



THE RIGHT TO PLAY

ATHLETES HELPING CHILDREN PLAY

Harnessing the power of sport for development and peace

Nikki Dryden

What do Jenny Thompson, Ian Thorpe, Matt Huang, Summer Sanders, Andrew Haley, Janet Evans, and Marylyn Chiang have in common? Okay, that's easy, they are all swimmers. So what about Johann Olav Koss, Wayne Gretzky, Haile Gebrselassie, Silken Laumann, Simon Whitfield, Lance Armstrong, and Dikembe Mutombo? Well, they are all athletes who have taken a stand for the right of every child to play, especially those children whose lives have been affected by war, poverty, disease, and illness. They are all athletes who have gone beyond themselves and used their success, celebrity, and voices to give to other children an opportunity to change their lives through the power of sport.

It all began in 1994, when Norwegian speed skater Johann Olav Koss won four Olympic gold medals. He immediately decided to donate a large part of the money he won to children, and he also challenged other athletes and the public to do the same. In doing so, Johann became the lead Athlete Ambassador for Olympic Aid, the legacy project of the Lillehammer Olympic Organizing Committee. The aim of Olympic Aid was to show support for people in war-torn countries and areas of distress. Olympic athletes were chosen to be ambassadors of Olympic Aid to assist in the fundraising efforts. An unprecedented US \$18 million was raised. Between 1994 and 2000, Olympic Aid continued to raise funds for children in disadvantaged situations, building on the momentum of subsequent Olympic Games, and Johann has not stopped since. "Johann works so tirelessly and with such passion," says Summer Sanders, who has been to Africa with him twice. "Our trips are non-stop, but I get to play with the kids, while Johann plays as well as works to send the message to ministers of sport and government officials. He never stops and it's always about the same thing, the kids. He is fantastic."

Summer Sanders joined Right To Play when it was still Olympic Aid, and went on her first trip to Africa in 1996. She traveled to Rwanda with Johann and saw firsthand some of the horrible effects of the genocide committed there just two years earlier. They spent one play day with over 300 children left orphaned from the war. Summer remembers one young girl whose legs were gone as the result of a landmine accident. She had no money for prosthetics, but she still participated in relay running races on wooden stumps. "She was only seven years old and she was so excited to compete. I saw it in her eyes, which just lit up with the idea of sports. She couldn't wait to be in the race and when she took the relay baton she ran so fast and was so happy."

In March 2001, Olympic Aid began to develop and

deliver its own child and community development programs using sport and play as its vehicle. In early 2003, Olympic Aid evolved into Right To Play in order to include both Olympic athletes and other elite sports figures as Athlete Ambassadors, to partner with a wider variety of private sector funders, and to deepen involvement at the grassroots level.

Right To Play is based in Toronto, but works with the most disadvantaged children and communities: refugee populations, former child combatants, and children who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. Today there are *Right To Play* programs in Benin, Ethiopia, Ghana, Guinea, Israel, Palestine, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Mali, Mozambique, Rwanda, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Zambia, Pakistan, and Thailand. These programs start with teams of volunteer coaches who work with the communities to implement sport and play programs. The goal is to enhance healthy child development and to develop community capacity by establishing community structures and building local community ownership through coach and leadership development.

Marylyn Chiang, the Canadian national sc record holder and silver medallist at the 2000 World SC champs in the 100 back, lived in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania for the last year. There she worked as a Communications Coordinator for *Right To Play*, an experience she will never forget. "There are so many motivated individuals who believe in sport and its connection to improved health. It was easy to engage teachers, youth, and women in our projects. Many of them, especially young girls, want to be participating in sports and other physical activity, but the opportunity to do so is seldom there."

Right To Play programs put children on a positive path to healthy development. While there are obvious physical benefits, sport and play programs help foster resilience, a meaningful connection to adults through the coaching relationship, and a sense of safety and security through regular activity. Sport and play also serve as tools to teach important values and life skills including self confidence, teamwork, communication,



Right to Play volunteers in Tanzania, with Marylyn Chiang (CAN) seated, holding flag.

inclusion, discipline, respect, and fair play.

Marylyn recalls an event held on Mafia Island, just off the coast of Tanzania. "We had all sorts of events: tug-of-war, running races, a bicycle course, weightlifting, etc. It's quite normal to see boys and men participate in sporting events, while women sit on the sidelines watching. But I thought this was a bit unacceptable, and went up to the groups of women and took them one by one to the tug-of-war event. Eventually, I had enough for a team. It was a hilarious, but also an encouraging sight to see. Hilarious because it happened to be a Muslim holiday, and so all the women were dressed in their party gowns. There were 4 party-gowned women on one side of the rope and 4 more party-gowned women on the other. It was encouraging, because these women were hard core. One was so determined to win even though it meant that her nice white taffeta dress was dirty from falling flat on her face after losing the tug-of-war."

Sport as a tool for development

Right To Play's programs are part of a growing movement that is recognizing sport as an important tool for development, health, and peace. Known as "Sport for Development," this emerging field is growing evidence that strengthening the right of children to play then enhances their healthy physical and psychosocial development and builds stronger communities.

"After that first tug-of-war, it was much easier to get young girls and women signed up for the 100 metre dash and the relay races," says Marylyn. "I might even venture to say that too many girls signed up, as I placed second to last in the 100 metre dash within a pack of 11-year-old girls (most of whom were not wearing shoes!). It is against the cultural norm in Tanzania for women to be participating in sport. Very few women in Tanzania do any kind of sport or physical activity at all, as they are mostly cooking, cleaning, and raising their children."

For Marylyn, breaking down those cultural norms by getting women involved in sport and encouraging them to take responsibility for their health was one of the most rewarding aspects of her time in Tanzania. "Those taffeta-wearing women have shown me; they might need a bit of encouragement, but mostly, they need the opportunity to play. If I can give them the opportunity, I am passing along all that I have gained from being involved in sport."

During Summer's first trip, she realized how important sport was to people, to the kids, and to their communities. "What I saw there was so different to my experience in sports, but I never felt bad for the opportunity I had back here in the US. I never felt sorry for them either, because seeing amputees helping each other was inspiring, I'd never seen such compassion and they weren't bummed out, so I decided that I shouldn't be either."

Many of us take sport for granted in our lives and we cannot imagine our lives without it. In Canada, sport is a national pastime and from pre-school through adulthood we are always playing, watching, or growing from sport and its interconnection with



our daily lives.

For Marylyn, it was the same way. "I have always taken for granted sport in my life. If ever I wanted to try soccer, tennis, or hey, even ballet, the opportunity was there." What *Right To Play* is able to do for the volunteers involved is show them how sport has positively changed and shaped their lives. "Sport has been key in developing my personality and values. After being a competitive swimmer for 15 years, I can definitely say I am a more confident, assertive, goal-oriented, and determined individual. I have experienced the close camaraderie of my teammates, who have supported me in my lows and celebrated my highs. I have survived training camps, 3 practices a day and 20 x 400 test sets, so I am confident I can handle whatever challenges life throws at me. I would not be the same person without swimming and sport."

Right To Play's vision is to be a catalyst for a social movement to improve health by harnessing the full humanitarian potential of sport, which is something Marylyn saw first hand. "Over the course of my year in Tanzania, I have seen changes in young women and men, and their attitudes towards women in sport. There are more women playing soccer, handball, netball, and basketball and that, in part, is because of me. I hope they continue to reap the benefits of sport and develop confidence, assertiveness, and inner strength... just as I did."

Summer will always be grateful for her experiences in sports, but for the kids that participate in *Right To Play* programs, sport has a different meaning. "I love these kids in Africa; to them, sports isn't about gold medals but community, conflict resolution, and a sense of family, because some of them don't have that in the refugee camps." She also said that while her experiences are hard to put into words and take back home, there are important moments she will never forget. "You don't ever forget the love you have for the kids and the compassion they have for one another. I just try to be as much like them as I can. There are no cliques there amongst the kids, they are at their purist. It is sad because they are victims of war and often have no family, but that's when you really see the human spirit and it's truly inspiring."

Give back something to people who are less fortunate

Right To Play is supported by a wide network of Olympic and professional athletes who donate their time and energy to give back to the world through sports. The support of these athletes inspires children, helps raise awareness and money for *Right To Play* at the local and international levels so they can make their programs a reality. Ian Thorpe, Jenny Thompson, and Summer Sanders are some of the best swimmers in the world who find time to be *Right To Play* ambassadors. For all three swimmers, giving back to the children of the world is a natural step in their careers as swimmers and role models.

"I guess I've always just accepted that as one of the top-ranked swimmers, I'd be a role model for kids," says Jenny. "I have a great time hanging out with kids and helping them realize their potential.



1992 Olympic 200 fly winner Summer Sanders (USA)

I think my swimming used to be more self-centred. Since I've been in medical school, my life has changed in that my role is to help others. Now swimming is more about how I'm touching the lives of kids than about my accomplishments. It's a totally refreshing and rewarding approach."

"I don't think I ever really made a decision to become a role model," says Ian. "I guess that, as I achieved more in the pool, I became more well known. It is not something that I really think about. I just do what I do because I enjoy it, and I am not conscious of the title 'role model,' I am my own self. I really enjoy working with kids and if I can make a difference in their lives, then that is a good thing. I don't see it as 'giving up of my time.'"

Ian is quick to add that you don't have to be an "Ian Thorpe" or "Jenny Thompson" to help. "I don't think it is important that you be an accomplished person or not; more importantly is the idea that anyone can give of their time. I think we can all give back something to people who are less fortunate than ourselves and I believe we all have a responsibility to do so. For me, I do it because I enjoy it. I know that I am in a privileged position to be able to make a difference and I can bring an awareness to certain issues, and I hope that this will benefit the programs that I am working on for the many children in my country and abroad."

Not only is Ian a *Right To Play* ambassador, but he also started his own charity in Australia called Fountain For Youth, which was established to assist organizations that support children and youth faced with difficulties in their lives due to illness, by raising much-needed funds. "I am really proud of the work we are doing with Fountain For Youth, all children should be given every opportunity in their lives to look forward to a happy healthy future full of hope. To involve yourself in charity work is a very personal decision. I don't really find myself talking to other swimmers about the work I do or about Fountain For Youth. Not because I don't want to, but I find many people will come and speak to me about what I am doing and I am more than happy to sit and talk to them about it. If they in turn decide to become involved, that's great."

Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth mission statement is "Embrace Humanity by Nurturing Children," holding to a belief in knowing that "together we can make a difference" in the lives of children. For someone who has accomplished what many of us can only dream about in the pool, Ian exemplifies the power of sport. "I am rewarded in

knowing that someone is benefiting by the work we are doing. A smile can be the best reward."

This summer in Athens, *Right To Play* will host a Round Table Forum to draw together international leaders from development, government, and sport with the aim of harnessing the full humanitarian potential of sport for development and peace. At the 2002 Games in Salt Lake, *Right To Play's* Forum drew Kofi Annan and Jacques Rogge along with the world's top athletes and development leaders. The two main focuses this year will be on the contribution of sport to creating peace and the fight against HIV/AIDS. For Jenny, this is one of the main reasons she is involved. "Right To Play is important to me because it's a worldwide movement to help kids lead safer, healthier, and happier lives through sport. What could be better than that? I think sport is a great vehicle for promoting health issues, which is one of the missions of *Right To Play*."

In addition to partnering with athletes from all over the world, *Right to Play* has also begun to build its sports partnerships. Swimming/Natation Canada is one of the most recent additions to the *Right to Play* family. "SNC is a proud supporter of *Right to Play*," said Ursula Thiboutot, Director of Marketing and Development. "We recognize the important role that sport plays in the social and economic development of all nations and we are pleased to be able to share the inherent values and benefits of sport among young people around the world."

"Look After Yourself, Look After One Another" is the philosophy that drives *Right To Play's* programs. Sport teaches us to look after our bodies and, to play, we need each other. *Right To Play* uses this philosophy to promote positive healthy behaviours and bring awareness, understanding, and funding to important health issues. They use the power of sport to provide health education, specifically to teach the importance of vaccination, HIV/AIDS prevention, and physical fitness.

Let every child around the world have the right to play sports

Jenny also believes it is important for other swimmers and top athletes to get involved. "I've had a lot of records, medals, and accomplishments in my 16 years on the National Team, but nothing compares to the feeling of being a part of an organization with such a noble yet realistic goal: to let every child around the world have the right to play sports."

Summer returned to Africa last April on a trip to Sierra Leone and she now tries to help *Right To Play* financially or by raising awareness through her career in television. "I believe in this so much that I have no problem telling people about *Right To Play* and where their money should go!"

Today more than 500,000 children in 20 countries and 45 communities participate in *Right To Play's* programs, but the demand continues to grow. For more information on how to become an Athlete Ambassador, a volunteer, or make a donation, you can visit *Right To Play* at www.righttoplay.com or email me at nikkidryden@swimmail.com for more information.