

Love of soccer the goal

Primary kids the target

Having access to decent soccer facilities in South Africa is only a dream for most kids.

Kally Forrest interviewed **John Perlman**, well-known soccer commentator and popular former anchor of SAfm's AM Live show, who now heads the Dreamfields Project. He tells her why he started it, how it works and what he thinks its meaning is.

Why did you start Dreamfields?

It came out of a personal need really. In late April 2006 I started to think about how I could make a contribution to the World Cup. I didn't want to be a commentator especially as the economic value of the Cup for South Africa is contentious and the benefits probably exaggerated – is the building of these stadiums worth it?

When I was working for *SAfm* radio I started the Zifundele project which was about raising money for books so that kids could experience the joy of reading. We provided schools with 50 books in a steel case for R3000 and raised about R1 million. I felt it would be possible to do the same with football, I'd like to promote the joy of playing football amongst school kids.

In the beginning as I discussed my ideas with people during the time of the German World Cup I had big ideas – running coaching programmes and so on, and everyone I spoke to added a new layer of ideas. Then came the first breakthrough in September 2006

I had approached a number of companies but there was little enthusiasm. I met with responses like, 'This has already been done.'

They were not necessarily negative but they just thought I was reinventing the wheel. Then I got a positive response from BHP Billiton which was a turnaround point. Later on Old Mutual joined in as our other founding partner.

Why soccer fields, why not a community centre or swimming pool?

I love football. People would ask me, 'Are you trying to find the new Lucas Radebe?' No I'd explain, that's not my aim. I'm trying to find the next Rus Langa (former chief justice), Zwelinzima Vavi (trade union leader), Mamphela Ramphele (former vice chancellor University of Cape Town). It's about creating a healthy environment in which to grow and develop. When I was at school soccer was a big part of me taking school seriously. In South Africa you don't have to introduce soccer to kids like cricket, they already know and play the game so you can build on that.

The World Cup will only be a success if ordinary people feel part of it and it brings something into their lives that wasn't there before. For me it's about taking the excitement beyond the metros into areas that won't get the benefits – into semi rural and rural areas.

What do you want to achieve?

For me there is joy in giving and receiving. It's about how we can all feel part of the World Cup. So we structured a way in which people could give whatever they wanted to Dreamfields – R500 or R5000. So we had the Ridge private school buying a bag of football kit, or people from Ekuhuleni townships or JSE companies contributing.

The project is for people to enjoy the opportunity to feel connected. It's about breaking boundaries, being connected. I think most people in South Africa want to be connected and there is a great spirit and desire to see lots of kids out there on soccer fields.

So the idea is to provide kids around the country with football fields, with kits and to get leagues going again. It's all the better if schools have their own leagues so we don't have to reinvent the wheel. We have equipped nearly 1000 schools with Dream Bags soccer kits and we've got soccer leagues going in at least 10 communities. The Dream Bag consists of 15 shirts, shorts and socks with numbers on the back; boots and shin pads and three soccer balls, all in a strong bag. If there is a tournament everyone receives a kit beforehand.



A soccer field in Tshisahulu before and after Dreamfield's upgrading.



vision is to build 15 fields by the end of the World Cup. Our long-term goal is to come up with low-cost low maintenance fields. So if the community does not have the resources to look after a grass field, we give them a level soil field with a good playing surface.

But there are two planks to Dreamfields. Our big goal is to create viable school soccer leagues across 27 000 schools. Every kid who takes part in a tournament gets

winners get gold medals and a trophy. Then we show them an even larger trophy and tell them that if they practise every Wednesday and play in the league they are eligible for this grand trophy.

How do you work?

We mainly work with primary schools. We are generally guided by sponsors in choosing areas. We make sure that we work with schools that are as close as possible

to each other geographically in order to facilitate the functioning of leagues.

Ideally we should work with Under 10s but it's too difficult to exclude kids in the higher grades who will feel aggrieved if they have nothing.

We work on a low cost, low-maintenance model in rural areas. Grass fields cost too much. Our research has shown us that all over Europe there are soil fields. These are durable and low maintenance.

Grass fields are high maintenance. They need to be mowed regularly and high rainfall is needed. Of course this is what communities want but we have to engage with them and explain otherwise.

We're on a big learning curve. We're still not precise enough about such things as what keeps a field low maintenance and playable. In fact such experimentation is still going on all over the world. A Dutch consultant who is an expert in soil has come over to work with us free of charge. We need to get a deeper technical knowledge of such things.

What's great about this work is that as we build fields other opportunities open up. So take Kagiso and Munsieville (West Rand townships) where there are two fields near each other run by the council. One field is beautifully kept by a council employee, but the other just down the road is not in good shape. So an opportunity could open up for the one employee to share with others how he does it.

In Botshabelo in the Free State for example we needed goalposts for a tournament. These were promised by provincial officials but did not arrive. So a welder in the community offered to make them which he did well. So later when we needed goalposts in Thembisa in Gauteng he expanded his business and came up and made them for us.

What problems have you met?

People in the community think lots of money will pour in. When they see the large amounts involved all sorts of other demands come forward before the basics are even in place. People start asking, 'Where are the change rooms? Floodlights? Spectator stands? Sometimes we tell sponsors to hold back on the money. In one community where we built two fields we asked community leaders to wait for 15 months before pursuing any of these demands, to make sure the fields were well used.

Also this work is harder than you think in the beginning. Getting stuff done is hard, there are all sorts of obstacles.

Some of the problems relate to cost escalation. You raise money on

the basis of a certain amount but by the time the project comes to fruition it's much higher and you can't go back and ask for more.

Also stabilising fields is a huge problem. To get people to look after them in the community is a challenge. Then there is the problem of expectations. People complain, 'We always had sand fields, what's different about these? Where is all the money going? I suppose development work often makes things worse before they get better. In a sense the large amounts of money involved for a while makes people more unhappy than they were before.

What kind of support do you get?

BHP and Old Mutual have put in a lot of money. Others have

sponsored a tournament, or field, or part of a field. And then individuals donate money to kits. The Department of Education has given us a lot of support and some of their districts like Gauteng Central are really well organised and we've worked well with them.

We've had support from 35 corporations, 85 small businesses and 112 individuals but we haven't had much success with foreign donations. We've also received a R6 million contribution for building fields from the Development Bank of Southern Africa.

Sometimes people who now live in the city want to donate a field to their home village, like Vhonani Mufamadi who put a great deal into laying fields in his Venda home town. There's a small trader in one



Dreamfields

Kids celebrate their new Dreambags which include t-shirts, shorts, socks, soccer boots, shin pads and soccer balls.



Free State town who has kitted out all the kids from his old primary school and they became provincial champions – fantastic stuff.

And we are getting better at using people's donations. It's amazing what a relatively small donation like R50 000 can do. We can run a tournament with caterers, taxis, marquees, a DJ, portable toilets and water on this. And we try to buy everything from people in the local area rather than going to buy in a city like Johannesburg. All in all we have injected R14 million into communities, most of it into small towns and rural areas.

This year we will be holding a 32-school tournament at Pretoria University, the Dreamfields Cup, for clusters of schools from small towns (only five are from metro areas). This tournament will have a huge impact on kids who will get to play under floodlights for the first time. It's a whole cultural experience. We also bring in

coaches who mentor kids and give them a bit of help. We are getting better at this sort of thing.

Girls also take part although there are fewer girls' teams. We hope someone else will run with our idea and get netball leagues going.

Kids are very shy. They look down when they receive their trophies and then run across the field to be on their own with their friends where they can really express themselves.

Some people like Fifa take the view that soccer development work in Africa must also achieve other things such as improve school attendance or reduce ethnic conflict or teach health lessons. This approach entails much deeper projects and so they are less widespread. We spread ourselves much thinner believing that kids must just go out there and play for the sheer enjoyment.

We work in a flexible way but also purposefully. We are

meticulous. My colleague captures the boot sizes of every kid in the team in every school that we work in so we can make sure they are used.

We don't get direct support from Fifa but they are aware of us. We met with Danny Jordaan and he knows all about the project.

So has Dreamfields become the reality you dreamt of?

There are of course many challenges. We have to make sure that fields are not damaged, or scattered with cow pats, littered, or ravaged by pathways. Fields need to be locked after matches but villagers are not used to closed spaces so this seldom happens. We have now come up with the idea of spring loaded gates which automatically close.

In one village we laid a grass field and in order to prevent overuse we also built a sand one. In consequence the sand field is used all the time and the grass field very seldom!

To maintain a level field we introduced a drag mat but young men in the village seldom use it. So it's a simple project but by no means straightforward. But as a colleague wisely said to me, 'If it was easy, someone would have done it before.'

But the big question is, are kids using these fields? The answer is yes mainly they are. And if nothing else 15 000 kids have Dream Bags and more access to the game of soccer. The changing nature of physical spaces in villages allows things to happen. An empty glass-littered area now gets cleared and becomes a busy place of life. There's a buzz right until dusk as spectators, players and hawkers move around. I have a hunch that if people see positive things happening this must be good.