

Succour through soccer

SPORT Football works magic with kids from neighbourhoods in the Capital. PHEROZE L. VINCENT on "Goal of Life" programme

What started as a football tournament, a decade ago, has turned into a perennial rejuvenating programme for children from underprivileged backgrounds in Delhi. Kutumb Foundation's "Goal of Life" programme teaches life skills, gender sensitivity, conflict resolution and pluralism, through football.

On weekends, children from the hutments and streets of Nizamuddin gather on the lawns surrounding Humayun's Tomb by 10 in the morning. Dressed in football jerseys, boys and girls first practise dribbling, passing and tackling before the match begins.

"The rules are simple. No foul language and no fighting. If you break the rules, you're out of the match and you won't get the banana and Frooty served after the match. Whatever happens, the children resolve disputes on the playground peacefully. They leave the pitch as friends," says Lalit Ram (21), one of their coaches.

Lalit and his fellow coach Hero (23, who only goes by his first name) are part of a chosen group of youngsters Kutumb calls "peer leaders."

"Hero and Lalit have been part of this programme since it began. While Hero is now a whole-time leader for our programmes, Lalit studies at Motilal Nehru College. Having coaches from the community attracts more children as they look up to them as role models," says Nandini Mazumder, programme co-ordinator.

Sameer is a 15-year-old from Nizamuddin. "Earlier I was a *badmaash* (villain). I used to fight with everyone — friends, schoolmates. I am good in fighting. I used to use foul words too. But nowadays I want to play football and become like Lalit *bhaiya*. If I remained like I was, I can't play. It's nice here without fighting," he says. Even among children from economically weak backgrounds, there is stratification, American volunteer Austin Mobley explains. "There are Hindu and Muslim kids, kids from different neighbourhoods, boys



PLAY OF LIFE Children hone their dribbling skills in New Delhi PHOTO: V.SUDERSHAN

and girls. Kids from the ghetto don't get along with kids who live on the street. Parents of kids who live in homes don't like them mixing with street kids who often get into fights, use foul language and even do drugs."

To involve street children, says Nandini, "We use a non-preachy approach. We don't tell them not to have gutkha or

smoke smack (heroin). Instead, we tell them if they continue to do it, they can't play as well as the others."

Amjad (13), who lives on Mathura Road, says other children would make fun of him if he smoked. "In football, we need discipline. If I am not in good health, I can't play like Hero *bhaiya*."

"With football we attract them. They

initially come for the refreshments, but have to stay for the match to get it. Street children are tough. They used to have blades, and other children were scared of them. But they have an inferiority complex. We try to remove this by changing their mindset," Hero explains.

He adds, "We ask them, 'What will be

your future?' After a few matches, they say they want to become like us — play football, go to college and get a job."

Currently Amjad and his friend Hamid (14) are being groomed to become peer leaders. It is hoped that they would be able to get more street children into the programme.

The critical part of Goal of Life is the

"gola session." Children sit in a circle and talk about what they learnt during the day and what they want to improve about the way they play. In the gola session this reporter attended, the children were unanimous that the day's match wasn't their best performance. While brainstorming as to what went wrong, the peer leaders encouraged them to see if better team work could lead to them scoring more goals.

The children are taught to put their points across politely, without aggression. Themes like gender sensitisation too are discussed in the gola. "Girls were initially scared of playing with boys as they're quite rough on the field. We showed them posters of female sports-persons like Mary Kom. We told them that women are winning medals for India in the Olympics," says Nandini.

Boys are also taught in practical ways how to respect girls. "Once when I was walking near here, the boys whistled at some girls. I asked them what they would do if someone whistled at me. They said they would attack them. I told them to think of every girl as someone like me," Nandini recalls.

Currently 13 girls and 35 boys from Nizamuddin attend. "Initially parents were hesitant to send girls. Now they encourage us. Elder sisters who play bring their younger ones along," Austin informs us.

Fourteen-year-old Ruby and nine-year-old Sunny practise tackling and passing before leaving for the day. "At first we were scared, but if we are disciplined we can play better than the boys. They then respect us," Ruby tells you. Sunny chimes, "*Bhaiya*, nowadays I do well in school also. *Log mujhe maante hain kyunki main football bhi khelta hoon* (People respect me because I also play football)." Before leaving he adds, "Write my name as Hero. I will be like Hero *bhaiya*, if I keep playing."

Goal of Life is in session at Khan Market, Nizamuddin and Ghevara. If you want to join the fun, visit kutumb.in