

# U.N. highlights power of sport as unifying force

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If you thought the United Nations and Secretary-General **Kofi Annan** were all about brokering peace deals and lobbying world leaders to play nice, brace yourself for the international body's venture into the sports field.

Don't look for the U.N. to do the impossible and negotiate a truce between radical elements of the Alabama and Tennessee fan base. Offer up a solution to the NHL labor stalemate. Or cut short another offseason spending war between Yankee boss **George Steinbrenner** and rival owners in Beantown.

But last week in New York, Annan unveiled plans for a yearlong push to highlight the power of sport as a means of bridging cultural and ethnic divides, officially dubbing 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education.

What that means is U.N. folks, like others before, hope to use the popularity of sport to call attention to some of the nagging needs -- like poverty, hunger, the spread of HIV-AIDS. The idea is to hold sporting exhibitions around the globe, in the most remote of places. Educate coaches to the ways they can further influence lives, on the field as well as in their communities and regions.

"I'm convinced that the time is right to encourage governments, development agencies and communities to think how sport can be included more systematically in the plans to help children, particularly those living in the midst of poverty, disease and conflict," Annan explained.

Whether we're talking PR fluff here or something potentially touching lives, only time will tell. But the U.N. boss is serious enough to have enlisted **Adolf Ogi**, the former president of Switzerland, as his special adviser on Sport for Development and Peace. And lined up the International Labour Organization (ILO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and other agencies to play a part in his initiative.

As supporters of former presidential candidate **Sen. John Kerry** will be glad to hear, several European countries have already gotten behind the movement and held conferences and even set up college curriculum to educate and train coaches. Officials say the United States has been a bit slower to react, though Georgia Tech and Kennesaw State are planning a United States Olympic Committee-endorsed international sports summit for next October. And Kennesaw State has signed onto a three-year partnership to develop a sports leadership curriculum.

It's no surprise that out front on the U.S. effort is **Mike Spino**, a top distance-running coach who set up a training base for international athletes in Atlanta prior to the 1996 Summer Games. Spino, as director of international sport education at Kennesaw State, also has been big on recruiting foreign coaches to his classroom.

"Most of these coaches really don't get to the point of preparing people for high-level competition, but I've observed first-hand how much influence they have within their local communities," Spino said. "And they really are the people that can encourage and motivate people, and make a big difference with these problems that are in their countries."

Already, baseball clubs have been organized and coaches trained in Mozambique, an AIDS-stricken African nation. International sports federations like rowing, softball and boxing are also working alongside coaches. The next push is to sign up professional sports leagues, as well as individual Olympic athletes.

But, hey, you can't help wonder what sport has to do with the serious business of jobs creation, health epidemics and all the world's other ills? At first, you say nothing. Then, crazy as it may be, you think about how folks get off on sports. The passion they bring to the games and those that play them, which in some precincts borders on hero worship.

"Sport is a neutral issue in a way, and therefore you can use sport to deal with the most difficult problems that humanities are facing like HIV prevention, which is totally based on inequality of opportunities and taboos," said **Giovanni DiCola**, coordinator of the ILO program.

"The other is you establish a dialogue. When you have sport rules and people are able to accept the rules, then automatically you have kind of a basis for dialogue. And when you think about tensions and about situations where there is a conflict, that is a way to enhance peoples ability and skills to communicate."

So, even if the Bush administration isn't seeing eye-to-eye these days with Kofi Annan and the U.N., it's good to know there is always sport to fall back on. And who says life isn't all about fun and games?

*Mike Fish is a senior writer for SI.com.*