

FUTBOL PALESTINA 2006

by Alon Raab

22 April 2005 | Since 1994, when FIFA recognized the [Palestinian Football Association](#), Palestine, although lacking a state, has appeared in international tournaments and games. Yet the first Palestinian team was established in 1908, in the al-Rawda School of Jerusalem.



"People carry on with their lives in spite of the astoundingly difficult conditions," writes U.K. global-justice group [Grassroots International](#) about this picture of children playing football in [Dheisheh](#) refugee camp. The [IBDAA Cultural Center](#) works with [Grassroots](#) to develop sports and other enrichment programs for some 5,000 children in the camp. See more pictures from Palestine [here](#). (Copyright © 2004 [Jennifer Lemire](#) and [Daniel Moss](#) | [Grassroots International](#). Used by permission.)

During the British rule of Palestine/Israel, the game was popular. There were separate leagues for the Jewish and Arab populations, but games between teams of the two nations took place, including for the state cup. These games of friendship ended in the early 1930s as bullets and bombs replaced soccer balls, and the young men who earlier had faced each other on the playing fields became enemies.

After the 1948 war, the fate of Palestinian football mirrored that of the Palestinian people—defeat, destruction, exile, struggle and renewed hope. Many of the players were killed or exiled, but teams from the West Bank participated in the Jordanian league, and a national team played in the Arab nations' championship games. After the Israeli conquest of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, all organized sports activities ceased. They resumed after 1973, with sports also helping to shape national consciousness and to restore pride, and in the last decade the national team has returned to full international participation after an absence of six decades. (Its last previous appearance was in the World Cup qualifying games of 1934 when it lost to Egypt.)

Lacking a state and an organized league, the process of assembling a team—depicted in the forthcoming film [Futbol Palestina 2006](#)—included a worldwide Internet appeal to players and fans to send names. Because of Israel's control of Palestinian territories, practices are held in Ismalia Egypt and home games in Qatar.

Several of the players grew up under military rule, and they, as well as family members, have known the hardships of occupation. One of the players, midfielder **Tarek al-Quto**, was killed. In addition, several players play in Chile, Germany, Lebanon and the United States, coming together only rarely. With a large part of the Palestinian population suffering from economic deprivation and hunger, money for equipment, training, travel and games is scarce. Only in the last year have several Palestinian businessmen come through with financial support, and FIFA has pledged \$1 million to help build a new stadium in Gaza.

The recent campaign to reach the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany, under the guidance of Austrian coach **Alfred Riedel**, began promisingly with an 8–0 victory over Taiwan and a draw with Iraq. Financial and political obstacles—such as the Israeli army not allowing five players to join their teammates for the important match against Uzbekistan—proved overwhelming, and Uzbekistan and Iraq advanced to the next round. Currently the team is under a new coach, **Azami Nasser**, and with recent political developments and moves toward a cease fire and the resumption of talks between Israel and the **Palestinian Authority**, perhaps soon the two sides will meet on the pitch.

Futbol Palestina 2006 focuses on several players. These include **Shaker Suleiman Asad**, who was born in Gaza and now lives in North Carolina, and who describes how wearing the Palestine uniform for the first time “gave me goose bumps everywhere. I have never been more proud of anything”; Chile-based **Eduardo Tomas Dias Lama**, who says that “one forgets everything else in his heart and fights to win something important for our people”; and **Eduardo Abdala Montero**, who feels that the players represent “so many people who are suffering. . . . We bring satisfaction and joy to these people.”

The desire to show the world that Palestine is not just about war is expressed by the coach and players and also by the filmmakers. Producers **Nelson Soza** and **Marcelo Piña** grew up in Chile under the dictatorship of **Augusto Pinochet** but from a young age felt an affinity with other struggles for justice across the world.

In a recent interview Soza described how he became involved in student politics in high school. “It was a terrible time, but also a time of learning and action. In those days we saw Palestine as a sister struggle; Chileans were also fighting in the streets. The fact that we were not unfamiliar with the word ‘Palestino’ could have also helped. Palestino is a first-division soccer club in Chile, founded by Palestinian immigrants in 1939. The club has produced great players. It all kind of worked together.”

Soza grew up in a working-class neighborhood of Santiago, overlooking the Andes. “In the middle of our buildings there was a soccer field. This was pure dirt and stones, even glass, but we loved this field because every weekend our club played in it. I was in the team since I was probably five. Some of my greatest memories are set against that field. After many years in the United States, the picture of it in my mind is one of my dearest. Recently, visiting the Naher Al-Bared camp in Tripoli, I saw a field that could have been the one I grew up on, only this one had the Mediterranean 50 meters away.”

Asked about his hopes for the film, Soza, who is a journalist and union organizer—Piña is a filmmaker and graduate student in cultural anthropology—said that in the United States the fate of Palestinians and the harsh reality of their lives is ignored. “When we see coverage sympathetic to Palestinians it is usually focused on the tears and blood of the conflict, and although they are legitimate images, they appeal to a very small number of people. Our contribution will be to step back a bit and see Palestinians not through the daily resistance, but through soccer. We hope the audience can see the richness of Palestinian people and realize that they are like the rest of us and as such need the peace and freedom we all cherish.”

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Note on sources: For more information about Palestinian football, visit the website of the [Palestinian Football Association \(www.palestinefa.com\)](http://www.palestinefa.com). If you would like to help the filmmakers complete their film, please e-mail info@futbolpalestina.com.

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