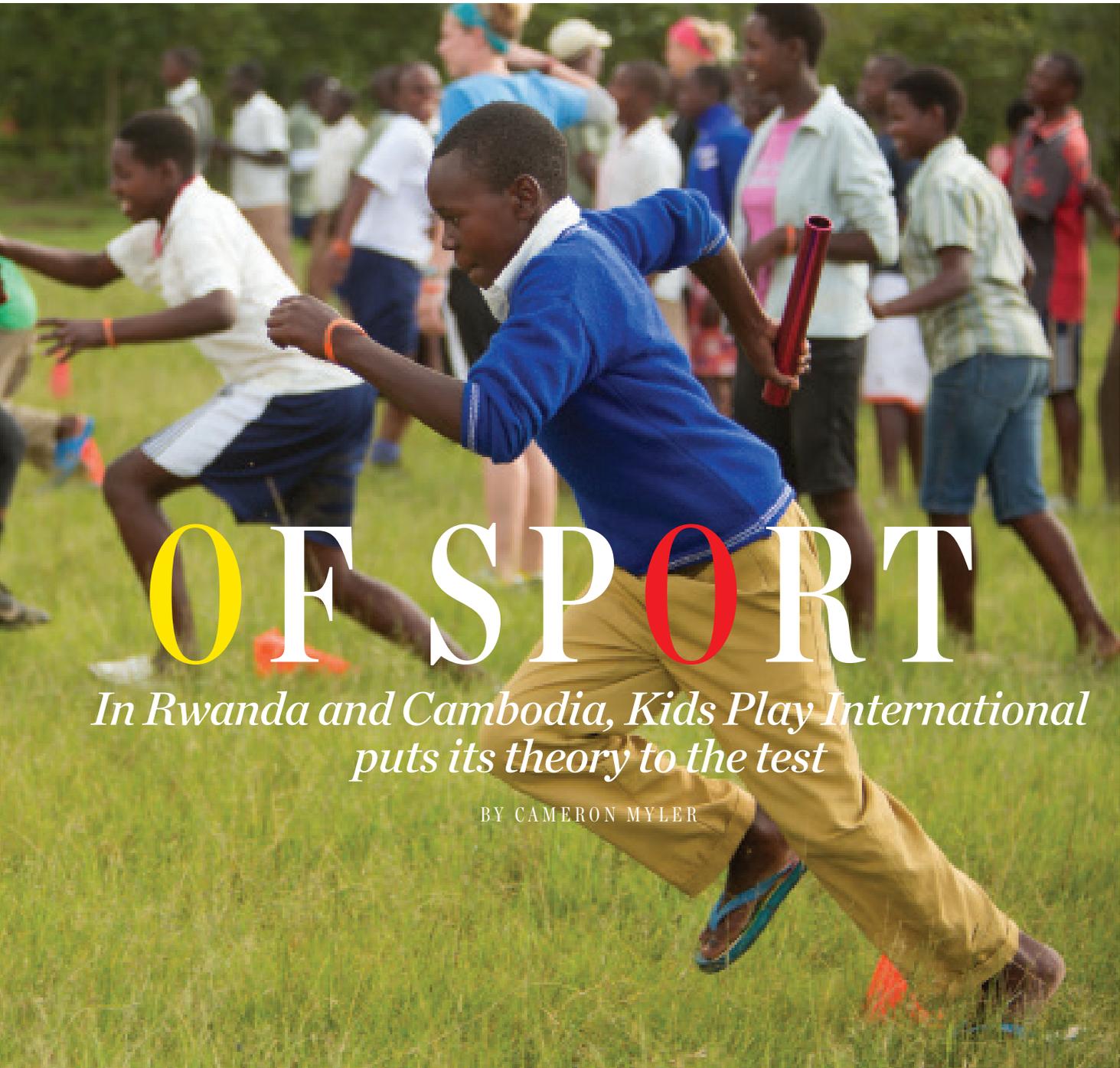




THE POWER

Can sports change the world?



OF SPORT

In Rwanda and Cambodia, Kids Play International puts its theory to the test

BY CAMERON MYLER



Volunteers in Rwanda working with boys and girls in the Let's Play Fair community sports program, which promotes the Olympic values of excellence, friendship and fair play. Olympians Emily Cook (above) and Jaime Komer (far left) are Athlete Ambassadors for Kids Play.

We all speak the language of sport, but some athletes have conversations that change lives. Tracy Evans is one of those athletes. She's a three-time Olympian in freestyle skiing (aerials), but perhaps even more remarkable than her ability to perform gravity-defying flips and twists is Tracy's commitment to using sport as a catalyst for social change.

After retiring from competition, Evans was urged by her mother to join a group of volunteers on a trip to Africa. Although she'd participated in sports her whole life, Evans didn't anticipate what she witnessed at orphanages there. Off the playing field, boys and girls followed traditional gender roles; on the field, everyone could be an equal member of the team. On the flight home, she realized, "There's just so much you can teach through sport. It can be used as a tool to promote equality between boys and girls—not just on the playing field, but in all other areas of life as well."

Inspired by her experience in Africa, Tracy launched Kids Play International. The nonprofit organization's mission is rooted in the core values of the Olympic movement:

excellence, friendship, fair play, and the belief that sport can be a powerful tool for change. Kids Play uses sport to promote gender equity in countries and communities that have been impacted by genocide. It currently dedicates its efforts to Rwanda and Cambodia. When asked why the focus of Kids Play is an ocean and a world away from her home in Park City, Utah, Evans replies, “Opportunities and choices. That’s what our organization makes available to kids who don’t have either.”

Through her work with Kids Play, Evans has provided Olympic and professional athletes with their own opportunity to experience the power of sport first hand. Since founding Kids Play in 2008, Evans has taken dozens of athletes on volunteer trips to Rwanda, and last year added a new trip to Cambodia. Jaime Komer, an Olympic Silver Medalist in water polo, has traveled with Kids Play to both countries, and is now an Athlete Ambassador for the organization. After her first trip to Rwanda, Komer realized what the power of sport could do. “It can provide boys and girls with opportunities, build confidence, encourage teamwork, inspire kids to dream, and bring a community together,” she says.

If you join Kids Play on a volunteer trip to Rwanda or Cambodia, there’s one thing you can count on: every day will be a once in a lifetime experience.

In Rwanda, the “land of a thousand hills,” your journey begins in the country’s capital, Kigali. The first stop on your tour is the Kigali Genocide Memorial Center, which serves as a reminder of the nearly million Rwandans who were massacred during 100 days in 1994. While a sobering experience, it provides context for Kids Play’s work in Rwanda: using sport to promote respect, tolerance and inclusion. “Sport brings people together on so many levels,” Evans says. “Our athlete volunteers have an innate way of being able to connect with kids – even halfway around the world in Africa – through sport.”

From Kigali, you’ll travel south to Gatagara, the rural community where Kids Play launched its “Let’s Play Fair” program in 2011. The organization has strategically taken a “one village at a time” approach to create sustainable programs that local schools, parents, coaches and kids will support. Gatagara is a community where most people live in houses built from mud bricks, and have no running water or electricity. It’s a community where most kids own a single shirt and walk a couple of miles each day to get to school. It’s also a community where, when you play with the most enthusiastic boys and girls you’ve ever met, you’ll be reminded of why you loved sport in the first place.

On a typical day of volunteering, you might play volleyball, soccer, baseball or another sport of your choosing with the youth group (7-12 years old) or young adults (13-18 years old) in the Let’s Play Fair program. You might also lead a skills and drills session during the weekly Community Sports Day, which serves over 1,000 kids, parents, teachers and coaches in Gatagara. Or, you could visit a local school to introduce boys and girls to Kids Play’s programs, and talk about the values you’ve learned through your own experiences in sport.

What you’ll see in each of those activities is boys and girls playing together and learning from each other. The girls gain confidence in their abilities; the boys learn how to share responsibility. Kids Play has found that boys and girls who can learn to pass a soccer ball to each other on the field can also learn to cooperate off the field. “It’s not that one is better than the other, or stronger than the other,” Evans says. “It’s about having boys and girls understand how they each are important and how they each can contribute.”

There are a few other experiences in Rwanda you won’t want to miss. One is a trip to Volcanoes National Park, which is home to the mountain gorillas made legendary by Dian Fossey. You’ll hike through the jungle and spend time with a family of gorillas—no cages, nothing between you and the alpha male. After the gorilla trek, you’ll stop in Musanze to meet with young women at the Ubushobozi Project, which provides training in sewing and weaving to girls who can’t afford school, who are orphaned, and who have no practical skills to support themselves.

Last year, Kids Play expanded its outreach—and volunteer trips—to Cambodia, another country still suffering from the effects of genocide. During the 1970s, the country’s ruling party, the Khmer Rouge, was responsible for the deaths of an estimated 2 million or more people – one of the worst mass killings of the twentieth century.

“Cambodia was a very different experience than the volunteer trips in Rwanda,” Evans says. “But one thing was exactly the same: sports making a positive difference in kids’ lives.” Kids Play works with an organization called TransformAsia, which runs an orphanage near the border of Thailand called the David Center. “What the volunteers do with the kids in Cambodia is based on Kids Play’s program in Rwanda,” Evans says. “You’ll gather the kids in a circle, do a warm up, talk about values, and then play! We divide the kids into groups and rotate through different activities: skills and drills, volleyball, t-ball and running the bases, soccer and a little yoga in the shade.”

Volunteers will also visit the New Development Women’s Center, which provide life skills, training and vocational opportunities to girls and women who have been rescued from sex trafficking. “It’s almost impossible to imagine what the lives of the women at the Center have been like,” Evans says. “But we were able to connect through volleyball. Sport is such an easy way to relate to someone whose life is so entirely different from your own.”

As a volunteer in Cambodia, you’ll also visit two schools near Siem Reap: the Spitzer School and the Kurata School. Olympian Kim Vandenberg, a Bronze Medalist in swimming and an Ambassador for Kids Play, visited both schools with Kids Play last fall. “Sharing the spirit of sport with the women and children of Cambodia was an eye opening experience,” Vandenberg says. “Values such as fair play, excellence, and friendship are universal—they transcend cultural, economic, and social differences.”

Ready for a trip of a lifetime? Join Kids Play on a trip to Rwanda from June 19-30 or to Cambodia from November 1-15, or contact Kids Play at kidsplayintl.org to organize.



By introducing new sports to kids in Rwanda, Kids Play gives boys and girls an opportunity to shed their traditional roles and play as equals on the field. Kids Play founder Tracy Evans (center) demonstrating baseball for the children in the Let’s Play Fair community program. Olympian and Athlete Ambassador Cameron Myler (below, far left) leading an activity to promote respect and inclusion on and off the playing field.

