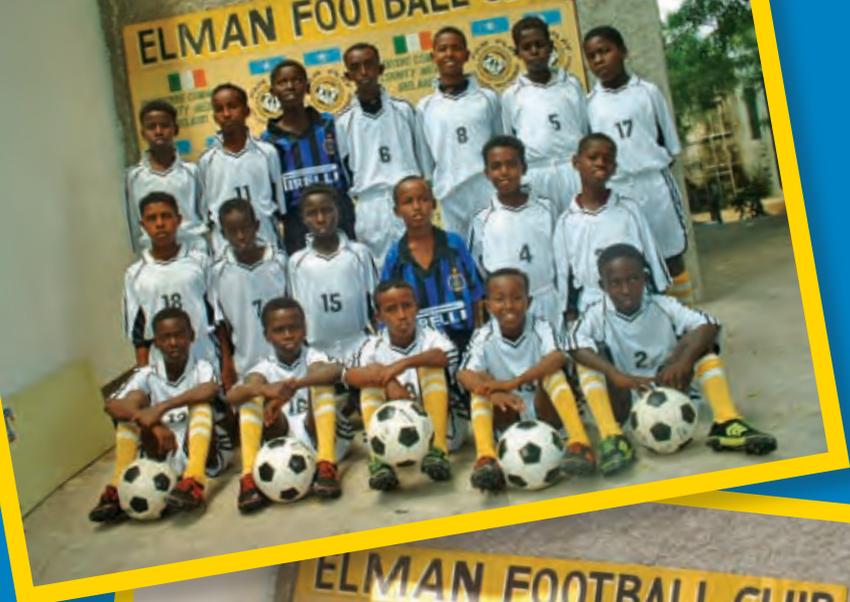


THE 2003 ELMAN TOUR WAS THE BRANCHILD OF NUR, the club's chairman, and Abdi, its secretary. Nur used to work at the American Embassy, a coveted position before the war. He got the job because he was one of the few Somalis who spoke English. Once war began, the embassy was abandoned, and it wasn't long before he too fled his home, leaving behind all possessions. Today he is both country director of Concern Worldwide, a nongovernmental organization working in the areas of health care, education, sanitation, and agriculture, and chairman of Elman FC, but if not for saving his US embassy identity badge, he might not be either. "Hundreds of people crowded about trying to get an interview the day Concern opened a Mogadishu office," he says. "I gave my ID card to one of the guards, and that got me in."

Abdi, Elman's club secretary, used to import clothes from Saudi Arabia before the war. He lived in a district of Mogadishu called Hodn (meaning "rich, affluent"), where many of the embassies were located. Today the area looks more like Dresden 1945, just rubble and burned-out building shells. Most Mogadishians refer to this part of town as Bermuda, a reference to the triangle. They say what goes in rarely comes out, especially at night.

"Everything in Somalia is past now," Nur says. "Nothing is in the present. People say I used to be teacher, I used to work at a refinery, I used to be a builder.





Very few people are what they are right now. They don't have employment, they have nothing to do. They say I used to have that because they have nothing now."

Nur and Abdi believed that sports could be a platform for talking about the war, diseases like AIDS, and education, and that's what inspired them to take the club across Somalia.

"Unfortunately, one has to take risks to make a difference," Nur says. "We cannot just play football, we must use the game to promote integration. We didn't go to win but to play the game and engage each town."

The sixteen-game, three-thousand-kilometer tour took a year to plan because traveling across a country with no civil order posed unique challenges. Even something as simple as paying for food presented problems because Somalia had no credit card system and carrying cash would attract bandits. The team found partners to offset costs and to help with such logistics. For instance, the Global Money Transfer Company, a Western Union of sorts, provided money at locations throughout the country, as well as local assistance.

To ease passage through checkpoints, Elman FC obtained written invitations and used them as travel visas, a sound idea when the guards were informed. The team also avoided night travel when possible.

The one-month tour cost only fifteen hundred dollars, but that's a king's ransom in Somalia, where the average annual wage is estimated to be less than five hundred. Fortunately, the money was put up by the US arm of Concern. "The funds covered fuel, the bus rental, food, and communication," Nur says.

Even with all the planning and precautions, the players' parents were understandably concerned. "We knew Elman couldn't guarantee the team's safety," Ali's parents said, "but our son is doing important work."

The team's most difficult planning challenge according to Nur was to convince a bus owner to take the job. "Clan politics are complex. If someone from the driver's clan commits a crime against another clan, the driver can be held responsible. Under such conditions, how could I say for sure that the bus wouldn't be hijacked?"

And yet Elman's policy was to carry no guns, and there were no security guards accompanying the team. "Guns don't make things safer," Nur says. "Guns make things riskier no matter where you are."

Qaasim Hamarro took a gamble in agreeing to put his bus on the line, but he was a huge Elman fan and knew the importance of the tour. "Someone had to take the chance," he says.



THREE HOURS FROM GURI-CEEL, QAASIM LEAVES THE CHINESE ROAD and heads for Caabudwaaq, home of the former dictator, Siad Barre, and stronghold of his Darood clan, for Elman FC's next game.

Barre took over Somalia in a bloodless coup in 1969, only eight years after the country had established its independence from its colonial rulers, England and Italy. Barre exploited the rifts of clan loyalties and regional interests to seize power. He pursued a program of “scientific socialism” and signed a treaty with the Soviet Union in 1974, only to see it unravel when the Russians switched allegiance during Somalia’s war with Ethiopia. Throughout much of the 1980s Barre was the beneficiary of US funding and military support, but by the end of the decade mounting opposition to his regime caused him to unleash his Red Berets, killing thousands of civilians. After several massacres in July of 1989, the United States began to withdraw its support of Barre. Two years later he was overthrown, leaving the various clans to jostle for control of the country.

In 2003 a delicate equilibrium has been established, but sporadic fighting still erupts, and there is no greater potential for volatility than when Hawiye and Darood clans mix, because theirs is the deepest rooted and bloodiest of all the country’s rivalries. And since Mogadishu is predominantly Hawiye today (in Barre’s time it was a mixed city), there is trepidation about the reception Elman will receive.

Mahamed-Ali Salah, a defenseman for Cabudwaaq, didn’t believe it when he heard Elman FC was coming. “The road is so rough, nobody takes it unless they know it well.”

The desert sand whips across that unmarked dirt road, often concealing the way for kilometers at a stretch. Qaasim follows the tracks of other vehicles in hopes of staying on course. To forge a new path would be suicide since Barre lined the road with landmines as a defensive measure in his waning days as dictator. “Not for a second did I consider trying to go off road,” Qaasim recalls. “We have a saying in Somalia, never drive where there are no tracks.”

And only a few meters from the road, the occasional cattle carcass is seen, unmistakable landmine kill.

The bus is unusually quiet. The team expects a tough game, but the locals are outmatched and defeated four to nothing without incident. “Although we came from a Hawiye-dominated area,” Nur says, “we were received as brothers. It was a great moment for the Elman team and the people in Caabudwaaq.”

Salah, the Caabudwaaq defenseman, was glad Elman came and felt that the team’s visit had an impact. “We dared ourselves to go for friendly matches to other towns, even with those that had longstanding hatred with us, and we had good games.” The next day Elman FC backtracks down that same dirt road and discovers that the winds have blown hard overnight. The sand is so thick that the bus gets stuck and the team has no option but to push.

The strong African sun bakes the desert sand that traps the bus. The players, wearing long pants, mostly velour track suits or jeans, are dying of thirst, but they have to conserve water. If road conditions don’t improve soon they will run out, so the team takes shifts. After four torturous hours they have moved the bus three kilometers to a solid stretch of road. Some players think that this has been a training exercise planned by Geela; the coach won’t say.



SOMALI CHILDREN HAVE NEVER KNOWN A WORLD WITHOUT WAR. Their parents call them jiiilka dagaaka sokeeye – the lost generation. They know only famine, floods, and civil war, and yet their spirit is strong, and nowhere is it more clearly seen than on the football pitch. As they chase after the ball in bright yellow Elman jerseys, it's easy to forget that many live in makeshift tents with no access to running water, electricity, or schools.

Elman FC runs clinics for children at six locations across Mogadishu, all supervised by players like Ali. "The kids love wearing the uniform," he says, "but there's always others hanging about wanting to play, eyeing those yellow jerseys, so we bring extra balls."

Although there is no skill requirement to participate, there is a waiting list. The best get a shot at making the Elman junior squad, but regardless of talent, participants are encouraged to spend time at the Elman Center to relax, watch TV, and mingle with the senior and junior players. All must abide by the rules, and for the most part they do, because inside the Elman Center they are safe, exchanging their tattered T-shirts for the Elman jersey, shorts, socks, and sneakers. Many don't even have shoes, let alone socks.

One of the kids participating in Ali's clinic is fourteen-year-old Ilyas Abdikadir Muse, nicknamed Adduunyo – meaning, "This is just a world that will not last forever." His parents were killed by a mortar explosion when he was nine; he and his two sisters were taken in by an aunt. "She was very good to us," he says, "but her husband didn't like us, especially me, and one day he got so mad he shoved me out of the house. I never went back."

Adduunyo fell in with the crowd that hung out at K4. He started smoking hash and chewing qat. Then he sold to other chewers. His life turned around when he met an Elman player. "He was well dressed and asked why I was ruining my life," Adduunyo says. "I told him about myself, and he took me to a beautiful place with pictures of people playing football, then I had a good breakfast and watched football games on TV. It was a completely different world. I couldn't believe there were still people who cared about others."

Adduunyo now spends afternoons at the Elman Center, proudly wearing his uniform. But before leaving he changes back into street clothes because his jersey would literally be ripped from his back the minute he left the compound.

When twenty-two-year-old Gaalos was ten, bandits stormed his village and gunned down seventy people. Gaalos was the only child among them, somehow alive beneath the carnage. Gaalos received no crisis counseling; he barely got medical care for his bullet wound. His parents were dead, and he was forced to fend for himself.

It is still unclear how he found his way to Elman, but he got involved with one of the soccer clinics. "I support the team because Elman Ali Ahmed, the founder, helped the poor," Gaalos says. "Everybody knows I'm a strong supporter and they welcome me at the club. I even traveled with them to Baidoa and Xudur."

THE TOUR'S GREATEST POTENTIAL FOR TROUBLE IS IN GAALKACYO, a city still divided after twelve years of civil war – once again Darood versus Hawiye. No wall divides the city; there is no formal checkpoint either, just the Chinese Road and the unspoken consequences of crossing that asphalt. To the north is the Darood section under Puntland jurisdiction, a part of the country that has organized itself and established a semblance of normality. There is government infrastructure here providing electricity, water, hospitals, schools, and a police force for roughly ten thousand. But the three-thousand or so Hawiye living in South Gaalkacyo have no access to this infrastructure; they live among collapsed buildings and burned-out vehicles, and at night their portion of town is dark except for a handful of bulbs running on generators.

"We wanted to play in Gaalkacyo to bring the two sides together," Nur says, "but we couldn't get them to agree. They insisted on two games, one on each side of town. That went against all of Elman's principles, but it was important to come, so we would play two if necessary."

The team reaches the outskirts of Gaalkacyo around one o'clock. The South Gaalkacyo coach and district sports committee members are waiting by the roadside in a mini-bus. It is a cloudless day and over ninety degrees. Camels graze in the scrub, oblivious to the heat. On that barren stretch of road the sports committee says that it is impossible for Gaalkacyo to play as one unit.

"We didn't want to push them," Geela says, "so I agreed to the two games, but I told them that on the way back from Garoowe we would still like to play a united team." The Hawiye representatives are non-committal. They escort the team to the southern part of town, past squat concrete buildings and tin lean-tos lining the road. Cars bump along with no regard to lanes. Horns honk to move pedestrians and goats.

After a modest lunch, several players drive around in the Land Rover. The Somali music, with its polyrhythmic beat and cheesy eighties synths, draws crowds, and whenever the Land Rover stops, lots of T-shirts are handed out.

The match is played on an open field of red dirt and rocks in front of a thousand people. Elman easily defeats South Gaalkacyo 5-0 with no incidents or injuries.

Afterwards, the team boards the bus and crosses the Chinese Road. On the north side the pavement is smooth, there are street lights, trees, even fresh paint on the concrete buildings. The hotel has running water and electricity.

"I didn't think they knew how to play football," the receptionist says to Geela.

"How were you treated?" the bellman asks, as though the Hawiye were capable of attacking Elman players. The next day the Land Rover motors around the streets of North Gaalkacyo while Geela meets with the district sports committee to float the idea of a match with a united team. "To my surprise, they considered the offer and claimed that if the Hawiye agreed to play on the north side, they would do it. I still don't know why they changed their minds."





But first there is a game to be played against North Gaalkacyo. It is another hot July afternoon, and two thousand people pay one thousand Somali shillings (five cents) to see the match. Before the game Elman players speak to the crowd and are received with a polite, reserved response. The football pitch has even more rocks than in South Gaalkacyo; some the size of golf balls. Many of the Elman players fear dirty play, and the game is rough. Elman takes some hard hits, but they dish out plenty of tough tackles too.

A steady wind blows sand across the field, and at times shrouds of dust envelop the players, making it impossible to see the action. The lime boundary markers blur in the dirt, and even the referees have difficulty seeing what's going on. At the end of play, the teams are tied 1-1. The players leave the field covered in grime, but with a grudging respect for one another. Before washing up, the Elman players stick around to give away more T-shirts. Geela contacts the South Gaalkacyo sports committee prior to the team's departure. Security is still an issue, but now they also want guarantees of no politics. "They didn't want any speeches by Puntland officials," Geela says, "so I got the Darood sports committee on the phone and they assured us that there would be none. They also pledged to do everything they could to ensure the safety of South Gaalkacyo players and their supporters."

It still takes several hours of negotiations and phone calls from Hawiye officials in Mogadishu to get the South Gaalkacyo representatives to agree, but eventually they do, and eight days later Elman returns to play the united Gaalkacyo team.

"Elman's visit was unexpected," says Khadar Warsame, center for North Gaalkacyo, "because no one could imagine a team traveling from Mogadishu to here. The fact they came without incident shows that sport belongs to peace."

An estimated four thousand people pay the one thousand shillings to see the game; three hundred of them have crossed the green line from the south without a problem. For many, it's their first time in North Gaalkacyo since the war started.

The atmosphere is festive, despite police wearing green camouflage and carrying AK-47s around the stadium. Kiosks along the side of the field sell ground nuts, sambusa, tea, and cigarettes. Women sit together, heads covered with xijab, or veils, some brightly colored, others a simple black.

The Land Rover is behind the Elman bench, its peace slogans visible to most of the crowd. Music blasts from the loudspeakers, and Aweys Winkey, the singing striker provides entertainment as the stadium fills.

The players stand in the hot sun, attentive, the ninety-five-degree heat searing a thin layer of reddish dust to their skin. The referee kicks a few stones, the pitch appears even rockier than last week, as if rubble has actually been added.

Six of the eleven Gaalkacyo players are Hawiye, and although they have had little time to practice as one team, on this day they are united against a common foe and they play well. Still, Elman is the better side, but whenever an opportunity presents itself, the referee blows the whistle, several times issuing Elman players yellow cards. At the half there is no score, but two Elman players have tripped over rocks and are seriously cut.

The team doctor has no formal training; he's learned only rudimentary first aid while assisting at several clinics sponsored by relief groups. He is used to dealing with minor cuts and sprains, but these gashes require stitches. With no anesthetic, just rubbing alcohol and gauze, he sterilizes a needle with a match. The players grit their teeth and wince, then return to action.

Early in the second half, a red card is issued to an Elman player, and they must now play the rest of the game short-handed. This gives Gaalckayo an advantage, and on a corner kick, they head the ball in for the only score. The Gaalckayo players surround the goal scorer, chests are thumped, some high-five, the crowd cheers.

When the final whistle blows, the players shake hands and the spectators fill the field. Some of the Elman team hand out leaflets about peace and social integration, some describe how to avoid getting AIDS.

Ali gets on the Land Rover loudspeaker to talk once more about peace while Hawiye and Darood mix as if the civil war is over.

Sahro Sheekh, a reporter for Radio Gaalkacyo covered the games and felt Elman's visit was like a dream. "It really contributed to the social-reintegration and peaceful cohabitation of the two sides of Gaalkacyo. Many people wanted to invite Elman players to their houses."

"This truly was a miracle," Nur adds. "For twelve years this town had been divided. Of course we would have liked to have won the game, but we were all winners that day."

Abdulkadir-Yahya Ali, co-director of the Center for Research and Dialogue, based in Mogadishu, was at the Gaalkacyo match and thought the Elman effort was a great start. His center is focused on promoting the social, economic and political rebuilding of Somalia. Ali had a more pragmatic view of these games. "It was wonderful to see the Hawiye and Darood mix, but one visit is not enough to change twelve years of division. Sports unites people, it breaks down barriers; Elman must come back to make a real difference, I hope they return soon to continue what was started."



THIRD WORLD COUNTRIES COMPETE FOR THE WORLD'S ATTENTION just as corporations, celebrities, and politicians do, and without a government, Somalia's people are at a disadvantage. Mass murder, natural disasters, famine, terrorism – these are the stories that get media attention. On the rare occasion when Somalia does appear on the front page of a US newspaper, it's images of children with twiglike limbs that make headlines. For some Americans, Somalia will forever be linked with Black Hawk Down. Last year, when the country was thought to be the site of Al Qaeda training camps, the world's media rushed back to Mogadishu, but when the rumors could not be confirmed, reporters caught the next flight out.



At the moment things are bad in Somalia, but apparently not bad enough for the media. Coverage of Somalia has dwindled to a trickle in the last few years and a positive story almost never makes the news. When the Elman team returned to Mogadishu last summer, they were welcomed home as heroes. It was a major local story – soccer team plays for peace across the nation – but not one international reporter covered it.

This lack of media coverage translates into less foreign aid, most of which comes from the UN and nongovernmental organizations like Concern Worldwide, Doctors Without Borders, and Care. Of the sixty or so NGOs in Somalia at the outbreak of war, less than ten still operate there, despite the need. The head of the Somali desk at the US State Department has never heard of Elman, the man or the football club.

This summer the country's key warlords and politicians put the final touches on an agreement to establish a new government and hold presidential elections. This was the fourteenth attempt to make a deal, and there was plenty of skepticism. Besides the Somali representatives, six neighboring countries were involved, including Ethiopia, Djibouti, and Kenya.

Although the July 31 deadline was missed, a transitional federal parliament was created at the end of August, and 258 members took the oath of office. The EU and Washington issued official words of encouragement. The New York Times gave the effort one paragraph buried in the 'World Briefing' section.

The political process is complicated by the interests of these neighbors and the various Somali leaders jockeying for positions. There are also three-and-a-half million people living in the self-declared Republic of Somaliland who are still not party to this agreement. They live in an area one-sixth the size of Somalia, and yet avoided turmoil by establishing a government peacefully at the start of the civil war. To date no country has recognized them as a sovereign nation.

Coca-Cola did open a plant in Mogadishu in June, the largest single foreign investment since the civil war began. That same week renewed fighting broke out in central Somalia. At the Athens Olympics, it was alleged that the head of the Somali Olympic Committee embezzled funds from the international soccer federation. The State Department's warning for Americans to avoid the country, first issued in 1994 with the closing of its embassy, is still in effect.

Regardless of what happens politically in Somalia, Elman FC will soon head south on another peace tour, covering six hundred kilometers of difficult road and rocky terrain. Perhaps this is where the country's greatest hope can be found, in its people, people like Abdi-Rashid Nur, a man who clearly has the education and means to leave the country and yet chooses to remain.

"We are tired of the fighting and suffering. Tired of war," he says. "The world is not watching. Our future lies in our hands, in our children. That's why I stay. And that's why the Elman effort is so important."

He pauses and looks out onto a dirt field where an Elman player is supervising a clinic. Dust rises from a nearby road. "Perhaps one of these kids..."★





ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Robert Steven Williams is a twenty-year music industry veteran and runs Against the Grain Productions, a studio and music publishing company. He writes fiction, songs, and co-authored the best-selling business book, *The World's Largest Market*. He was a finalist in the Raymond Carver 2005 competition. Robert is a Harvard Business School Graduate and is currently working on a novel. For more information visit his website at: www.rswmusic.com



Concern Worldwide

104 East 40th Street,
Suite 903, New York,
NY 10016

Tel: 212.557.8000

Fax: 212.557.8004

Concern Worldwide

166 East Superior,
Suite 502, Chicago,
IL 60611

Tel: 312.642.8400

Fax: 312.642.8470

Photography by:

Liam Burke, Press 22, Ireland
Pieternella Pieterse

info.usa@concernusa.org

www.concernusa.org