

Title	The signigicance of playing sport for those in poverty : A case study of the "Nobushi Japan" team in the Homeless World Cup
Author(s)	Okada, Chiaki
Citation	Osaka Human Sciences. 1 P.169-P.187
Issue Date	2015-03
Text Version	publisher
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.18910/56423">https://doi.org/10.18910/56423</a>
DOI	10.18910/56423
rights	
Note	

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## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAYING SPORT FOR THOSE IN POVERTY: A CASE STUDY OF THE “NOBUSHI JAPAN” TEAM IN THE HOMELESS WORLD CUP

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### Abstract

The ninth Homeless World Cup was held in Paris from 21 to 28 August 2011. Over 600 homeless players from a total of 64 countries (48 men’s teams and 16 women’s teams) participated in football matches. According to the regulations of the Homeless World Cup Organizing Committee, all players must be at least 16 years old and have not taken part in any of the previous Homeless World Cup matches. Additionally, players must meet at least one of the following criteria: (1) have been homeless at some point within the preceding 12 months, (2) earn their main income as a street paper vendor, (3) be asylum seekers currently without positive asylum status or be previous asylum seekers but have obtained residency status one year previously, or (4) be currently in drug or alcohol rehabilitation and also have been homeless at some point in the previous 24 months.

The purpose of this study is to clarify the value of sport for poverty reduction using the case example of “Nobushi Japan,” Japanese team that participated in the Homeless World Cup 2011. Field studies were conducted from January to August 2011, on 34 related persons, including 18 homeless players, mainly by personal interviews. Additionally I was a volunteer staff member for the Japanese team at the 2011 World Cup in Paris.

This study consists of three sections. The first section outlines the Homeless World Cup, the Paris Cup in 2011, and the activities of the Japanese team for the Cup. In the second section, I discuss the Competition, focusing on its characteristics as an “international”, “world-wide mega”, “semi-anonymous,” and “competitive” event from the viewpoint of its benefits to players. In the third section, I consider the significances of sport as a tool, referring to the case of the Homeless World Cup.

In conclusion, the core significances of the Competition are to offer several opportunities for participating players to gain self-esteem and to establish trust with other people. Moreover, a series of activities for the Competition gave players hope and pleasure in sharing sporting experiences, and, of course, exposed the difficulties in

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This article is the English translation of the original one “Okada, C. (2012). Why sport makes sense to people who live in poverty: “Nobushi Japan” for the Homeless World Cup 2011- A case example. *Bulletin of Human Sciences Osaka University*, **38**, 59-78 (in Japanese)”.

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creating personal relationships. By fulfilling their own role in the team, players gained enough confidence to return to society in the future.

The Homeless World Cup is a trial to resolve the worldwide problem of poverty from the roots using football, which provides a rare and precious opportunity to consider the value and role of sport in contributing to solving social issues.

Key words: poverty, homeless world cup, sport, football

## 1. Introduction

While we have witnessed improvements in the standard of living through developments in science and technology throughout the twenty-first century, we also see that poverty is becoming an increasingly urgent world issue. The United Nations Development Program (2003) stated<sup>1</sup>:

It kills a child every three seconds. It directly affects 1.2 billion people across the globe. Twenty-five million more people join its victims every year. No, it is not war. It is not natural disasters. It is not the result of an economic downturn. This frighteningly powerful phenomenon is extreme poverty. And it entraps one fifth of the world's population, making it almost impossible for them to utilize their talents to fulfill their potential.

A variety of approaches can be adopted to tackle poverty issues, one of which, “development through sport,” is attracting increasing attention.

“Development through sport” is a generic term used to refer to tackling the various problems that developing countries face—such as education, healthcare, conflicts, inter-ethnic/racial harmony, youth education, and HIV/AIDS—through sports. Sports are becoming increasingly used as a means of resolving global-scale challenges by cost effective means. However, there is undeniably insufficient scientific investigation regarding this approach due to the blindly optimistic, yet prevailing view, that “sports have some developmental meaning.”

This study therefore focuses on “poverty,” which is at the core of all global-scale life-style challenges, by investigating the case of the Japanese entry in the Homeless World Cup in order to answer the question “why do people living in poverty play sports?” The Homeless World Cup, first held in 2003, is an annual international futsal Competition attended by homeless people from around the world for the purpose of solving the problem of homelessness at a fundamental level, namely, eradicating the problem of poverty. Objections to the Homeless World Cup include sentiments such as “if there is enough money to send them abroad, use it to put a roof

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<sup>1</sup> Facts of Poverty. See the UNDP's website: [http://www.teamstoendpoverty.org/wq\\_pages/en/visages/lesvisages.php](http://www.teamstoendpoverty.org/wq_pages/en/visages/lesvisages.php) [accessed on February 12, 2015].

over their heads” and “if they are well enough to play futsal, they should be well enough to work,” which therefore makes it all the more important to continue examining the positive outcomes of the Homeless World Cup.

According to a survey carried out by the organizer of the Homeless World Cup six months after the 2007 Competition in Denmark among the 381 players who took part in the Competition (the research subjects), 110 (29%) had found a job and 122 (32%) had found educational opportunities. Furthermore, 145 (38%) had experienced an improvement in their living conditions and 118 (31%) had escaped from alcohol and drug dependencies.<sup>2</sup>

This study examines the significance of the Homeless World Cup from a qualitative viewpoint. It is impossible to measure the significance and characteristics of the Homeless World Cup from a quantitative perspective alone since each individual player who took part in the Competition had a unique background and circumstances, and outcomes differed from one player to another. This study was carried out with the knowledge that in addition to quantitative research, qualitative and long-term research would also be required.

## 2. Study Outline

### 2.1 Aim

To investigate the value of participation in sporting activities for the homeless.

### 2.2 Method

Interviews, field observation, and literature surveys were employed in this study. A total of 34 interviews were conducted between January 22, 2011 and August 25, 2011 with eighteen current and former members of the Nobushi Japan futsal team, seven staff members (including interns) who managed the Competition, five volunteers including the manager of the team, and four staff members from associated organizations. The average interview length was 70 minutes, and most were personal interviews except for those of four players, two staff members, and two staff members from associated organizations, due to time constraints. Additionally, two players and one volunteer staff member were interviewed jointly by two researchers; however, because at least one of the interviewers had known an interviewee previously, it was assumed that the presence of two researchers would not put psychological pressure on the interviewees. Interviews were conducted at the Big Issue offices, cafés, and on the practice fields in Tokyo, Osaka and during the Competition in Paris, depending on respondents' preferences.

Field observation was undertaken at the twice-monthly practice sessions in the Osaka area, the player selection event, and the Paris Competition. During my observations, I spoke to

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<sup>2</sup> Impact Research Copenhagen 2007 Homeless World Cup. See the Homeless World Cup's website: <http://www.homelessworldcup.org/our-impact/impact-research> [accessed on September 28, 2011].

subjects about issues which were not mentioned in the interviews and spoke to those who were not subjects of the study. The findings from these conversations were also included in the analysis.

### *2.3 Definition of the term “homeless”*

The definition of “homeless people” adopted in this chapter was proposed by the The Big Issue Japan Foundation,<sup>3</sup> which organizes the Nobushi Japan team trips, and refers to those who are in a “roofless (sleeping rough)” condition<sup>4</sup> as well as those in a “houseless” condition<sup>5</sup> (i.e., people who sleep under a roof which is not their home, such as Internet cafés or facilities for the homeless) (Big Issue Japan Foundation, 2011).

People eligible to participate in the Homeless World Cup have to be aged 16 years or older and have not participated in past Competitions. Additionally, each player must have been homeless at some point after the previous tournament in accordance with the national definition of homelessness. Alternatively, they make their income as a street paper vendor; or are asylum seekers; or are currently in drug or alcohol rehabilitation and have been homeless at some point in the preceding two years.

The Big Issue Japan Foundation carries out its day-to-day activities based on its own definition of homelessness, but when selecting players for the Homeless World Cup it adopts the Cup’s definition.

## **3. What is the Homeless World Cup?**

### *3.1 Competition outline*

The Homeless World Cup was initiated by Mel Young of Big Issue Scotland and others at the International Network of Street Papers Conference (INSP) in South Africa in 2001, and began in 2003 as a futsal Competition for homeless people. The number of teams taking part has steadily increased since the first Competition in Austria. The ninth Competition in France in 2011 consisted of teams from 64 countries (Table 1).

The aim of the Homeless World Cup is “to eradicate homelessness from society and to

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<sup>3</sup> The Big Issue Japan Foundation was established in 2007 and was based on the Big Issue Japan Ltd. For details, see The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s website: <http://www.bigissue.or.jp/> [accessed on September 10, 2011].

<sup>4</sup> Being “roofless” refers to sleeping rough on a street, park, or river bank. As of January 2010, a total of 13,124 people were confirmed to be sleeping rough (according to the survey by the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. See The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s website: <http://www.nobushijapan.org/> [accessed on August 31, 2011]).

<sup>5</sup> Being “houseless” refers to having a roof over one’s head that is not part of a house (e.g., sleeping in skid row, facilities for the homeless, Internet cafés, saunas, capsule hotels, video booths, fast food shops, friend’s houses, and camping sites). As of August 2007, it was estimated that there were about 5,400 houseless people (according to the survey by the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare. See The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s website: <http://www.nobushijapan.org/> [accessed on August 31, 2011]).

TABLE 1. Homeless World Cup Host Sites

	Year	City	Country	The number of teams
First	2003	Graz	Austria	18
Second	2004	Gothenburg	Sweden	24
Third	2005	Edinburgh	Scotland	32
Fourth	2006	Cape Town	South Africa	48
Fifth	2007	Copenhagen	Denmark	48
Sixth	2008	Melbourne	Australia	48
Seventh	2009	Milan	Italy	48
Eighth	2010	Rio de Janeiro	Brazil	64
Ninth	2011	Paris	France	64

Source: Compiled by the author based on the Homeless World Cup's website

TABLE 2. Main differences between the Homeless World Cup and official futsal rules

	Homeless World Cup	Official futsal
Playing field	22 m × 16 m	40 m × 20 m
Surface	Artificial turf	Wooden and artificial materials
Goal size	1.3 m × 4 m	2 m × 4 m
Ball size	Size 5	Size 4
Number of players	Three plus a goalkeeper	Five
Substitutes	Four (unlimited substitution)	Seven (unlimited substitution)
Duration of match	Two halves of seven minutes	Two halves of twenty minutes

Source: Compiled by the author based on the Homeless World Cup's website and the Japan Futsal Federation's website

energize homeless people to change their own lives.”<sup>6</sup> The Competition lasts approximately one week, during which, accommodation, food, and transportation for ten people (eight players and two staff members) are provided. The sponsoring body of each country is responsible for the travel costs (primarily airfares) to the Competition site, although the sponsoring body differs from country to country and some are not involved in selling street papers.

The Competition is described as a futsal game, but as Table 2 shows, its rules differ from those of the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). The Competition consists of three stages: the qualifying, group, and trophy. In the qualifying and group stages, winning teams each receive three points; the winners of each stage are determined by their total points, but losing teams do not go home after the qualifying stage. The top teams from the qualifying stage and lower teams compete in the group stage, and the top teams from the group stage and lower

<sup>6</sup> See the Homeless World Cup website: <http://www.homelessworldcup.org/> [accessed on August 20, 2011]

teams then compete in the trophy stage. Therefore, each team plays about ten matches during the week-long Competition regardless of the results of the qualifying stage, and each category at the trophy stage has a winner. All players are given a medal at the conclusion of the Competition.

### 3.2 Outline of the 2011 Homeless World Cup in Paris

The ninth Competition was held from August 21–28, 2011, in Paris, France (Photo 1) and included more than 600 players (men from 48 countries and women from 16 countries).



PHOTO 1. 2011 Paris Competition

The playing field was prepared in Parc du Champ-de-Mars overlooking the Eiffel Tower,

and a morning parade on August 21 marked the start of the Competition. The players participated in one or two matches between 10:00 am and 6:00 pm, and conversed with players from other countries, had friendly matches, or were interviewed by the media. The group stage started on August 24, 2011, and the trophy stage of the tournament was held from August 27 to 28, 2011 to decide a winner from among the top teams for the following categories: the Homeless World Cup, the Host Cup, the Dignitary Cup, the Community Cup, the City Cup, and the INSP Trophy (for women, the Women’s Cup and the Women’s Plate Cup).

Players received accommodations at one of three locations in Paris, and members travelled to the Competition venue by bus and the metro using a free pass that was valid for all public transportation. During the Competition, about 500 volunteers helped inside and outside of the venue, and each team had one or two volunteers assigned to them who could speak the official language of the team, in addition to French. The volunteers assigned to each team guided the

TABLE 3. Participating teams

Men (48 countries)	Argentina, Austria, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Cambodia, Canada, Chile, CostaRica, Croatia, CzechRepublic, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Greece, HongKong, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Mexico, Namibia, Netherlands, Nigeria, Norway, Palestine, Philippines, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Scotland, Slovenia, SouthAfrica, SouthKorea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Ukraine, USA
Women (16)	Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Colombia, France, Haiti, India, Kenya, Malawi, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Paraguay, Scotland, Uganda, USA

players to the Competition venue and provided support for Paris sightseeing trips during the teams' free time. They also dealt with injuries and other issues.

The organizers of the Competition provided all of the players with accommodation, transport, food and amenity kits. In addition, they also arranged a tour of the Eiffel Tower, a cruise on the River Seine, and tickets to galleries/museums and soccer matches (French League) so that teams could enjoy sightseeing in Paris between matches. This afforded valuable breathing space during the Competition and provided opportunities for in-team bonding as well as building friendships with other teams. Players also engaged in daily interactions with those from other countries, despite the language barriers, through sharing accommodations, exchanging of greetings at breakfast and dinner, and participating in table tennis games.

Parc du Champ-de-Mars is a popular tourist destination in Paris that usually attracts a large number of visitors, and admission to the Homeless World Cup Competition was free to ensure access for all spectators, including not only those involved with the teams and their supporters, but also tourists who cheered on players from the stands on either side of the playing field. The similar levels of support shown to top teams as well as struggling ones must have motivated the players, as well as spreading awareness of the issue of homelessness.

### 3.3 Background to Nobushi Japan team

The Big Issue Japan Foundation sent the Nobushi Japan team to represent Japan at the Homeless World Cup in Gothenburg in 2004, Milan in 2009, and Paris in 2011. The aims of sending teams to these events are: a) to create *hope* for the homeless through the enjoyment of hobbies/recreation, b) to regain relationships with others by providing a space for open communication, and c) to nurture *confidence* and a “never say die” mindset by scoring goals and winning, as well as providing repeated experiences of small successes.

The main programs for the homeless provided by The Big Issue Japan Foundation include: a) support for independent living, b) job searching, c) sports and cultural activities, and d) opportunities for social participation. Participation in the Homeless World Cup is part of a wider programme to support sports and cultural activities where the homeless take the lead in organizing club activities and events in order to create *meaning* in life and *joie de vivre*.<sup>7</sup> Regular activities consist of music, dancing, and sports etc., which includes futsal practice sessions held twice a month on average both in Tokyo and Osaka. From this perspective, the Homeless World Cup is a natural extension of the foundation's regular activities.

After a two-year absence, the Nobushi Japan team decided to participate in the 2011 Competition in Paris. Due to the Great East Japan Earthquake in March of that same year it was not clear at one point whether or not the team would be able to participate, but efforts made by

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<sup>7</sup> From The Big Issue Japan Foundation's website: <http://www.bigissue.or.jp/activity/index.html#03> [accessed on August 25, 2011].



TABLE 4. Outline of the selection event for the Nobushi Japan team

Date and time: Saturday, June 4, 2011, from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm
Venue: Toyota Fuchu Sports Centre
Number of participating teams: 10 teams (+2 teams for the Nobushi Japan team)
Total number of participating players: 101
Total number of spectators: 15
Total number of volunteers: 10
Total number of staff: 8
Total number of participants: 134
Total number of matches: 23

those involved—namely the Paris Competition organizer’s call for support for the Japanese team, grants and support from several sponsors—made it possible for seven players to participate in the Competition. In the selection process, twelve teams comprising players who had been practising in Tokyo and Osaka participated in the selection event on June 4, 2011 (Table 4) and from this, eight players were selected as members of the Nobushi Japan team.

However, during the two months between the residential training session held from July 17–22, 2011 and the departure to Paris, four resigned, and three reserves joined to form a seven-strong team to participate in the Competition.

The team arrived in Paris on August 20, 2011 to participate in the opening ceremony of the Homeless World Cup. After the opening ceremony, in response to requests from the Competition’s organizers, Nobushi Japan team gave a 15 minutes presentation on the Great East Japan earthquake. The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s “East Japan Charity Futsal Competition”<sup>8</sup> had raised donations for members of the Nobushi Japan team to participate in voluntary activities in the affected areas on several occasions.<sup>9</sup> Team members showed photographs to describe the severity of the Great East Japan earthquake and their activities in the affected areas.

The team took part in the qualifying stage in Group D that began on August 21 and played Argentina (0-12; hereafter, the final scores are in brackets), Greece (2-18), Lithuania (2-9), Costa Rica (0-18), and Ukraine (1-20), thus proceeding to the group stage with no wins and five defeats. The team was in Group H in the group stage and played Finland (1-10), South Korea (0-3), Slovenia (2-12), Austria (4-8), and Kazakhstan (1-9), thus proceeding to the INSP Trophy tournament stage with no wins and five defeats. Eight teams competed in the INSP Trophy

<sup>8</sup> The event was held on April 21, 2011 in order to support the victims of the Great East Japan earthquake. More than 80 people including members of the “Nobushi Japan” team took part, and over a million yen was raised.

<sup>9</sup> They volunteered in Momoura Hamagurihama, Ishinomaki-shi by engaging in debris removal and providing support for victims. Some of the Big Issue magazine vendors utilized their past experience from fields such as the construction industry, Self Defense Forces, and catering.

tournament, and the Nobushi Japan team lost to Romania (0-12) in the quarterfinals. They lost to Cambodia (0-4) in the stage for defeated teams before losing to Spain (2-5) in the last place final match, which meant that they were not able to achieve their goal of posting a win, which would have been the first for a Japan team.

#### 4. Features of the Homeless World Cup

##### 4.1 Internationality

The Homeless World Cup, which attracted 18 countries in the first Competition in 2003, brought male players from 48 countries and female players from 16 countries in 2011. The event has been held in a variety of locales including South Africa and Brazil, resulting in development into an international event.

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) stated that “international exchange through sports not only contributes to the spread and development of sports in Japan itself, but also plays a significant role in promoting mutual understanding and friendships with other countries.”<sup>10</sup> However, mere international exchanges can be realized by inviting foreign players to take part in practise sessions and matches held in Japan. In fact, players from Tokyo have had many chances to hold practise sessions with foreign-owned companies in Japan, thus playing futsal regularly in an international environment. However, going to Paris and taking part in a Competition with players from a total of 64 countries meant something special to these players, as evidenced by the following statement: “I really felt the responsibility of representing Japan in multiple senses of the word.” In other words, there was special meaning behind the act of playing futsal abroad.



PHOTO 2. Players on the field



PHOTO 3. Players off the field

<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology’s website: [http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/sports/athletic/070817/009.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/sports/athletic/070817/009.htm) [accessed on September 25, 2011].

The Nobushi Japan team took part in a number of friendly events with players from various countries during the Competition (Photos 2 and 3), and one player summarized his impressions after meeting the Cambodian team as: “when I heard about what is going on in Cambodia, I thought that we are lucky in Japan. When I was their age I had both of my parents, went to school, and could buy whatever I wanted. I did not know what to say to them. Honestly ‘keep going!’ did not seem appropriate.”<sup>11</sup> Although the circumstances of homeless people in different countries and regions vary, becoming familiar with one another’s environments and problems leads to a re-examination of one’s own situation, which overlaps with MEXT’s aims for international exchanges.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, being interested in and having a concern for others, recognizing the importance and difficulties in being understood by others, and gaining confidence by engaging in such activities all serve as the basis for building interpersonal relationships in one’s own society. One player reported that “a multitude of people from many different countries are here,” which is not just an objective observation of the Homeless World Cup, but also affirmation that he could accept “a multitude of people” (himself included) as members of that particular event.

Another significant point regarding participation in Homeless World Cups held abroad is that protocols need to be followed in order to be eligible to take part; players not from the host country must obtain a passport in order to participate, which, in Japan entails entry in a family register and a record of residence. Many players had had no wish to “identify themselves” for many years, so had to contact their families for the first time in years in order to obtain a passport. It was not easy for some members of the Nobushi Japan team to obtain a passport, and some had to give up participation in the Competition due to this. On the other hand, there were cases of participants who were so driven by their desire to take part in the Homeless World Cup that they managed to overcome the difficulties related to participation with help from a variety of people. According to one player, because it was necessary to “do all of these things in my life properly,” the efforts to obtain a passport for themselves served as the first step toward independent living.

#### *4.2 Event effects*

More than 100,000 homeless people had taken part in the Homeless World Cup until 2011. It is now supported by Nike and The Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), and is

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<sup>11</sup> Extracted from the key note speech “Soccer and Me: the relationship between the problem of homelessness and soccer” delivered at the Ninth Conference of the Subcommittee on International Health and Sport of the Japan Society of Physical Exercise and Sport Science on September 4, 2011. See also The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s blog on the homeless soccer project: <http://ameblo.jp/one-goal-one-step/page-3.html#main> [accessed on September 30, 2011].

<sup>12</sup> The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology defines the aim of youth exchange projects as “for leaders and youth in our country to deepen mutual understanding and to develop international sensitivity through common experiences with youth from other countries, and for them to develop autonomy and creativity.” From MEXT. (2000).

developing into a large-scale, global sporting event. The effects of such sporting events have been studied widely, in particular their economic aspects. The Technology Research Institute of Osaka Prefecture (2008) studied effects such as the activation of regions, while the Sasagawa Sports Foundation (2006) studied social effects such as the regeneration of communities, creation of regional culture, development of human resources, and youth education in addition to individual effects such as improvements in quality of life, health, self-realization, and the search for meaning in life.

It is reasonable to assume that there are some direct economic effects of hosting the Homeless World Cup, even though generating them is not the event's main purpose; it can also be said that because the event aims to contribute to homeless people's regaining a place in society, it confers latent economic effects as investments in the future. However, in reference to the Competition's current features, its significance as a large-scale event is summarized with both social and individual effects.

In terms of social effects, we need to point out that the event raises awareness and encourages acknowledgment of the problem of homelessness. The Paris Competition was held in an open environment where people were able to enter and exit the venue as they pleased to watch the event free of charge (Photo 4). Three playing fields surrounded by four walls were built in the park overlooking the Eiffel Tower, and there were stands for spectators on both sides of the playing fields. Tourists were also able to enjoy free entry through two gates at the venue and there was always a large crowd, even when popular teams were not on the field. This meant that a very lively atmosphere was maintained throughout the Competition. The open environment provided an opportunity for people not interested in homelessness to face the problem directly through the filter of sport. The players running on the field sometimes cut a very different figure from the stereotypical image of homeless people, and the audience developed some familiarity with the participating countries and teams by watching the matches. This encouraged people to discard the mindset that homelessness belongs to "a different world," which resulted in increased awareness of the problem. Education about homelessness and poverty-related problems through sporting events is an innovative method that has not been seen elsewhere, and it can be assumed that the larger the event's scale, the more far-reaching the awareness will be.

Individual effects also exist regarding the participating players. As discussed in detail in the *Competitiveness* section, the game played at the Homeless World Cup is similar to futsal, but with its own rules. One of the most significant features is that there are more opportunities to play, although the duration of



PHOTO 4. The gate to the Competition venue

each game is shorter. As a result, there are not many chances for a particular player to stand out, and all players are given equal opportunities. That all players have an opportunity to stand out and simultaneously succeed means that all of them also have the possibilities of experiencing failure and embarrassment, and in each case, would also have to go through the experience of “standing out” in front of a large audience. Some players sported unique hair styles as if they were making the most of this opportunity (Photo 5), which suggests that some players see participation in the Competition as an opportunity for self-expression. Young, who initiated the organization of the Homeless World Cup, said at the opening ceremony in Paris: “please do not forget that all of you gathered here at the venue are special.”<sup>13</sup> The fact that each player recognized himself/herself to be special, in the spotlight and supported by a cheering crowd during matches can be seen as one of the most substantial benefits of the event.



PHOTO 5. Players' individuality

#### 4.3 *Semi-anonymity*

The Homeless World Cup has its own eligibility criteria for players, but as long as players meet them they are not asked about individual attributes or backgrounds such as gender identity,<sup>14</sup> nationality, or educational attainment. This was also the case during the selection process within each country, and as far as the Nobushi Japan team was concerned, no one was asked for related experience or skill in futsal. Some people from other bodies<sup>15</sup> joined the Nobushi Japan team and the Big Issue vendors at the practise session stage, but there was no need to disclose personal information then or even when participating in the Paris Competition. In principle, no personal information except for the required minimum was disclosed.

Since there is often no need to disclose various individual background information when participating in the Competition, anonymous relationships can be built. When the Nobushi Japan team was practising, many considered “being yourself regardless of age and gender” and “being able to talk to anyone as an equal” as advantages, and found the situation where anonymous interactions in which past relationships and personal history did not matter, to be comfortable. On the other hand, in the case of practise sessions the statement “I joined because I was invited

<sup>13</sup> From the opening ceremony of “the Paris Homeless World Cup ” on August 20, 2011.

<sup>14</sup> At the 2011 Paris Competition, female teams participated from 16 countries. Among the countries which did not have female teams, some female players still participated on some of the teams.

<sup>15</sup> In Tokyo, the “NPO Support Centre for Independent living: Moyai” and “Shinjuku Co-ordination Group” and in Osaka, the “Social Welfare Legal Person Miotsukushi Welfare Group, Ooyodo Dormitory” and “Kamagasaki Patrol.”



by someone who I know to a certain extent” demonstrates that, not totally anonymous, but semi-anonymous, relationships were formed.

Similarly, at the Homeless World Cup players on other teams and spectators never learned of players’ personal backgrounds unless they engaged in conversations with them. This means that even when spectators felt familiar to players on the field, it was not based on a deep understanding. However, liveliness and out-of-breath playing on the field have the power to convey a “self” which cannot be captured in words by spectators. “Flat relationships” are built among players and between the players and spectators not by presenting different personal backgrounds to others, but rather by showing “the person himself” through serious Competition. Tada (2011) pointed out the following as one of the effects of the Homeless World Cup: “everyone these days needs to meet others away from one’s interests, daily obligations, and social standing. Sports carry a huge expectation as one of the tools to do this in an instant.”

Related to the aforementioned effects of the Homeless World Cup, it is not easy to raise awareness of the issue of homelessness among the general public, and many of those who are aware hesitate to get involved. The semi-anonymous relationships built by the Homeless World Cup provide an opportunity not only for players to become sincerely involved (if only for a limited period of time and without serious obligations), but also the general public.

#### 4.4 Competitiveness

Playing in the Homeless World Cup entails the use of unique rules, as shown in Table 2. The playing field is smaller than the one used in official futsal, and each team is made up of four players. Attacks are carried out by three players without a goalkeeper, and defense is carried out by three players without a field player. Players can be substituted at any time during the seven-minute halves, but all of the players on the bench have to take part at least once during the match. Because the field is covered by artificial turf (Photo 6), it is difficult even for a skilled player to advance by dribbling, and because both offense and defense are carried out by a small number



PHOTO 6. Artificial turf



PHOTO 7. Playing field surrounded by walls

of players, each player has to live up to their assigned role, even if only for a limited period of time. The field is surrounded by four walls that are 1.1 m in height (Photo 7) so the ball never leaves the field, and once the match begins, play continues for seven minutes without stopping. It is played according to a simple set of rules without off-sides or throw-ins, but because the field is small and surrounded by walls, the ball frequently bounces back and forth. This creates a sense of speed and power, which entertains the spectators and requires players with football or futsal experience to devise new plans and improve their skills.

Each match is presided over by three referees, but their role is not limited to identifying rule-breaking and deciding a winner, as unlike in other sports they are also expected to carry out an “educational” role, which is explained as follows: “refereeing in the Homeless World Cup is a special skill. There is a delicate balance between upholding the rules of the fast and often keenly contested games while also maintaining the spirit of the Competition, which is to build confidence, motivation, and self-respect within each of the participants.”<sup>16</sup> More concretely, it was observed that when rules were broken during a match, the referee allowed the match to continue without blowing the whistle and spoke to the offending player personally in/after the match. Since the main aim of the Homeless World Cup is not to win the cup, but to facilitate each player’s independence, referees who understand the aim of the event are naturally assigned an educational role.

All of the teams at the Homeless World Cup were engaged in matches through the qualifying, group, and trophy stages. Due to this structure, the more matches that are played, the more likely it is for any team to meet another of equivalent strength, which means that the chance of winning increases. It is widely known that the Homeless World Cup is not about winning the cup, but it is very difficult to maintain “excitement” throughout a number of matches if there is no element of winning. Matches played to promote friendship would become duller with every match that is played, and the sense of earnestness would be lost.

In the Homeless World Cup rules are adjusted in order to enable “everyone to join in” while maintaining its appeal as a competitive sport. Its unique rules that appropriately restrain competitiveness clearly indicate the Competition’s aim and direction: to compete as a team unit rather than rely on the talent of individual players. By setting up a number of “places of Competition as a team,” the Homeless World Cup provides as many players as possible the opportunity to experience goal achievement and a sense of satisfaction, which is a rare characteristic not seen in other sports.

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<sup>16</sup> From the Homeless World Cup website “Whistles of International Friendship:” <http://www.homelessworldcup.org/news/whistles-of-international-friendship> [accessed on September 20, 2011].

## 5. Conclusion: the Significance of Participation in Sports Played by the Homeless

Young, one of the founders of the Homeless World Cup, was once involved with the problem of homelessness as a journalist. Since he has been engaged in supporting homeless people for many years, we can assume that he has a firm grasp of this problem. He adopted the global Competition of futsal based on his knowledge of homelessness, and he expects that all participants will find their “*joie de vivre*” (Young, 2011) through participation in the Homeless World Cup. In fact, many participants felt this and had newfound hope, as one of the Nobushi Japan players said after the Competition: “one team has to win and the other has to lose, but we should never give up until we drop dead because we are taking part. I think we had once given up on life. Futsal is similar to life. You bring the ball to the goal by passing the ball well. I was standing still for a while, but because a pass has finally come my way, I am beginning to connect to others and am heading toward the goal.”<sup>17</sup>

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs divides human needs into five stages: physiological, safety, belongingness and love, esteem, and self-actualization. Normative values such as joy and pleasure are closely intertwined with all needs, and serve as the basis for human beings to confirm meaning in life. Tanaka et al. (2010) analyzed the relationship between homelessness and mental health and stated: “when people in a homeless situation play sports, it not only allows them to regain their physical health, but also facilitates the recovery of their will to live and confidence, which means sports bring about immeasurable effects to the individual by helping them become mentally healthy” (Tanaka et al., 2010). Among the players who took part in the 2011 Paris Competition, there were some views such as “my life is all about soccer” and “I live for soccer”, which suggests that these players not only gain temporary pleasure through sports, but also maintain the will to live and gain confidence important for daily life.

Alcohol and gambling are often sources of short-term satisfaction, with dire consequences. On the other hand playing futsal differs from alcohol and gambling in most respects, especially participating in futsal contains an element of “sharing” joy and pleasure “with others.” Joy and pleasure obtained on the basis of relationships with others lead to empathy and on, to the forging of a bond. Sano, a representative of The Big Issue Japan Foundation, pointed out that one of the major factors that causes homelessness is “having one’s relationship with others severed.”; Conversely, as long as one’s relationships with others are maintained, even if one loses a job or the means to make a living, one does not have to become homeless. As discussed earlier, in the Homeless World Cup opportunities for every player to be at the center of attention are provided. When one is the central focus and shares joy with others, it produces hope in one’s life and

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<sup>17</sup> (see 10) Extracted from the keynote speech “Soccer and Me: the relationship between the problem of homelessness and soccer,” delivered at the Ninth Conference of the subcommittee on International Health and Sport of the Japan Society of Physical Exercise and Sport Science. See also The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s blog on the homeless soccer project: <http://ameblo.jp/one-goal-one-step/page-3.html#main> [accessed on September 30, 2011].



mitigates the sense of isolation. By experiencing the transformation of individual joy to the joy experienced as a team, trust towards others is naturally formed and leads to a strong bond. The group with a strong bond forged through futsal gives security and confidence to its members, and this experience of success empowers each participant to try to participate in new groups and in society as a whole.

From a different point of view, these relationships with others represent a “quasi-social experience” in which one confirms one’s role in society. A quasi-society with the purpose of winning futsal matches was formed at the Homeless World Cup Competition, and different roles on and off the field (such as a captain and morale booster) were unconsciously and spontaneously assumed. Because the number of members was limited, no player was allowed to be a “bystander,” so everyone had to have a role. Although there were a variety of reasons participants in the Homeless World Cup had become homeless, many of them found it difficult to find their own role in society. However, after participating in the Homeless World Cup, many felt changes in themselves, which are summarized as follows:<sup>18</sup>

“We supported each other while clashing with one another. I am grateful that we did it together. We did not win any matches, but I believe our team is the best as a team.”

“I would like to be able to listen to others and say what I think. I think I am a little more confident.”

“We quarrelled and experienced conflicts as we played more and more matches, but in the end, there was team unity. It was difficult to bring the team together, but I have learned that if we make the effort, we can unite.”

“It would have been better if we had started to think as individuals a little earlier. But I had team members who shared the same aim, and I was very pleased that we became a united team in the end.”

“I think I have acquired the ability to not give up and learned to trust people by participating in this Competition. I do not know what kind of job I would like to find in the future, but I will continue looking for what I want to do. I had some differences with my teammates, but I am thankful to them for their help. I want to keep in touch with them.”

“I will make efforts to join society on my own by looking for a job more actively from now on.

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<sup>18</sup> Excerpt from The Big Issue Japan Foundation’s blog on the homeless soccer project: <http://ameblo.jp/one-goal-one-step/page-4.html#main> [accessed on September 30, 2011].

I will be separated from my teammates after the Competition but I would like to build relationships with them so that we can talk about good things as well as the sad things.”

“Looking back at the Competition, while we were not united as a team at the beginning, we became one at the end. I am very happy that I was the captain of this team.”

During the Competition, the players sometimes developed negative feelings towards one another and had to face relationship complications that they would have probably run away from in the past. They went through difficulties together by trial and error in an unfamiliar environment and although they did not achieve that first win they desired, in the end they did experience fulfillment and a sense of achievement. What was achieved here was not a superficial “making friends” or “improvement in the ability to communicate,” but deep relationships with others, which are rather difficult and take a long time to build in daily life. These solid relationships with others will be an asset for them to gain a place in the society in the future. The fact that each player voluntarily found their own role in a constructed quasi-society and carried out that role gave them confidence in themselves as social beings with trust in others.

## 6. Last Words

In examining the significance of the Homeless World Cup, the need to reconsider what poverty is, has surfaced. There is no doubt that poverty is at the foundation of the problem of homelessness. Still, if there were some kind of relationship with others as a safety net, it is unlikely that anyone would become homeless. On the other hand, even with relationships with others, as long as it is impossible to ask for help for some reason, or if the relationship becomes severed, many people are psychologically cornered and become uninterested in life, which makes them unable to make decisions from a long-term viewpoint, and this becomes a vicious cycle. In other words, it is clear that the problem of homelessness cannot be solved by tackling economic poverty alone, and ad-hoc support or charitable activities are not a fundamental solution.

The Homeless World Cup and amount of preparation necessary for the event is a mechanism “to create momentum for regaining a place in general society” and has been adopted in consideration of individual cases and the difficulties in solving the issue of homelessness. Players participating are empowered to repeat the process of trial and error to find their own social role by being embedded in a quasi-society as a member of the team, overcoming the idea that “I am alone in this world.” The trial and error process leads to recognition of oneself as a social being who exists in relation to others, and although this is not a panacea, it continues to encourage players after the Competition to act on their own initiative in order to gain independence for the future.

The Homeless World Cup uses futsal because it is easily understandable. On the surface it appears as a global-scale event with eye-catching elements of people, goods, and money moving dynamically. Needless to say, superficial “flamboyance” is used to raise the general public’s awareness about the problem of homelessness. It can also be argued that futsal has been adopted as the result of the search for the most effective solution that can be applied to as many homeless people as possible, all the while paying attention to each individual player from a micro point of view. Sano imparted that “even if you become homeless, you must not be hopeless,” which carries enough weight to explain how the significance of the Homeless World Cup bestows hope. The attempt to solve the problem of homelessness through futsal is therefore a rare and valuable attempt which makes the most of the characteristic features of team sports: it is a large, international event that simultaneously directly influences each participating player to induce long-term change.

### Acknowledgements

A number of people were kind enough to help me carry out the research for this paper, including those from the Big Issue Japan Ltd. and The Big Issue Japan Foundation, and I would like to express my deep gratitude to those who offered help. This study has been supported by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology through its Grant-in-Aid for young researchers (A) and Osaka University’s Initiative for the Involvement of Diverse Talent.

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