

## **BOBBY DUVAL AND HIS SOCCER PROGRAM**

*Note: Below this June 2001 story about Bobby Duval's soccer program are three further stories from earlier newspapers as well.*

### **Bobby DUVAL'S SOCCER PROGRAM HELPS SPREAD HOME IN HAITI**

By Tim Collie  
Sun Sentinel Staff Writer  
Posted June 20 2001

#### **PORT-AU-PRINCE, HAITI**

By any measure, Bobby Duval has more than paid his dues as a social activist. Nearing 50, he might be forgiven for kicking back and enjoying life.



He has been imprisoned, starved and tortured in Haiti's notorious Fort Dimanche prison. He saw hundreds of fellow activists die during a stint there opposing the dictatorship of the Duvalier family. Many were beaten to death in front of him.

He's a former soccer star, affluent, American-educated and speaks French and English. A son of Creole elites, he might be just as at home shopping in Paris, or coaching at one of his old haunts in Boston or Montreal.

Yet here he is on a hot Saturday morning, on a dusty playing field, surrounded by hundreds of poor children, teaching them skills their families cannot afford, raising hopes they're not supposed to have.

"There's no big deal, really," he says. "I just decided that this is my country and I was going to do my best to make a change here. That's all."

That's not all to the 300 or so children who attend Athletics of Haiti, a novel program that offers sports, food and education to children from the vast slums of Port-au-Prince. Against odds every bit as formidable as the struggle for democracy here, Duval has kept the program running for five years of turmoil in Haiti.

Since 1996, he has run Athletics on a 15-acre compound near the capital city's international airport and not far from Cité Soleil, one of Haiti's most notorious urban slums. The children in the program are given medical checkups, tutoring and, of course, plenty of coaching. They're given healthy meals each week, and their parents are counseled on education and other matters.

The immediate aim is to provide an escape for the athletic talent that might be hidden in the country's vast shantytowns. Soccer is the national sport in Haiti, but the country's deep poverty and class differences are formidable barriers for even the most talented among the poor.

The best soccer clubs and schools are private and tend to cater to the small middle class and elites. Basketball also is taking off here -- kids can be found playing on many streets -- and Duval is expanding efforts to build courts for boys and girls. Before he can turn his attention to athletic skills, he must deal with nutrition.

"Right now, I need food -- I need to increase the quality of the kids' food," Duval said. "You can see [the children are] very small.

"They've already accumulated calorific deficiencies. I need to offer balanced meals. I only give some carbohydrates and some meat now, some protein. But we need to have iron, vegetables and stuff.

"That takes money, and that takes organization."

The scion of a prominent Haitian automotive family and a former soccer star who led Montreal's Loyola University to a championship in the early 1970s, Duval returned to his country after graduation and became a leading opponent of the Duvalier dictatorship. At one point, he served a 17-month sentence in Fort Dimanche but emerged even more invigorated and authored a book on the prison. By 1996, though, Duval found himself tiring of the seemingly endless debate over the nature of Haitian democracy and wanted to devote himself to something more "concrete." Using his family connections, he persuaded the owners of the compound to let him open a sports camp.

The idea would be not only to help the poor, but also to bridge the chasm between the impoverished and the tiny upper classes. This would be done by having children play together, and play well, on competing teams.

Children having supportive parents is the only requirement. Each child is given a physical examination, tutoring and educational support, a luxury in a country in which only half the population makes it past the fifth grade.

Despite some support from the United States, the vast majority of the equipment, energy and money that pays for the organization's \$15,000 monthly budget comes from friends and businesses within Haiti.

The only drawback is that the club must be somewhat selective, taking only as many children as it can afford on a largely first-come, first-serve basis. Otherwise, it could not handle the demand -- half of the country's population is younger than 20 and many of them live in the vast slums ringing Port-au-Prince.

"We wouldn't have enough space. You'd probably see 1 million kids here overnight," said Felix Biguesnel, 29, who has worked at the sports organization since its inception. "We have to be restrictive."

The organization has sponsored two teenagers who traveled to Paris for tryouts on soccer clubs. Biguesnel said Haiti's formidable class divisions make it difficult for even the most talented youngsters to get the training they need.

That's not evident to many of the youngest, who speak in awe of the sports organization's seeming riches once they're inside the grounds. There are clean basketball courts, lots of soccer balls and even a bin full of used cleats.

Wearing a tattered yellow City of Boca Raton T-shirt and a nervous grin, Pierre Samson, 10, is listening to a coach explain how to dribble a soccer ball. It's his first day inside the compound, which he has observed at times traveling from the Delmas section of Port-au-Prince. A friend has brought him today, and Pierre is in the process of getting a medical exam and his first meal there, a lunch-time treat of rice and juice.

"I want to be a sports star when I grow up, or maybe a [bus] driver," he said, naming two of the more lucrative professions visible to many Haitian youngsters. "It's a bit strange here, but I like it so far."

Despite his connections and reputation -- in addition to his political activism, Duval was a star on Haiti's popular Violette soccer team -- he has been attacked from all sides during the past four years. The poor parents of the children he serves have been suspicious of a mulatto elite giving local children food, medicine and education. The middle-class owners of private schools and sports clubs resent having to play against his teams because of the competition, Duval said, and even his reform-minded rich friends wonder why he's spending so much money on poor kids.

"Any day I can be thrown out," Duval said. "I went to the owners and asked if I can use this land. They said yes, go ahead. But they want to maintain the option to sell at any time. There's a lot of money being spent here, but these are the basic things I need to operate.

"What I hope is that the owners will have a change of heart one day, that they will come and say, man, it's kind of crazy, but let him do his thing."

He sees this as a logical extension of his work as a political activist, when the struggle was for self-determination. Older now, and the father of a teenage son, he's more interested in what he calls "the concrete, not the abstract."

"For 20 years, being an advocate of human rights ... I wanted to do something that I could [put] my hands on, really," Duval said.

"When you're an advocate, it does have an effect. Had we not done what we did ... to advance the social movement, I probably couldn't have the political space now, this real space, to do what I'm doing today."

**MORE**

### **MORE THAN JUST A GAME**

In Haiti, soccer provides hope for many children

By Yves Colon  
January 1, 2001

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP)

The children step out of the pickup, laughing and tugging on their blue and green undershirts as they race across the soccer field. Nearby, cows and horses lazily munch on the grass, not seeming to mind the company.

The youngsters look up at the jets flying low overhead, and joke that they could reach their silver bellies with a good kick of the soccer ball. They lace their boots and head for the training field bathed in the gentle, tropical light of the setting sun. Bobby Duval doesn't notice any of this. He's frowning. The day before, someone stole one of L'Atletique d'Haiti's large red coolers. Buying another one is out of the question, and replacing it will involve another complicated dance with his sponsors. The club was running out of juice, too, not to mention the small soccer balls used to teach the smaller players. "Man, this never stops," laments Duval, 47, the founder of L'Atletique, an anomaly in Haiti because it takes youngsters from the slums of this city and gives them training, food and hope -- at no cost. "This is a lot harder than playing. Much harder."

It's easy to spot Duval on the field. A former semiprofessional soccer player, he's a tall, muscular man who has gone a little soft in the stomach because he no longer plays. In his own way, he's an anomaly, too, this light-skinned man who has spent the past six years of his life transforming a field of broken glass into a place where kids can launch their dreams of soccer stardom. In Haiti, where skin color marks boundaries and possibilities, Bobby, as everyone calls him, shouldn't be here. His charges would point him out as a child of the light-skinned elite from the hills above the city. Duval's father is an auto-parts industrialist, and his brother, Edouard, is a celebrated Haitian artist in Miami.

Unlike many in his social class who have left the country or retreated behind walls and private security guards, Duval came down those hills -- at least in spirit -- many years ago. He sees L'Atletique as his own longterm development project, to bring his people together and to bring hope to youngsters like Wendy Jean, a 17-year-old from Duvivier, an overcrowded neighborhood nearby. "I want to make millions," said Wendy, standing in front of the goal, wearing a goalkeeper's gloves and dressed in a black and purple long-sleeve shirt. In his wallet, he keeps a picture of the star keeper for the French national team, and has a poster of the Brazilian star Ronaldo on the wall of the bedroom he shares with four brothers and sisters. "I want to go far," he said. "I want to participate in nationals, and I'm working hard for that."

Younger children such as Fedner Jacquet get recruited, if they're talented, or are enrolled by families who want to take advantage of the opportunity. They pay nothing, get picked up every day and get help with equipment. All the children have to do is maintain good grades. "I can't think of being anywhere else but here," said Fedner, 8. "I make sure I study before I come." The children are split into several groups and learn how to move the ball. By the time they're 12, "they're supposed to know well all the different techniques, but we're not expecting them to be totally clean," coach Biguesnel Felix said.

Duval doesn't want his program to be a canteen, where kids come only for the free lunch. "If a kid with better skills comes arounds, he'll take the place of somebody else," he said. Wendy is among the older boys who have been with L'Athletique the past four years. He's typical, too. (He said his father only recently realized the name he gave his son is a common girl's name in the United States.) He stayed away for six months because his father could not come up with \$50 for a new pair of soccer shoes. He stopped going to school, too, because the family could not afford the monthly tuition. His mother is dead, and his father hasn't worked since he was 11.

"Whatever you want to be in life, you have to fight for it," said Wendy, who is also learning plumbing and health care in case he doesn't make it on the soccer field.

"I'm going to win. I'm going to be a footballer. I'm sure of it."

Duval is less certain of the future of the club, which used to be a dumping ground for a bottling company. There are as many as 300 children in the program, about 130 of whom show up every day. Duval, who still has many friends among the elite, gets some to donate uniforms, shoes, balls and nets to keep the program going. He also gets help from abroad. Every two months, Food For the Poor brings in bags of rice for the hot meals each child receives after every workout. Duval gets other people to donate cooking oil, beans and juice, as well as money he uses to pay the coaches he employs.

"I want this to work because I want to help the kids of Haiti," he said. "I want them to be successful through sports. This is the space I'm trying to change, in a progressive manner." He takes no salary for his efforts, living off rent from a building he bought several years ago during his 15 years as a businessman. Duval's own soccer career with the Violette club ended abruptly in 1976 after he

was jailed. He was young back then, full of idealism. He thought he could make a change by speaking out against human-rights abuses committed by Jean-Claude Duvalier's Tonton Macoutes. He spent 17 months in prison. When he got out, he started a support group for former political prisoners, and continued to speak out until the regime fell in 1986.

He returned to Violette several years later as president of the club. But, looking around, he saw that Haitian children were being left on their own to learn soccer. Haitian soccer, competitive at one time at the international level -- especially in the Caribbean -- was in shambles. By this time Duval had a son he wanted to place into a club that would teach him how to play, but he couldn't find one. That's when he stumbled across the field where dozens of children from the nearby slum of Cite Soleil were playing. The land was unused after mobs occupied the property during the waning days of the Duvalier dictatorship.

"I said, 'That's what I want to do,'" Duval said. "I thought the owners were going to help me.' They did. For a while. Duval built two basketball courts and an outdoor lunchroom where the children can eat. Lately, though, he has been locking horns with the owners. They want their field back, now that he has cleaned it up and the property has increased in value because of its proximity to the airport. The 15 acres could easily accommodate several factories and warehouses.

"If they leave me here, not kicking me out, it's because they see I'm doing a job the people appreciate," Duval said. "I'm trying to make them realize that this is a way out of the tensions between the haves and have-nots. I'm trying to show them how strong they can be, how powerful they can be. "If you decide to do good and make a dent in this country's poverty, that's power and that translates into goodwill. Power is when you talk and people listen. Really, they don't have a choice."

Duval has gotten a few people to listen. He regularly holds meetings with parents, who support him on just about everything he wants to do. He has even convinced some of his business friends to bring their children to the club to learn how to play.

"I hope my efforts will inspire others, show them that in the end it's going to be better for them," Duval said. Some of the industrialists have used the field to organize soccer tournaments for their own employees, to "lower tension," Duval said. He's negotiating to run a similar training facility for another businessman

who has been impressed by his successes, but so far they have not come to an agreement. For Duval, soccer is more than the workouts, more than just a daily plate of hot food for the children. Soccer can be a key that helps open other doors, he said.

The lessons he learned from his playing days have come in handy -- in business and elsewhere. Since Haiti is a soccer-crazy country, he made many friends, some of whom have saved his life on several occasions by warning him of impending attacks. He feels the center is a way to pay back.

"You have to show people how to find a life," Duval said. ``We don't have a choice here."It's paying off. L'Atletique teams have 18 first-place prizes in various tournaments. In one tournament alone, L'Atletique teams earned eight first-place trophies. Six of its players have made it in the Under-17 National Team, and several players are being scouted by Haitian professional teams. Two of Duval's players, including his son, were invited to try out with a second-division team in France. Duval hopes the successes will encourage the children to stick with it, to learn discipline, become goal-driven -- like the professionals he brings to meet them.

"That's what makes a citizen," said Duval, who last year invited Haitian American basketball player Mario Elie -- Duval is married to Elie's sister -- to visit the club. "Wherever this kid grows, he'll succeed.' Coach Felix believes that, too. On that afternoon, he was working with 83 players on the field, making them run sprints and practicing set plays. Felix knows the value of what Duval is trying to do. Like many of the children, he was born in Cite Soleil. He has gone on to coach a first-division team and has been the head technician at the club the past four years. Soccer has no secrets, he says, as a farmer rounds up the cows and walks them through the field. Here, he says, soccer needs work from the bottom. "This program allows the kids to know they have a talent, something in life," he said.

``Instead of being on the street, they are here learning they can do something."

**MORE**

## NBA's ELIE VISITS SCHOOL IN HAITI

*Note: Despite the title, this article is about Bobby Duval's soccer program*

By Michael Norton  
Associated Press Writer  
Saturday, August 14, 1999

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP)

Mario Elie felt proud when he returned to his parents' homeland and saw how a dedicated former political prisoner and soccer player was nurturing hope in disinherited slum kids.

"I'm Haitian, too. And I'm tired of hearing nothing but negative things about Haiti. But this is positive," said the 35-year old Manhattan-born guard for the NBA champion San Antonio Spurs, who had been with the two-time champions Houston Rockets.

Elie hadn't visited Haiti since he was 17. So when Bobby Duval, a soccer star who now helps underprivileged children, invited him to return, Elie jumped at the chance.

Duval runs Haiti Athletic, a soccer school for poor kids that he has almost singlehandedly turned from a vacant lot four years ago into a soccer field and clubhouse.

The asphalt of three basketball courts had just been poured, and Elie was there for the opening Friday. Located in suburban Drouillard, the field is near some of the poorest neighborhoods in this poorest country of the Western Hemisphere.

"Most are slum kids, and their models are juvenile delinquents," Duval said. "But our kids won't turn into bums. They learn discipline and how to dream a brighter dream."

About half of Haiti's 8 million population is under 18. "Hundreds of thousands of poor kids want to get involved in sports. I want to show them the way," Duval said.

Duval's professional soccer career ended brutally in 1976, when he was accused of political activism during the Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier dictatorship. He was arrested and imprisoned in the Fort Dimanche fortress for 17 months. After Duvalier's exile in 1986, Duval became a political activist and went on to

work in his family's construction business. Now at age 45, he works full time at keeping the school alive.

Friends, private-sector sponsors and private voluntary organizations provide the school with funds and supplies, but it survives on a month-by-month basis. Sometimes Duval cannot meet the payroll for his 20 employees. Under Duval's supervision, eight trainers teach soccer skills to more than 200 slum kids from ages 7 to 20. Hundreds more flock to the field to watch. Many of Duval's kids are so poor they come to practice barefoot.

At Haiti Athletic everything is free -- soccer gear and the hot meal the players get after practice. Duval also pays their school fees and medical bills.

Duval said there is hope that Haitians may someday rebuild the ruined sports infrastructure that, in 1974, pushed Haiti into the World Cup finals. Haiti has 24 first division A dilapidated sports stadium was recently renovated, and the government runs a soccer camp for promising young players.

"There's hope for us. Haitians are doing things for Haitians," Elie said.

## **MORE**

### **SOCIAL LABORATORY ON A FIELD**

28 Dec 1999

By DAVID GONZALEZ

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti

In sports and in life, Robert Duval has always fancied the left wing. As a soccer player, he thrived at the position, helping to lead Loyola University in Montreal to a college championship. But when he returned to his native Haiti after graduating in 1976, his opposition to the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier earned him a brutal 17-month prison term in solitary confinement.

In 1996, after 20 years of political activism during which he encountered dictators, military governments and coups, Duval wondered what he had accomplished. Despite presidential elections and talk of democracy, he was beginning to see his nation slip into a political stalemate that would cripple it for the next few years. While his nation was undergoing this political crisis, he too

was experiencing a crisis, a more personal, midlife kind.

"Every person in this country has to find a way to express himself and make sense of his life," Duval said. "Many quit and say there is no hope. That is the response of the middle class and the upper class. That is not my way. Where do we go from here?"

Back to the soccer field.

On a 15-acre lot where the only things that glistened were thousands of shards of broken glass, Duval, who is 46, founded Athletics of Haiti, a sports organization that takes youngsters from the slums of Cite Soleil and gives them training, food and tutoring.

Relying on a Candide-like optimism and contacts among the elite with whom he grew up, Duval has turned a patch of dirt on the outskirts of an industrial area into a rare sight here in Haiti's capital: a wide-open green space with lockers, showers and equipment usually unavailable even to the nation's biggest athletic clubs. Just as rare is that Duval is running a social laboratory, fielding teams composed of rough-and-tumble ghetto children, who grew up kicking around plastic bottles, and middle-class youths, whose parents see soccer as the ticket to a college scholarship.

Duval sees soccer as more than a diversion. In a nation where class and color have long separated people, he wants to use sport as a way to bring people together and move them forward. Traditional politics, however earnest or well meaning, had its limits, he decided. But soccer, a Haitian passion if not a world-class pursuit, gives him a chance to see results among the 215 youngsters who come to the center each day.

"It's not really about sports," he said. "There are some kids you find here with a lot of talent, whether it be intellectual, poetry, music or sports. Sports will expose them to a higher level of life. I wanted to prove that you can do something positive with Haitian kids. I am sick and tired of hearing people dump on Haiti and say it has no hope."

As a former member of the Violette team, one of Haiti's most popular soccer teams, Duval had already learned a life lesson or two from his playing days. During the most turbulent periods of political unrest in Haiti in the mid-to late

1980's, acquaintances who remembered him from the sport would sometimes warn him about impending attacks by supporters of the dictatorship.

"If I had not had that kind of past, I would be dead because of my politics," Duval said. "Sometimes I was protected by gunmen who were supposed to shoot me. He would know me from the team and say, 'Don't go there because I'm supposed to kill you there.' That showed me how much soccer means to the Haitian people."

Duval, the son of an auto-parts industrialist, spent years at the forefront of a political struggle as an outspoken advocate for human rights. But he grew introspective in the mid-1990's, slowly pulling away from politics and beginning to look for ways to spend more time with his teenage son, Guy Robert.

"I wanted my son to have a different experience," said Duval, who is divorced. "I didn't want him to be raised behind walls, not like the bourgeoisie."

One day, while searching for a place where his son could play soccer, Duval stumbled across a dirty field filled with dozens of children from the nearby slums of Cite Soleil. The land had been unused since angry mobs sacked the few houses that stood there in the vengeful months after the Duvalier regime collapsed in 1986.

"This was what I was looking for," he said. "I came here and took a group of kids and told them I wanted to do a team with them. I had tryouts and a thousand kids came out. I had to choose 100. Can you imagine? I didn't know what I was getting into. I was just trying to do something for my son."

Soon, Duval was doting on a huge extended family, imparting lessons about the importance of school and sports. He reached an agreement with the owners of the land, who allowed him to use it for free. He began to call up old friends -- some of the very elites he had scorned in previous years -- asking them for donations to help provide food, equipment and money for books and school tuition.

Today, the three soccer fields are clean, thanks to a grounds crew that spent weeks hunched over the dirt plucking out shards of glass. A wall protecting the children.