

In a Buenos Aires slum, dreaming of Paris

By Hugo Passarello Luna



With her eyes fixed on the ball, she takes a deep breath, does a quick run making a storm of dust and Karen Gomez kicks the ball that passes just outside the net. This time she missed, but later in the game she will score.

When the field dust settles, the figure of Mónica Santino, 43 years old, appears. She is the coach of the first shanty town female soccer team, the “Goals for Girls” squad. Her players are 40 young girls aged from 15 to 18 living in Villa 31, one of the biggest slum districts in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Among them, there is Karen, 16, one of the best players of the team. Mónica closely follows her training, and is pleased. “She has made a lot of progress” she says.

The group works out very hard, but more so since they set a goal for 2011: to participate next August in the Homeless World Cup in Paris as part of the Argentine female national team.

Since 2007, Mónica, an ex professional soccer player, has been training the Villa 31’s group, just minutes away from the wealthiest neighborhood in the city. At the beginning there were only 10 girls, but the news spread in the 26000 strong shanty town and it quickly fourfold. Since then, every Tuesday and Thursday they gathered during the evening in a ground covered in dirt, the only open space they have. They play soccer but they also talk about their personal issues to Mónica.



The idea behind “Goals for Girls” is to provide these young girls with a leisure space, to build teamwork spirit and to allow them to imagine a different future, beyond becoming maids, housewives or even fall into criminal activities. “A very difficult objective”, says Mónica, “because sexism in Villa 31 is very rooted”.

“Before, these girls did not have access to any recreational activities” tells Mónica “they would go from home to school and from school to home.” Cleaning, ironing and taking care of younger siblings are the traditional tasks for teenage girls in Villa 31. For them free time is uncommon; playing soccer is out of the question. It is a boy’s thing, and boys are unjustly relieved from house chores. It is a girl’s thing.

“If I don’t clean the house, I am not allowed to play soccer” says Karen with a voice that reveals both her vibrant youth and her harsh life experience. She says it in front of a camera of a local producer who is doing a documentary on the team and she appears to enjoy being in the limelight. “She is an amazing player, she deserves to go to Paris” says Mónica, her tone sweetening as she talks about Karen. “But she comes to practice already tired from all the house work. I have to encourage her to keep working on her talent, despite all the obstacles”.

And to keep Karen and her teammates motivated, Mónica sets concrete goals like the World Cup in Paris.

However, it is not easy to take the team to the city of lights. It is not easy to train in harsh conditions: a dusty field littered with plastic bottles and most of the time occupied by boys. Not easy to morally support the girls: they face poverty, sexism, violence, drug addiction and early motherhood. And it is definitely not easy to find the money to go to Paris: just the plane ticket, 1000 Euros, is a fortune for the players.

Mónica is concerned, but optimistic, “I have to be, if not I wouldn’t be doing this work.” Last year they managed to go to Rio de Janeiro for the same tournament, this year “we will make it to Paris” she assures.



Mónica Santino and her team

She herself had a rough time being different: a female soccer player in a sexist country and rising up from a humble background. After 25 years of hard work she achieved national recognition as a coach. Mónica is a role model for the “Goals for Girls” players, an example that, despite all the barriers, a different life is possible.

Soccer is the opportunity Mónica offers to them. Paris is the reward for the effort.

Karen dribbles at one side of the field. The dust rises again. “She just needs to correct her bad temper towards the rest of the team when things don’t go the way she expects” says Mónica.

For her what really matters is not the game but that the girls develop a sense of community. “They might not notice, but as they play they are building something together” says Mónica. “At the beginning they use to insult each

other. With time they learned to take their anger on the ball and to work as a group. That is the true goal.”

If four years were enough to change how they worked with each other, issues like early motherhood take much longer to uproot. Last year five girls were pregnant. Two aborted, risking serious consequences as it is illegal in Argentina. “One of the pregnant girls, Tuti, was selected for the World Cup in Rio. But once pregnant, she could not go” says Mónica “she is today a good mother. I want her to have the chance to play in Paris.”

Girls in Villa 31 end up pregnant not because of lack of resources or education, but due to a peculiar cultural factor in shanty towns: being a mother gives them an identity. They stop being a girl to become a respected woman. And motherhood also grants them a sense of ownership, “when you own nothing, the first ‘thing’ you have is your baby” reveals Mónica. “Once they become mothers, their life projects stop. Everything goes around raising their children and staying at home. I hope this won’t happen to Karen. But it is the reality they live in”.

Travelling is a way for them to see women in a different reality, beyond life in Villa 31. When they play tournaments, the girls visit other places around the city and they meet women with very different backgrounds than theirs. “For them a single trip is worth more than 50 books” sums up Mónica.

The first big journey was to Rio “it was incredible, it open up their minds to encounter people from all over talking so many different languages” recalls Mónica. “We even visited a favela [Brazilian slums] and the girls were amazed about the living conditions and the organized crime there. After that, Villa 31 seemed a much better place to them.”

Paris will be a completely different experience for the “Goals for Girls” players. While they had some ideas about life in Rio, the girls ignore everything about France. They don’t have an image of the city nor of French people, “it is completely unknown to them” says Mónica.

“Besides playing soccer I want the girls to visit museums. They might never have a chance to see those things again, only in books”. But what Mónica calls “fantastic” is to take the team to visit those in Paris that like them suffer exclusion.

While they keep training twice a week, the girls dream about being on a plane and discovering Paris. In August they might be battling for the World Cup in the Champs de Mars, below the shadow of the Eiffel Tower and in front of the outstanding École Militaire. With so much novelty and beauty, hopefully they will manage to keep their eyes on the ball.

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Photos by: Maciej Okraszewski and Kate Stanworth



