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Kicking poverty out with football

United Football Club Navy (UFCN) transforms lives of youth in Palawan, Philippines.

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They run and kick in ill-matched socks and hand-me-down shoes, but this doesn't concern the boys of United Football Club Navy (UFCN). This is more fun than scavenging for scrap metal and plastic after school.

The club, based in Puerto Princesa, Palawan (Western Philippines), has

overcome odds in spite of its shaky beginnings and lack of resources. UFCN is a relaunched 2023 version of the original *Paragua Father and Son Football Club* founded in 2016. It aims to train students from public and private schools in the field of sports as part of their total development.

From 15 boys in 2016, it has grown to 120 players from ages 5 to 19 grouped in four teams. Eighty percent of the players come from the city's poor communities. Through football, these kids have developed new skills and steered themselves away from gangs, drugs, online games and alcohol.

Donalyn Canaricio, 11, says: "If I wasn't playing football, I would be spending evenings from 6pm-10pm on social media and online games."* Donalyn is one of the 10 female players in the club.

Rachel Ann Dacir, a housewife with two sons in the club, says her eldest son Earl Jake, 13, used to be overweight and sickly but has lost weight, turned brown and healthy, since he started playing football. He also spends less time with online games.

The club's chief coach has discovered incredible talent among its recruits. Four players - three boys and a girl - have been selected to play in national tournaments. Gifted players are given scholarships and the allowance has helped them and their families.

One of them, Billy Madarcos, 13, will represent Puerto Princesa in the Batang Pinoy 2024 National Championships. A son of a laundrywoman, he receives P500 allowance a week.

Lack of proper football shoes has not prevented Billy from being good in

the sport. For four years, he wore hand-me-down shoes covered with packing tape across the toe cap to keep it from flapping while he ran and kicked balls.

Joel Solivio, 14, scavenges after school to earn money for his allowance. He's a powerful striker and one of the team's gifted players. His talent has earned him a scholarship; he gets P500 for five days for his transportation and snacks. He has six siblings; his father works as a maintenance man in a military camp and his mother works as a laundrywoman. With his allowance, he does not have to scavenge as often as before.

NOT JUST A CLUB

Along with football skills, the children learn sportsmanship, which they realize is an important life skill. Alexa Enriga, 14, says football has taught them "how to lose graciously.

Instead of crying, we learn to take loss as a challenge to make up in the next game.”

She adds: “Being in a team teaches us how to get along with each other. We try to iron out our differences, we talk to our teammates and settle differences before the game.”

Daryl Lorenzo, 16, who has played since he was nine says: “In the field, there is no single good player. No one thinks he is better than the other. Neither should one take advantage of the other because we need each other. “

A football coach once said that “the team spirit, the constant concern for the common good, the willingness to sacrifice one’s ego and to assist others to make the goal can be found to the highest degree in football.”

The sport fosters a “culture of inclusion,” says Pope Francis, a

football fan. To belong to a sports team “means to reject all forms of selfishness and isolation – it is an opportunity to meet and be with others, to help each other, to compete in mutual esteem and grow in brotherhood.”

While most of the players come from poor families, the club also includes children from middle class and affluent families. Everyone is treated the same: whether rich or poor, or whether one has matching shoes and socks or not. That goes as well for Daryl who is a member of Tagbanwa tribe. The Tagbanwa people are one of the oldest indigenous peoples in the Philippines, mainly found in central and northern Palawan.

Jolly Huela, UFCN’s manager, says that when the club started , it was “each to his own.” Eventually, the children learned to regard each

other as teammates, learning and caring for each other.

As parents, she and her husband have learned to give themselves more not only to their own children but to the other children, as well. “I learned to be more patient. I realize my husband and I need to work more so we can continue to provide our service to them. This is not just a club but a family. In a club, parents look out for their children only, or maybe, the friends of their children. Here, we who have more, share with those in need.”

RICE WITH SALT

Nida Fernandez, 53, the club’s coordinator, comes from humble beginnings. She is the eighth of 10 children of a fisherman and works for the Puerto Princesa City government as an administrative assistant.

Nida has three sons in the football club. “I can buy shoes and socks for my boys,” she says, “but I saw most of the boys didn’t have money to buy the proper gear. I came from the slums but I was helped to get out of it. It’s now my turn to pay forward.”

Nida shops for clothes and shoes at second-hand stores. She also writes to corporations and individuals for donations to fund the boys’ uniforms and allowances. She was able to raise P30,000 from private donors and used this to buy 45 pairs of shoes for the players.

“We want to make a difference in the life of these kids even in small things.” Paraphrasing St Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, she says: “Small things become big when done with love.”

Rachel, who has two boys in the club, says most of the boys have had to fend for themselves because their

parents are unable to support them. “They are often hungry so we usually buy bread and feed them before they start their practice. Some of them are not able to attend tryouts because of hunger. Others can’t make it for the practice because they have no money for transportation.”

Prinsipe Caleb Agas, 8, has been playing since he was four years old. He gets a scholarship allowance of P100 a week. At P20 a day, his lunch is rice, salt and water because he uses the money to buy school supplies. After school, he scavenges for scrap metal and sells these to buy rice for the family.

The club has given the kids a sense of belonging especially for Lhianne Barrameda who was thrown out of the house by her stepmother. She has been given an allowance of P500 a week to cover her needs.

The children treasure the friendships and the sleepovers at their coach's house. Says Nida: "We're family to them because their own parents are too busy trying to make ends meet."

She adds: "Other clubs focus only on sports. We aim for the children's holistic growth by teaching values like respect for parents, spirit of service and generosity to others."

Imparting holistic growth is what attracted Nida to Opus Dei. She says Opus Dei has given her the "compass" to stay on track when she was going through depression brought by a family crisis in 2015. "I went through five years of intense emotional struggle and pain but God also gave me the means to overcome it – the daily Mass and the sacraments."

Her work with the football club has also been therapeutic. It taught her to forget herself and her

circumstances, something which the boys are also learning to do.

Being underprivileged does not mean one cannot reach out to help others. Last October, the club helped feed children in an orphanage in Puerto Princesa. “We’re poor, but we can share and serve those who are poor like us,” says Benjie Bonbon, 12, son of an itinerant junk trader.

Another visit to an orphanage run by the Franciscan Order also made the children realize their blessings. “We still have parents and we are able to go to school. We can serve others even if we have nothing,” says Reynald Geli, 12, son of a laborer. During their visit, the boys taught the orphans how to play futsal.

‘BORROW YOUR SHOES’

Providing the needs of the children with limited resources taught Nida to

have faith in God's providence. "It taught me hope. We can do it."

From food and uniforms to transportation, these are all from the generosity of people. Only 20% of the players, through their parents, are able to pay the salaries of the club's coaches because most families don't have the means, says Nida.

Most of the boys' uniforms are donated hand-me-downs from rich teammates. Players need to have football shoes, grip socks and shin guards to protect them from injuries. Only the rich players have complete gear while the rest take turns borrowing from the others.

Alexa says: "We lend each other not only shoes, but also socks and uniforms." Daryl has no shoes. He waits for a teammate to return from the field to borrow his shoes so he can play.

During training and tournaments, football moms bring food “triple their usual portion” because they know most have no food.

“But these boys do not only receive. They know how to share. They don’t take advantage of the situation,” says Nida. Joel was offered P160 a day allowance. He said he would take only P100 so more teammates can benefit.

Even as the club aims to develop children in sports, education is a long-term priority for the organizers. “We want them to finish their education. Through their football skills, we hope to get university scholarships or sponsorships. We are also looking for donations so more children can be given an allowance,” says Jolly, the team manager.

There are three paths for young people to lead them to a better life, says Pope Francis. These are the path

of education, the path of sports and the path of work. “School leads you forward, sports leads you forward and work leads you forward.” For Billy and Daryl, they have been led forward even with hand-me-down shoes.

*Quotes were translated from Filipino

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