

# ESCAPING KAKUMA

## SOCCER AND THE PURSUIT OF MEANING INSIDE THE WORLD'S THIRD-LARGEST REFUGEE CAMP

Two teams fought to a nil-nil draw in regulation, dust puffing around their feet like flint smoke as they ran. The shootout begins after Kakuma's 6 p.m. curfew. Four thousand or so fans push in from the sidelines to form a human outline of the penalty box. Every minute past curfew means greater likelihood that there will be repercussions from police.



Night falls fast in Kenya. Men with sticks swat at children to get back. After the score is tied in the fifth set of penalty kicks — both goals — a fan yells, “They can’t see!” As I stand at the edge of the box, the full weight of the crowd leans in behind me.

The best scorer in the league smashes a penalty into the left of the net on the first attempt of sudden death. It should have won the match.

His opponent takes the next kick and sails the ball wide and high into a dark, waning blue. I track its flight but never see it land when suddenly several dozen Congolese refugees run me

over. Their team, Atletico, has seemingly beaten the mostly South Sudanese, mostly Dinka squad, known as Legends, to earn the final spot in the 16-team Kakuma Premier League, the elite soccer organization of the world's third largest refugee camp located in the far reaches of northwest Kenya.



There is an eruption of noise and people going every which direction except home. I get spun around and spat out of the back of the throng. Atletico has hefted their goalkeeper onto their shoulders, parading him around the field.

Too slowly, I realize that the sounds of cheering have become protests. A cluster of stakeholders in the match — refs, coaches, players, and a few fans who poke their noses in — forms at the penalty spot, their urgency implying that an injustice is about to take place. Legends successfully argues that the match should be decided the old way: with two penalty shots after the initial round of five, as had been done in Kakuma for years, rather than the sudden death method that the KPL adopted last year (and is FIFA standard).

Full-throated arguments and fist fights break out among the crowd. On the next set of kicks, Legends ties the match, enraging an Atletico squad that had celebrated moments ago. The match is called and a crowd that had intently looked on breaks into skirmishes across the pitch. My fixer, Maya, grabs my shoulder and tells me that we have to go. We had allowed ourselves to start having fun and that had been a bad idea.

[https://volume.vox-cdn.com/embed/d57cf2144?player\\_type=brightcove](https://volume.vox-cdn.com/embed/d57cf2144?player_type=brightcove)



You can drive to Kakuma, but you shouldn't except under the guidance of a trained professional, and not even then.

Kakuma hosts roughly 180,000 people on 12 square miles of terse terrain. It is tucked up high in the upper left nook of Kenya, near the borders of Uganda, South Sudan, and Ethiopia. The closest significant city is Lodwar (population: 49,000), 76 miles away, and the roads between it and the camp have been eaten away leaving teeth-crushing potholes. Turkana children stand on the side of the road with bags of sand. They'll fill in the gaps when they see you coming, hoping you'll give them money. The sand is useless, however, and the truth is your driver is long past falling for the ruse. She drives the passenger van as fast as it can go without breaking an axle.



*Refugees occasionally hire drivers on mopeds, called "boda bodas," to get around Kakuma.*



*Roughly 180,000 people live within Kakuma's 12 square miles of neighborhoods and markets. (Image by Mark Munene)*

It's very impressive, but when your neck still hurts a week later, you will have wished she had taken her time. It's better to fly, if you have that luxury. Almost everyone who lives in Kakuma, at some point, took the road.

You'll notice three things when you get there. First, the hills in the distance are big and blue and pretty, and could be between 10 and 100 miles away — the long, flat dirt expanse plays tricks on your depth perception. Second is the heat, which seems to have tangible weight, like a lead vest you can't take off, keeping your feet to the ground. Third is the flies, which are as stupid as they are oppressive. Within a few days you'll come to accept them, swatting at them with half the effort and one-tenth of the consciousness you paid the pests when you first arrived.



Kakuma opened in 1991 to accommodate torrents of homeless, unaccompanied minors fleeing war in Sudan. Today, the population is roughly 60 percent South Sudanese, and the rest is made up of people from Somalia, Ethiopia, Uganda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It was built to be temporary. Twenty-five years later, Kakuma is a teeming settlement that would be nearly impossible to dismantle.



*Kakuma camp in 1993, just a few years after it opened. Back then the camp housed around 21,000 refugees, 16,000 of which were children. (Howard Davies/Corbis via Getty Images)*



*Kakuma camp seen from Kalemchuch Hill in 2001. (Bill Greene/The Boston Globe via Getty Images)*

Kakuma has people who were born in the camp and never left. It has multiple markets with fine clothing stores, cafes, hair salons, book stores, DVD stores, supermarkets, photo studios, and sporting good stores. You can buy Adidas, Nike, and Puma. You can buy a cell phone and a data card, and connect to the world. You can go grab a Coke, or a beer, or eat at a restaurant. [An honest-to-god millionaire lives in the camp.](#) The people here love him.



And there's soccer. Like many other places in the world, Kakuma's community often centers on sports. The camp has 592 registered sports teams — 73 of which are women's — ranging across soccer, basketball, volleyball, running, boxing, judo, netball, and more. Soccer is by far the most popular, however, as evidenced by the resources poured into the Kakuma Premier League.

The KPL has been a revelation, a league that pits the best players in organized competition for real stakes. The winning club gets 50,000 Kenyan shillings (KES) — roughly \$500 — to use however it sees fit, as well as shoes, balls, training cones, goal nets, and two full sets of kits and track suits. Second and third place get 30,000 and 20,000 KES, respectively.

The KPL had been a dream for years. The organizing NGO — the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), which oversees refugee services and recreation in Kakuma — struggled to secure the necessary funding, but its biggest hurdle was the lack of a bus. Roughly five miles separate the two furthest points of Kakuma, which is shaped like a hatchet — a long, skinny stretch of settlements from the main entrance leading into the big, wide blade. Only once the LWF secured a big school bus, so that players never had to walk an hour through withering heat to play away games, did the KPL take off.



The LWF didn't have to look for teams. Clubs had already been playing each other in loose competition for years, and some — like Okapi FC, which is primarily Congolese, and Naath FC, which is primarily Nuer people from South Sudan — are nearly as old as Kakuma itself.

The league debuted with 12 teams that played each other twice. Matches became major social events in the camp, with crowds of more than 5,000 people showing up for the best teams. Tom Mboya, an LWF youth officer, worked the hardest to make the KPL a reality, hoping to nurture talented youths so that they don't have to rely on the lottery of resettlement to places like the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

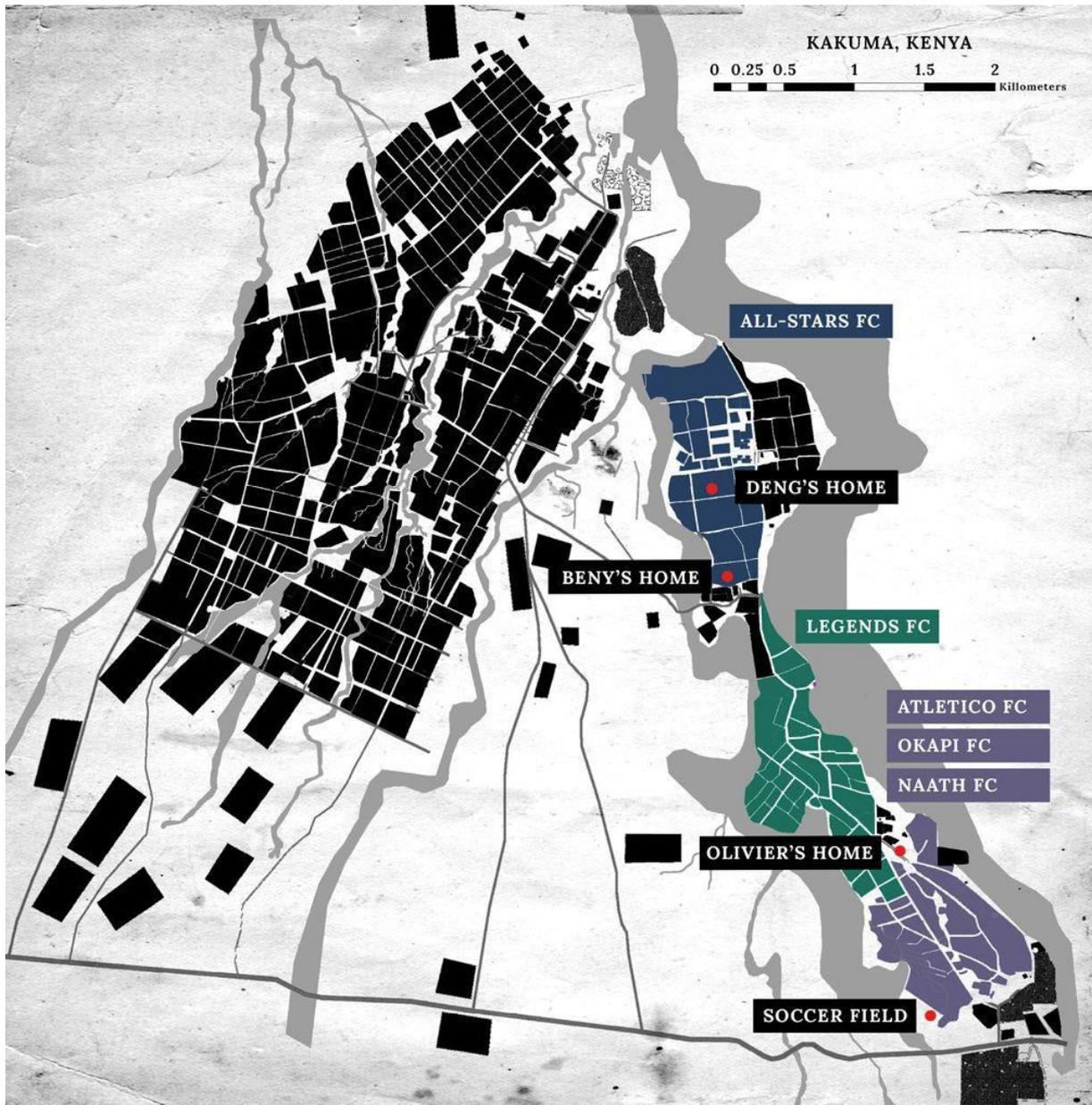


“That’s a dream that may not materialize for them,” Mboya says. “So we want to use sports and talent as a source of durable solutions for them. Let somebody go to America on the basis of what he can offer to America, or to England. Not on the basis of sympathy.”

Kakuma’s refugees face a lot of immediate problems — disease, crime, police oppression, rape, and female genital mutilation. These can lead to severe mental health issues when coupled with the trauma they suffered from the places they left. Some turn to drugs. Then there are two factors which crystallize the unique experience of oppressed, tethered people: idleness and monotony.

Camps like Kakuma do some things very well. They are safe havens from the immediate dangers of war, they feed hungry people, and they provide access to education and vocational training. But in a bitterly cruel way, this benevolence of the NGOs, western nations, and Kenya also imposes on camp refugees a sense of uselessness. Refugees can obtain the equivalent of a high school diploma in the Kenyan school system, but after that they have nothing to do. Few nations will take them, and employers in Kenya won’t hire them.

So they are shackled to the dirt, hoping NGOs will pay them to do menial jobs at a fraction of the rate they might pay a Kenyan. Men sit in the markets and maybe watch television, talk to neighbors, or sit and think about the life they wish they were living. Women are confined to their compounds, expected to handle the traditional household duties of cooking, cleaning, and child-raising, plus waiting in line for water, firewood, and food rations. The camp has no gates, and yet it’s nearly impossible to leave.





“We engage ourselves through sports. Just kind of wasting time,” Willy Kwezera, a pastor in Kakuma, tells me. “Because we think a lot. And by thinking a lot, this stress comes in. We have so many problems. So I act like a motivator. Some other people they resort to hanging themselves. Thinking too much, they say, ‘No, my life is ended.’”

Anyone you talk to in Kakuma can tell you about missed chances — how close they would be to playing professional soccer with proper training; [how soon they were set to resettle in the United States if not for Donald Trump’s travel ban](#); how they tried to go back to their home countries and found something worse; how they might have been able to see their families again, if only.

What is the effect of all that missed opportunity? Of idleness added up, of failed relocations and deferred repatriations? You can believe and hope for something, and know something else to be true. Like the flies in Kakuma: First you come to accept the nuisance, then you begin swatting at it, even after the flies have gone to sleep.

When I get back to my room following the Atletico-Legends match, I get a message from Samuel Deng Makheer, a coach of another Premier League team.

Deng: “In fact Atletico are supposed to be winners but referee decide poorly.”

Me: “The referees said that Legends won?! Why?”

Deng: “No Legend didn’t won, but they to rematch game again which isn’t fair.”

The referee, probably wisely, did not declare a winner in the nighttime frenzy of the elimination match. Deng had been rooting for Legends — he is Dinka, too — but his belief in fairness, instilled over 14 years as a soccer coach and primary school teacher, overrides his loyalties.



*Samuel Deng Makheer, center, coaches the All-Stars Football team. Gabriel Beny Thon, left, is the All-Stars' captain.*

I suggest that the referee might have been swayed by the crowd, and Deng agrees.

“Yeah, that’s what I have seen, too,” he wrote. “Maybe the office will make their decisions and Atletico can qualify for Kakuma Premier League.”

Deng coaches the All-Stars, which was the seventh-place team in the KPL last season and is not, in fact, an all-star team. That the All-Stars were better than anyone, much less five other teams in the league, is a small victory according to Deng.

Whatever money teams have come from the coaches and players themselves. Deng makes 6,000 KES, roughly \$60 per month, from teaching, and gives most of it away — 2,500 for his mother and siblings; 2,000 for his aunt, who is paralyzed and has a daughter who is deaf and also paralyzed; 500 for his sister; and 500 for himself. That leaves 500 for the All-Stars, almost all of which goes to drinking water for the sidelines.

“Some teams, they have their brothers from abroad, they help them, and they buy players,” he says. “But me, I don’t buy players, I just sweet talk them.”

Deng came to Kakuma from South Sudan in 1992 when he was one year old, making him as old as the camp itself. He has known many of the players since they were children. Deng started coaching under-10 players when he was 12 years old. The All-Stars' best player and captain, Beny Thon, now 23, was one of Deng's favorite players in the camp from a young age. Beny, out of respect for Deng, decided to play with the All-Stars despite material incentives to play elsewhere.

"He liked my coaching style," Deng says. "And when I was given a team, I called him, and I handed him over the captain before he said any word. And that one, he was so happy."

Deng teaches at Malakal Primary School, the same primary school he attended. His classroom has roughly 115 fourth graders sitting shoulder-to-shoulder in front of him and his chalkboard. Other classrooms have students spilling into desks situated outside their doorways.



*Samuel Deng Makheer teaches in classrooms with more than one hundred students.*



The subject is family pronouns for “he, she, and the little ones.” He creates three columns and fills them left to right with the words “Dog,” “Bitch,” and “Puppy.” Below that, he fills in “King” and “Queen,” then asks for a volunteer to fill in the blank.

He calls on a student named Antil.

“Prince and princess,” Antil says.

“Very good,” Deng says. “Let’s clap for Antil.” All 100-plus students clap their hands, one time, in unison, and the lesson continues.

Deng is a soft and reticent speaker, but he’s engrossing once he has momentum with him. During his first ever week of teaching, students referred to him as “The teacher who is afraid.” After his first lesson he realized that he hadn’t told his students his name.

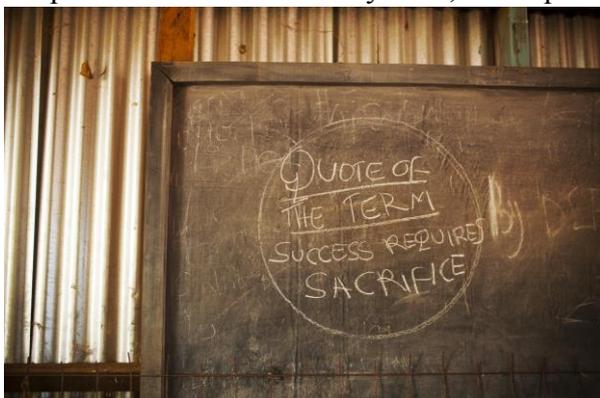
Deng has actually been back to South Sudan since coming to Kakuma. His father called him home to Jonglei in 2007 to become a cattle herder. Deng hated it — he hated having to interrupt his own education, he hated having to leave soccer behind, and he hated leaving what had been his lifelong home. Less than a year later, his mother gave him a bull to sell and told him to take the money and go back to Kakuma.

“When I reached Kakuma I immediately called him, saying, ‘Father I’m sorry, forgive me, but I need education more than you need me,’” Deng says. “He used to call me and advise me, ‘you did this and that, and if you continue doing this I will disown you.’”

Deng’s father, who went blind when an axe fell on his head, eventually forgave Deng for his decision. Deng is the oldest of his mother’s six children, and the third oldest among the eight children from his father’s three wives. When his father realized how much Deng wanted to provide for his family, he gave Deng his blessing.

“I have never given up in life, because I have my mother and I have my father,” Deng says, “because if I give up, my siblings, my mother, my father, they can be nowhere, and I have to work harder for them.”

He pounds the desk as he says this, and repeats: “I work harder for them.”



Soccer is the one thing Deng does for himself. He likes studying it more than playing. Cristiano Ronaldo became his favorite player when, as a kid, he used to peek his head into the windows of television halls showing soccer matches and watch the then-Manchester United star. The Red Devils became his favorite team then, too. His friends teased Deng when Man U struggled this year: “Manchester United has moved to seventh, and your team, All-Stars, is now seventh, what do you think of that?”

As a coach, he says he’s rough like Jose Mourinho. Formationally, he likes Antonio Conte’s 3-4-3. Deng likes defenders who are flexible, midfielders who can shoot outside the 18’, and the comfort of at least one solid striker on the pitch. He hasn’t had any formal training as a coach.

Even in a place filled with soccer obsessives, Deng stands out. The vast majority of people living in Kakuma don’t have electricity, much less personal televisions, so men often gather in television halls to watch English Premier League games. Most games cost 10 KES for admittance, but big games cost 20.

Sometimes, if there are multiple matches at the same time, supporters will pool their money and bid for the match they want to watch. Once, Deng paid 1,000 KES that were meant for his mother to watch Man U play Arsenal, then told his friends to relax and enjoy the match.

“I lied to her,” Deng says. He told her that he spent it to fix up his home, “because if I told her that I paid the game, then it’s a big fight.”

Simply watching an EPL match in Kakuma can be dangerous. Matches are played well past curfew, sometimes ending at 1 a.m., and the Kenyan police who patrol the camp roads at night are vigilant and aggressive. To return home, Deng will creep alongside the roads, staying hidden behind bushes and fences, and out of clear line of sight. Once, he was caught, beaten, and thrown in a cell until morning without being asked what he was doing out.

“It was not even at night, it was evening at 7 p.m., they were doing their patrolling, and I was injured, I was so tired when I came from the training in my team,” Deng says. “So I give them the [6,000 KES] incentive I have, and my siblings stayed for that month without having anything.”



Deng wants to leave Kakuma. He wants to take coaching as far as he can, and earn more money that he can send back to his family. He has done everything he can to put himself in position to succeed should he get his opportunity. Now he waits, as he has for 26 years.

“I doubt, I doubt, I doubt a lot, because I don’t know how that chance came,” Deng says. “If God, if he is there, my dreams can come true.”

Success ought to be a two-part equation: the exact sum of a person’s hard work and talent. In practice, this is rarely true, and a third variable comes into play. In Kakuma, good fortune — the generosity of donors, or the hope that a resettlement office in a Western nation considers your application — exerts its fickle will over everyone, more than anything. A clump of 180,000 people, all waiting, like Deng.

“Someone can be born with talent, but the talent can go, just like that, because you cannot take it anywhere,” Deng says. “Like me, I have to be a coach in the future, but I don’t have anywhere to learn being a coach in my life. I cannot learn. And where will I go with it?”

“I have to die with it, in Africa, until the time goes.”

The morning after the elimination match between Atletico and Legends, a Wednesday, Shabani Mulinde Olivier, the Atletico scorer who should have been the match’s hero, is, truth be told, not all that upset.

“At least to me, the match ended well,” Olivier says. “If the referee had declared a winner, then it would have been a war.

“So I am happy no one got hurt.”

Olivier is one of the most popular players in Kakuma. Within the camp, you could call him a celebrity.

Parts of Kakuma are named after faraway places. Okapi and Atletico are based in the southern part of Kakuma 1 — Zone 1, Block 13 — otherwise known as New Canada. There’s another part called California, and another called Dubai. Olivier walks through Kakuma’s largest market, known as Hong Kong, almost every day, and as he does, men on the road call his attention by shouting his nickname: “Cristiano, hey.”

Getting nicknamed after one of the game’s great players is perhaps the ultimate sign of respect for a soccer player in Kakuma. Olivier tells me to ask anyone, that even if they don’t know anything about football, they know who the Cristiano Ronaldo of Kakuma is. People say, “Come here Ronaldo,” and he talks with them about the goals he scores, and he says he becomes a happy man, “just like that.”

Olivier is seemingly indefatigable. When we speak in his compound, he leans forward and bounces and keeps finding excuses to get up and rush out of the room. He puts on the red-and-white striped jersey that Awer Mabil — a former Kakuma refugee who was relocated to

Australia at age 11 and became a professional soccer player — gave him on a visit. He grabs an Okapi flag, with the head of a deer/zebra/giraffe-like animal depicted on it, then gets the trophy he won for being the league's top scorer last season. Olivier calls himself a singer, street dancer, and funny man when he's not playing soccer. He is learning how to become a mechanic and wants to open a garage. He almost never stops grinning.



*Kakuma's residents know Shabani Mulinde Olivier, center, by his nickname, "Cristiano Ronaldo." He was the league's leading scorer last season.*



Yet Olivier had to steady himself before the penalty kick that should have beat Legends in the fast-falling night. “When everyone is relying on you to win, everyone is just praying and watching you, all eyes are on you,” Olivier says, through a translator. “I was really tense — looking at the keeper, looking at the ball. And that’s the final prayer to God to just allow the ball in. Then after that you can forget so much pressure.”

He made sure to address the ball the same way he always does, looming over it before hopping out wide, same as Cristiano Ronaldo.

Scoring goals is Olivier's favorite thing on Earth. He scored 17 times in 22 games last season while playing for Okapi. Against Virunga FC Last season, a team he calls one of the most feared in the KPL, he netted the game winner late in a 3-3 game. He celebrated the whole week. The community threw two parties for him. Some painted his name around the camp, or gave him money that he used to renovate his compound. He says it was the best moment of his whole life.

"Through football, I came to learn that it gives a smile to anyone and happiness, then it makes people around you love you," Olivier says. "I never thought that I could get so much love from people. That's when I realized happiness exists. Happiness exists in football."



In 1998, Olivier and his older sister watched his parents get slaughtered in the Democratic Republic of Congo. They were caught up in the escalating days of the deadliest conflict since World War II, he and his siblings betrayed by their faces.

The Hutus — with the backing of Laurent Kabila, the by-force president of the DRC — began killing Banyamulenge people living on the eastern edge of the country, labeling them as Rwandan invaders. Olivier's mother and father were from separate, non-targeted tribes near the border, but Olivier's maternal grandmother was among the Banyamulenge, and so the tribe was in their blood.

On August 8, 1998, a charge went out on DRC state radio:

*Wherever you see a Rwandan Tutsi, regard him as your enemy. ... Open your eyes wide. Those of you who live along the road, jump on the people with long noses, who are tall and slim and want to dominate us ...*

Olivier and his family could not hide. When Kabila's army came to their city of Uvira, he and his siblings had been playing in the house. His mother hid them — he and his older sister outside in the bushes, his younger sister in a small box, and a baby brother who he lost track of in the moment. His parents were still inside when the soldiers entered. Olivier and his older sister were the first people to see them dead.

“They were sleeping in a pool of blood,” Olivier says. He is calm. He spares no details as he tells his story. “We were left as orphans.”

His sister raised them, but when she became engaged, she ran away with her fiancé, leaving Olivier to take care of his two younger siblings. When the conflict with Rwanda escalated again in 2012, he left town — they had run to Goma by then — with his younger sister. Olivier felt that his younger brother was still too small to come and left him behind. He has not seen or heard from him since.



*The interior of Shabani Mulinde Olivier's compound in Kakuma.*



*A photo of Shabani Mulinde Olivier's sister and brother-in-law on their wedding day.*

Olivier was separated from his younger sister when M23 soldiers — rebels against the DRC government — captured him on their way north, towards Uganda. He doesn't know what became of her, either. He was the rebels' captive for four weeks, marching next to scores of other young men who didn't want to become soldiers in the conflict. They were tied together and forced to work without food or water. A shootout saved them. While he and the others were taking one of their few rests, the rebels were ambushed, and the young men escaped.

They made it to Uganda on swollen legs by eating wild fruits and following the few who knew the terrain. In 2013, he was finally settled in Kakuma by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), where he knew his sister and her now-husband were waiting for him. He played in a proto-form of the Kakuma Premier League in 2013, and led all scorers then, too.

“To me, football is like the first family to me, because that's the only thing that gives me a sense of happiness,” Olivier says. “Whenever I get into the field and play, the joy of other people seeing whatever goal you are doing, it's just overwhelming. People see me doing great things, but they don't know how wounded I am inside.”

Mental health counseling provided by the Jesuit Refugee Service helped Olivier to fight his dark memories. It quashed the revenge he thought he wanted. He came to realize that there was no external action that could heal the pain of losing his family and that was good in many ways. But then there was the matter of the pain itself, something he has had to face alone, haunted even in his most exalted moments.

“I am not a proud man,” Olivier says. “When I play football, yes I bring so much victory and happiness to other people, but at the same time, those people go have their parents whenever they are scoring, or if their team wins.

“The worst thing in my life is seeing other people hugging their parents. They’re so happy, and that’s always taking me back to when my parents were killed.”

Olivier completed his secondary education in the DRC, but stalled in Kakuma when, after speaking mostly French, he had to try to get his Kenyan diploma while being taught in English and Swahili. Sometimes he performs soccer tricks in Hong Kong for money, but he says that, as a man, he’s tired of asking for help.

“He’s having a hard life,” Buchiza Bya-Mungu Jerome, Okapi’s head coach, says. Jerome understood when Olivier left Okapi to play for Atletico because their coach offered Olivier a compound. Jerome recalls how, last season, players would show up late for practice, and he would tell them to go home. Olivier never would.



*Shabani Mulinde Olivier, right, with Okapi FC head coach Buchiza Bya-Mungu Jerome, left.*

“He used to say, ‘OK coach, if I will not enter the field, help me with a ball,’ Jerome says. “He will even say, ‘I want to play with the small children.’ He used to take a ball and go play with the small children. That’s why I’m saying he is different from others.”

Olivier only speaks about his happiness in terms of others — the happiness he observes in teammates, mothers, and young ones in the camp. He hasn’t yet found a way to be happy on his own terms. When he doesn’t feel good, he grabs a ball, goes to the field, and plays. When

he's outside, there is a good chance that someone will recognize him. He can't sit still, and he can't be alone.

"I will play, until I get back to the house and I feel very light and OK," Olivier says. "That's why [I'm] socializing with other people. I waste a lot of time before I get home. It's already late. And then I sleep, and another day starts like that."

Olivier can't keep a grin off his face for long. Next to his head is a poster pinned to a thin wooden wall of barnyard animals and the sounds they make. It's torn at the bottom. He says he's had to accept the fact that he's getting used to life here.

Following the Tuesday meeting between Atletico and Legends, the LWF promptly schedules the rematch for Thursday. As a precaution against the loss of daylight and potential violence, the game is set to start at an earlier time, 4 p.m, and at a neutral location, across from the walled-off UNHCR compound.

Until 1 p.m. that day, the teams didn't know where the match would take place. They initially believed it would take place Saturday, the same day as the big season opener between the defending champions, Naath FC, and the runners-up, Okapi.

Because of Kakuma's expanse of sky, the rain clouds seem to lord over the camp even as they gather far away. Before kickoff, there is already commotion. The same ref who worked the first game and gave Legends penalty kicks they didn't deserve shows up to the rematch promptly, dressed in a red Adelaide FC soccer kit.

There is a short, excited LWF official overseeing the match who stuffs the game ball under his LWF polo such that he looks pregnant. He is trying to calm down Atletico, who are understandably furious from the last match. The brand of Swahili spoken in Kakuma borrows several English words, and the word "corruption" filters out above the arguing.

A light drizzle begins. The referee is standing far away from the fray, but occasionally an Atletico player will break free to point a finger in his stoic face. The LWF official is doing everything he can to keep the attention on himself. Olivier is smiling and addressing his teammates.

"Sawa sawa," he says, a common Swahili phrase that essentially means, "I'm good, you're good, we're good." He says: "It's OK, they'll change the referee."

Quickly, the sky becomes mottled, the blue gone, and the rain turns steady now. Many of the fans who showed up — maybe a quarter of the original crowd — run and huddle under a wide, flat-topped tree to watch.

Though Kakuma is arid, rain isn't always welcome here. "The water doesn't help," Istarline, one of our fixers, tells us. "It doesn't even last." Sometimes it rains so hard that the Tarach River bed, which runs through the camp like a spine, overflows and washes out dozens of mud huts, melting them, Istarline says, "like chocolate." Sometimes the rain falls far away in the hills, unseen, and the water comes rushing into the camp unexpectedly, wreaking havoc.



The rain is welcome at the start of the match, tamping down the dust and adding some semblance of control to the ball. After a minute of play an outright downpour begins. After another minute, the conditions are unplayable and the match is whistled. Players on both teams run off the field, straight for cover, and to their bags for extra clothes. I catch Olivier.

“What’s happening?”

“We will play tomorrow now,” he says, then he lifts up his foot to show me the bottom of his cleats. They are caked in mud and useless.

“Are you getting frustrated by the delays?”

“Me? No, never,” he says. We walk away, and someone calls after him, “Cristiano.”

The match is postponed, again, to the following Wednesday. The Thursday after, I receive a text from Olivier saying Atletico lost, 1-0.

Olivier is Kakuma’s best scorer, but people agree the best soccer player is Okapi’s Okanda Philician. He is densely built and broad, which makes him stand out among Kakuma’s otherwise wiry soccer population. I arrange to talk to him through Jerome on the morning they are set to play Naath FC in the opening match of the 2017 Kakuma Premier League.

We sit in little plastic chairs in front of Jerome’s compound. Jerome is there to translate. Okanda is staring at the dirt. Before we start, Jerome gives him a pep talk.

“I was telling him, ‘Be free for every question you will be asked. Give him the answer that you have, and don’t fear, because he is a journalist,’” Jerome tells me. ““These questions will help him maybe to write some books. Either he can go to the radio and publish the answers that you will give him.””

Okanda makes his imposing figure small. His voice is high and quiet and straining, like he is trying to lift something too heavy. He tells me that, at 21 years old, time is running out for him.



*Okapi FC's Okanda Philician was voted the best player in the Kakuma Premier League.*

Soccer players age quickly in Kakuma. At 24, Okanda will no longer be eligible for a U23 development program. His only hope, then, would be that his talent is good enough to join a professional team. Jerome says: “If [Okanda] can be selected this year or next year, at least at 22 years, if he can reach a big club — like Manchester, like Real Madrid, like Barcelona, like Dortmund, like PSG from France — he can be very happy.”

Beginning the season with a match between Okapi and Naath is like a Week 1 meeting between the Patriots and the Falcons. Last season, the league’s two best teams played a thriller, and it ended in controversy. With six minutes left and Okapi winning 1-0, Naath were on the attack when the referee whistled a foul outside of Okapi’s penalty area. When the whistle blew, however, a Naath player shot the ball at the net, and Okapi’s players, assuming play was dead, let it go in.

The linesman raised his flag signalling a goal. The referee ran to him to conference. Together they decided to count it, shocking everyone, including Naath fans. Okapi refused to continue playing the game, forcing the referee to end it early in a tie. The LWF later reversed the decision and gave the game to Okapi.

Naath, Okapi players like to say, doesn’t actually play soccer. They win by intimidation — by playing rough, injuring players, and by bringing the full force of their large fanbase to every game. Naath is a primarily South Sudanese club, made up of Nuer players.

“Everybody used to say they fear them,” Shadrack, Okapi’s left winger, says. “They never accept to be defeated.” To beat them, you need to be fast with your touches. “At least one

touch, you give the ball to your teammate,” Alex, Okapi’s left fullback, says. “You touch and you give, you touch and you give.”



Okanda was discovered by a member of the Okapi community who saw him playing at a reception center as his family was waiting to be settled by the UNHCR. He told Jerome that Okanda could be an asset to the team, so Jerome and two other members of Okapi went to the reception center to scout Okanda in person. Jerome saw a powerful player, one who could facilitate others, and who had a stolid demeanor on the pitch.

Jerome needed to convince Okanda’s mother to let her son live in Kakuma, however. Her and her seven children were selected to be resettled in Kalobeyei, a new UNHCR settlement 18 miles from Kakuma that hadn’t established sports programs yet. Jerome borrowed Okanda for a trial game against Naath, and Okanda commanded the midfield as Okapi won, 1-0. Jerome then canvassed the Okapi community to pool their money, 50 KES at a time, to show Okanda’s mother the support that her son would have.

“The community accepted that, they would assist whatever he can ask for, even if we will not support 100 percent,” Jerome says. “We agreed. So, the mother said, ‘He is now in your hands. Take him like your son, like your brother, and help him to extend his talent.’”

Corruption pesters Jerome. Though Okapi went 2-0 against Naath last season (after LWF rectified the referee’s mistake), he insists that his team should have won the inaugural season of the KPL and its prize of 50,000 Kenyan shillings. He says that referees were often against his team because the Congolese are a minority in the camp. South Sudanese teams like Naath, he claims, repeatedly receive preferential treatment.

The LWF office doesn't refute those claims.

“You can't pin it, you can't know someone's heart. But you feel it,” Mboya says. “And especially that one, between Okapi and Naath, at the back of my mind I thought nationality came into play in making that decision, because the referee was Sudanese, a South Sudanese.”

It is Okanda's every intention to leave this all behind — these officials, the violence on the dirt pitches, Okapi, Kakuma, his family in Kalobeyei. “He is not happy to be here, he is not happy to be in Kakuma,” Jerome says. “He wants to benefit more. He wants to benefit more than what he is benefiting here, and go outside.”



Mboya calls the match between Atletico and Legends “not quite medium” sized compared to the full-bore crowd he expects for the season opener. To head off clashes, the LWF will employ maximum security for Okapi-Naath FC. There will be 20-30 members of Kakuma's civilian protection group, as well as LWF officials and armed Kenyan police.

The LWF has planned a festival around the match — food, dancers, participants from the *Kakuma's Got Talent* competition for entertainment. It is worried less about the players than the latent animosity that may be infecting the crowd. The LWF has selected “Peaceful Coexistence” as the theme of the match.

Okanda looks antsy. His expression doesn't change but his knee is jiggling, up and down, in a chair that is too small. I'm not sure if I ever got to know what he is thinking. Kickoff is approaching.

“For me, football is my star,” Okanda says, via Jerome. “It is a must for me to take it with two hands.”

For the 4:30 game, Okapi meets at 1 p.m. to eat together in New Canada. They make ugali, a dish of maize and sorghum mixed together to form a doughy, starchy substance that sits in your stomach for hours.

The players chat idly, building useful nervous energy. For as much as they like to proclaim it, no matter how often they say that it’d be the only outcome that is fair and just, victory over the Nuer boys is not guaranteed. For two hours they stand up and sit down, again and again.

At 3:30 they gather in the midst of Hong Kong market, waiting for a critical mass of fans and well-wishers to join. Fans orbit the team with Okapi flags and vuvuzelas, acting as hype men.

As Okapi FC walks towards the pitch, they sing. More fans. There are at least three vuvuzelas now, contradicting each other. The team takes a left fork and passes a butcher shop with skinned goat hanging in the window on which the flies stop and watch.



The procession leaves the camp and goes out past Kakuma’s de facto welcome sign, a cartoon depiction of a toddler pooping on the ground, and words warning, “This is a no open defecation area.” At the pitch, three big, white tents line the far sideline to shade the VIPs. There are banners around the pitch like the ads you’d see around an EPL game, except these show messages about HIV awareness and stemming gender-based violence.

Okapi line up on their goal line and skip together in rhythm to the edge of the penalty box, clapping their hands on their knees. As they do a stretch circle, Naath FC streams onto the pitch, their contingent even bigger and louder. Okapi players and fans collapse around their captain, take a knee, and listen to his exhortation.



*Just before kickoff of the Kakuma Premier League season opener between Naath FC, left, and Okapi FC, right (in playing kits).*

The crowd swells quickly to an imposing size just before kickoff, 20 or 30 people deep around the entire pitch — the LWF estimated the crowd at 15,000 people. It's unclear how they will be kept at bay during the match, and in truth, they can't — Okapi loses possession in its own territory and Naath scores first, sending fans rushing onto the field. Several people do cartwheels, and hug players. One man rips off his shirt and sits cross-legged in the dirt, apparently finding peace as thousands of people rush past.

The sky is bright blue, the clouds deep and geographic. The crowd is in constant conversation. The announcers, Ali and Allan, give And1-style running commentary throughout the match. The mothers of Okapi players sit and stand next to me in colorful pagnes, smiling. In front of them, Jerome is running back and forth between the same two ends of a 20-foot stretch of sideline, upset at how the match is unfolding.



Okapi is playing like he'd feared: They're slow with the ball, allowing Naath players to get their bodies into them. The referee never sees, or never calls, the hard elbows that fly as players wait for 50/50 balls to land. A Naath player tries to sell contact with Okapi's striker, No. 6, who wags his finger in his opponent's face when the referee doesn't blow his whistle.



Okapi is fortunate that Naath can't generate a surge, either. The goalkeepers remain relatively untested, until Naath makes a mistake similar to Okapi's, turning over possession on its end and letting the ball leak into the net. Okapi's celebration rivals Naath's. One of the mothers runs onto the field swinging a green plastic chair like Petey Pablo swings a shirt.

At halftime, Jerome tells me Okapi will win. The late goal was a strong motivator, and he will change Okapi's formation from a 4-3-3 to a 4-2-4 to put Naath on their heels. Fans join in both teams' pep talks. The start of the second half is delayed while the referees, civilian security, and LWF try to calm the crowd, which began pelting Okapi's goalkeeper with rocks.

Okapi's shift pays off quickly. They pin the ball in Naath's half of the field for most of the half. Okanda now plays an even more pivotal role with more space around him in midfield. Okapi is finally playing the fast, precise soccer it promised. Naath's goalkeeper begins to shake. Okapi scores with 20 minutes remaining, and nearly scores again soon after when the keeper dribbles the ball dangerously in front of his own net. Satellite celebrations begin among Okapi fans around the pitch when he is pulled.

Naath press, projecting their desperation. They need help.



Okanda gets hammered to the ground just outside Naath's penalty area, and the referee doesn't blow the whistle (Naath fans would say he fell and writhed in the dirt entirely of his own accord). He has to go off the field for a medical check. He comes back at the next opportunity with dirt smeared on the back of his jersey, but Jerome is not happy. He yells at referees for letting the game get too physical, and at security for letting Naath fans encroach the sidelines.



Okapi fans begin pleading with the ref: "Time, time, time!" The team becomes defensive allowing Naath, again, to dictate the match, seemingly praying with their fans for the end at last. A slide tackle deep in Okapi's territory sends the ball stumbling free in front of the net, but no one can touch it in. Jerome looks back at me, relieved, as if he had escaped.



In the 93rd minute, Naath dribbles the ball into a mob near the right post of the Okapi net, and the ball slips out and over the goal line. Naath fans grab fistfuls of dirt and throw them in the air, obscuring the field and the now thousands of people on it. The mountains, faraway, disappear. Okapi and Atletico tie, 2-2.



Jerome and Naath's head coach shout at each other. Jerome immediately alleges corruption. Both sides — players, coaches, and fans — empty a complete spectrum of emotions at once, bursting as if too big for their clothes. I get caught in the middle of a fist fight.

"I'm not happy. I'm not angry for the result," Jerome tells me. He is breathing heavily, visibly upset, unsure of what to say or feel or do next. "There is win, there is draw, and sometimes you can lose. So any of them you have to accept, and you have to know that it can happen."

Gabriel Beny Thon is one of the few players, like Okanda and Olivier, who is good enough to be a target in the Kakuma Premier League's informal free agency. He has never played for a crowd like the one that turned out for Okapi-Naath, however. He has been offered small stipends and better housing to play for other teams, but he chooses to stay with Deng's cash-strapped All-Stars. He's the team's captain, Deng's proud co-pilot, and he's one of the select who has a nickname.

Beny also goes by "Dinho." As in Ronaldinho. As in one of the most technically impressive footballers ever. That's important to him.

"Those fans they are watching the kids, saying, 'You know, when you play football, there's player which is your role model, you follow,'" Beny says. "You look when people play Champions League. You say I'm Cristiano Ronaldo, Ronaldinho, there's a role model you follow. And fans love every single player."

Beny, roughly 23, has made a tidy life in Kakuma. He lives in a compound he likes. It has stone walls and a metal roof. He has just one roommate, two mattresses between them — one on a frame, the other on the dirt — and a desk that they split. Two bibles and four engineering books rest on top of it. Beny's compound is one in a short row of four compounds occupied by young South Sudanese men like him.



*All-Stars FC captain Gabriel Beny Thon, center, with his coach Samuel Deng Makheer, right, outside of his home.*

Few in Kakuma love soccer enough to tailor their skills the way Beny has. The sand is hot and hard, with no grass or moisture to give the game the normal physics of other places. In play, the ball changes ends of the pitch quickly, careening back and forth, and skies high when it bounces. In this environment, if one were to willingly stylize his game around any soccer god, Ronaldinho — with his superior control and endless tricks — might be the worst choice. Soccer as it is played in Kakuma allows almost no room for nuance.

Beny's loyalty to what is, for now, a middle-of-the-pack KPL team is surprising given his potential. Deng wooed him by appealing to Beny's ever-consciousness of legacy. Beny speaks in low, staccato epigrams. "You don't play for the fans, you play for the flesh," he says, reminding me that playing soccer is a personal endeavor, "because what you are doing, people are watching you play around the world, and you might not know."

Beny went to South Sudan in 2011 in hopes of sparking his soccer career. He thought he might compete for a spot on the national team. He bounced around to several clubs but says he never felt a connection anywhere he went. He felt like an outsider, "no friendships," and went back to Kakuma, deciding that it would be a better place to struggle.

That was the first and last time Beny has been to South Sudan.

Beny learned soccer in Kakuma. "That's the only talent I have," he says, and he has accepted the truth that his potential will never be fully realized.

“When I used to play football, I knew I was going somewhere. But at last I came to realize I’m not going anywhere,” Beny says, matter of factly. “I come to accept and say, ‘OK, there is nothing I can do. No matter. Maybe God never meant for me to play football. Maybe I was meant to do other things.’”

*All-Stars FC captain Gabriel Beny Thon, center, with his coach Samuel Deng Makheer, right, outside of his home.*

Few in Kakuma love soccer enough to tailor their skills the way Beny has. The sand is hot and hard, with no grass or moisture to give the game the normal physics of other places. In play, the ball changes ends of the pitch quickly, careening back and forth, and skies high when it bounces. In this environment, if one were to willingly stylize his game around any soccer god, Ronaldinho — with his superior control and endless tricks — might be the worst choice. Soccer as it is played in Kakuma allows almost no room for nuance.

Beny’s loyalty to what is, for now, a middle-of-the-pack KPL team is surprising given his potential. Deng wooed him by appealing to Beny’s ever-consciousness of legacy. Beny speaks in low, staccato epigrams. “You don’t play for the fans, you play for the flesh,” he says, reminding me that playing soccer is a personal endeavor, “because what you are doing, people are watching you play around the world, and you might not know.”

Beny went to South Sudan in 2011 in hopes of sparking his soccer career. He thought he might compete for a spot on the national team. He bounced around to several clubs but says he never felt a connection anywhere he went. He felt like an outsider, “no friendships,” and went back to Kakuma, deciding that it would be a better place to struggle.



That was the first and last time Beny has been to South Sudan.

Beny learned soccer in Kakuma. “That’s the only talent I have,” he says, and he has accepted the truth that his potential will never be fully realized.

“When I used to play football, I knew I was going somewhere. But at last I came to realize I’m not going anywhere,” Beny says, matter of factly. “I come to accept and say, ‘OK, there is nothing I can do. No matter. Maybe God never meant for me to play football. Maybe I was meant to do other things.’”

“Football is a game about losing and winning,” he says. “It’s a game about rectifying your own mistakes.”

Beny’s prowess has cultivated a following. That’s perhaps the biggest privilege he has as a soccer star in Kakuma: the ability to meet so many people, and to know he has made them happy. His favorite moment from his first season with the All-Stars was when they beat Okapi, 4-2. The result was vacated because the All-Stars played their suspended goalkeeper — Beny calls that game the beginning of the All-Stars’ downturn — “but it was a nice day, you know?”

Children talk to him. “They all start saying, ‘you see that guy there, that’s the guy they call Dinho.’” Beny listens. He wants them to play soccer too, to keep the teams full and increase the quality of play in Kakuma until a point when the rest of the world has to notice. Some of those kids have started nicknaming themselves “Beny Thon.”



That, Beny says, makes him happy in the face of everything he wishes would have gone right in his life. While Deng and others may hope that the KPL serves as a flare to the outside world, Beny accepts his role as a bright star that can only be seen in this darkened part of the world.

“I believe when you struggle that’s when you get something. And when you are struggling, you have to struggle with a clean heart,” Beny says. “You know life here is not easy, but I’m struggling and you see me here. I’m happy, but I live inside a lie.

“I have to accept the fact I’m happy.”

## Escaping Kakuma

### **CREDITS**

**Story by Louis Bien**

**Images by Kainaz Amaria**

Editors | Elena Bergeron, Spencer Hall  
Copyeditors | Sam Eggleston, Kurt Mensching

Designer | Tyson Whiting

Developer | Graham MacAree

Video | Rob Langevin

Special Thanks:

Maya Aluel

Istarlin Abdi Halane

Aarti Shah

Matina Stevis

Foreign Correspondents' Association of East Africa

ALSO:

[Watch video from inside Kakuma and meet Olivier, Kakuma's best scorer](#)

© 2017 Vox Media, Inc. All Rights Reserved



