

PHOTO ESSAY BY JESSICA HILLTOUT

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Hero Worship: Mansah Dosseh's boots, Etoile Brilliante d'Eburnie FC, Abidjan, Ivory Coast

IN DREAMS

INTO AFRICA WITH A CAR-LOAD OF SOCCER BALLS

If you want to see soccer as a beautiful sport, take a trip to Africa, to some of its poorer villages, far from the main road



Home-made balls: Rags, plastic bags, tree bark and old stockings are among the ingredients

Ah, soccer. The Beautiful Game . . . lithe, millionaire athletes who rake in more pay in a month than their fans earn in a lifetime. Multi-billion-dollar TV deals that benefit only the richest teams. Cynical marketing designed to extract cash as quickly as possible from the pockets of besotted and brainwashed consumers.

What's beautiful about that?

Now, if you really want to see soccer as a beautiful sport, take a trip to Africa, to its rural villages. Communities far from the main roads, where farming and soccer are the essential forces – one necessary for the continuation of life, the other to satisfy the need for relaxation and enjoyment.



Thandile: Cape Town Stars FC, Litha Park, Khayelitsha, South Africa

The balls are, more often than not, home-made from rags tied together with string; or from yarn, plastic bags and tree bark



**'Petit Poto,'
Sin-Yimi District,
Ouagadougou,
Burkina Faso**

Here, there are no superstars, no real stadiums and very little money. The teams play with balls that are, more often than not, home-made from rags tied together with string; or from yarn, plastic bags and tree bark; anything that can be made ball-shaped and is resilient enough to withstand the punishment of the hard, unforgiving, terrain.

Jessica Hilltout has taken that trip several times, gathering material for her photographic tribute, *Amen: Grassroots Football*. "I was fascinated by the handmade footballs," she says. "They are symbols of Africa's inventivity, endurance and craftsmanship. Each one is like a little jewel. I exchanged real soccer balls for hand-made balls during my photographic trip. However, at the beginning of my project I knew little about football and which balls to buy. The first balls I gave away were cheap, made in China, and didn't



Seidou, Bourganza, Burkina Faso

They show inventive adaptation of old gear that pampered foreigners binned years earlier



**Etoile Brilliante
d'Eburnie FC,
Vridi-Sir
district,
Abidjan,
Ivory Coast**

survive. After spending some time in a little village in Mozambique, I gave them a ball and when I came back the next day, it had split. They had already re-stitched it! I did not make that mistake again." Ironically, the ball that she had replaced – made from yarn – had lasted three days! (After that first trip, she was sponsored by Adidas which supplied 500 balls, boots and shin pads, which she distributed during two later journeys.)

The photos from Hilltout's journeys show inventive adaptation of old gear that pampered foreigners had binned years earlier: boots passed from generation to generation, lovingly personalised with the names of the world's top players. And where boots were not available, anything else would do – even flip-flops with plastic bags as straps.



Soale, Kpenjipei, Ghana



Vento Inha vs Barcelona, Pacasse, Mozambique



"So many people have so much and do so little with. The people I met had so little and yet managed to do so much with it"



**Raymond,
Bantema
Methodist
Primary School,
Kumasi, Ghana**

The uniforms: ragged shorts, old tee-shirts are customised with the scrawled names of their soccer heroes – Drogba, Ronaldo, Lampard. Mismatched shinpads, home-made; goalposts roughly-shaped tree branches. There's a lesson here for us and our children, points out Hilltout, "So many people have so much and do so little with it. The people I met had so little and yet managed to do so much with it."

The games are played wherever there is space for a makeshift pitch and goalposts. Hilltout tells of passing a village on the way to Tete in Mozambique. "The land was dotted with baobab trees. Cattle huddled around the water hole by the football field. We stopped the VW Beetle and got out to take a look. A man came over and we got talking. As luck would have it, he was the trainer of the Vento Inha team. We decided to organise a match



Orlando, Chicome, Mozambique

Perhaps the absence of 'stuff' makes their dreams just a little more real than those of us who have everything and want more



**It's not all rags:
Samuel and
Sani with the
Under 17 team,
Anokye Stars FC,
Kumasi, Ghana**

for the next day between his team and the next village. What I saw was amazing; the other team, Barcelona, had dressed in long, winter coats, some were wearing hoods and scarves, all in an attempt to imitate the players they had seen on TV. Imagine this in 45 degrees Centigrade. The match started, spectators arrived. Cattle were milling around on the edge of the field. Dust filtered through the warm light. The players were giving their all, sometimes running straight into the cattle to get the ball."

Memory-stirring stuff. Long ago, I was a soccer-mad, ragged-arse urchin, not in Africa, but in rural England. Photos from that time echo those in this book. Cows our only fans, their droppings soft, evil-smelling landmines on the rough, uneven pitch. Our boots old, big and brutal; balls heavy, battered and stitched; uniforms faded, worn-out and incomplete.

We share a common identity: our dreams transform us into soccer heroes, small pitches become huge stadiums, and the mooing of cows is rapturous applause. Perhaps those dreams create the true beauty of soccer, for they bind the generations and transcend the miles that separate vastly different cultures. They link my life indelibly to those of Mensah in Ghana, Thandile in Cape Town, Orlando in Mozambique . . .



Odwa's jersey, Cape Town Stars FC, Litha Park, Khayelitsha, South Africa

Playing is all that matters – the rewards are not measured in cash and greed, but in joyful pleasure



**Unknown,
Ferroviario FC,
Beira,
Mozambique**

There is an abundance of joy in the photographs in this book, showing an acceptance of things as they are. Perhaps the absence of 'stuff' makes their dreams more real than those of us who have everything and want more. Yes, life is tough, but there's resilience and determination, too.

That, more than the cash-drenched, corporate circus that we have in the west, epitomises the essence and heart of the real Beautiful Game. Playing is all that matters – the rewards are not measured in cash or prestige, but in joyful pleasure.

I am the Game. The Game is me. What could be more beautiful than that?

● Amen: Grassroots Football is available from <http://jessicahilltout.com> or <http://amazon.com>



Ramata, Dori, Burkina Faso

AMEN

GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL



JESSICA HILLTOUT

JESSICA HILLTOUT is a Belgian-born documentary photographer who studied at the Art College in Blackpool, England. She has completed various overland travels for her photography. One of the first trips which resulted in the series Faces and Places was from Brussels to Mongolia and home via Africa (80,000km) in an old Jeep. Some of Hilltout's photographs are currently being exhibited at the Futball Artist Network Group Show in New York – <http://futbolartistnetwork.com> Her book, "**AMEN: GRASSROOTS FOOTBALL**", from which these photographs were taken, is available from the author at <http://jessicahilltout.com> or from <http://amazon.com>

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