

Like football, the fight against TB requires teamwork and endurance

By Luis Figo

Luis Figo was the 2000 European Footballer of the Year, the 2001 FIFA World Player of the Year, and Portuguese Footballer of the Year, 1995–2000. He became a goodwill ambassador against tuberculosis in 2008.

As the world counts down to the 2010 World Cup, the question arises: What could enthuse people the way football does? With 3bn fans and at least 265m players – not counting the kids around the world playing football any time, anywhere, with balls made out of just about anything – the answer is probably nothing.

In the past two World Cups, I was out there on the pitch. This time, having become a goodwill ambassador against tuberculosis and having retired from football, I can take a step back and look at things from a new perspective.

And so for me the real question becomes, what should enthuse people like football does? And the answer is: stopping tuberculosis.

TB is a curable disease that is still killing close to 2m people every year. The vast majority can be cured with a course of medicine costing about \$20. But for too many, this doesn't happen. Their cough gets worse, the night sweats persist, they lose weight, they die.

I am often asked why I became a goodwill ambassador. I'll admit that I didn't know much about it until I was approached by the Stop TB Partnership. But when I heard the numbers – almost 5,000 people dying every day of a curable disease – and learned about the issues, I jumped at the opportunity to do something about this injustice.

As a father and husband, I could not imagine seeing my family suffer from a devastating disease like this – and I don't see why anyone else should either.

Similarly, as someone from a modest background who has been able to achieve my dream, I want children everywhere to at least have a chance of doing so.

As I began to learn about TB, I began to see the parallels between fighting it and playing the “beautiful game”.

Football is all about teamwork, which is also essential for achieving a TB-free world. An individual can do relatively little, especially because many of the circumstances that go with the disease – poverty, poor access to health care, malnutrition, overcrowded prisons and increasing immigration from countries with unsuccessful TB control – remain outside the control of a single person.

We need co-operation among agencies, countries and individuals to co-ordinate efforts and spread knowledge.

Football is also a game of struggle and endurance; no matter how long or tough the match, I have always believed in persistence and hope until the final whistle.

In the fight against tuberculosis, the same applies. We may not be able to cure everyone who is suffering from TB today, but the more treatments we get out there, the more lives we will save.

When I see the energy and enthusiasm of football fans – especially young ones, who are the leaders of tomorrow – I know that if a fraction of this passion can be channelled into fighting tuberculosis, we can win.

That is why I have focused my activities on youth, encouraging them to learn about the disease and spread the word to protect themselves and others.

The message that I communicate to young fans actually applies to everyone, regardless of age. So I urge all of you, on World Tuberculosis Day and in the run-up to the World Cup: please join my team – pick up the ball and run with me to stop TB. Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2010. You may share using our article tools. Please don't cut articles from FT.com and redistribute by email or post to the web.