

## A tale of two halves

IN 2006, A *READER'S DIGEST* WRITER FOUND A STORY OF HOPE IN WEST LONDON. THREE YEARS ON HE EXPLAINS HOW HE'S BECOME PART OF IT

**T**he blind corners and low lighting of the Brunel Estate in west London made it a haven for drunks and drug dealers. I was there to write a story for *Reader's Digest* about a sporting miracle: deprived local kids had formed a community football club and their coach claimed that kicking a ball around was keeping them in school and out of police custody.

I turned a corner and found myself looking at a small Tarmac court with two lines of kids in yellow and green kits dribbling footballs round cones. Shouts filled the air—"Come on!" and "Faster!" The winners cheered while the coach barked at the losers to perform 20 press-ups. Next, the kids were split up into teams of two to pass the ball to each other.

The coach, Andrew Amers-Morrison, had been a semi-professional footballer before he was brought down by a series of injuries. While convalescing, he'd kept in shape by practising tricks on the open spaces near the estate: balancing the ball on

his head, then over his shoulders, catching it on the back of his foot. One March evening, a few local kids came down to watch. The next day one of them asked, "Hey, mister, can you show me how to do that?" A week later there were enough kids to make a team and, soon after that, Samba Street Soccer was formed.

**On the train home I read through my notes and my mind drifted back to my time on the school football pitch. I remembered the ritual humiliation of the line-up when**



'Football can transform lives'

Andrew Amers-Morrison goes for glory

Heading for glory? Nick Morgan and some of the Samba soccer players

the best players were chosen as captains. They'd then cherry-pick the most popular kids until there were just a few of us left. I hadn't been disadvantaged in the way these Brunel kids were, but I knew what it was like to be an outsider.

**Andrew was charismatic and this would make a good story, but for me there was more here. If, two hours previously,**



Nick's original article in October 2006

somebody had tried to convince me that football could transform kids' lives in one of the most deprived areas in the country, I'd have laughed. Now I had to give it serious thought.

The next day I rang Andrew and said, "I can build you a website. Would that be useful?" I bought the domain name sambastreetssoccer.com and made a home page.

I realised I'd need photographs. Andrew invited me to the game on Saturday, a home match against West Drayton Explorers, played on a pitch just outside Wormwood Scrubs prison.

But perhaps "pitch" is the wrong word: this was little more than lumpy field, peppered with used syringes and dog excrement. "Before any match, we have to go over the fields picking and cleaning for an hour," Andrew said. "We don't always get everything—it's dangerous."

I said, "You've got to have a proper pitch." Andrew laughed at my naivety. Suitable green areas in this part of town were non-existent and the nearest dedicated football ground charged more than £100 a session.

I looked at the kids kicking the ball to one another and made a silent promise: *I'll get you a safe place to play.*

I met with local MP Karen Buck, who gave us a helpful letter that read: "Despite its image of wealth Westminster, and Westbourne in particular, has exceptional levels of poverty and deprivation—recent figures indicate that 83

per cent of all children in Westbourne are living in workless households—the highest in England...Overcrowded housing is very common, levels of mental ill-health are amongst the highest in the country...I am personally wholly committed to improving access to sports in the north Westminster area and see Samba as an essential element in this strategy."

**The website was slowly taking shape.** Then the article I'd written was published in *Reader's Digest*. The response was amazing. There were many small donations—cheques coming from as far as

Australia—and some large ones too.

Matt Dennis, a graphic designer from Swiss Cottage in north London, visited and pledged £6,000 in equipment. A company called Intellect also offered to contribute kit and equipment. They promised to support Samba in the long term—they wanted to see it grow and help as many children as possible.

The Christmas party that year was phenomenal. By then Samba had more than 100 kids in five teams. After a dinner of turkey and roast potatoes I was presented with an award I still keep on my wall: "A special thank you from Samba Street Soccer".

From that point on I stopped discussing what Samba would do next and started to ask, "What will we do next?" I was part of the team.

Samba sometimes played on a concrete pitch under the A40 Westway flyover. It was a good size and the overhead motorway protected the players from the worst of the elements. But it was a rough area and the concrete surface shredded skin.

Now Westminster City Council was going to lay world-class Astroturf with rubber crumbs underneath it to absorb impact if you fell. Then the area was to be made secure with 10-foot fencing and given floodlighting.

By November 2007 the facility was up and running. Seeing the estate kids touching the Astroturf for the first time

## Fulham FC invited 24 Samba players to try out for the junior team—of those, 22 were retained

was better than seeing Beckham put one in the back of the net from a set piece.

Samba were also winning silverware in their league. The results were not lost on Fulham FC, who invited 24 Samba players to try out for the junior team. Of those, no fewer than 22 were retained, a phenomenal result.

### It's not all been easy: using the

Astroturf pitches costs just under £7 per hour—a heavily subsidised rate. But because Samba used two pitches for two hours a day, four days a week, a debt quickly grew. When it approached £1,000 the council kicked Samba off the pitches. Fortunately, much of the damage has been repaired, but the relationship with Westminster Council is still not a happy one.

The next stage is to get Samba charity status, which should ease the financial situation. As I write, I'm up to my armpits in paperwork and Criminal Record Bureau checks. Even so, I'm driven on because I know that every day Samba grows, more and more children get to have a slightly better life. And if I can be part of a team that's making that happen, then I'm winning.

*Find out more at sambastreetssoccer.com.*

■ Tell us a personal story of your own: touching, inspiring or about an exceptional event in your life. It could earn you £100. See page 12 for details.