

"FOR 90 MINUTES

These men and boys have escaped unimaginable horror, and risked their lives to reach Europe. Here, faced with endless uncertainty, and plagued by the traumas of their past, football is their salvation

When we think of the vulnerable, we picture babies, small children, women and girls. Their images accompany harrowing reports about

humanitarian crises, their faces look out at us from charity ad campaigns. Men are missing, because men are considered innately strong.

These men and boys, though, have fled the worst atrocities imaginable, seeking safety in Europe. They have travelled thousands of miles – often alone – risking torture, enslavement and death, yet when they arrive in Europe, battling mental and physical scars, they are largely overlooked.

"We have this idea that men don't suffer, but the guys we work with are incredibly fragile," says Thomas Farines, project leader for Aniko, a charity that uses football to provide structure, support and social inclusion to displaced people in Thessaloniki, Greece. Founder Dan Teuma agrees: "They are left behind in every aspect, from delivery of aid, to food, to psychosocial and health services, yet these guys are the most susceptible to crime, drug abuse, trafficking and serious mental-health issues."

Entangled in a system over which they have no influence, these men face a new, arguably equally damaging risk once they arrive in Europe. "Their days are empty and unstructured and they can easily sink into depression," says Farines. "Having an organised, structured activity, like football, helps them to forget, but it also gives them a sense of purpose."

This sense of purpose emanates from the pitch where Aniko FC train, a space donated by third-tier local team Iraklis FC. The atmosphere is light, determined, brotherly. Every player shares an overwhelming gratitude for the opportunity to play, and genuine passion for the game, but the greatest sense you get is one of friendship. They laugh, joke and gently tease one another with heartfelt affection. There is very real talent on the pitch, too; talent spotters from Iraklis [the equivalent of a League One club in the UK] are eyeing at least two players for potential trials.

You could be fooled into thinking that they're any other Sunday league team, but for these guys, two hours on their



WE CAN FORGET"

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➤ graffiti-covered pitch is nothing short of sacred. Many return to refugee camps after training, others have been given accommodation, but still no certainty over their future. Most have either lost family, or their loved ones are still struggling to reach safety. Some don't know if they're still alive.

Their journeys have been beset with danger and trauma, from hunger, to mistreatment, to risk of drowning or being crushed to death on tiny overcrowded boats. On arrival in Greece, they are sent to island detention camps, surrounded by three layers of barbed wire. Teuma describes the Moria refugee camp as "hell on Earth". Modelled on Guantanamo Bay and Australia's Manus Island camp, it's intended to act as a deterrent to would-be migrants. According to EU policies, no one should be there for more than three months, but some have stayed beyond two years. "A young Moroccan guy we work with was there alone for 18 months," says Teuma. "You can see the trauma all over him."

When people move to camps on the mainland, there is a lack of food, inadequate shelter, crime and violence to contend with, but also – particularly for men – a soul-crushing state of limbo. "In camps, people's lives haven't ended, but they can't progress," says Rory O'Keeffe, a communications expert and political and contextual analyst (koraki.org), who works closely with humanitarian groups including Aniko. "These men and boys had lives; they worked, brought up families and attended schools. At the camps, they are totally reliant on outsiders to decide if they are allowed to restart their lives."

This is where football comes in, because it empowers these men, lost in limbo, devoid of purpose. Since training sessions began, NGOs have reported fewer clashes in the camps, a reduction in drug and alcohol abuse, and fewer crimes. The players also attend matches with local fans, to integrate in a way that wouldn't otherwise be possible. To become Greeks-in-the-making.

The two hours these men spend training are two hours without reliving the trauma they've experienced, without thinking about what lies ahead, without being tortured by what could be happening to loved ones at home. It's two hours where they can dream of a future, and forget the past. They're among friends, family, brothers. They're not refugees here, they're a team. That's the power of football.



"IF I WASN'T HERE, I WOULD BE DEAD"

Kamal, 23, from Iraq

My dream is to be the world's best goalkeeper. I have been playing since I was 17; it's all I want. I feel happy here, training with people from all over the world. **I came alone from Mosul.** It was an incredibly hard, frustrating and exhausting journey, because I kept smuggling myself from my house all the way to Greece. It was incredibly dangerous, but when I arrived I immediately felt I had rights as a human. **I would have been killed if I stayed.** Men my age are being randomly detained, going missing, dying. After I arrived I got news that my older brother had been detained. When the government reclaims areas from Isis control, they assume the people there are part of Isis, even if they are innocent. After being interrogated for seven months they finally released him. **It's been two months since I spoke to my family.** There's no communication in Mosul now, so I worry every day whether they are safe. I have spent three months trying to see a psychological doctor here because I don't sleep. I can't stop thinking about my family. The only time my mind can rest is when I am here playing football.



"FOOTBALL GIVES ME POWER, EVEN IF I'M WEAK"

Mahmoud, 17, from Iraq

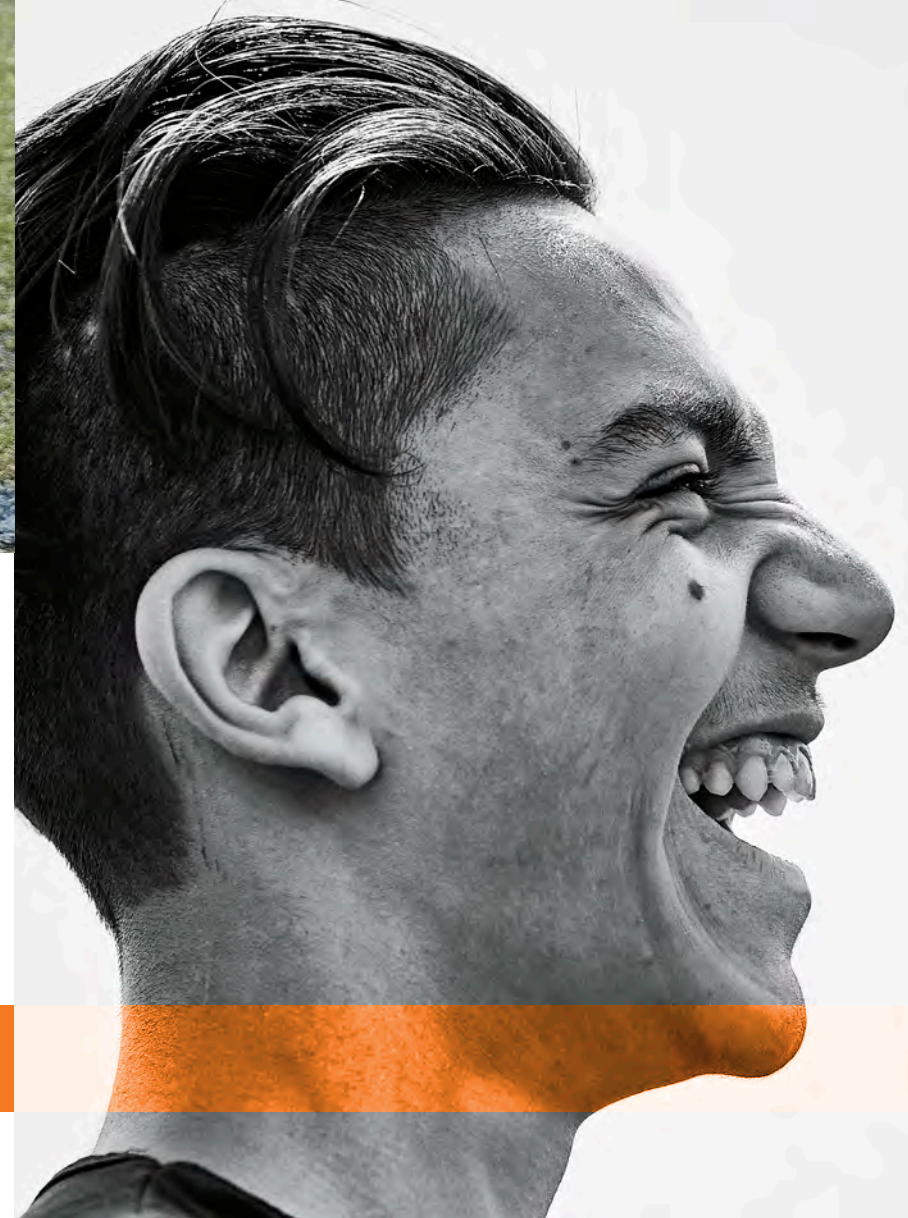
Football has been my dream since I was a baby. I train every day, work hard every session. Thomas has faith in us, and that makes me believe we have a future. **The journey here was the most difficult thing I have ever done.** I have terrible memories, but once I arrived I felt safe. Once you enter Europe you really feel what human rights are. **I'd be OK living in the streets, as long as I have football.** I live in a camp here. Sometimes it's difficult, sometimes it's OK. I just focus on football. It gives me power, even if I'm weak.



"I WANT TO BE THE NEXT GARETH BALE!"

Hamza, 16, from Syria

Everyone's talent is increasing session by session. We're all here together, helping each other, building a team. We're not only friends, we're brothers. **I ran away from death, and I succeeded.** I came from Syria 13 months ago with my cousin, who is 21. I don't like to think about the journey or what I left behind. I want to go to Germany so I can bring my family from Turkey. **Life here has been very difficult, but football has made it good.** I was in a camp at first, and it was really hard, then I was moved to a house in Thessaloniki, and I felt so relieved. I want to continue my studies, but my dream is to become a footballer. I want to be Gareth Bale!



"BEFORE FOOTBALL, I HAD NOTHING"

Zitouni, 23, from Morocco

This team is my family. I came to Greece four years ago and I had nothing. Now I train with Aniko I am thankful every day. I used to play in Morocco, so playing here in Greece makes me feel good in my heart, and I have friends from Africa, Syria, Afghanistan, Guinea. We are from all over the world, but we are a family. **My country couldn't give me a life.** I came to Greece because I had given everything – I had finished school, I had a diploma in accountancy, but I couldn't have a life; I couldn't have a career. I wanted to start my life. **I want to stay in Greece, but it's not for me to decide.** Next month I will be told if I can stay or not. If it's a no, I don't know what I will do. I don't know where I will go. **I want to play, to train, to study, to work.** I am very happy, but I am very fearful.



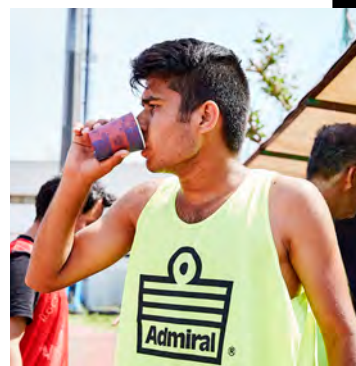
"I WON'T GIVE UP ON MY DREAMS"

Mojtaba, 17, from Afghanistan

When I play football, I feel happy. Football is one of the best opportunities I have been given. We have fun, we make friends and we sometimes go to watch matches. How do I feel when I play? Hot! But metaphorically, I feel happy. If someone tries, they can achieve their dreams. I have been in a refugee camp for two

years. My situation isn't as good as in other European countries, but it's better than my country. Two days ago there was an explosion there. Here I am safe. For the first year I was living in a tent. Now I live in a container, and we have some facilities, so it's good. Some people are in homes, I prefer to stay in the camps because we look after each other. Most of my friends have left, but I have Greek friends. We're not so different.

I'm studying here – it's what I've wanted all my life. I'm here with my two brothers and one sister. At first it was strange, but we have grown used to it. I am so thankful I can play football. Aniko is open to everyone. There are so few things I can do here, so this is very important to me. I want to play for Liverpool – like Mohamed Salah. I know it's difficult, but if I keep trying it will happen. I won't give up.



"ONLY HERE CAN I FORGET ABOUT THE PAST"

Masud, 42, from Iraq

This is the friendship of brothers. We are Muslims, Yazidi, Christians, from Sudan, Africa, Somalia, but we're family. Here, I forget about my struggles and think about my teammates. I was going to be killed, so I fled. I had a normal life, working with the Central Investigation in Iraq, but they told me to kill someone – an innocent. If I didn't, I would be killed. They gave me photos of the person, so I took them, got in my car and left. I flew to Turkey and paid €2,000 to take a truck to Greece. I was detained by the police, then I arrived here the next day. I am terrified for my family. I want to get residency here, so that I can bring my wife and three sons to safety too. I am terrified the government will hurt them because of me. This football pitch is the only place where I can rest mentally. It's the only time I don't feel tired. I can't feel any joy, I don't go out with friends, but here, I have a team.



"FOOTBALL IS MY ONLY DREAM"

Secou, 18, from Guinea

These are my brothers, regardless of nationality. We don't have the same parents, but we are a family. The coach gives us his time, he is here regardless of the weather to make sure that we can have some fun. My football has improved, but the biggest improvement is mental. I left a football career in Guinea, because I needed protection. I have always played, and I was good – I left school to play full time with the support of my family. I was in a football school for two years, but then I had some issues with my family and I had to leave Guinea to find a safe place. I needed protection from my family. I came as a 17-year-old, alone on 9 November 2016, via Lesbos. It was an incredibly difficult journey, but I had to go through it in order to be safe. Football helps me forget all the issues I face. I train hard and study every day. My dreams are only football, as long as I can play, I am OK. I dream of being as good as my idol, Dani Alves.

"I FINALLY FEEL SAFE"

Mohammad, 19, from Syria

I played football in the streets in Syria, but here it's my biggest passion. The boat was incredibly frightening. I told myself that though I might drown, I would at least die having a new experience. When I arrived in Greece, I felt overwhelmed that I had finally arrived at a safe place. This is what all refugees are seeking – safety. I lived in camps for more than a year. Softex [a camp near Thessaloniki] felt dangerous – there were drug dealers and fights on a daily basis. I wanted my mother to be safe. I found work with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, so I was given a flat, but I stayed in the camp and put my family there. I couldn't bear seeing my mother and nine-year-old sister in that camp. I always keep hope. Once you give up, you lose. In life, and in football.

WITH THANKS TO EASYJET FOR THEIR SUPPORT



"I'M A STRICT COACH, BUT I'M ALSO A FATHER AND A MENTOR"

Thomas Farines, coach for Aniko FC

We're using football to build futures. In camps, people have no objective, no structure, no will. Having queued to eat and had everything donated, when they leave there is a huge vacuum. Football sessions have a beginning, middle and an end, a set of rules, and they give players back a sense of normality. The only part of their lives they can control is the game, so they are desperate to win. It's my role to remind them that football is about so much more than that. The win is a consequence of the enjoyment, because if you're having a good time, you'll give more. These players share two things: football and struggle. An Arab and a Kurd technically shouldn't be friends, an Iranian Shia shouldn't get on with an Arab Sunni. They may not go for coffee together, but on the pitch they all play under the same colours. Every player has embraced those values. Listening to somebody is the smallest thing you can do. We've only seen their struggles through a lens, particularly the guys from Africa, most of whom have endured the risk of slavery, not to mention the danger of the crossing. I'm discreet, I don't ask questions, but they know they can talk. Aniko means 'belong'. We want to make our players feel part of something, to feel human. We also connect players with local fans who take them to stadium matches. People said it would be impossible, but we are always welcomed, and that connection happens organically. That's the thing with football, it bridges gaps.

To learn more about Aniko, to donate or to join their World Cup sweepstake, visit weareaniko.com

