

How power of sport helped Eric survive Rwandan genocide

I was just a young boy who wanted to play football because I could see it was the most exciting thing, but as far as having the power to impact the lives of people, no, never."

The words are hardly surprising as when we take up any sport we do it for the sheer enjoyment, not really thinking about what it may bring us in the long term.

Football came to mean the world to Eric Murangwa Eugene though, and helped save his life.

His story is unquestionably gripping, but that does little to describe the terrible human loss of which Eric was spared because of his sport.

Cambridge United's Abbey Stadium and Coleridge Community College are worlds away from Rwanda and yet it is lessons learned from the 'land of a thousand hills' that brought Eric to the city.

Twenty-five years ago this Sunday

MARK TAYLOR meets Eric Murangwa Eugene, who visited Cambridge United's Abbey Stadium and Coleridge Community College to explain how football saved his life.

(April 7) marks the genocide in Rwanda against the Tutsi in the east African country, directed by the members of the Hutu majority government.

During a three-month period, about a million people were killed in their homes, at roadblocks across the country and in churches, schools and public buildings where they had gathered for protection.

It is his experiences of courage and humanity during that horrendous time that Eric uses to inspire and teach peace and unity.

Eric grew up in a Tutsi family in the eastern city of Rwamagana in Rwanda which had been in the grip

of a civil war from 1990 to 1994, but football was a strong part of the culture and tradition of the country.

"The way the game was introduced in Rwanda and the way it captures the imagination of Rwandans is something very special and unique," says Eric.

It was taken there by Catholic church missionaries in the 1920s and was first and foremost for the most privileged, who at the time were the ruling Tutsis.

King Mutara III Radahigwa, who ruled from 1931 to 1959, saw the new sport and was captivated by the power of the beautiful game, becoming a huge fan and instructing his chiefs

and sub-chiefs to establish teams.

It was a bug that also bit the young Eric, who quickly developed a passion for kicking a ball around.

By the age of 11, Eric found himself drawn to goalkeeping, which

stemmed from being a ballboy at training nights for Rayon Sports, the most popular club in the country and based in Nyanza.

He did not have to wait too long before becoming their first-choice keeper, aged 19, and was part of a famous African Cup Winners' Cup win over Sudan's Al-Hilal, a leading African club side, on March 6, 1994.

"It didn't matter whether we were Hutu or Tutsi, what mattered most was to play for the club and win for the club. In every other area of Rwandan life at the time that was what mattered most, which ethnicity you belonged to," he said.

"In a football environment it didn't matter, what mattered was your skills and how good you were."

The match in question was only a month before hell broke loose in Rwanda – triggered when president Juvenal Habyarimana's plane was shot down on April 6 – but it was to have a profound effect in sparing Eric's life.

"When the genocide happened a number of situations contributed to my survival that had some element of me being the football player of the club that I was playing for," he explains.

"On the first day of the genocide, on April 7, my life was spared when a group of soldiers who had come into my flat to kill us found out that I was who I was."

That was in part when they discovered a photo album of Eric and his Rayon Sports team-mates, and he was asked by a soldier whether he was Toto – a club nickname that means the young one in Swahili.

"One of the soldiers happened to be a big fan of the club I was playing for," says Eric. "Once he realised I was who I was, he convinced his



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Goalkeeper Eric Murangwa running a coaching course at Coleridge Community College
Picture: Keith Heppell



A leader on and off pitch

Eric Murangwa Eugene was an inspiring figure for pupils at Coleridge Community College.

The former Rwanda international goalkeeper addressed more than 220 students with a talk about how being a footballer saved him from death during the genocide in Rwanda against the Tutsi in 1994.

Russell Burgess, head of arts at Coleridge, said: "It was such a privilege to be the only school in Cambridgeshire that Eric visited. It is so important that students understand Eric's message of standing against all forms of discrimination and it was particularly apt after the racial abuse England players had experienced the night before in Montenegro."

"Students were gripped by Eric's story of how he became an international footballer and how this saved his life during the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Eric then delivered a goalkeeping masterclass that will live long in the memory of those students who took part."

After the talk, Eric got to work to put five young goalkeepers from Cambridge Area Partnership schools through their paces.

He said: "We were doing goalkeeping sessions but I was also trying to highlight the importance of building cohesion and the importance of understanding that being a goalkeeper is being a leader."

"If you're a leader you're not only a leader on the football field but in the community and in your country."

"It looked like they were very amazed and enjoyed the time."

Jasmine Moore, a Year 8 pupil at Coleridge Community College, was one of the goalkeepers to be coached by Eric, and she said: "It was amazing to have goalkeeping specific training from a former international goalkeeper. Eric was so supportive and I improved so much."

The event was organised by Helen Weinstein on behalf of Cambridge City Council as part of the Holocaust Memorial Day programme.

In the evening, Eric visited Cambridge United's Abbey Stadium for a talk hosted by Cambridge United Community Trust chief executive Ben Szreter, in partnership with the Cambridge Ethnic Community Forum.

colleagues to leave and not to kill us. "Once my life was spared on that day by this soldier, I left the flat where I used to live to stay with my Hutu team-mates which was not something many people would have done at the time."

"Most Tutsis were in danger when they were amidst their friends and work colleague Hutus at the time."

"I went to this house of my Hutu team-mates and they didn't disappoint, they did everything to try to help me."

What his Rayon Sports team-mates did for him, and indirectly his family, was one of the reasons he survived the genocide.

They provided food, information, updated him when danger was coming and helped with cajoling and bribery to preserve his safety.

Eric was even helped by Rayon board member Jean-Marie Vianney Mudahinyuka, otherwise known as Zuzu, a notorious leader of the Interahamwe militia – a Hutu paramilitary organisation – who was subsequently imprisoned for his role in the genocide.

"Sport has a tremendous power to influence people positively," he says. "We have had many different experiences where it has also contributed to wrong behaviour, but generally speaking the values of sport are positive."

"It's about working as a team. It's about coming together, it's about being disciplined, it's about being tolerant, it's about having acceptance of one another."

"All these values, if you really have them in you then you're a decent person. That's what came out from my team-mates at that particular time."

"They just looked at all those hours we spent together on a football field kicking the ball together, sweating for the benefit of our football club, and they said why would this person be seen as our enemy, why should we abandon him?" "It's what made me believe in the

power of sport and the power of football so much that I've dedicated my life to basically highlight those things to make sure the younger people who play football today understand that there is much more that they can take out of it than just the skills of scoring nice goals, heading or other skills."

Those values were present in the first public gathering after the end of the genocide, when 15,000 turned up to watch Rayon Sports take on Kiyovu Sports.

"That game gave Rwanda a sense of hope and going back to normal life again," says Eric, who went on to captain the Rwandan national team.

"It kicked off what Rwanda has managed to achieve in the last 25 years."

"It was a fantastic symbol of resilience. Football played a big part in the reconstruction of the country."

Eric lost 35 members of his family, including his seven-year-old brother, during the genocide and Hutu team-mate Longin Munyurangabo, who so selflessly saved Eric and his family from the Hutu murder squads.

His life is now guided by the values of playing football alongside team-mates of all ethnicities and nations. He founded the charity Football for Hope, Peace and Unity which has now joined with the Survivors Tribune to create the organisation, the Ishami Foundation.

He has become an activist and educator against prejudice and racism, aiming to get communities to embrace values to make the world a better place.

"The way we use the power of sport is to run sessions or clinics with young people in schools or communities where we play football but focus on the message of positivity that we have in football," he says.

"Rwanda is a very important lesson for the rest of the world and that motivates me to do what I do today. I share my story because I want young Rwandans to learn from the mistakes of history and never repeat them."



Eric in Rwanda