

PETER AND JANICE CLARK IN SIERRA LEONE

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We had just been listening to the BBC World Service's and Alan Green's programme, World Football, as we stepped out of the car onto Lumley Beach. 'Greenie' had been reflecting on the Achilles-heel injury suffered by David Beckham earlier in the week and its likely impact on his desire to play the world cup in South Africa later this year, as we set off for our less demanding exercise on a stunning location in West Africa. Within minutes of tracing the high tide line, we met a group of men who were squeezed onto the higher drier sand. All attention was on one of them, a man poised with a whistle between his lips with his right arm vertically extended. A shrill sounded and a flurry of flying sand and physical activity followed as the amputees five-a-side football got under way.

The speed and skills of the eight outfield players and the dexterity with which they demonstrated passing moves and step-over skills were mesmerising. So that it took us some time to realise that whilst both goalkeepers had two legs they only had one arm each so that punching a ball was preferred to catching it. The referee was able to remain stationary on the halfway line but he was still a very busy man, as crutches and a single leg makes challenging an opponent for the ball a very problematic task for all the players. Beach football is extremely demanding for able bodied people but this match demonstrated just how fit and strong these young men were as the initial pace of the game showed no signs of slackening as time elapsed.

It was difficult not to recall the words of the BBC on David Beckham. The man has a global iconic status that reaches far beyond football but as we winced at some of the challenges, it was difficult to compare the pain his injury with what the ten footballers in front of us would have suffered, not on a football pitch but a civilian battle field in the Salonean war, that ended a decade ago. Most of the 'stars of the sand' on Lumley Beach would have been teenagers when they lost their limbs, the age at which David Beckham signed for Manchester United.

We spoke to Albert Manley Mustapha, the Public Relations Officer for the Single Leg Amputee Sports Club (SLAC). He expressed his disappointment that when David Beckham visited Salone, "he was kept away from SLAC". Nevertheless Albert was enthusiastic about the start of the new season and the competition within the country's five teams, two of them 'East' and 'West', being based in Freetown. This is a big year for SLAC as they have been invited to participate in the World Cup which will be held in Argentina in October. However, despite the funding from the Federation of International Football's Street Soccer Section, funding SLAC from within the country is so problematic as to be almost non-existent.

Our personal interest was warmly received and the clarification of the rules, regarding the improper use of crutches, was responded to with additional information on the improper use of the residual limb. Albert spoke with passion and pride for the sport, adding that it had been

Salone which hosted the first world cup. The adapted rules includes three breaks in the hour long game, so as players left the pitch to pick up their water packets, they invariably beamed with delight at the two new spectators. Meanwhile, we were left wondering where future funding might come from, for the beautiful game that is played in such tragically unfair circumstances.

In walking and driving around Freetown we are constantly surprised at the ingenuity of children and young men to create recreational spaces on the smallest piece of ground. In some cases it might be the informal kicking of deflated ball, whereas as others, including a patch of land in Tengbeh Town it is much more. Each working day a sign board in colourful chalk lettering announces the day's football match, be it between Italy and Brazil, England or the Ivory Coast or Ghana. Then, as the heat of the day relents, a 5 a-side football match will draw a crowd from those returning from work or school and the Old Railway Line will be the Theatre of Dreams for more than just a few.

Universal male aspirations, be they of David Beckham's dreams, Mohammed Koroma's or Samuel Bangura's, are all vital elements in the hopes of engaging in a meaningful activity. In Salone, the universal language of football transcends the ethnic, linguistic and creedal distinctions with an amazingly simple ease. The global dream, of both young men and women to find meaningful work is as acute in Salone as it in any other country on the African continent, although it is never as visible a sporting spectacle.

The Achilles heel in Salone's socio-economic political life during the 1980s (and before) appears to have been the lack of opportunity for youthful aspirations especially among men, to be satisfied with meaningful work and the acquisition of an appropriate place in society.

It is acknowledged that it was in the preparations for the Trojan War that led to Achilles damaging the heel of Telephus, an injury that he was subsequently slow to heal. However no one we have spoken to has suggested that a remedy for any of the current national problems be it of atrocious health statistics, an impoverished economy, a fragile educational system, or of national unemployment among young people at approximately 75%, will be cured by another armed conflict.

It is the prayer of Saloneans, women and men, young and old, urban and rural, Muslim and Christian, that the dreams of prosperity and peace will be fulfilled through a democratic process of socio-economic reconstruction, in partnership with international agencies and funding, so that the aspirations of all its citizens are addressed.