



#meeting14

Press Release n. 52
35th Edition
Meeting for Friendship amongst People
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Making the Impossible Possible: When Sports Help you Grow Up

Rimini, August 26, 2014 – In the salone D3, packed to full capacity, the unthinkable becomes possible as coaches and educators demonstrate “how one grows up through sports.” Peripheries are not just places, but first and foremost, people who feel the need for help in growing, in becoming adults and fulfilling their potential, said Davide Perillo, Director of the monthly magazine Traces, while introducing this session. This entails a journey which allows one to discover one’s personality and become more human. “We are ontologically needy,” continued Perillo, “and sports can play a crucial and very useful role at the ‘edges’ of that which is human.”

The session had three panelists: Massimiliano Ruggero, Manager of Banca Generali, is also Rugby Coach, a former professional rugby player and coach for national youth teams, and the soul behind an important project in Treviso; Marco Calamai, a professional basketball coach, played and coached professional players, led the Italian national team during the world military championships, and eventually left professional basketball to take up a career to help disabled youth. Finally Pedro Samaniego is Director of Casa Virgen of Caacupé, in Asunción, Paraguay.

Ruggero first highlighted the value of rugby, a sport which is also used as a tool to educate children. He wanted to give life to a project, together with the professional rugby team of Treviso, which collaborates in educational project with prisons. He remarked that “this sport welcomes and is capable of valuing differences among people. In this discipline, people of many different physiques play together and each one of them can feel important in a team game which teaches self-worth, respect, support, and solidarity. In rugby, everybody plays both as an attacker and as a defender, moving forward and advancing in the field. Then, in the so called ‘third-time,’ we all eat together with our opposing team.” To play rugby is to belong to a community: the expression of such belonging is through rules and behavioral norms, which comprise the so called ‘laws’ of rugby. Ruggero continued: “The experience I’m living in Treviso allows me to invest my time with so-called difficult kids (who had an unfortunate past) and turn them into winning players by giving them good principles.”

Marco Calamai, a basketball coach and Professor at the Faculty of Educational Science at the University of Bologna, was very evocative. Having had ten years’ experience as a basketball coach, he highlighted the psycho-educative value of the sport through two video clips. “When I quit coaching at an international level, I decided to dedicate myself to communicating the fundamentals and rules of this sport to people with disabilities. Often, the people we describe as not ‘normal’ are subject to racism, and considered unsuitable either to play sport or to lead the ordinary life of so-called normal people.”

The first video clip showed some autistic children put into contact with a ball. At first, they observe the ball as an external object outside of them. Eventually, once they become aware of its usefulness, after several attempts, they begin to use it and make it spin. After this first step, it becomes a social tool: once put on tables or under them, it even becomes a tool for social interaction with others. The coach then provides some basic rules and teaches them a few small games. Calamai continued: “We also have organized a festival, inviting the Harlem Globetrotters from the USA. Some volunteers and I taught fundamentals to



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autistic children, youth with Down syndrome and other syndromes with neurological impairments. We noticed that not only did they have fun, but that they also took up approaches completely suitable to the surrounding context (we were afraid they would flee or turn aggressive, especially the autistic ones), and also felt gratified. They were highly interactive and this was important for the improvement of their pathology. It may not be possible to completely overcome autism or other neuropathies, but education in sports definitely led to great improvements in the social capabilities of these children."

His conclusion is noteworthy: "Often, when coaching youth teams, I encountered many young people struggling with the challenges of adolescence. Sport helped them in a significant way. The biggest challenge has been that of involving people with heavier pathologies. They too, like the 'normal' adolescents, benefitted from this sport, through progress in their capabilities."

The contribution of Pedro Samaniego, Director of Casa Virgen of Caacupé in Asunción, Paraguay was no less evocative: "Soccer is the national sport of our country. I immersed myself in the world of soccer from a very young age, and this experience allowed me to appreciate people's interest in the sport and welcome many youth with difficulties into our communities." Pedro and his friends, working with judges and case managers, began to open their house to youth with criminal records and who were given time to serve. Pedro continues: "Soccer made us, the responsible people, happy, in the first place. Thanks to this climate, it was then easier to involve kids in the activities we were proposing to them. While doing their time, many of them made up with their relatives or children precisely thanks to this sport. This was possible for them by talking to their dear ones about what they were doing while incarcerated, and describing their progress in sport." Such witnesses, coming from the margins of the world and of existence, but with an important message for everybody, were thus perfectly aligned with the main theme of the Meeting.

(F.P., M.T.)

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