

‘He shoots! He scores!’ – Uganda-style

BY THOMAS FROESE

“Peace is not something you wish for. It’s something you make. Something you do. Something you are. And something you give away.”

– Robert Fulghum,
All I Really Need To Know I
Learned In Kindergarten

KAMPALA, Uganda ♦ While here in the heart of Africa, I think of Canada often. Fall is no exception.

Of course, besides dry and rainy, there are no seasons on the Equator. And while tropical rains can be sudden and torrential, Uganda is well above sea level, with moderate temperatures. (The locals pull out their tuques if it dips below 20C.)

Still, to a Canadian in Africa, October has a certain feel. It’s a time when the apple tree dies and the earth prepares for that blanket of snow. It’s a time to give thanks and reflect.

And, thank God, it’s time to start playing hockey again.

The game has now made it here, at least behind my home at Uganda Christian University, where some years of moving a mountain of hard soil – mostly with pickaxe and wheelbarrow – plus an education in making and laying asphalt, has culminated in what must be Uganda’s only Canadian-built hockey pad.

On a hill overlooking Kampala’s

suburb of Mukono, enclosed with fencing and a stone retaining wall, this joint project with the university includes rising seating for enthusiasts – maybe 150 – who, if not around to watch hockey can look down on other sacred events such as weddings.

So it did feel like a rather holy moment when I recently sat on a stone stair with my four-year-old, Jonathan, to watch a dozen Africans help christen the pad: sticks from Canada in hand, shooting on nets that I bought from a Canadian in, of all places, Yemen.

It felt like the day this summer when, in Canada, I took Jon for a romp at Maple Crest Park in St. Catharines, where my public school once stood. A generation ago I was among the kids who played on a rink on the school’s wintry field: information that prompted Jon to say excitedly and

repeatedly, “So it was right here?!”

Seeing Africans play now also feels like being in Field of Dreams, in that moment of “If you build it, they will come.” In fact, when these Ugandan youth spontaneously came and played, bare-

footed and laughing and eyes aglow, they showed a true love of the game so fast it took me by surprise. After all, hockey is “our game,” and I didn’t know how to respond when Jon asked me,

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THOMAS FROESE, SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Africans enjoy Canada’s national past-time on a new hockey pad built in Uganda by writer Thomas Froese, a Hamiltonian who lives in the African country for much of the year.

“Daddy, why are they using my stick?”

(Nor did I know how to respond later when one excited Ugandan boy informed me that our team would be “Manchester.”)

Ugandans’ own season of late hasn’t been easy. Just after my family’s recent arrival for our current work tenure, ethnic violence in the capital took two dozen lives. While rioters set Kampala ablaze and got beaten dead by authorities, Jon and his mother were trapped in the city overnight, unable to travel the road home. Days later, gunshots came so close to our house that Jon and his sister asked why they couldn’t see “the

fireworks.”

Certainly Uganda’s jobless rate, which is reported as high as 40 per cent, fuels such violence regardless of cause. And close to half of Uganda’s employed are still working for less than a dollar a day. It’s a national emergency most Canadians could never imagine.

But one thing I discovered this summer while in Cape Breton is that even Alexander Graham Bell, who lived and invented on the island for some years, wouldn’t answer the phone during dinner.

The message is that somehow, if we remember to be human “beings” rather than human “doings,” we can bring peace to, if nothing

else, the moment.

Combine this with some advice from Robert Fulghum, posted at the entrance of my kids’ international school here in Uganda: “Be-ware of wonder. Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.”

It’s not the type of message that can completely fix our world. But – with a new game in town – it’s a good word that can still help.

Thomas Froese is a writer and part-time Hamilton resident. He can be reached through his website at thomasfroese.com