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Football constructing new paths for young Haitians

The power of the Academia Pérolas Negras, and its place in the field of training new subjects

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| Brazil |

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Since 2007, civil society organisation Viva Rio has managed the *Kay Nou* house — or *our/your house* in Creole — in a community space in Bel Air, in the capital, Porto Príncipe. Projects connected to sustainability were held here, the practice of capoeira, and artistic development, among others. In 2009, the organisation started to form the Academia Pérolas Negras (Black Pearl Academy - APN) football club. But it was only in 2011, following the Porto Príncipe earthquake that the project developed. The earthquake reached 7.3 on the Richter scale, and it was estimated that it generated between 100,000 and 300,000 deaths, leaving more than one million Haitians without a home. Thus, many of them headed to Kay Nou in order to find assistance. The house redirected its efforts to assist more than 2,000 families, who went to live in Kay Nou for several months. The artistic and sports activities within that context were reconsidered as tools which could contribute towards the refugees' mental health.



Photo by Vitor Madeira

Having been established in Haiti, a second training centre for sport and education was established in Brazil in 2016, with its focus on benefiting young people in a vulnerable situation, and refugees. Registered at the State of Rio de Janeiro Football Federation (FFERJ) in 2017, APN were the Rio de Janeiro Series C champions in their first year, then rising to Series B2 the following year. Since then, the club has been improving its performance, and is now taking place in the national football system. For example, following the establishment of a national training system for athletes, it no longer assists only Haitians. Other people also take part, particularly refugees, and the project has been evolving to became an international, integrated training network, with a central hub in Resende and Itatiaia in Vale do Paraíba, in the State of Rio de Janeiro.

The Black Pearls' training programme



Photo by Vitor Madeira

More than a football club, the Black Pearls is a training centre which operates as a reception, education, and co-existence network, which enables the people who pass through the club, although dispersed in different cities and countries, to keep in regular, daily contact.

The young Haitians, above all from communities such as Bel Air, Cité Soleil, and Canaan, among others, face impoverishment in the territories which are included among the socio-economically most vulnerable urban clusters on the planet. They are places of informal economy, where work regulated by laws is a rarity. In Haiti, as in Brazil, young people form the segment most affected by unemployment and informality in the world of work.



Photo by Vitor Madeira

The Academia Pérolas Negras operates in this context. It acts in communities, focusing on adolescents and young people. In football, it seeks young people with talent and skills, who are able to endure the discipline and demands of challenging training, which open up professional job opportunities. Therefore, APN is a training space and bridge for the football market. Even if not all of the APN members become successful, high performance athletes, the training obtained opens up other possibilities for them. Almost all the members and former-members have regular work and, although they are still very young, have already been able to help their families.

An expressive number of APN Haitians were able to migrate and find work in other countries: 18% of the Haitians who have passed through the organization in Haiti and/or Brazil up until 2019 were able to migrate and work abroad, almost always in the football field. The list of countries is important, not just for the number, but also for their expressiveness in the world of professional football.

The discipline of sports training, the values which guide high performance sport, the living conditions at Pérolas Negras, the emphasis on education for life, and the technical quality of the trainers, all open up an exceptional field of opportunities for the athletes. Talent, added to discipline, and the values of sport, create a large circle of promising young people, who do justice to the name “Black Pearls.”



Photo by Vitor Madeira

Education is a fundamental part of Academia Pérolas Negras’ work philosophy. It is demonstrated in extra school assistance and acceleration programmes, learning languages, new technologies, and the pacific resolution of problems and conflicts, in addition to other activities. It is also demonstrated in constant encouragement to take part in regular public education and continuation at higher education levels. Partnerships with universities and technical training centres create opportunities for those graduating from the organisation. None of this is easy, since the training time and competitions are intensive.

Academia Pérolas Negras' experience demonstrates that investment in sport, under the terms set by the organisation, allows rapid progression for its target audience. Even before reaching the age of 20, the young people are able to help their families. Indeed, this is a central objective in the young people's narrative, from the time they start at the academy. The monthly transfers, although modest, start in the first month of paid activities, from a scholarship or job. They are small sums, but relevant in the context of expressive economic fragility.



Photo by Vitor Madeira

Unlike the majority of their compatriots, the APN young people benefit from a scholarship or regular work. They receive housing, a balanced diet, health care, and a physical development programme, according to their individual profile and functions. They also count on tactical and strategic training, an expanded education, including learning languages and new communication technologies; competitions which take them beyond their communities, cities, and countries, exposure to weekly challenges, in-depth experience

in how to deal with victories, defeats and draws, the spotlight, applause, and public criticism.



Photo by Vitor Madeira

Black Pearl training is an adventure which radically transforms these boys' and girls' lives. And there is more: alongside adventure is the awareness that preparation for another time in life, following their youth, is required. It is well known that it is difficult for an athlete's career to last until they are 40 years old. Of all the information collated here, it is positive to know that 92% of our graduates decided on, and found, ways to continue studying.

Black Pearl has become a life reference in their home communities, which have access to the Pearls through social networks. Besides numbers, they display images and stories which are told around the world.

APN at the Global Refugee Forum in Geneva

In December 2019, members of the Academia Pérolas Negras embarked for Geneva, to take part in the First Global Forum on Refugees organised by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Five athletes represented APN at the forum: the Syrians, Ahmad and Hafith, and Haitians, Badio, Basquin, and Tijô. In addition to players, the delegation was formed by the APN president, Rubem Cesar Fernandes, and creative director, André D'Ávila.

The forum discussed the issue of refugees and migrations motivated by catastrophes, including economic crises. It was the first time that UN Member States had made this invitation to discuss the issue. One of the focuses of the event was understanding sport as an instrument to integrate the refugee population. The Black Pearls were part of an opening event for the forum.

APN has become an important world reference for being the first with refugee athletes with permission to belong to a federation, and act as professionals. At the forum, the Black Pearls reiterated, and were an example, of how practicing sport is a powerful instrument of inclusion. APN stayed in Geneva for one week. Having acclimatised to the European winter, the athletes took part in planned activities. They recorded a report for the Globo Network (Brazil), and played in a football championship on 16th December, with various beneficiaries from international projects that focus on sport for refugees. Six teams were formed, with nine members in each, without any division by gender, or nationality. The competition was held on one day, but this did not limit the power of this event. A female Afghan player commemorated a Haitian goal against a team of Syrians and Palestinians. We stored the memory that it was a meeting to celebrate inclusion and respect for migrants and refugees around the world.