

GEORGE LAVENDER THE POWER OF SPORT FOR DEVELOPMENT

When people reference ‘the power of sport,’ images are conjured up of stunning and dramatic wins that galvanise a nation, respectful displays of sportsmanship between foes, or physical feats that inspire all those watching. Indeed, sport does all these things and more, but the power of sport that is often forgotten is in its ability to truly change the lives of those it impacts. This month, we sat down with George Lavender, who has felt this impact on a personal level. Through sport he was able to achieve feats he didn’t think possible, and is now looking to inspire others through his own sport for development foundation.

“My passion is development, my passion is youth.”



‘Football is not just a game, it’s a lifestyle.’ This quote, spoken to a group of 13 year olds at the start of a sports development camp, may have taken longer than expected to hit their mark, but when they found the target, they blossomed. Among the crowd was George Lavender, who didn’t realise it at the time, but would go on to live and breathe these words in his own work. Having always loved sport, George discovered how it had the power to influence the rest of his life, through academics and business. Today, he looks to pass on this knowledge to others, both in the UK and in Zambia.

George’s passion for sports development started during university, when he was offered the chance to travel to Zambia as part of the UK Sport led IDEALS programme. This gave him the chance to see how sport could be used as a tool to break down social barriers and bring people together. “In Africa there was a boy named Kelvin who was blind in one eye and so was partially sighted, which was a massive barrier for him, especially given where he was living. Often disabilities are seen as the devil’s work in Africa, so he faced a huge amount of challenges in his life. He would always come and sit and watch the boys play football, but one day I walked over to him and started talking. He was so shy when speaking but said that he loved football, I asked him why he didn’t play and he responded with “I can’t because I am different.” I told him that he wasn’t different, but special, and that

blind football took a lot more skill than regular football. We got to the point where we could make a joke about and he told me he would come and play from then on. He came to every session despite his disability and having no shoes, and he just grew and grew to the point where he was almost unrecognisable. I recently got a picture from my programme manager out in Zambia which showed that Kelvin is now in the team, playing regularly and friends with all his team mates. If that doesn’t show the power of sport then I don’t know what does; we went from a boy with no confidence who was defined by his disability, to a regular starter who now doesn’t care about his eye.”

It was personal relationships like these that caused George to fall in love with Zambia and the people he met, so much so that he knew he wanted to help contribute to the community. “I said to Alfred, my peer leader, when I went out the first time, “What can we do and what can we set up together to make a difference in the community?” I had the idea of setting up a football team, which he ran with and thought was brilliant. Of course there are organisations that aim to help, but organisations can’t help every community and compound in Africa. So I decided I wanted to go it alone; obviously I wanted to work alongside NGOs as well, who I am in talks with now, to support each other where we can.” So with the simple idea of setting up a football team, the Football Chance Foundation

was born, which uses football as a platform to teach key life skills within the community. “The programme is pretty much what it says really. The Football Chance Foundation is going to use the power of football to increase participation, to allow the boys and girls to have a platform to play football for free, to supply them with the kit and equipment they need, and allow them to play in a safe environment. Alongside this we are also running a school sponsorship programme, so through our website you can sponsor children to go to school in Zambia. We are also running a food programme, which will mean that the team will be able to eat properly before matches and training.”

For George, the choice to use sport and the basis for his foundation was a simple one; through his own experiences, both professional and personal, he has witnessed the power of sport to often to ignore it. As well as setting up his foundation in Zambia, George also works for the West Ham Football Foundation, helping to reach some of the most disadvantaged children in London achieve key life skills. “My passion is development, my passion is youth. I believe it and I’ve seen it first hand, not just out in Africa but here in the UK. I really believe in the power of sport, you think of Nelson Mandela’s quote, as cringy as it sounds, but it’s the truth. The kids I work with now at the West Ham Foundation are mostly based in Newham, which is the most deprived borough in London and the impact you can

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have by using a vehicle such as football to engage them and then start to deliver life skills and their own personal development, awareness and social skills is massive."

It is clear from speaking to George, that sport for development projects have had a huge impact on his life, and is something he would recommend to anyone who gets the opportunity. "I would say do it. If you get offered the opportunity to walk through a door, absolutely take it. If you half peek through it, you will never fully know what's behind it, and if you close the door you will live with that regret and you don't want to live with what if. I would say open the door fully and walk into the unknown, and I promise you will go away with unbelievable experiences. You have to 100% committed to it and 100% passionate about it. I am 21 now, and if you had said to me when I was 16, having just done my GCSEs, that in five years time I would have a degree from the University of Bath and be in the process of setting up my own charity in Zambia I would have laughed. But that whole experience of going over there and breaking the culture and seeing different things has allowed me to find my passion."

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