



**EUROPEAN
SOLIDARITY
CORPS**

EPIRUS
KENTPO NEQN

THE ROLE OF SPORTS IN SOCIAL INTEGRATION

**" ALL MY DREAMS WERE ABOUT SPORTS"-SYRIAN
REFUGEE**

"IT GIVES ME STRENGHT AND JOY"-SYRIAN REFUGEE

**"IT DOESN´T MATTER WHO YOU ARE, YOU CAN
ALWAYS PLAY"- AFGHAN REFUGEE**

TOMÁS RODRIGUES, PORTUGAL

“Interview with a refugee”

1- Who are you? Describe yourself

My name is Hamid, I am 16 years old and I am from Afghanistan. I like to play football and in the future I would like to be a mechanic. If I get enough money, I would like to help the poor people. In terms of sports, my favourite sport is football.

2- What do you feel when you do sports?

When I play football, I am very happy and I forget all of the bad things that happened to me. It is very nice for me to play football, I just play and forget everything and I try to put all my efforts to do my best and be the best that I can be.

3- I noticed that you have a tattoo related to football in your leg. What does it mean to you?

For me it represents part of my story and my dreams related to football. It is a boy holding a soccer ball and dreaming about winning a lot of trophies and that's my dream; I want to be successful and achieve all my goals. Furthermore, it was a friend of mine who did this tattoo so it has a special meaning.

4- Tell me about a sports player that inspires you and why?

A sports player that I like and that inspires me is Cristiano Ronaldo. He is a very famous player and he is the best player in the world. He also has a nice story which motivates me a lot: in the past he didn't have anything but with all his dedication and hard work, he achieved what he has today and this motivates me a lot to always do my best.

5- Would you like to be part of a sports organization?

Of course. I would like to learn more and develop new skills with the help of the coaches and the teammates. I also would like to be part of a sports organization to meet new people and make new friends. I want to practice to become a better player and I think that it is easier to do it while you are part of a sports organization.

6-Why are you so passionate about playing sports?

I am so passionate about sports because it is good for my body, for my health, for everything. If you do sports you never get sick and you feel that everything goes away. During the time that I am playing football I only think about football and forget all the problems and the hard times that i have been through and after that I am very calm and feel that all my problems just went away.

7- In what way do you think that sports makes you evolving as a person?

With sports I feel like I am a more relaxed person, it also improves my concentration and focus during the activities that I do on my daily basis. I also feel that sports helped me to become a better student and get a better performance at school.

“Interview with Suzan”

1- Who are you? Describe Yourself

I am Suzan, I am 27 years old and I am French. I got a Master degree in Language Interculturality. I spent the last 2 years between France and Greece working in organizations that work with asylum seekers.

After that, I found a job in Paris in a organization that works with migrants families. With this opportunity, I am able to get in touch and get to know the migrants families that we work with. I am seeing different things and facing a different reality from the previous one that I faced in the past 2 years.

I also played football in France and also during my time in Greece



Suzan, 27, France

2- During your time in Greece, you were part of a football team. In what way did it help you to integrate in the society and break some social barriers?

I was part of the Ioannina Football Team but I was only allowed to practice because my sport licence was not valid in Greece but it was an amazing experience.

When you are abroad and you are part of a team you have to find your way to communicate with the teammates and also to find a way for the others to understand you and football helped me a lot in this. During the practice, I was always trying to understand my colleagues during the exercises, I was always following them during the exercises and with that you start to build relationships with them and at a certain point they start to become your friends more than teammates. At the beginning it was difficult but the team helped me to feel integrated in the society and in the city of Ioannina and also to enjoy my time in Greece.

3- How did sports help you to evolve as a person, in physical and psychological/mental aspects?

I played with the professional team and the training sessions were hard and intense and this helped me to improve my physical condition and also my mentality to do everything that they asked me. I always tried to do my best to enhance my skills because my physical condition was not as good as the others girls and this helped me to evolve as a player but also as a person and when I came back to France I felt that I was better in every aspect.

4- How do you see the impact of sports in social integration?

We can only see the impact of sports in social integration as a good thing. When you are part of a sports organization, doesn't matter if it is a football team or other sport, you get in touch and meet people, you face a different reality and you have to break some social barriers to get around your teammates. Within a team, all differences are put aside and everyone works towards the same goals, making the relationship between everyone stronger.

The team spirit makes everyone feel integrated, not only in the team but also allows teammates to relate to each other outside of the training sessions, thus creating friendships among everyone.

In addition, all the support given by the coaches makes the athletes feel integrated and see the coaches as someone who can help them in all situations, even outside of training.

5- What would you like to say and what are you able to say to the sports organization in order to them focus more and open the doors for migrants to be part of them?

Sports organizations should organize more events where the competition would be between everyone, not just local teams. This way, both local teams and teams from other cities/countries will have contact with other players and other cultures, and this would break down some social barriers and it would be an example that everyone can be part of a team and do sports, regardless his origin or culture.

“Interview with Pedro Lopes”

1- Who are you? Describe yourself

Born and raised in the lovely city of Porto, my name is Pedro Lopes and I’m 25 years old. Being born in a country that only cares for football, I wanted to rebel against it from a young age, so I picked a different sport. That was when I started playing basketball and shortly after I fell in love with it. It is my obsession. Currently, I have a full-time job that is not related to basketball, but the game still is a major part of my life.



Pedro Lopes, 25, Portugal

2- You started playing basketball when you were 12. How did basketball help you to interact with new people and integrate yourself in the community?

I was 12 when I started playing. Basketball has always been an incredibly important part of my social life. I've made most of my closest friends through basketball. I truly believe the game is a facilitating factor for real and close relationships. I have lived in Czech Republic and Germany before, and the best relationships I have made in both those countries happened on a basketball court. The game sees no races, no colors, no ages, no money. As long as you have a ball and a hoop, you can play basketball and have the time of your life. The bond you create with your teammates can hardly (if at all possible) be replicated in other situations. That is why I will always be grateful for basketball.

3- At the moment you are part of a basketball team. How do you see the possibility of receiving/welcoming migrants in your team and have them as teammates?

This is more than a possibility, as it has happened before and will probably happen again in the future. As I've previously mentioned, the bond you create with people while playing basketball and hanging out together with your teammates on and off the court is hardly replicated. I then truly believe that basketball, but also sports in general, can be a wonderful tool to integrate migrants into a country, as they will automatically have a support system and a group of people who will be willing to help them in any way possible, as if they're part of the family already. That is my experience, at least.

4- How do you see the impact that migrants could possibly have in your team?

I can only see positive impacts coming from it. There have been studies conducted that show that teams with players coming from different countries perform significantly better than their opposites. While this might be related to players of higher talent coming to play in another country, I truly believe that the multiculturalism in teams can improve a teams performance by itself. Different points of view, different previous experiences and different ways to approach the game can benefit the teams performance, but also help the current players to improve themselves on the court and off the court, as it helps them develop very important and not always available social skills, including inclusiveness, a sense of camaraderie and overall a more positive way of looking at people and the world itself.

“Interview with Special Olympics Europe Eurasia”

1- The organization is called “*Special Olympics Europe Eurasia* “. Can you describe shortly the role and the aims of this organization?

Special Olympics Europe Eurasia is one of seven regions within the Special Olympics movement. Founded in 1968, Special Olympics is a global movement to end discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities. We foster acceptance of all people through the power of sport and programming in education, health, and leadership.

Special Olympics in Europe Eurasia encompasses a diverse range of cultures, languages and customs traversing 58 countries in Western, Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia. From Iceland to Israel, from Portugal to Russia, Special Olympics promotes respect, inclusion and human dignity for people with intellectual disabilities through sports. There are close to 543,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities in the Europe Eurasia region. The next two Special Olympics World Games—World Winter Games 2022 in Kazan, Russia and World Summer Games 2023 in Berlin, Germany—will take place in the Europe Eurasia region, bringing increased awareness and support for our movement and increased visibility for our athletes and their message of inclusion.



Special Olympics Logo

2- What type of activities do you do related to sports and social integration?

Special Olympics Unified Sports®:

Special Olympics Unified Sports® is an excellent example of our work connecting sports with social integration. Team sports bring people together and Unified Sports means that players with and without intellectual disabilities play on the same team together, promoting social inclusion through shared sports training and competition experiences. The concept of Unified Sports was inspired by a simple principle: training together and playing together is a quick path to friendship and understanding. On these teams, the players win and lose together, building connections, trust, respect and naturally fostering inclusion through sport.

In Unified Sports, teams are made up of people of similar age and ability. That makes practices more fun and games more challenging and exciting for all. Having sport in common is just one more way that preconceptions and false ideas are swept away.

Special Olympics 'Unified with Refugees' programme

Special Olympics 'Unified with Refugees' brings the transformative power of sport to the most marginalized and amplifies our calls for social inclusion. Refugees and other people on the move often live on the fringes of the societies to which they flee, due to lack of acceptance and poor access to resources. People with intellectual disabilities (ID) know the social isolation and exclusion that people on the move face. That is why Special Olympics is bringing Unified Sports to refugee camps, reception centers, and host communities. Players with intellectual disabilities and refugees play side by side, helping refugees demonstrate the ways in which they can contribute positively in their new homes, providing pathways to community and acceptance. Gerald Mballe, originally from Cameroon and now living in Italy, first came into contact with Special Olympics through our 'Unified with Refugees' programme and he embodies the power of the programme. He is now our first ever Advisor for the 'Unified with Refugees' programme. Gerald says, "Joining the Special Olympics Europe Eurasia team as the first-ever Advisor for the Unified with Refugees programme is the most exciting thing happening in my life right now. Having a role as a Unified partner on the pitch—and advisor off the pitch—for me is the best way to give back in return for the overwhelming welcome the athletes of Special Olympics gave me some years ago when they invited me into their family during moments of great personal desperation. I can't wait to get started!"

Read more about Gerald: <https://www.specialolympics.org/stories/news/gerald-mballe-becomes-first-ever-advisor-for-unified-with-refugees-programme?locale=en>

3- Do you think that sports can break some social barriers and integrate everyone in the society?

Absolutely! The power of sport to break barriers and progress integration is the foundation on which our movement was built. We have expanded our work into other areas such as inclusive health, Unified Schools and Unified Leadership but the power of sport to drive social inclusion remains the beating heart of our movement. The incredible expansion of our movement across the world since its foundation by Eunice Kennedy Shriver in 1968 demonstrates just how effective sports is as a tool to tackle exclusion: In 1968 about 1,000 athletes with intellectual disabilities from the USA and Canada competed in the first Special Olympics International Summer Games in Chicago – today, Special Olympics has more than six million athletes and Unified Sports partners in over 190 countries and territories and more than one million coaches and volunteers, and delivers more than 30 Olympic-type sports and over 100,000 games and competitions every year.

Programmes across Europe Eurasia even stayed as active as they could during lockdown. Here are just some of the activities that they organised: <https://www.specialolympics.org/stories/news/online-national-games-across-europe-urasia?locale=en>

4- What can you tell us about the progress of the children since the day that they started get in touch with sports activities?

For many children with intellectual disabilities, their first experience of Special Olympics is through our Young Athletes programme. Special Olympics Young Athletes is a sport and play programme for children with and without intellectual disabilities (ID), aged two to seven years old. Parents, teachers and caregivers have reported impressive development. The focus is on motor skills, social, emotional and learning skills. Parents and teachers of children who took part in the programme have reported impressive developmental and social progress. For example:

- **Motor skills.** Children with ID who took part in an eight-week Young Athletes curriculum saw seven month's development in motor skill. This is compared to a three month gain in motor skills for children who did not participate.
- **Social, emotional and learning skills.** Parents and teachers of children who took part in the Young Athletes curriculum said the children learned skills that they will use in pre-primary school. The children were more enthusiastic and confident. They also played better with other children.
- **Expectations.** Family members say that Young Athletes raised their hopes for their child's future.
- **Sport readiness.** Young Athletes helps children develop important movement and sport skills. These skills get them ready to take part in sports and recreation activities when they are older.
- **Acceptance.** Inclusive play has a benefit for children without ID as well. It helps them to better understand and accept others.

In 2019, there were over 35,000 Young Athletes in Europe Eurasia and over 580,000 worldwide. Here is a story about how Young Athletes stayed active during lockdown: <https://www.specialolympics.org/stories/news/pioneering-programme-to-support-young-athletes-in-montenegro?locale=en>

5- How do you see the impact of sports in social integration?

We see sports as the ultimate unifier. With our Unified with Refugees programme, sports builds bridges between the displaced communities and athletes with intellectual disabilities and creates the opportunity to reach refugees and other displaced persons with intellectual disabilities and their families—the most marginalized among the marginalized. Speaking after a Unified with Refugees event in Brussels in October 2019, Hamza, a Special Olympics Belgium athlete said, "It was fun to play with [the refugee players]. Even though we do not speak the same language, we played well together and understood each other". Here is a video that gives a taste of the Unified with Refugees experience: https://youtu.be/QANV7g8_fv4

Regarding Unified Sports, today, with over 1.6 million Unified teammates compete in over 30 sports around the world, and the momentum continues to grow. Jake Van Mierlo, Unified Partner, explains how sports unites and drives understanding and connection. He says, "It's not he or she. It's us and we." Watch this video to learn more about Unified Sports: <https://www.jointherevolution.org/50-game-changers/unified-sports>