

Steven Phillips
Bamako

***Steven Phillips** tells of the impact that American sports stars have on the campaign to take life-saving health interventions to the children of Mali.*

Day 4: U.S. Sports Stars Suit Up Against Malaria

Ruth Riley led the University of Notre Dame to the women's NCAA Basketball title in 2001. The 6'5" center went on to win Olympic gold with the U.S. women's basketball team in Athens in 2004. More recently she was named MVP in the WNBA finals as she led the Detroit Shock to the WNBA championship in 2003.

Dwayne De Rosario is a dynamic mid-fielder for Major League Soccer's Houston Dynamo. As a Canadian citizen, he has represented his country as a member of his national team since the age of 16. He was recently named MVP of the 2007 Major League Soccer Cup, where he scored the winning goal.

Diego Gutierrez is an 11-year MLS pro midfielder for the Chicago Fire. He has been a member of five MLS championship-winning sides and received the Humanitarian-of-the-year award in 2007 from the U.S. Soccer Federation.

All three athletes are national spokespersons for the United Nations Foundation's Nothing But Nets campaign which is a partnership of faith based, sports, and business sector participants. ExxonMobil is a financial and program backer.

On this typically bright and hazy early Saturday morning in Bamako, we are off to the Madibo Keita Stadium, a 1960's Soviet-era construction to watch Ruth, Dwayne and Diego in action. Over 200 kids aged 8-16 are already there, decked out in appropriate athletic apparel and awaiting their instructions. The girls are guests of the Mali National Olympic basketball team and the boys are here with the national soccer coach. They represent a broad swath of Malian social strata and know they are among the few lucky ones to have been selected to the high honor of participating in a training clinic with the American athletes.

But before they are allowed to take the field for drills, the excited, hyperactive, but timid group of kids has a price to pay — sitting still for a 25-minute world health organization-standard malaria training module.

They are led through their malaria paces by Elizabeth McKee Gore, the head of the Nothing But Nets campaign, and the lead of our visitor delegation. Elizabeth can make cod liver oil go down like birthday cake, and predictably does.

The girls go off with Ruth to an indoor court and the boys with Diego and Dwayne to the outdoor field to engage in two hours of intensive drills and skills training. Ruth has a natural magnetic attraction with kids. They clearly regard her with awe and reverence, and are probably asking whether they will ever be able to make lay-ups and fade-away jumpers with such casual assurance.

The boys are not surprisingly simultaneously more aloof and intense than the girls. Evidence that they are part of a soccer-mad Africa abounds. Their jerseys bear the names of Henry, Eto'o, Diarra, Essien, and Diouf — testimony that there is a higher status than to be an African playing professional soccer in Europe, especially in the U.K. Premier league.

After the kids are strategically exhausted from the drills, the athletes gather them in seated circles to deliver more malaria messaging of the type only they can convey with conviction. To be able to become community leaders and robust athletes in Mali, the kids are told, they must not allow themselves to succumb to malaria. Prevention and recognizing early symptoms and getting rapid treatment are the keys. The kids attentively take it all in, especially because from the corners of their eyes they detect bundles of bed nets and a cornucopia of athletic goods and gifts that await them.

Over the course of the past few days of delegation travel, we have come to know Ruth, Dwayne and Diego. They are not only great athletes, but also exceptional human beings. And here in Mali they are more than ambassadors of hope, but also a vital bridge linking the common interests of American and African continents and people.

Diego and Dwayne are here with their wives, Ginna and Brandy respectively, and the couples are away from their young children. They are actively aware of resource and opportunity disparities between the two continents and are resolved to deploy their "star power" to do something about it. Ruth is in the same league. She has already been to Angola, Nigeria, and South Africa on similar Nothing But Nets and other outreach visits.

It is telling that all three picked malaria and Nothing But Nets as the platform for their personal mission and humanitarian zeal. I ask myself "why," then I ask them. Their wisdom and heart shines through. They intuitively understand the importance of mobilizing a largely unaware American public to face the devastating human scourge of which they know so little. And the athletes know that to have credibility with their legions of American fans, they must first confront that scourge face-to-face.

I observed that it was the three athletes in our delegation who found our local hospital visits to be the most emotionally stirring and physically shocking. Seeing malnourished and emaciated children and some obtunded and glass-eyed with cerebral malaria is difficult for anyone. But for Ruth, Dwayne, and Diego this seemed an abstract notion until they were confronted with the harsh physical reality. So their message to the aspiring young Malian footballers and basketball players took on a more urgent and strident tone ... as will their overtures to their fan-bases on their return home. Now they will all be speaking with the conviction of experience.