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Where Young Refugees Find a Place to Fit In

By [FERNANDA SANTOS](#)

UTICA, N.Y. — Standing on the midfield line, Win Zaw bellowed, “Left!” and Muridi Ukash dashed toward the left corner of the goal box, where the ball Win had arched perfectly landed at Muridi’s feet. With a leg-twisting dribble, Muridi eluded the goalkeeper to score.

“Gosh, these guys are incredible,” Joe Koperda, a freckled 13-year-old with braces, said from the sidelines.

Under a sprinkle of rain on a recent Saturday afternoon, Win, who is 14 and came here three years ago from Myanmar, formerly Burma; Muridi, also 14 and from Somalia; and a mélange of other refugees from at least a half-dozen countries were competing for spots on a travel soccer team coached by Joe’s father, Mike Koperda, who was born in Utica 47 years ago.

Throughout the summer, some of these players joined in a series of pickup games in the park that resembled a younger, sweatier [United Nations](#) summit meeting. But the eight competitive squads in Mr. Koperda’s New York Dash Soccer Club offer the only year-round soccer option in this down-on-its-luck city with little else to offer teenage boys from far away.

The players would probably never meet other than on the soccer field, where, they say, it does not matter how well they speak English; a nod or a simple “right” or “left” is enough to send a teammate to the sweet spot.

“In school, the Americans bother me because they know how to speak English better than me,” said Muridi, a member of the Bantu tribe, whose members were enslaved and persecuted in Somalia until the early 1990’s, when civil war forced them to flee to Kenya’s desolate refugee camps.

“Here,” he said, surveying the field, “everybody is the same.”

In Utica, a robust influx of refugees over the last 15 years kept the housing and job markets afloat during tough economic times. But the local resettlement agency, like its counterparts around the country, has struggled since the Sept. 11 attacks, as government funding has dwindled along with the number of refugees admitted to the country.

The agency, the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, has cut its staff in half and canceled youth programs, said its executive director, Peter D. Vogelaar. Soccer has since become a critical assimilation tool for teenage boys, who often confront extra problems in trying to adjust to their new lives in the United States. (Mr. Koperda's club is open to girls, but refugee girls tend not to join the games here.)

"When you watch a middle-class American kid playing next to this refugee kid, sharing tips, laughing together, it's amazing," Mr. Vogelaar said. "These games are about creating opportunity for people who would not otherwise relate to work together. Ideally, that's what we'd like to see happen in the whole city."

Utica was once a bustling industrial hub, dotted by textile mills that hummed day and night and employed thousands of Irish, Italian, German and Lebanese immigrants. Locomotives chugged along a vast network of tracks and boats plied the Erie Canal, ferrying goods and spurring growth deep into western New York State.

At its peak, in the 1950's, the city had 125,000 residents, an Air Force base, and a collection of ornate buildings that belied its blue-collar roots. But as the textile industry crumbled and factory jobs migrated south, Utica lost half its population over 40 years, exhausted its finances and stood perilously close to collapse.

In recent years, though, an influx of refugees has helped stem the decline: as of 2003, about 11,000 of Utica's 60,000 residents were refugees.

"We were hemorrhaging," the city's mayor, Timothy J. Julian, said in an interview. "Then the refugees started coming here and we got this new burst of life."

"In many ways," Mayor Julian added, "we owe our survival to the refugees."

And many of the young refugees say they owe their survival here to soccer, a respite from trying, chaotic and often lonely lives.

Abdi Chivala, 19, a courteous Somali Bantu who speaks with a slight lisp, is too old to join Mr. Koperda's club — players must be 8 to 18 — but he was a regular at the summertime scrimmages, which ended in sideline chats rich with accents, and showed up for the tryouts anyway.

After 12 years at a refugee camp in Kenya where education meant disjointed lessons in dirt-floor huts, Mr. Chivala said he struggled at school, unable to read or write, when he moved to Utica in 2004. He did not know how to dress for class, he said, or what to do once he was at his desk.

When he stepped inside Thomas R. Proctor High School here for the first time, he was terrified.

“I didn’t know nobody, I didn’t have no friends and I didn’t look like the other people in my class,” Mr. Chivala recalled of his first days at the school. “The kids, they looked at me because I was different.”

Win, the Burmese boy, had similar feelings. “I was the only Asian kid in the room,” he said in the living room that doubles as a bedroom for him and one of his five brothers, Pyae Phoe Aung, a 9-year-old who spends most weekends lost in his video games.

At the refugee camp in Thailand where he grew up, Win said, he played soccer with members of Myanmar’s national team, who had also fled the country after its bloody military coup in 1988. Mr. Chivala, for his part, made soccer balls at the refugee camp in Kenya by tying T-shirts tightly together, and fashioned goal posts out of branches or broomsticks.

“At the camp, we played soccer to forget,” Mr. Chivala said, shivering in a sweaty jersey after the tryout.

Here, young refugee boys play soccer to belong. Win played for his middle school’s team last year, and in March he joined Mr. Koperda’s soccer club, making his first American friends.

“We teach more than just soccer here,” said Mr. Koperda, who picked up a nimble 10-year-old boy from Myanmar at the Sept. 30 tryout. “In a nice way, we teach structure and discipline.”

“Many of these kids here don’t even have the benefit of having their parents watch their games,” he added. “Refugee parents are always working and the kids are raising themselves in rough neighborhoods, but soccer can offer them some type of stability.”

Resettlement experts said that young refugee children were apt to quickly learn to speak English without an accent and adapt to school routine, but that teenagers typically found themselves in a frustrating race against time, trying to cram a full education into a few years. (Age, not academic background, determines the grade placement of refugee children in schools in the United States.)

In most cases, these teenagers have to decipher the language and culture on their own, since parents do not know it or are too busy to be able to help.

“They’re guys with big feet,” said Rubén G. Rumbaut, professor of sociology at the [University of California](#), Irvine, who studies the refugee experience in the United States. “They’re stumbling around, trying to figure out their place in the adult world, and they don’t always get it right.”

A 2002 study by the nonprofit Center for Multicultural Human Services in Virginia found that inadequate education, lack of family support and cultural divides may lead teenage refugees to aggression, vandalism and serious violation of rules, such as skipping or dropping out of school and running away from home.

But young refugees who take part in structured activities are less likely to get in trouble, said Julianne Duncan, associate director for children's services in the Migration and Refugee Services office at the [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](#), one of the country's largest resettlement agencies.

"And to a lot of these kids," Ms. Duncan said, "a team sport like soccer works as the greatest equalizer."

After the soccer tryouts here, Muridi, four other Bantu boys and Yo Yoh, a 13-year-old Burmese who arrived in Utica last year, went to dinner at the home of Richard Mueller, an assistant coach at the soccer club. As chicken sizzled on the grill, three of the boys played pool and Yo played table tennis with Mr. Mueller's teenage son, Paul.

Meanwhile, Muridi and Shay Callahan, an 11-year-old girl with long blond hair who also plays soccer at the club, danced and sang along to a Justin Timberlake tune that boomed from the stereo.