

Sport Unites Gaza and West Bank Football Players' Perspectives

By Khalid Al Nabris and Ibrahim Kareem Salhab



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My name is Khaled Al Nabris, a football player with the Khan Younis Union team, which recently won the Tokyo League 3 for youth. I was born in 2001 in the Gaza Strip, the State of Palestine.

I started my sports journey nine years ago in Khan Younis club where I went through all stages of training, starting with the beginners' team. Two seasons ago, and due to my talent in playing football, I became a member of the first team even though I was the youngest player. The Khan Younis (Orange) team gave me all the support I could imagine in order to reach the advanced level of performance that I have now achieved.

My experience in the Tokyo League is unique. We made it to the final game in Gaza against Al-Bureij team, and we won, three goals to two. I myself scored two goals which enabled my team to win the Tokyo League 3 Championship. I was named the top scorer, with six goals.

In order to participate in the Tokyo League Championship, Shabab Al-Khalil, the Hebron young men's team, managed to get in to Gaza. It was the first time, possibly ever, for a team from the West Bank to make it to Gaza to compete in a football match. The match itself was phenomenal, and the competition was exciting and unique. It was also the first time we played with a team from the West Bank, a place where we do not get a chance to play.

The audience was very special as well. They chanted both for us and for Al-Khalil team which was very encouraging and unifying. My family was among the audience, and they felt very proud of me. I was actually very happy to see them come to support not only me but also all players from both teams.

For me, the game constituted a small part of the whole experience we had during the visit of Al-Khalil team. Before the match, we had the chance to meet and get to know them. We spoke together about our teams and our hopes. Even after the game, the atmosphere was very pleasant. Meeting our friends from Al-Khalil city, playing with them and sharing our playground with them was something that we will cherish forever.

We competed, played, and did our best. The competition was exceptional, but I do not believe that either of our teams was the winner. The real winner was the State of Palestine, and I hope that we will be able to have another match in the West Bank. I

even hope that the Tokyo League will organize regional matches and help us travel and compete with other regional youth teams. This would be great!

Finally, I would like to thank UNDP and the Ambassador of Japan for attending the final game and supporting the sport sector in Palestine. Their attendance meant a lot to us, and we hope that their support will continue in the years to come.

Ibrahim Kareem Salhab – West Bank

My name is Ibrahim Kareem Salhab, captain of Shabab Al-Khalil team. I was born in 2002.

I have loved football since I was very young. I used to practice in open playgrounds with colleagues and friends, and I dreamt that one day I would become a famous football player. The football became my friend that accompanies me wherever I go.

In 2016, I started to play football with Shabab Al-Khalil team, after our coach Fayez Nassar saw me at school and liked my talent. He helped me join the team, and I started training. I put a lot of effort into improving my talent since football was my passion. In 2017, my team and I travelled to Spain to participate in the Barcelona World Cup for Youth, and we were crowned in fourth place.

Then we participated in the Tokyo League 3, and we were the finalists among the West Bank teams playing against Al-Obaidiya team. We played very well, and we won 3 to 1. The final game was set for April 10, 2019. Initially we thought that we would not be able to make it because the game was to be held in Gaza. However, we managed and were able to enter Gaza! The warm welcome we received from the people of Gaza was great. First, we headed to Al Yarmouk stadium where a match was ongoing. We were welcomed by Al Shujaya team and the spectators. We were extremely happy to be in Gaza. We visited the beautiful sea. I collected seashells and brought them with me to Hebron to keep as a token of remembrance. Unfortunately, we lost the game. I was very sad at the beginning, but then we all felt happy for the Khan Younis team as they were celebrating their victory. Visiting Gaza was the best visit we had ever made, and we felt as if we were amongst our people and families, especially during the last day when we visited Al Shujaya market and we were greeted by everyone there. I would like to thank everyone who contributed to this event, especially UNDP for its support and help.