

MCC Foundation Rwanda and Uganda Trip Report 2024

On 21 February 2024, MCC Foundation, (MCCF), and the MCC Men's Touring Team, stood for formal photographs in the Long Room before setting out to East Africa, where MCC would be playing fixtures in Rwanda against the National teams and coaching MCCF beneficiaries, and MCCF would be visiting its projects across Rwanda and Uganda.



Rwanda, the land of a thousand hills, is a surprising place. Negatively prominent in our news, its orderliness, lush green countryside, lakes and forests, excellent infrastructure, sense of progress and above all, its overt welcome, were the dominant impressions of our visit.



We started our journey at the Genocide Museum. 2024 marks the thirtieth anniversary of the 100-day genocide, when between 500,000 and 800,000 Tutsis were massacred. The museum guides are victims of those terrible days. Our guide was orphaned aged 8, his entire family was wiped out, his history and his childhood ending abruptly in the madness.

The museum houses walls of photographs revealing the history of those brutal days when neighbours turned on neighbours and hatred whipped up a frenzy of killing. Whole rooms are lined with pictures of child victims taken before the massacre, smiles on their faces and descriptions below of what food they liked, what their favourite subject was at school, their aspirations and then, how they were murdered. Skulls shattered by machetes and clubs fill grim display cabinets, the scale and brutality shocking. And yet, the overwhelming feeling as we laid a wreath on the mass graves in the garden, was one of peace and awe at the truly remarkable determination of a nation to work together on unity, forgiveness and recovery and the astonishing progress made over thirty years.

We went from the museum to a playground on the outskirts of Kigali. The exuberance and joy of hundreds of school children as they spilled out of school and onto the dusty field in their colourful uniforms was the total antithesis to the emotions of the morning. Singing, dancing and clapping, they swarmed around the coaches, picked up bats and enjoyed an hour of joyful cricket.



The coaches are role models for the children and not only coach them but invest in their welfare. There is a family of orphans who have been embraced by the cricket community which ensures they are fed and clothed.



Landry, second left, and "Tall" Eric, far right, lead the Rwanda coaching team

MCCF works in Rwanda with Cricket Without Boundaries (CWB) and the Rwanda Cricket Association as partners, helping to promote cricket across the country and to use it as a platform to transform young lives. One of the projects takes place in the Mahama Refugee Camp, which houses Burundian and Congolese refugees. The cricket has been a great source of hope and opportunity, with some of the players trained as coaches. Working with UNHCR and CWB we have developed a Cricket for Protection manual which is being adapted for use with refugees across the world. A great sadness was being denied access to the camp as we had looked forward to visiting and to encouraging the young coaches and beneficiaries. We were sent photos of the session which were truly uplifting and illustrated the much-needed joy which the cricket brings.



Coaching at Mahama Refugee Camp

The following day, after a formal tea and cake reception at the residence of the British High Commissioner, the MCC Men's team played the Under 19 Rwanda National Team at the Gahanga Stadium. Constructed by the charity now known as Cricket Builds Hope, it is the most beautiful stadium, set in a bowl of hills about half an hour from Kigali centre on the site of an infamous Tutsi massacre. The match was close, with MCC winning off the last ball. The young Rwandans were devastated, but quickly rallied as they sat with the MCC players, chatting about the game, receiving kit and relishing the interest shown in them and their talent. It is hard to overestimate the value of these tours. Just being visited brings great happiness to the hosts, add to that the kudos of playing against an MCC team, the experience such a match offers, the memories generated, and the lessons learned, and you quickly see why they are so important.



Over the next few days, we visited our school projects in Kayonza and Nyamata with our young Rwandan coaches, travelling through rural Rwanda and its bustling market towns. At all the schools hundreds of young children were waiting for us and our coaches miraculously gathered them into groups and delivered coaching drills which totally engaged them and showed us the tremendous potential of the young athletes.



Exuberance and passion for the game were in abundance, and we just wished we had more kit to leave them and more coaches to assign them. They love the cricket and turn up religiously to the sessions twice a week.

We watched a hugely competitive cricket tournament between 8 schools in Nyamata and gave out the prizes. Some of the children were relatively new to cricket, but all of them played with total determination, cheered on at very high volume by their school and team mates on the touchlines.



One of the schools we visited was an all-girls boarding school run by an order of nuns, with stunning gardens offering shade for the pupils with views across a lake. Most of Rwanda's schools are boarding schools and all of them are fee-paying, with a minimum cost of around \$30 a term, which many Rwandans find hard to find. We met Sister Marie Felicite', Headmistress of the school, who welcomed us warmly and embraced the cricket. She took us up to the sports court, where hundreds of girls turned up for the session. At first, they seemed rather subdued, but after a few minutes they were fully engaged in drills and as competitive as can be, screaming out to encourage their teams to win. On Fridays the nuns allow music to be played full volume beside the courts and we witnessed the incongruous scene of nuns in their immaculate habits watching hundreds of pupils in large circles playing cricket, with Hip Hop music blasting out in the background as the light faded to dusk in a far corner of Rwanda.



From Rwanda, MCCF flew on to Entebbe, Uganda. Uganda has a population of roughly 45 million and is the size of the UK. It sits on a central plateau covered by rainforest with high volcanic mountains to the eastern and western borders. South Sudan lies to the north, Kenya to the east, Tanzania and Rwanda to the south, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to the west. Uganda gained independence in 1962 with one of the more developed economies and one of the strongest education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa, but it descended into political turmoil and internal conflict that lasted more than two decades. Idi Amin seized power in 1971 and led the country into economic ruin and rampant mass atrocities that killed as many as 500,000 civilians. Yoweri Museveni became president in 1986 after his insurgency captured the capital and is widely credited with restoring relative stability and economic growth to Uganda but has resisted calls to leave office and is now approaching 80.

Uganda has a totally different feel to Rwanda. Beyond the tarmac arteries of the main roads which link the cities, there are muddy potholed tracks lined by corrugated iron-roofed shacks in the towns and thatched rondavels across the countryside. There is no sense of orderliness, as we felt in Kigali, but rather a wonderful chaotic vigour, with crowded markets bursting with people who have descended on the towns with produce to sell. Watermelons and pineapples are piled up high along the road beside smoke-filled food stalls. Crazy traffic, swarms of motorbikes, buses and lorries all hooting wildly,

somehow make progress along the narrow ribbon of tarmac. We travelled straight to the North, an 8-hour drive, arriving at night in Gulu town.



Over the next 2 days we visited 10 schools, watching energetic coaching under the scorching sun, delivered by Ivan and his team from the Uganda Cricket Association. Some of the sessions incorporated teaching around HIV and its prevention. At all the schools we visited, we found talent and great enthusiasm for the game and a clear desire for more cricket. At one of the girls' schools, we met 3 players, all of whom had been picked for the Under 19 National Team and heard how it had transformed their lives. One of them said she felt like "an angel who had fallen from heaven" when she heard the news of her selection. It meant she was given a scholarship to her school and that meant a whole change of fortune for her family who had been struggling to afford the fees. Cricket had guaranteed her education and without our project it would never have happened.



More than 1,900 cricket sessions were delivered across Uganda, Rwanda and Kenya with MCCF support last year, which amounted to over 4,700 hours of coaching with the total attendances at those sessions of over 100,000. In these countries which have witnessed war, and which are both designated by the UN as amongst the Least Developed Countries in the world, we saw how cricket can bring unity, joy, hope and opportunity. We are supporting the Cricket Associations in both countries to build their grassroots cricket, bridge the gap between grassroots cricket and the professional game and in time, to climb the ICC world rankings.

It was a truly humbling visit. What will stay with us most of all was the sheer joy the cricket brings to young people who face significant challenges in their lives, and we are so grateful to all those generous people who have supported us to make this happen. We also saw first-hand, the power that a combined MCC/MCCF tour can have and how we might develop that in the future to maximise the impact of all we do.



To watch our short film from the trip, please [click here](#).



Dr Sarah Fane, CEO MCC Foundation March 2024