

THE BOY WHO HAD A DREAM

HOW AN AFGHAN FOOTBALL FAN GOT TO MEET HIS HERO, LIONEL MESSI, IN QATAR... AND THE UNEXPECTED CONSEQUENCES OF HIM BECOMING A VIRAL SENSATION

BY BEN JACOBS

EVEN A PAIR OF OVERSIZED ORANGE SHORTS that required constant attention couldn't stop six-year-old Murtaza Ahmadi clinging to his idol Lionel Messi more closely than world class defenders can only dream of.

The Afghan boy became a viral internet sensation in January last year after pictures of him emerged on social media kicking around a punctured ball in a makeshift Argentina shirt crafted from a blue-and-white striped plastic bag. MESSI 10 was sketched on the back with a marker pen.

Murtaza's identity was originally a mystery, but his Australia-based uncle Azim soon came forward. And once his father Mohammad Arif revealed he couldn't afford a real football jersey for his youngest son, offers of authentic Messi shirts soon flooded in. "I got promised enough to open a whole sports store," the father of six tells Esquire. Arif was a farmer in Afghanistan's Jaghori District in eastern Ghazni at that time, a world away from our interview in Qatar. "Funnily enough the majority actually tried to donate



Murtaza Ahmadi, with his plastic bag jersey, in Jaghori district of Ghazni province.



Murtaza, wearing a donated and signed shirt by Lionel Messi, in Kabul last February

Real Madrid ones with RONALDO 7 on them. The attention was overwhelming and I just kept telling everyone Murtaza was desperate to one day meet Messi, but I never dreamed it would happen."

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which has a partnership with Barcelona, and Qatar 2022's Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy had other ideas. The organisations joined forces to track Murtaza down and invite him to mingle with Messi during Barca's December visit to Qatar. And when Luis Enrique's stars jetted to Doha to play Saudi Arabian champions Al Ahli in an exhibition match on December 13th at the Al Gharafa Stadium, their 5-3 victory was eclipsed by Murtaza's fairy-tale introduction to Messi, which could melt the hardest of hearts.

SADLY, OF COURSE, life is rarely that simple. Murtaza's unexpected rise to fame not only forced him into hiding but almost cost him his life. In April, while enjoying a kick-about with his 15-year-old brother Homayoun, Murtaza, who was only five at the time, was beckoned over by a stranger in a tattered Barcelona shirt. "This old man promised me he knew Messi," Murtaza tells us via an interpreter. "He had a big knife. I was scared he would burst my ball so I ran back to my brother."

Homayoun's presence thwarted the possible kidnapping, but it proved the first of many abduction attempts. One death threat, in the form of a letter, even audaciously demanded a \$1

million ransom from Messi himself. These incidents prompted Murtaza's father to conclude that it wasn't safe to stay in Afghanistan. The family sought refuge in neighbouring Pakistan last May. "We moved to Islamabad, but it was too expensive," he says. "I sold all of my possessions but it wasn't enough. We now live in Quetta. If we hadn't ran away Murtaza could be dead and all because he wrote Messi's name on a carrier bag."

Lionel Messi might have inadvertently almost caused Murtaza's death, but that didn't stop the adorable Afghan boy from sticking closely to his side in Doha. He also received a signed shirt from the five-time Ballon d'Or winner in the Barcelona dressing room and got to lead out the Spanish giants to a cacophony of 25,000 cheers.

Having confidently placed the match ball in the centre-circle Murtaza didn't want to leave the field. Instead he sprinted straight back to a grinning Messi, while also trying to stop his super-sized shorts from falling around his ankles. He then made an unexpected cameo in Barca's official team photo alongside a delighted Luis Suarez and Neymar and proved so popular with

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES

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the so-called 'MSN' trio, that they may soon need to be renamed MMSN. "I will never live a better day," raves Murtaza when we meet him after the game. He tells us how he plans to visit the Camp Nou. "I hope to see Messi again. We are friends now and I want him to teach me how to play for Barcelona."

"This is just one example of football uniting the world," Hassan Al Thawadi, the secretary general of Qatar 2022, later tells us. "We have always said that this World Cup is a bridge to bring people together."

WHILE GREAT LENGTHS were taken to allow one refugee to rub shoulders with Messi, cynics will inevitably point out that there are many other displaced people in the region who desperately need a greater level of assistance from Qatar and other GCC countries. Most obviously this includes victims of the wars in Syria and Yemen.

Of course, this isn't the Supreme Committee for Delivery and Legacy's fault or responsibility. It only has the power to back sports initiatives, and did recently fund two football pitches for Syrian refugees in Jordan via a partnership with the Canadian charity 'Right to Play', a move for which the group hasn't courted headlines.

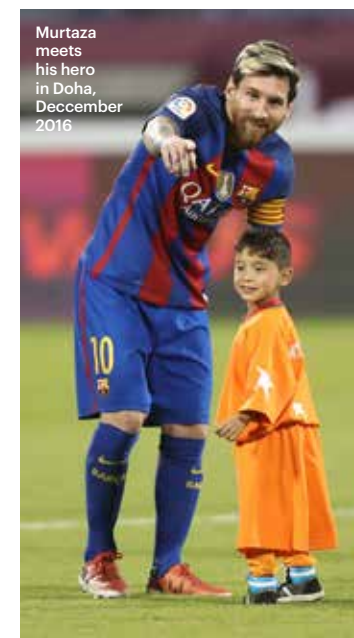
The truth is, though, the Murtaza-Messi meeting was a bit of a PR exercise but, much like the refugee team at Rio 2016, Messi and Qatar 2022 are still shedding a much-needed spotlight on the startling UNHCR Global Trends report, which concluded that 65.3 million people across the world were displaced from their homes by conflict and persecution in 2015.

Meanwhile, Lionel Messi may be shy by nature but he clearly doesn't only talk with his feet. He donated \$100,000

to fund the now destroyed Children's Hospital in east Aleppo, directly saving lives and, whether he wanted to or not, making a political statement in the process.

Meanwhile back in Murtaza Ahmadi's native Afghanistan, Messi's goals provide vital moments of escapism to a football-mad nation still rebuilding from two decades of Taliban oppression. It is still tough for some people to walk into a sports stadium without associating it as a site for mass executions by the Taliban, particularly in Kabul.

Murtaza might well be, in some ways at least, a pawn in a publicity stunt, but the point is his unbridled joy was genuine and infectious. His beaming smile will give other refugees hope that something as innocuous as a plastic bag could lead them to a happy ending with their heroes and perhaps they will think twice about throwing it or their dreams away. **👊**



Murtaza meets his hero in Doha, December 2016