

Uncle Joe's Adventures with the Soccer-loving Bradley Boys

By Joseph Healey, M.M.

NOTE: The USA National Soccer Team began their 2014 World Cup Dream with an exciting 2-1 win over Ghana in Natal, Brazil on 16 June, 2014. Our classmate Joe Healey who presently lives in Nairobi, Kenya, East Africa will give periodic updates. In this article he shares his family story with many Princeton connections.

I have a big extended American family. My African friends love that. I have 27 nephews/nieces, 35 grandnephews/grandnieces and one great-grandnephew. Here are my adventures with two of them— both who appear in occasional stories on soccer in the sports pages of *The New York Times*.

Bob Bradley is my oldest nephew born March 3, 1958. Bob was born and raised in Montclair in New Jersey, playing soccer at West Essex High School. He is Princeton Class of 1980 and played varsity soccer. He was head coach of the Princeton Varsity Soccer Team from 1984 to 1995, winning two Ivy League titles and reaching the NCAA Final Four in 1993. He is married to my niece Lindsay, the daughter of my younger brother in Baltimore. Bob is presently the manager of the Norwegian soccer club Stabaek. This makes Bradley, 56, the first American head coach of a top-tier European team. Bob is the former national team soccer coach for the United States and Egypt.

Michael Bradley is my oldest grandnephew, the son of Bob and Lindsay. He was born in Princeton, New Jersey on July 31, 1987. He has two younger sisters Kerry and Ryan in a sports loving family. Presently Michael plays for the Toronto Football (the name worldwide for soccer) Club in the Major League Soccer League. He is a starting midfielder and a key player on the US National Soccer Team playing in Brazil. He plays like the team “quarterback” with the main responsibility for coordinating the passing game.

I had the privilege of going to the World Cup in South Africa in 2010. The USA National Soccer Team practiced at Princeton before flying to Johannesburg. I traveled with my family since Bob was the Coach of the US Team and Michael the starting midfielder. When Michael scored a goal against Slovenia we were ecstatic.

The world is closely following the World Cup that started in Sao Paulo, Brazil on June 12 and will end in Rio de Janeiro on July 13. Here in Nairobi, Kenya and throughout Africa fans are glued to their TV sets and the internet especially following the five African teams: Algeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast and Nigeria.

Soccer is a passion on the continent of Africa. When I first came to East Africa I knew that the best way to connect with African young people is through popular music and sports. Well,

I have been a disaster with music – there are just too many different rock stars, bands, styles, rhythms, etc.

But I have done well with sports. Want to start a conversation in Nairobi. Just mention Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo or African stars like Didier Drogba, Yaya Toure and Samuel Eto'o and you have everyone's complete attention. Young Kenyans follow especially the English Premier League and know the names of the starting players of Manchester United and Arsenal by heart. People flock to the local sports bars where on Saturday or Sunday each team has its own TV and shouting fans. When asked what is my favorite European team I answer "The team with the most African players" and get nods of approval.

I teach a course on "Small Christian Communities" at the colleges of the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi. Fortunately the course is in the Spring Semester so I always announce the scores from the previous day's African Cup of Nations matches and get big ovations from the students of the winning teams. I am now 76 years old. The students started calling me "Mzee" (the Swahili word for "Elder") as a title of respect. But I said "No, not yet. Please give me another name." The next day they gave me a new name – "a youth from a long time ago." I like that a lot better.

So to stay youthful I follow sports closely. My Facebook friends know me through my photo in an official Baltimore Ravens jersey. When I launched a new book in Nairobi, the MC said that the three most important things in Joe Healey's life are "Notre Dame Football, Small Christian Communities and God – in that order." I really believe that sports can be a missionary apostolate, real evangelization, a genuine ministry to reach especially young people in Africa and around the world. In our Maryknoll parishes we encourage soccer team composed of players from different ethnic groups. This is a teaching moment on equality and positive ethnicity.

I use many sports examples in my homilies and talks to emphasis teamwork, fair play, inclusiveness, opportunity, perseverance and hope. Star African athletics witness how they have risen out of situations of poverty, broken homes and political unrest. What a wonderful image the Olympics portray of athletics from over 200 nations around the world competing peacefully and fairly.

Some years ago I was in London, England for a Book Launch and the high school students told me all about the map and history of Ivory Coast that they had learned from the internet. Did they get that from Social Science Class? No. That's the African country of Didier Drogba, the famous striker of Chelsea. When I visit America the Kenyan marathon runners are known as well as the President of Kenya.

Now back to the Bradley boys. As a long time missionary in East Africa I was excited when Bob was hired as the Coach of the Egyptian National Team. Africa became more real to my extended family. It is almost impossible for Americans to imagine how important soccer is to the Egyptian people. Ten TV stations broadcast the games of the National Team live. The coach, especially if he wins, is a national hero. Despite the political unrest and violence during the Egyptian Revolution Bob and Lindsay stayed in Cairo, Egypt and called for peace and calm. Their visits to injured people in the hospitals made national TV. As Egypt won its games in the

preliminary rounds Bob emerged as a steading force for national pride. One headline announced: “Bradley is a rock star bigger than Obama to Egyptians.”

Bob and Lindsay’s personal witness in Cairo was inspiring to me and many others. When Bob stayed in Cairo to be in solidarity with the Egyptian Soccer Team and the Egyptian people amid the ongoing violence and chaos a Maryknoll priest friend wrote me: “I can’t think of anyone who is participating in the Mission of God more than Bob at this time. Go Egypt!”

Ghana beat Egypt 7-3 on aggregate in the last qualifying match for the 2014 World Cup leaving the whole country in sports mourning. That sad evening a TV announcer on a sports talk show in Cairo in Arabic said: “We thank Mr. Bradley for the amazing effort he gave to the Egyptian Team. We all owe him words of appreciation for bearing with us through our difficult and harsh times. Thank you. Mr. Bradley.” I choked up hearing that.

I stay connected with Michael too. I baptized his son Luca in New Jersey in December, 2012 and visited him in Rome in May, 2013 to watch him play on the well-known team Roma in the famous Olympic Stadium. Our family is proud that Michael, his wife Amanda and son are a close-knit, loving family. Michael has stayed simple and focused without the inflated ego of so many sports stars.

I was invited to join family members who are going to Brazil in June to watch Michael Bradley and the American team in action. This time can’t go, but I will be leading the Michael Bradley African Fan Club in Nairobi, Kenya. With other Maryknoll missionaries and African friends I will be avidly watching the games live on TV. One thing for sure. When Michael steps out on the field for the first game against Ghana in Natal, Brazil on June 16 both his son Luca and I will be proudly wearing our No. 4 official US jersey with the name “Bradley” on the back.

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Websites:

Small Christian Communities Global Collaborative Website and “Facebook Page”

www.smallchristiancommunities.org

African Proverbs, Sayings and Stories Website (including the “African Stories Database” and “Facebook Page”)

<http://www.afriprov.org>

Club



Bob Bradley, who most recently coached Egypt's national team, now is top-level European soccer as the manager of the Norwegian club Stabaek.

AMR ABDALLAH DALSH / REUTERS