

newSpecial

Uniting for sport and art

FOR THE PEOPLE ACROSS
VARIOUS DIVIDES

PRINTED & DIGITAL EDITION
NEWSPECIAL.ORG

JUNE 2024 - N°837

SERVING THE PEOPLE OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS IN GENEVA SINCE 1949

Beyond Borders

SPORTS AS A BRIDGE

The remarkable resilience and determination of refugee and migrant athletes like Cindy Ngamba and Yusra Mardini illuminate the healing impact of sports. Harnessing the inspiration of these and other refugee Olympians, the Olympic Refugee Foundation (ORF) leverages sports as a global catalyst for positive change.

On 2 May, Cindy Ngamba, a 26-year-old boxer from Cameroon, qualified for the Olympic Refugee Team. A homosexual outcast in her home country, she is the first refugee athlete to qualify for boxing. She is also part of the largest ever team of 36 refugee athletes from 11 countries, who will compete in Paris across 12 sports and represent over 100 million displaced people around the world.

Beyond strength and resilience, Cindy's journey shows the remarkable ability of sports to offer instant relief and connection. Their healing, inclusive, and integration properties provide a safe and easily accessible space for those suffering from trauma, mental health concerns and life challenges to find solace, empowerment, and a sense of belonging.

"Sport offers a unique platform for community engagement and empowerment", says Jojo Ferris, the Head of the Olympic Refugee Foundation. Under Ferris's leadership, the ORF has strategically leveraged sports to address displacement and specific challenges faced by refugee communities worldwide. "Through structured programs, we promote teamwork, leadership, and mental well-being", Ferris notes.

This approach is particularly crucial in regions like Bangladesh, where climate displacement poses significant risks, especially for women and girls. *"In Bangladesh, we have seen remarkable transformations where sport has become a vehicle for hope and solidarity. Women and girls, in particular, have gained confidence and agency through participation in our programs, challenging societal norms and fostering aspirations for a brighter future. Similarly, in Burkina Faso, the re-integration efforts have led to improved community acceptance and support for returnees, bridging divides and promoting social inclusion."*

Yusra Mardini, a Syrian refugee who represented the Refugee Olympic Team in the 2016 Rio Olympics, inspires millions of women and girls around the world with her resilience and determination. Mardini's journey from fleeing war-torn Syria to competing in the world's top swimming competitions symbolize a sense of purpose, hope and strength.

The story of the Afghan Women's National Cycling Team is another powerful example of how sports can break down barriers and empower the marginalized and the vulnerable. Despite facing cultural and societal challenges, these women have used cycling as a means of self-expression, independence, and resilience, challenging gender norms and inspiring a new generation of female athletes.

Fast forward to Paris 2024, there is another first for Ngamba and her Team. The unique emblem, a unifying symbol of a heart, giving the Team its own unique identity. *"The Refugee Olympic Team, symbolized by a unique emblem of a heart, represents diversity, inclusion, and the healing power of sports", Ferris emphasizes. "This identity is about representation, resilience, and hope, transcending borders and challenging stereotypes."*

The unique emblem is one of many changes that the ORF has undergone under Ferris' leadership, reflecting its growing impact and reach. Ferris highlights these transformations: *"We have seen significant growth in our athlete support programs, with an increase from managing the Refugee Olympic Team during Rio to now supporting 74 athletes globally through scholarship programs."*

The ORF's evolution over the past year reflects its commitment to innovation and impact. Ferris highlights the Foundation's strategic initiatives, including expanded athlete support programs and partnerships with diverse stakeholders. *"We have amplified our engagement with refugee communities," Ferris explains. "By embedding sports into humanitarian responses, we can enhance outcomes and promote social inclusion. Recently, we have seen sports included in response plans for Ukrainian refugees and in Sudan."*



Anatoliy Kamarali, himself a Ukrainian refugee and coach of the U4U Badminton Club in Lausanne, exemplifies the impact of such engagements. His journey from displacement to leadership demonstrates how sports not only provide solace but also empower individuals to contribute positively to their communities.

The Club, which is run by refugees for refugees and locals in the heart of the Olympic Capital, is an immediate real-life testament that sports like badminton serve as a catalyst for healing and connection. A familiar sport accessible to all generations, walks of life and athletic levels, badminton has physical, mental, and emotional benefits that are key to recovery and community building.

“For women refugees and migrants, engaging in sports like badminton provides an accessible and happy link to the host community,” Kamarali notes. *“We are overwhelmed with demand by women and girls to expand the Club to intergenerational teams. A familiar group sport, badminton provides a platform for self-expression and integration, creating a sense of belonging.”*

Integration through sports is the motto of another social initiative, FLAG21 in Geneva. Its name reflects the multicultural ethos, fostering social connections and empowering migrants through various sports activities.

Ferris’s perspective extends beyond the confines of any single organization, however, highlighting a broader understanding of how sports serve as a universal language of hope and healing. *“Across diverse communities and cultures, sports have the power to unite people,”* she explains. *“Whether it is through the Olympics, grassroots programs, or community initiatives, athletics create pathways for dialogue, understanding, and transformation.”*

As the ORF continues to expand its reach, Ferris envisions a future where sports serve as a catalyst for positive change globally. *“Our aim is to strengthen partnerships and promote sustainable solutions to pressing humanitarian challenges,”* she shares. *“Ultimately, we envision a world where sports inspire and empower individuals and communities to overcome adversity and thrive.”*

As we celebrate the achievements of athletes and communities in Paris 2024, Ferris calls for continued support and investment in sports-based programs. *“Let us recognize and amplify the healing, therapeutic, and peace-building power of sports,”* she urges. *“Together, we can build bridges towards a brighter and more inclusive future for all.”*

Together, let us continue to pave the way for a more inclusive and compassionate world, where sports serve as a universal language of hope and resilience. //

Cindy Mgamba is the first transgender refugee athlete to qualify for boxing in the 2024 Paris Games.