**What is MYSA and how did it start?**

For me and many other boys growing up in the small Canadian town of St. Catharines in the 1950s, school was what we did between Saturdays. With our fathers volunteering as the organisers and coaches for our summer baseball and winter ice hockey youth leagues, on Saturdays we put on our team uniforms and proudly bicycled through town to play with or against our friends. On those eagerly anticipated Saturdays, we won or lost the bragging rights for the next week.

Through sport, we learned vital lessons and social skills which helped us then and later in life. We learned that achievement is our reward for self-discipline and constant training, for getting fit and staying healthy and, most importantly, for extra effort and teamwork. We learned to cope with losing as well as winning, gaining new insights into our weaknesses from our losses and earning new self-confidence from our victories. We also learned to respect the rules, the referees, our coaches, our teammates and even our opponents.

Our teams and leagues were also a miniature United Nations in which multiculturalism thrived as many players were young wartime refugees from faraway places such as Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Slovakia and Ukraine. But, once we put on our team uniforms, they stopped being foreigners and became our teammates and friends instead.

Without those many fatherly volunteers and the early life lessons and social skills I learned while playing in their youth leagues, my character would have had sharper edges and my life been far less user-friendly. As they made sport such a force for good in my life, I owed them a debt of gratitude that I vowed to repay some day.

Three decades later the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) became my payback to them. In August 1987 in the huge Mathare slums near the UN headquarters in Nairobi, I stopped at a little dirt field to watch some barefooted kids excitedly playing with their homemade football made of old plastic bags and string. Their joy triggered a flashback to my own youth and led to this thought: *Why shouldn’t these kids also get a chance to play and learn useful life lessons in leagues with real rules, footballs, coaches and referees?*

A few days later I met with some young leaders in the slums to start organising some youth leagues. I set only one key condition, that ‘if you do something, I’ll do something, but if you do nothing, I’ll do nothing’. They agreed and the first MYSA leagues kicked off two weeks later with over 500 youth in 27 boys’ football teams and six girls’ netball teams.

The MYSA youth leaders and members adopted the same “giving-back” approach which soon transformed MYSA from just a few youth leagues into a self-help and multi-faceted community development project using sport as its starting point.

For example, the huge piles of garbage were major causes of disease and deaths in the slums so environmental cleanups became an integral part of all MYSA leagues. While teams get 3 points for a victory, MYSA teams also earn *6 points* for each completed cleanup project. Then, and still today, MYSA likely has the only sports leagues in the world where the standings include points for games won or tied *plus points for garbage cleanups*.

MYSA’s community service activities expanded in response to many different needs and risks in the slums. In 1994, when Adrian, a shy and popular teenager on a local streetkids team, suddenly grew thin and died of a then unfamiliar disease, MYSA started a HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention programme which still exists today. Training in AIDS prevention as well as child rights and protection against sexual abuse became part of all MYSA staff, coaching and other courses.

From its humble beginnings in 1987, MYSA rapidly expanded and by the mid-1990s was the largest self-help youth sports and community service project in Africa and had also become the global pioneer for the now worldwide sport for development and peace movement.