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SOUTH AFRICA

SECOND PRIZE, CLASS D
IN THE 2009 COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION

THE BEAUTIFUL GAME

Anyone can become a *kgalala* in soccer! All you need is a ball and a few friends to play. The story below shows why it inspires such passion around the world...

The African sun rose early that morning, waking Tiko at five o'clock. Mornings were a busy time for him; he was the man of the house. Tiko lived with Gogo, his mother's mother, in Hammanskraal, an informal village outside Pretoria. His own mum died from Aids a few years ago. Gogo looked after Tiko and his younger siblings: Tumi, Teboho and Thabo. Tiko thought he looked after Gogo as much as she looked after them. That morning Tiko was particularly eager to finish his morning chores. "Eish wean! I need to feed the chickens, make a fire to boil water, dress in my school uniform and make breakfast-".

Tiko met his friends on his way to school. They chattered about the championship soccer match that afternoon. They attended the Indaba Good Fellowship Church, which doubled as a school on weekdays. There were 42 boys and girls in their Grade 4 class. That day, Tiko found it very hard to concentrate; his mind kept wandering to the match that afternoon.

Tiko and his *chanas* raced home leaping over *dongas* and hardly noticing the clouds of dust kicked up from the passing taxis and bakkies. They were careful to avoid getting their uniforms dirty. Tiko knew that tonight of all nights, he would not have the time to wash it.

When Tiko arrived home, Gogo was in the garden tending to her precious vegetables.

"Yebo Gogo, sawubona," said Tiko before kissing her on the cheek.

"Sawubona my darling, how was school?"

"Shap, shap," answered Tiko.

"I have prepared your favourite lunch: pap and inkomazi."

"Siyabonga, Gogo!"

"I'm going to the soccer match soon – okay?" he asked.

"Laduma! Laduma!" Gogo looked at him warmly, her eldest grandson, the quick one, the one with strong legs. She always thought of him as her little springbok.

Tiko pushed open the stubborn tin door to the house. He crouched down on his hands and knees and stretched his long arm under his bed. That was the safest place in the house to keep the box that held his lucky t-shirt and cut-offs.

As dusk settled over the village, people had gathered already to watch the championship match between two of the area's most talented young soccer players. Tiko was the star striker for the Hammanskraal lightning. The soccer pitch was a patch of dirt where most of the rocks and shrubs had been cleared. Spectators sat on fallen tree trunks, empty milk crates and discarded power cable drums. Tiko and his team members were barefoot and he was bouncing on his tiptoes. "What's that? A vuvuzela? Someone has actually brought a vuvuzela to *this* match?" Tiko was tickled.

The raucous trumpeting of the vuvuzela disrupts Tiko's reminiscing. He is a grown man, standing in the player's tunnel in Soccer City, Johannesburg, far from the dirt field in Hammanskraal. Tiko is on his tiptoes, bouncing, ready to run out for the first match of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. He is wearing a shiny new sponsored uniform and soccer boots and he is the star striker for the South African National Soccer Team, Bafana Bafana.

Tiko looks up and finds Gogo among 95 000 wildly enthusiastic fans. Her broad smile and bright green vuvuzela gives her away.

She is proud of her eldest grandson, the quick one, the one with the strong legs, her springbok.