

US Soccer Team Brings Joy to Vulnerable Children June 11, 2009, Pilditch Stadium, Pretoria, South Africa



Children from Heartbeat show off their newly signed t-shirts.

Pictures and Article by Saba Hale
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On a cold wet Thursday afternoon, more than 300 South African children from various disadvantaged communities braved the wet weather to cheer Men's U.S. National Soccer team. The team is one of eight participating in the FIFA Confederations Cup held in Pretoria, South Africa. The U.S. Soccer team will be facing defending World Cup champions Italy on June 15 in Loftus Versfeld, a local stadium in Pretoria. The team will also play against Brazil on June 18th.

The United States Embassy arranged for 300 orphaned and vulnerable children from various relief projects to come to one of the teams open practice before the Confederations Cup, and for the boys and girls to meet inspiring role models. The children are from various partnership projects in which 162 boys and girls from Heartbeat, a USAID funded project with funding from PEPFAR. Heartbeat is a non-profit organization that empowers orphaned and

vulnerable children to reach their full potential.

The children were thrilled when they received brand new U.S. Embassy supported T-shirts and USAID supported hats, a luxury they are not accustomed to. They were more ecstatic to watch the practice where they sang South Africa's national anthem and other songs for the players, an obvious sign that the children were enjoying themselves. At the end of the practice session, the U.S. team got ready to greet their eager fans. With as much order as any one could muster with 300 excited children, care givers escorted the children down on to the field to meet the team.

Onlookers couldn't tell who enjoyed themselves more--the kids or the soccer players. A Heartbeat manager, Charle du Plessie, said, "The kids felt spoiled being treated like kings and queens." For the boys and girls from Heartbeat, the experience was a great distraction from their daily lives. The kid's delight was contagious. Every person involved was grinning, especially the caregivers who were elated to see their kids so full of joy. The team's players and coaches were more than happy to sign anything and everything the kids gave them, including hats, t-shirts, and even body parts. The U.S. Soccer team was able to give hundreds of vulnerable children an opportunity and an experience that will remain in their lives forever.



Vulnerable children meet a coach from the team, yet another inspiring role model.



The boys and girls ranged from 10 to 18 years of age.