

More than 1,000 Africans currently play football for clubs across Europe while football in Africa remains a hugely popular but under-funded domestic obsession. Pictures and words by **Pieter van der Houwen**

The beautiful Game

Football in Africa

On the border between Tanzania and Rwanda sits one of the largest refugee camps in the world. Working there as a photographer was extremely difficult. The tension was almost tangible. More than half a million people sought refuge and safety in the camp, all with their own horror stories to tell. No one was waiting for a white western photographer to record his improvised existence after the genocide. Who could blame them?

Every day at 4pm you could hear dozens of referee's whistles blowing, announcing the many football games about to start throughout the camp. At precisely that moment each day, the tension around would almost physically evaporate. For a few hours only, people could escape the trauma of their tough and tedious daily lives.

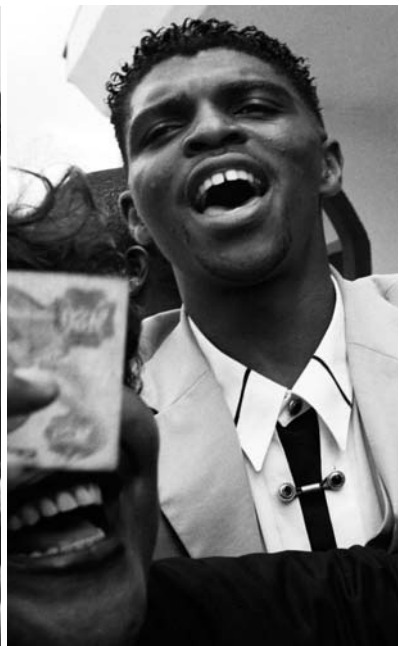
One day, after watching a very exciting game, I accompanied two young players, both orphans, back to the makeshift-dressing-room (it was a shed) their team shared. In perfect French, the younger of the two turned to me and asked, "How is Marco van Basten?" At that time, Van Basten's brilliant career had been cut short after an injury. I was amazed by such a question. This boy had lost both his parents in the genocide, had witnessed horrors beyond my comprehension, and still he was concerned about the well being of an overpaid European football star. Was he mad, or was I?

Orphan players from the Benaco refugee camp. Senegal 1996/97



“You shouldn’t lose any sleep over van Basten,” I tried to convince him. “I’m not worried about van Basten as a person,” he said and I quote, “but when my magnificent game loses such a talented player, I start to worry about the future of my beloved sport.”

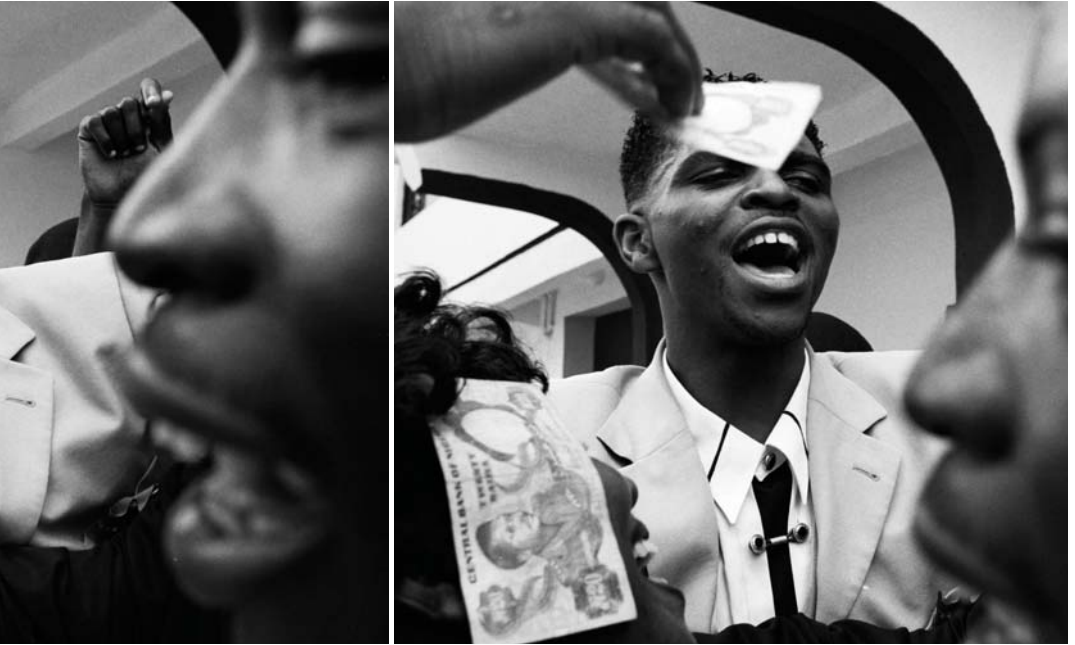
This coming from a 12-year-old convinced me that he lived his football, unlike his European counterparts (who are often fuelled by alcohol and hooliganism). This young boy’s football was woven into the daily existence of his life; it was his window of opportunity, perhaps even his escape.



Outside the walls of Kanu's new villa, large crowds gathered waiting to catch a glimpse of their hero. Kanu could not leave the compound. To visit his parents, the great Arsenal player had to be smuggled out, hidden in a taxi.

Money

The House of Kanu, Owerri, Southern Nigeria



In keeping with Nigerian tradition at the inauguration of Kanu's house in Owerri, Southern Nigeria, the guests lavish the musicians with money. Celebrations lasted for three days.

Magnet

Dancing cheerleader. Casamance region, Senegal



Often referred to as the 'garden of Senegal,' the Casamance region is well known for its cultivation of rice. Farming rice is extremely labour intensive, especially during the rainy season. For some years now, the younger Diola people of the region have migrated to the larger cities in the north to find work and greater opportunities.

Between June and September each year, the younger generation are drawn back by the Navetanes [rainy season] football competition. The idea behind the games is to draw young people to the region, so that they too can help in the cultivation of rice that the area needs to thrive.

People



From 6 o'clock each morning until midday, both young and older men and women work in the rice fields. In the afternoons there is always 'the games' to look forward to with some 200 teams taking part throughout the region.

Unique to Senegal is the fact that 50% of spectators at these football matches are women. They chant erotically-charged songs, which have often been composed in the rice fields that morning. This phenomenon guarantees not only a simmering atmosphere but the very survival of a people and a way of life.

Power



The Watanga Football Club's training ground is just outside Monrovia in Liberia. There is not a blade of grass to be seen. Nevertheless, the club is unique. It is made up entirely of former child soldiers of opposing factions who now play together as a single club.

Training

Practice at Watanga FC, Monrovia, Liberia.



During the civil war, football was deemed so important that the war ceased for one hour before and one hour after every match by the national team in the national stadium. The opposing armies hung up their AK47s in special facilities outside the stadium. After the game, they would retrieve their weapons, and the war would once again commence.

Ground

Kick-off at the Navetanes competition, Senegal



Pure

Eye on the prize: young Liberian talent, Monrovia, Liberia



Genius