

# GULU RISES

IN A LAND WHERE TERROR REIGNED AND CHILDREN KILLED, LIFE IS STARTING TO GET BACK TO NORMAL. A NEW SOCCER ACADEMY HAS OPENED, AND THE CANADIAN RESPONSIBLE SEES IT AS MUCH MORE THAN CHARITY—HE BELIEVES THERE'S MONEY TO BE MADE.

BY RYAN DIXON IN GULU, UGANDA  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEXI HOBBS



# EVERY DAY BEFORE TRAINING,

a rope is strung between a tree and a signpost at the northeast corner of the big, lumpy field. It doesn't cover too much ground, but serves its purpose, letting the predominantly young observers—whose numbers always swell over the course of the afternoon—know that unless you're wearing the yellow-and-black kit of the Gulu United Football Club's youth academy, kindly steer clear of the action on all three pitches. The unmoored cows at the far end of the grounds need no such deterrent as they peacefully munch on grass a few metres away from the fury.

What typically spills off the field are errant balls and the odd shout of "Handball!" or "What. A. Finish!" Today, though, the rope barrier is being breached from the inside as members of United's youth academy leave their drills in packs of four. Preteen players duck under it, while several of the older ones scissor-kick their way over. Greeting them on the other side of the boundary is team doctor Amos Wokorach, who pulls pieces of paper from one of three manila envelopes marked U-13, U-15 and U-17, and hands them to the faces matching the names. From there, the players jog across a high school laneway of signature red African soil, muddied slightly by the late-April rainy season in northern Uganda. Just inside a steel gate adorned with the crest of St. Joseph's College Layibi, each player—still beading sweat—hands his paper to a man in a lab coat, exchanging it for a vial. Then the kids squeeze into a dusty, cramped room populated by a bunch of stacked desks, two more lab coat-wearing men and three women who—in addition to singing and humming—are drawing blood to be tested for HIV and hepatitis A. Every so often, one woman slowly shuffles out of the room to quietly utter the same words: "Some more." And on it goes, with four more players summoned for an examination made mandatory by the club, while four others—perhaps after a brief arm flex or two—break back toward the pitch and the beautiful game on the other side of the rope.

Adrian Bradbury has made it a point to know exactly what's in his players' blood. Figuratively, he's known for a while, and it's precisely what's driving him to think big in a place with which he now has a decade-long, deeply personal history. In 2005, Bradbury became a high-profile advocate for the people of northern Uganda, where Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army stormed the countryside, breaking kids down into dead-eyed child soldiers and terrorizing the population. As part of his push to raise awareness of the situation, Bradbury helped spearhead GuluWalk, an initiative with humble roots that wound up garnering international traction and press. The region is well into a period of recovery now, but

Bradbury hasn't gone anywhere. In fact, he's more visible than ever in Gulu—the largest city in northern Uganda, with a district population of about 500,000—albeit for much different reasons. The 45-year-old is currently elbow-deep in a push to rebuild Gulu United, largely through a youth academy of 50 kids chosen from nearly 1,000 hopefuls around the region. As international and academy director of the club, Bradbury believes there's money to be made on the feet of these talented youngsters. And if one of them—just a single player—can ride a confluence of skill, schooling and opportunity to something bigger, the payoff for the club and community could be enormous. Making a go of things here requires facing more than a few familiar sub-Saharan problems, overcoming some challenging local norms and subverting the entrenched, often problematic business of international soccer. But Bradbury, equal parts general and dreamer, is in it for the long haul—and his faith is unwavering.

**THE PLAYERS BRADBURY** is working with don't spend a lot of time lying on the ground. It's striking what a dearth of writhing there is in a game that is sometimes derided for the theatrics of its participants. But in Gulu, getting knocked down while playing the game you love isn't really viewed as a hardship by kids who have developed a natural hardness. "They're fearless," says Victor Satei, the club's technical director.

Even tiny Ocen Genesis Odiya never stops to lick his wounds. The eight-year-old is the academy's youngest participant by a couple of years and the smallest by as many inches. His shorts reach down past his knees, to about the second of three black stripes on his yellow socks. When he's not running, Genesis sometimes sucks on a key that hangs on a string around his neck. All the players at the academy board at one of two schools, and, for the primary kids, pretty much every possession they own is stuffed into a blue tin trunk back at the dorm. Losing the key for that lock isn't something Genesis is willing to risk, so it goes everywhere he does.

Bradbury had no intention of taking a player so young when Gulu United was holding tryouts last year, and Genesis didn't seem to have any obvious intention to change Bradbury's mind. He showed up to one of United's camps with some other young friends who, after being tossed a ball, started playing their own game on the sidelines. Having witnessed the pint-sized kid pull a couple of big-time moves, Bradbury sent one of his coaches over to invite him to participate in the tryout. (While all the kids understand and speak at least some English, Bradbury often communicates with them through a local coach. The vast majority of people in the region are Acholi and speak the tribal language of the same name.) After seeing the way Genesis held his own against players who dwarfed him, Bradbury decided he could





have a spot in the academy. Now, the staff have worked Genesis's hometown into their affectionate nickname for him: "The football ambassador to Awach."

All the kids who tried out for Gulu United did so in bare feet, which helps account for their sublime feel for the ball. Bradbury had barely got their first pair of boots tied before most of them were trying to kick free, favouring their old, natural way of playing. Like everybody else, Dennis Vivo eventually got used to his new equipment. The 15-year-old striker has the type of touch that could titillate a European club. Just getting him signed up was a challenge, though, as Vivo's dad can't read or write English. Vivo also went AWOL earlier this year, disappearing for a couple of days before turning up at a teammate's house. After being told something like that can't happen again, Vivo was allowed to rejoin the club. At the other end of the spectrum, there are more than a few kids Bradbury couldn't drive away with a bulldozer. Under-17 defender Eric Wokorach (no relation to Amos, the doctor) walked 15 miles to attend his first tryout. Brothers Yona Opio, 16, and Abraham Opio, 14, took a 90-minute bus ride to Gulu to attend a tryout, landing with no money for food and no place to stay overnight. Bradbury made sure the boys were housed and fed for a couple of days, and both wound up making the club. That wasn't initially the case for 16-year-old Desmond Arop, who was cut from the squad but showed up at the school the United kids attend anyway. When Bradbury asked him what he was doing there, Desmond said he wanted to be around the team to prove he belonged. The keeper finally wore Bradbury down, and he's now a model student and one of the most enthusiastic players on the team.

Not that energy is ever in short supply. The high school-aged players stream out of Layibi each afternoon, depending on when their classes end. A few of them—along with Bradbury's sons,

**"AFTER ALL THAT'S GONE ON HERE, THIS NEEDS TO BE THEIR ESCAPE—A PLACE WHERE THEY CAN COME AND BE FREE AND ENJOY IT AND EXPRESS THEMSELVES"**

action. When somebody has the ball, his name is screamed by a number of teammates who, open or not, really believe they should have it next. The kids have even put a local spin on Isaac's name, yelling "Aye-Zoh!" whenever he's in a position to pass. After practice, the kids clown around a bit—jumping on each other's backs, even forming the odd breakdance circle—before sitting

14-year-old Isaac and 11-year-old Owen, both academy players—are usually wheeling out nets from storage or playing keep-ups when the younger kids arrive by bus from nearby Bright Valley Primary School. There is no shortage of faces and arms sticking out of windows each day as the vehicle chugs up the roughly 500-metre Layibi laneway, which is flanked on both sides by sprawling fields that are green during the rainy season and parched, unforgiving terrain when it's dry. The modest surroundings do nothing to strip players of a certain natural swagger, but there's also a sincerity about them as they make sure to greet any adult in their vicinity with a handshake. Once the session officially begins, players in all three age groups whirl into

#### "THEY'RE FEARLESS"

There's no writhing on the field when players get knocked down, and they trot off for blood tests with little fuss. But not everything has been easy—when Bradbury, left, first put boots on their feet, they tried to kick free, preferring to play barefoot.



down to get feedback from Bradbury and the coaches. Questions along the lines of, "Did we learn something today?" and "Are we going to focus and be even better tomorrow?" are always met with a group response that grows in volume: "yeah, Yeah, YEAH!"

Before the academy began training on a day-to-day basis, Bradbury held meetings with parents to talk about his approach and goals for the kids. In another world, this would be the part where a club director begins fielding petulant questions about playing time.

In Gulu, many parents couldn't care less about the soccer, but were thrilled to learn United would cover the costs required to have each child board at either Layibi or Bright Valley. A Westerner walking into the dormitories where these youngsters live can't help but be taken aback by the barn-like building and the decrepit blue bunk beds they sleep on, with thin mattresses that look as though they offer no more comfort than a folded-over beach towel. Still, these are the two best schools in the region, and most United parents couldn't dream of sending their kids to either without financial support.

Academics, though, weren't the only topic of conversation at those initial meetings. One father stood up, declared himself to be HIV-positive and asked if his son could be tested. This drove Bradbury to pay for health-care workers to come out to the field and do blood work on every child in a place where about 20 percent of the population has the disease. (Many people avoid being tested because they don't want to risk being discriminated against if they're found to be positive, despite the fact that quality treatment is not only readily available, but often free.)

Negotiating the contours of a foreign land is only possible for Bradbury thanks to the club's staff of locals, most notably first team director Calvin Okello. A Gulu native, Okello attended Layibi



and was soccer-obsessed long before his high school years. Now a 36-year-old who works in Gulu University's finance department, Okello will talk all day about the sport he loves. Settling into his office chair at the university—the stacks of papers on and around his desk are a reminder of what life was like before advanced software ruled the day—Okello recalls the organic way games took shape in his youth. No coaches, no age restrictions and no limit to the number of feet chasing the type of makeshift ball you can still find in Ugandan pickup games today, one made from plastic bags bound tightly together and wrapped with twine. "You go for almost 30 minutes without even kicking it two or three times because there are so many people," Okello says. "And bigger guys would come and they would push you away,

push you away."

Like many men in their 30s, Okello's smile grows broader the second he starts reminiscing about his athletic past. But not every memory in his bank is a happy one. The soccer sessions of his youth may not have had scheduled start times, but everybody knew the game was over the second they heard gunshots.

For a huge portion of Okello's life, Kony and the LRA brutalized northern Uganda. The rebel group thrived by making soldiers out of children, especially in rural areas where there was no electricity for lights and little in the way of armed forces to stop its advances. For many people, the only defence was to walk into towns like Gulu every evening, where they could sleep near a storefront or in a high school—such as Layibi—where government soldiers kept watch. The next morning, they would make the trek back to their homes and farms, walking for hours each day to survive.

In November 2003, Okello was on a bus travelling through a neighbouring district when a rebel ambush brought the vehicle to a horrifying halt. All he could do was crouch down with the passenger beside him, leaving his fate in the hands of a higher power as a rain of bullets tore through the bus siding like rocks through wet paper. "It's just God helping you," he says. Some rebels managed to board the bus before army forces arrived on the scene to chase them away. Ten people, including the driver, were killed. Okello was among the 20 or so who, physically, were unharmed.

The LRA's initial attacks in the area date back to the late 1980s, meaning multiple generations of Ugandans like Okello had the same relationship with abduction and murder that Canadian youth would have with going to Disneyland—if it didn't happen to you, it damn sure happened to people you palled around with. "We lost so many good friends and young kids and parents," Okello says of the war. "It was horrible."

Half a world away, a relatively new father had the same reaction.



**ADRIAN BRADBURY GREW** up in a blue-collar home in Oshawa, Ont. He was the first person from his family—which had no humanitarian background and absolutely no connection to Uganda—to attend university. Bradbury, a vegetarian who opts for sugar-free beer and still cuts an athletic figure, played basketball for the University of Ottawa during his first two years there, coming off the bench to offer hard-nosed defence or in the hope that he'd get hot from beyond the three-point arc when the team was down. He stayed in the game after school, doing some coaching in Japan, but that quickly started to feel more like a job than a passion. By the turn of the century, Bradbury was married to kindergarten teacher Kim Atwill-Bradbury, and their life in the east end of Toronto gained another dimension with the arrival of Isaac and Owen. He's often asked where his altruistic streak comes from, and while he can't completely account for it, Bradbury does acknowledge that becoming a dad altered the way he viewed the world. "The same as the usual clichés, which are a bit sad and pathetic, but also true," he says.

Increasingly, Bradbury's thoughts were ensnared by the approximately 40,000 "night commuters" in northern Uganda. One evening in 2005, he devoured Douglas Coupland's book *Terry*, a tribute to the life of Terry Fox and his Marathon of Hope. By the next morning, Bradbury had mapped out a route of his own. Along with his friend Kieran Hayward, Bradbury decided to call attention to the commute in Uganda by walking west from Toronto's Victoria Park Station toward Yonge Street, then south to City Hall each evening in July. Once the two-plus-hour journey was complete, Bradbury and Hayward would sleep on a little patch of grass in front of the building, then get up early for the trip back home so Bradbury could blog about the experience before heading to work as the media relations director for varsity athletics at the University of Toronto. They were hoping to attract some local media coverage; by day six, they were on the front page of the *Toronto Star* and the story took off from there. The issue became central to Bradbury's life, as GuluWalks—one-off events aimed at raising awareness of northern Uganda's problems—were organized all over the world. Bradbury's first of numerous visits to the region came in 2006, when things were still a little hot. Word of this Canadian guy who'd taken up their cause quickly spread through Gulu and, to this day, it grants Bradbury significant credibility. Whenever Okello introduces him



#### THE CHOSEN ONES

Almost 1,000 players from around the Gulu region tried out for the team. In the end, 50—including Genesis, top left—made the cut.

to somebody new, he always provides the context: This is the man who co-founded GuluWalk.

While Bradbury's metamorphosis into a soccer aficionado was fuelled partly by his boys' love of the sport, there was another, more philosophical aspect to it. With a basketball background, Bradbury was reared on a game in which a team with a couple of elite players stands a fantastic shot at victory. That's not necessarily the case in soccer, where a well-schooled squad can use superior tactics to topple a more skilled opponent. And Bradbury just couldn't let go of that underdog notion.

By 2008, the LRA's power had been greatly reduced and Kony was pushed into hiding (he remains in South Sudan and the Central African Republic). As northern Uganda began to heal, Bradbury shifted his focus to raising funds for the region's soccer team, Gulu United, in the hopes that the senior club could climb back into Uganda's premier league. It did, in fact, get to the top division, but money was still incredibly hard to come by, and the success couldn't be sustained—they now toil in the country's third-best league. By 2013, however, Bradbury was ready to take another run. This time, he wanted to do it right, taking full control of the club and building from the ground up with a youth academy. Initially, he thought it might be something he could run from Toronto. At the time, Bradbury was a program director for a company called Public Inc., where he worked with corporations and charities on ways to develop advocacy and fundraising campaigns. With that experience behind him, Bradbury registered a business called Football for Good to be

the vehicle that would generate money for Gulu United. But as he hit the bricks trying to cobble together some dough, Bradbury kept running into the same problem: People were hesitant to pony up for a guy who wasn't going to be on the scene. One morning in the spring of 2014, Bradbury and Kim went out for breakfast, where he lamented the dilemma. Without hesitation, Kim—whose face reflects the depth of her every emotion—blurted out, "Just tell them you'll be there." In the fall of that year, Bradbury took a two-month leave from Public Inc. to get United rolling. Then he went all in, leaving his job completely and paying himself a salary from the Football for Good kitty. Nobody in the family except Bradbury had ever been to the area when, just after Christmas, they all hopped on a plane to start the new year in a new place.

**ISAAC BRADBURY LIKES** to barter with the boot doctor. Having been a Gulu resident for about four months, he's had no problem latching on to local customs. He and Owen—who are home-schooled by Kim—sometimes travel by "boda," the motorcycle taxis that rip all over town, darting around walkers, bikers and vehicles on action-packed dirt roads. If you've got the stomach for that, you certainly don't mind pressing the man who mends Gulu United's footwear for a few extra pennies. The boot doctor charges 1,000 Ugandan shillings (a little less than 50 cents) for a repair job, but Isaac is always very satisfied when he can talk him down to 500. In terms of business savvy, Isaac seems to be his father's son.

Adrian Bradbury's heart may have been what originally led him to Gulu, but today it's his head pushing things forward. He's become obsessed with counting the beans, and something doesn't add up.

**IT'S TANTAMOUNT TO A COUNTRY GETTING NO RETURN ON A NATURAL RESOURCE PLUCKED FROM ITS LAND. IT'S AN INJUSTICE, BUT ALSO AN OPPORTUNITY.**



Unlike the four major sports leagues in North America, which distribute athletes through a draft system, soccer clubs purchase players from all over the world through transfer agreements. At the highest level, wealthy clubs like Manchester United or Barcelona pay astronomical fees to other teams—meaning tens of millions of Euros—to acquire top talent. But underneath those mega-clubs is a planet full of mid-size and small outfits in the business of developing and selling quality players for more modest sums. The problem in Africa is that many regions lack the resources necessary to run clubs and youth academies. No club means no transfer fee coming back to the area when one of its talented players leaves for a bigger opportunity. It's tantamount to a country getting

no return on a precious natural resource plucked from its land. That, in very basic terms, is where Bradbury sees not only an injustice but also an economic opening. "There's some element of righting a wrong," Bradbury says. "I don't want it to be cloaked in charity or being a do-gooder. It's not my intention. This is just a huge missed opportunity to run a really viable, global business that could make a lot of money and do a lot of good."

Bradbury and his family have committed to living in Gulu until June 2016, with the distinct possibility they'll stay beyond that. They're quite comfortable in their three-bedroom house, which is big by local standards, but can still be rented for about \$300 per month. The property has a gate at the laneway, which is not unusual for larger homes, many of which were, at one time, occupied by the British who colonized Uganda. Hotels often have gates as well, and while the

visual of guards toting automatic rifles there and around things like bank machines can be jarring, it's really more ceremonial. The area still has its problems, but it's by no means a dangerous place to live or visit. The adjustment to Gulu life has probably been toughest on Kim, but she's adapted by finding a yoga class and providing her boys with a diverse curriculum, including gardening lessons in a sizable backyard that's home to mango, lemon and avocado trees. While he'd love to make something happen as soon as possible, Bradbury knows it might take five, even seven years for that first transfer. That said, he's hopeful the club can at least get some tryouts in Europe in the near future, something made a bit more plausible because of the connections he made through GuluWalk. Those include Steve Nash, another former basketball player with a deep love of soccer. The two-time NBA



#### PITCH PERFECT

Bradbury believes the spartan setting in which Gulu United plays is a benefit, pushing players to pursue their dreams. He also sees the area's obsession with soccer—something local coach Calvin, below, knows well—as a precious asset that must be sustained.



MVP introduced Bradbury to Matthew Benham, who runs FC Midtjylland in Denmark and Brentford FC in England. Last spring, before the youth academy was up and running, Bradbury brought Kipper Luwalo, a player he knew from Gulu, to Toronto. There, both Toronto FC and scouts from Brentford had a look at the 15-year-old. While neither club was prepared to take the player on, his natural skill was roundly noted.

The sport's governing body, FIFA, has rules in place to regulate transfers and protect smaller clubs like Gulu United. Still, a lot of skullduggery occurs, with larger organizations often finding ways to poach talent without any regard for the regulations, especially when dealing with poorer places. "There's a lot of ugliness that goes on," Bradbury says. "It's going to be hard, and I think there are going to be people who try to take advantage of what we're doing, or are not going to buy it: 'Why would you be developing these players and why should we have this professional relationship in backwards northern Uganda?' We're going to have to earn that."

One huge factor in Bradbury's favour is that money goes 10 times further in Gulu than it would just about anywhere else outside of Africa. Because of that, there's less pressure to score a hefty payday. Yes, he acknowledges a few million Euro would change the club forever, but he's certainly not banking on that. The two things he's told Football for Good's investors are: Best-case scenario, he can get them their money back with a small percentage on top; secondly, should United—which costs about \$100,000 to run annually—happen to hit pay dirt, the majority of the funds will be poured back into the club. Profits are earmarked for things like visits from high-level coaches, getting the kids in some international tournaments and possibly opening other academies in sub-Saharan Africa. Bradbury also has designs on starting a local school that would incorporate different teaching methods—he refers to the current system as "rote"—and investing in young community leaders in a variety of disciplines, such as agricultural entrepreneurs. Gulu's most likely positive outcome is a small transfer fee from a club taking a chance on one of its players, with an agreement that, should the player then be sold again to a bigger club, United would get a percentage of the fee. While it's fair to say United is pushing the ball uphill, the success of this venture doesn't hinge on Bradbury establishing an elite soccer factory. "That's the beauty of it; it only takes one," he says. "Then, also, that one creates this whole other level of attention around what we're doing and way more interest in our kids."

**MANY MORNINGS,** Bradbury has just enough time to pluck a mango from the backyard before setting out to tackle his to-do list. Daily training sessions don't start until mid-afternoon, but

other organized teams in the area—trying to get his players in a few friendlies with any group that can tape together a squad. When they do get matches—it usually happens about once every three weeks—the academies' three squads often play older kids and more than hold their own.

On Monday mornings, Bradbury meets with his eight full-time coaches to meticulously plan out drills for the week. With the finishing touches still being put on a club office, the staff often meets at a local pub or hotel. These men all have extensive soccer backgrounds, some having played professionally in Uganda and around Africa. That doesn't mean the transition to coaching has been smooth. On a basic level, punctuality just doesn't hold the sway in Uganda that it does in other parts of the world. Early on, Bradbury would pull the Toyota van adorned with yellow and blue Gulu United lettering up to an agreed-upon meeting spot only to find certain coaches weren't there. When verbal warnings didn't work, Bradbury issued fines until the message got through.

When Bradbury and Okello began interviewing for the coaching positions, the former was perplexed by the fact that nobody could talk about their own unique qualifications and what made them the best person for the job. Okello explained that positive feedback isn't common in Uganda. Whether in a scholastic or athletic setting, people are accustomed to hearing about what they're doing wrong, not what they're doing right. "They cannot speak of their goodness, what they feel is good and unique in them," says Okello, who is still sometimes caught off-guard when Bradbury sends him a note of gratitude over text or email.

Omara Oscar, nicknamed "Monday," is one of the coaches who initially had trouble verbalizing his attributes. The spindly 27-year-old spent eight years in Uganda's top league—mostly in the capital, Kampala—before returning to Gulu to begin a new phase of life. The husband and father of two young children was raising and selling chickens for about \$4 apiece when the opportunity to



join Gulu United arose. Monday—who still handles poultry when he's not on the field—is missing a front tooth thanks to a stray elbow during his playing days. But while the physical toll soccer takes on players never changes, he believes the mental one can. "All coaches tend to be harsh," Monday says of the default Ugandan mindset. "That's why you see our football is not growing much. But now, with what Adrian brought, I can see lots of changes, and the kids are picking it up very fast. Even us coaches, we change."

Satei, the club's technical director, is another force behind that transition. Based in the Toronto area, he runs a consulting company for coaches and plans to make three trips to Gulu in 2015. As somebody who spends most of his time tutoring North American coaches and kids—most of whom have been coached since their first moments in the game—Satei delights in the Ugandans' creativity. As he puts it, "Nobody's ruined them yet." While discipline is a non-negotiable part of what United is doing, both Satei and Bradbury believe in creating an environment where kids feel secure and happy. The club tries to arrange for the kids to watch the odd European game together on TV and offers a treat—like fresh sugar cane, purchased from a nearby roadside stand—on Fridays. "After all that's gone on here, this needs to be their escape; a place where they can come and be free and enjoy it and express themselves," Satei says.

While Bradbury has worked to alter some things in his new home, he's also trying desperately to preserve much of what's there, the most precious element being the in-the-bone love of soccer evident all over the country. From Liverpool logos on dump trucks to kids passing around well-worn pictures of stars ripped from magazines, there's no question the sport is king. "It's everything here," Bradbury says. "And you can't fabricate that, you can't replicate that."

The ability to manage the ball is also something Bradbury is maniacal about nurturing. As was the case for Okello decades ago, these kids cut their teeth competing in games where, if you couldn't keep the ball away from swarms of legs, you weren't going to touch it much. To Bradbury, maintaining that skill is paramount to producing the type of high-end player a European club would be interested in. He bristles when his players declare their intention to play in England's Barclays Premier League one day. Bradbury favours the Spanish style—particularly that of Barcelona—which emphasizes possession and control, as opposed to bombing the



ball downfield and hoping to win it in the air. Over and over again, players are reminded to keep the ball on the ground as much as possible and always look for the open teammate.

What Bradbury is definitely not concerned with is getting pristine balls for the kids to kick around or making big upgrades to United's facilities. He believes a spartan setting can help kids develop a stiffened resolve in their pursuit of more plush dreams, as with marathoners in neighbouring Kenya, sprinters in Jamaica or any number of inner-city success stories. "I think being in Gulu is better even than a 13-year-old being at Real Madrid," says Bradbury, referencing the famous Spanish club. "I full-heartedly believe that. I think they will be tougher, stronger, more competitive footballers if you can give them the level of training and competition they need to grow in all the other facets of the game."

**A COUPLE OF DAYS** after their HIV testing—there wasn't a single positive result—Gulu's under-15 and under-13 squads get a rare chance to demonstrate what they've learned in actual game action. The opponent is a bit of a makeshift squad from Restoration Gateway, an organization that provides education and health care to some of the region's many orphans. In the under-15 game, one of the Gulu players who is also growing up without parents—Wilfred Oloya—starts a rout for his team by heading home an arcing corner kick. Originally, the team had slotted Wilfred on defence, which calls for aggressive marking and in-your-face play. It fast became apparent that it was the wrong position for a kid with anger issues. "All the worst of Wilfred came out," Bradbury says. The club decided to move him up front, where he could taste the exhilaration of scoring a goal.

With one of his coaches translating, Wilfred pushes out just enough words to crystallize what the past few months meant for him. "In Gulu United, life has changed," he says.

In the under-13 game, Genesis, as per usual, gives away a lot of pounds and inches to his opponents. Much of the time, the kid is a little overmatched. But early in the second half, he shows a glimpse of his raw ability and demonstrates what the right player can do with even a sliver of opportunity. As he nears the Gateway goal, a defender steps up to block his path. Genesis is certainly close enough to justify taking a shot, even if the likely result is a ball deflected out of bounds. As the keeper and defender steady for a shot, Genesis instead slides a stealthy pass to his left, starting a play that quickly culminates with the ball rolling into an empty net.

Watching from the sideline beside Bradbury, Satei shakes his head and laughs. "Any other kid would have hammered it," he says with disbelief.

But this one didn't. And one might be all it takes. [@Dixononsports](#)