

Finding Common Ground on the Soccer Field

by Todd Tuell



This poster for The Team in Nepal features a character named Seema, a player who gives up a chance to play in the United States to coach a Nepalese team.

Sahr is a teenage boy. Like many boys his age around the world he loves sports, especially soccer. When he was still in elementary school, his life took a turn different from most children growing up in the United States, but too much like the lives of many boys in his home country of Sierra Leone. He was snatched up from his village playground and forced into military service. At just eight, nine, and 10 years of age, boys like Sahr had weapons shoved into their hands and were forced to commit terrible acts. These children fought on behalf of the government or the rebels against their own neighbors for reasons they did not understand.

When the fighting ended, Sahr and thousands of other child soldiers returned home, but they had forgotten how to be children. Having been raised in a culture of violence, the only thing they knew was war. Even with an end to the fighting, the horrors of war remain. "Unfortunately for too many years people have been fighting with each other and they have been using adversarial means of dealing with conflict," explains John Marks, president of Search for Common Ground, an organization working to change how people around the world deal with conflict. He continues, "Conflict is a completely normal way of human interaction, but how a society deals with conflict and how they try to resolve it is the question that we are dealing with."

Many organizations have tried to help resolve conflict, but Search for Common Ground is doing something new with their efforts. They have

*Search for Common Ground produces **The Team** series for television and radio in seventeen different countries.*

developed a soccer soap opera called *The Team*. "Using soccer, the most popular sport in the world, as a way to reach people on common ground where they could move past their differences was something that we could do," says Marks. "A few years ago we started making dramas like ones Americans see on television any given night, but we made them about a soccer team." In the dramatic format, the actors live out situations common in local viewers' lives. The audience sees healthy methods for resolving conflict between people traditionally in opposition to one another. The goal is to reincorporate these young men back into society by showing them teammates working together to resolve problems where violence is not an acceptable answer.

Conflict is not unique to Sierra Leone. For the people living in areas of conflict from Cote d'Ivoire and Morocco to Congo, Pakistan and Palestine, simply instructing them how to live peacefully is not enough. Seeing it lived out by the characters in a realistic, dramatic situation helps social change become part of the attitude and behavior of that society.

In Cote d'Ivoire, The Team is known as L'Equipe. Here actors are being filmed on set.



Search for Common Ground produces *The Team* series for television and radio in seventeen different countries. In each country it is a local version of the show written by local writers who understand the culture and the conflicts. These conflicts stem from the tribal, ethnic, religious and economic differences of the region.

Many of these countries are quite poor. In rural areas where the hatred and conflict are sometimes most deeply rooted, there is often no access to television. Search for Common Ground brings *The Team* to these areas quite literally. In addition to setting up movie screenings of the show in small villages, they bring along some of the show's cast members to meet their audience and discuss the shows. In these countries, the program has become tremendously popular, and its actors have become national celebrities.

In Kenya, the show focuses on the idea of a soccer team made up of people from two different tribes with a history of violence. The storyline of *The Team* shows that members of different tribes can be on the same soccer team and work together. "The core ideas," notes Marks, "is if they don't cooperate they don't score goals." They can find respect for each other and even see something of themselves in people they considered their enemy. They can discover that their enemies can in fact become valued teammates. In something as simple as passing the ball allowing a teammate to score, they can become winners, too, because they all have the same goal, to win.

The Team is regularly rated as one of the top 10 most viewed programs in all of Kenya. Independent evaluations and surveys have shown that the program has had a profound impact



In the first season of The Team: Sierra Leone, a team must use their diversity to win a tournament.

Cast members of The Team: Zimbabwe practice their lines together off screen.



on the behavior and the attitudes of people in Kenya with an actual decrease in the number of tribal-related, violent occurrences. People watch *The Team*. They talk about it. And it is making a difference around the world.

Sports have the unique ability to unify people. There is something pure about working toward the good of the team. Because *The Team* uses the idea to demonstrate that people can come together despite age-old conflicts, boys like Sahr can find common ground in something as simple and as beautiful as a game. They can learn to resolve their differences on a soccer field rather than a battlefield.

Ronaldo Luis Nazario de Lima, better known as Ronaldinho, made his breakthrough at age 17 when he joined Brazil's national team. The Brazil team won the World Cup in both 1994 and 2002. When he played for the famous Spanish team FC Barcelona in 1998, his team made it to the World Cup finals. He has won FIFA World Player of the Year awards three times. This striker has had some ups and downs, but no matter what, he'll go down as one of the greatest scorers of all time.



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In this episode of The Team: Kenya, players tackle the problems of tribalism both on and off the field.

