

RADICAL FOOTBALL

Steve Fleming

Jürgen Griesbeck and the Story of Football for Good

Featuring a Radical XI on
their vision for football



Foreword by
Lotte Wubben-Moy

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The First Half

Manrique, July 1995

THE TWO groups of young men pulled out guns from their jeans and leather jackets and put them in piles on the ground. One member of each gang was left to stand guard over the weapons while the others stepped on to the football pitch. In that moment everything changed; the two gangs became two teams, and with the tools of violence left on the touchline, a game of football commenced. The players were unaware that watching from outside of the wire mesh fence that surrounded the dusty pitch was a young German man. Nor could they have anticipated that this fleeting moment in their lives would trigger a change of direction in his, which would ultimately transform the landscape of football forever.

Jürgen Griesbeck was walking the hilly streets of Manrique, a district in the north-east of Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city, when he saw the rival gangs take out their revolvers and ritually place them on the ground. What followed was a competitive football match, with the two teams self-officiating and reaching agreements. Jürgen watched the game for ten minutes before continuing his walk, taking with him the genesis of an idea.

In previous months, Jürgen had been walking a lot. He wanted to explore the city, naïve to the danger that he faced every time he stepped out alone into the unfamiliar streets. The Medellín Cartel had collapsed 18 months earlier in December 1993 with the killing of its leader Pablo Escobar by the Colombian National Police, and in the aftermath, a fragmented collection of gangs emerged. The boys Jürgen saw on the pitch that afternoon, just a 20-minute walk from the rooftop where Escobar was shot dead, were a part of that chaotic legacy.

Jürgen's walks were more than just a desire to familiarise with his local community. A year earlier, the Colombian footballer Andrés Escobar (no relation to Pablo) had been murdered less than two weeks after scoring an own goal at the 1994 World Cup against the USA. The death of Andrés – ‘the Gentleman of Football’ – shook Jürgen to the core. He had met Andrés while attending matches of his home club Atlético Nacional, gaining insight into the personality of a man so beloved by Colombians. In the wake of Andrés's murder, the PhD that Jürgen had been studying in Public Health became meaningless, and he resigned his Doctorate to begin a Master's in Contemporary Social Problems. As he walked the streets of Medellín, Jürgen wanted to understand more about the underlying complexities that characterised the city, but he was also searching for something more specific, a positive way forward from the brutal killing of Andrés. Until now, it had not occurred to him that the solution could be found within football itself.

As the blue Medellín skies faded to dusk, Jürgen arrived on 66th Street. The blue and white 1954 Ford Crestline parked outside his small house indicated that his wife Elida and their baby daughter were already home. After putting four-month-old Sara to bed, over dinner he told Elida

about his experience at the football match. She was less enthusiastic about Jürgen's ramblings and, having grown up in Medellín, was acutely aware of the city's inherent risks, later explaining, 'When Jürgen began to walk the neighbourhoods of Medellín, especially those of greatest conflict, they were times of confusion and instability in the city, with armed violence from urban guerrillas, drug-trafficking groups, paramilitaries, common criminals, police and the military.'

Yet while the dangers were ever-present, Elida knew that her husband was going through a process, and needed time to work things out. So, while the walks continued, she advised him on how to stay safe and avoid dangerous situations. 'I would also pray,' she recalls, 'asking his angel for protection.'

That night, as she listened to Jürgen's story, Elida reflected on the many football pitches that Pablo Escobar had built in an effort to gain public support, a strangely positive legacy of a man who had brought so much death and misery to Medellín, and the country as a whole. These fields provided dedicated spaces for playing football, alongside the hundreds of makeshift pitches that marked the streets, up and down steep hills, around corners and incorporating street furniture. As he recounted the events at the pitch that afternoon, it was evident to Elida that something was brewing in her husband's mind.

Indeed, in the weeks that followed, the experience in Manrique continued to dominate Jürgen's thoughts, and in witnessing the transition of the young men from armed rivals to two teams co-operating in a sporting encounter, he started to believe that football could be more than just a leisure activity. He began sharing with friends, and colleagues at the university, the idea that football could be a wider civic experience, used purposefully as a

vehicle for promoting peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution.

At the age of 30, Jürgen's journey in Football for Good had begun.