

On a football pitch in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Hong Kong's diminutive number Seven, coolly receives the ball from his keeper. In a flash he controls it, then swivels and sends a neat volley into the corner of the England goal. Hong Kong is thrashed in the match, but the 20-year-old striker scores his first two goals of the tournament. He would go on to score another 20, including hat-tricks against Argentina, Greece and Germany.

The player was Wahid Mohammad, a Hong Kong-born Pakistani, and this was the opening match of the Homeless World Cup Tournament held in September. Wahid ended up as Hong Kong's top scorer and a tournament favourite. Host Brazil won the trophy, but Team Hong Kong had reasons to be proud. They managed to boost their world ranking from 40th place to 37th out of 43 teams.

For the team players, this was a great achievement. Players for the Homeless World Cup are recruited from marginalised groups in society, such as the homeless, drug users and problem gamblers. They are put through four months of intensive training and then participate in the annual international tournament.

For Wahid, it has been an eye-opening and life-changing experience. The third of four children, he grew up in Hong Kong and speaks Cantonese, although he cannot read and write Chinese. He attended a school with other ethnic minority students but did not like studying. So he left after taking his Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations and started working.

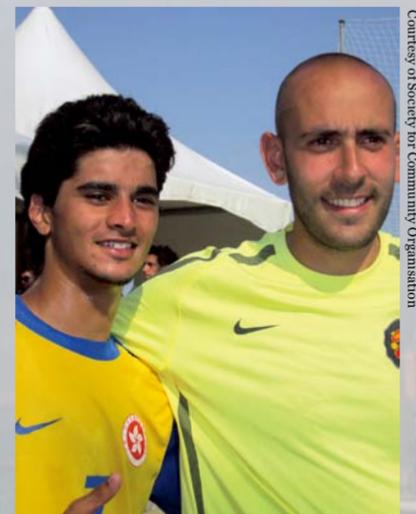
Wahid's first job was as a waiter in a coffee shop, but he did not take it seriously. He was always late for work and then he fell in with a bad crowd, joined a gang and took drugs like ketamine and marijuana. "We would go out, eat together, have some fun, and get into fights," he says.

Fighting was a fixture in Wahid's life at that time. He had a quick temper both on and off the football pitch. Wahid has always been crazy about football, and played regularly at the Sham Shui Po Sports Ground. However, his hot-headedness hindered him from an opportunity to exploit his talent and passion for the game.

He was once hired as a part-time player for Southern District football team, which was still a third division team at the time. But in a match against a Wong Tai Sin football team, he got into a fight with the opposing team members and the referee, earning him a red card and a six-match suspension. The match had taken place during a work break, and his boss was shocked to see him returning to work covered in bruises.

Despite his frequent scraps outside, Wahid has always been a model son at home. He loves his family and, while once he had no problem violating norms in society, he follows every Muslim custom: he never eats pork, he goes to the Mosque with his family at the Islamic New Year and also loves and respects his mother very much. "I didn't dare to let her know everything I did outside, like taking drugs and joining a gang," Wahid says.

"When my elder brother knew I was taking drugs, he scolded and beat me," he recalls. It was this older brother, Tofiq, who suggested that Wahid try out for the Homeless World Cup. Tofiq, had been introduced to the Homeless World Cup by Hong Kong Unison, an organisation working for ethnic minorities. He represented Hong Kong in the Milan tournament last year.



During the Brazil trip, Wahid had the chance to play with foreign players and appreciate each other's skill.

At the trials, held in March, Wahid impressed the coach Leung Chi-wing. "He has good pace and technique, he has the qualities a football player should have," says Ho. After the four-month training period, he had no doubt Wahid would be in the starting line-up of the four-man team from a squad of seven.

From the Beautiful Game to a Beautiful Life

by Candy Chin Hoi-shan

Wahid's performance vindicated the coach's confidence. His goal in the game against England was lauded in the tournament's official match report as Drogba-esque (a reference to the English Premiership side Chelsea's iconic striker).

"Many of the impressive moments in the game showed me that he applied what he learnt in practices very well. It proved he was really dedicated to the training," Leung says.

Wahid returns the compliment. "Coach has taught me a lot," he says. "I am small, so if I want to play in the first division, I need to bulk up, I need to be able to run at opponents. He used to be a defender, so he knows these things."

His temperament has also changed. Although he still gets upset and frustrated during games, he no longer tries to blame anyone. Instead, he has learnt to deal with his emotions on his own instead of hitting out.

"We are like friends. He listens to me," says Leung. "The key is to tell him not to lose his temper easily, in a mild way."

Apart from the coaching staff, Wahid also has a good relationship with his teammates. At the beginning, as most of the players were Chinese, they felt it was hard to communicate with Wahid and his cousin, Dick, because of language and cultural differences.

"Sometimes Hong Kong people speak Cantonese so fast that Wahid and Dick can hardly keep up," says team Vice-Chairman Ho Wai-chi, "at the same time they speak Urdu and Pashto to each other, so others also don't understand."

But after months of training and playing together, then spending days and nights together in Brazil, they now understand and respect each other more. Wahid and Dick try to speak as much Cantonese as possible and the other team players try to speak more slowly in Cantonese. Wahid also acted as an interpreter when they gave interviews in English in Brazil.

"It impressed and cheered me a lot during the Brazil trip, when the Chinese team players actively asked the catering volunteers not to provide any pork because of Wahid and Dick's religious customs," Ho Wai-Chi says.



Winnie Tse

The social worker for the team, Sonny Yau, says he has witnessed the positive change in Wahid.

The whole team is now full of warmth and support for each other. They also appreciate the care shown to them by the team organisers. "The team secretary Sonny (Yau) works really hard. He often asks me about my job. He cares about us. We sometimes have gatherings and sharing sessions," says Wahid.

Sonny Yau, who is also the team social worker, says the Homeless World Cup is about more than football. "We want them to get something from this game. Arousing their interest in football is not the main aim. Rather, we want them to build up their confidence and forget about the past," he says, "Moreover, we make them feel like they're at home. When they encounter hardships, they know how to ask for help and support."

Vice-chairman Ho says he has noticed a change in Wahid. He believes that taking part in the tournament and playing so well have boosted Wahid's self-esteem. It has given him an achievement he can be proud of.

"All the players in the tournament were given participants' medals. Wahid kept his on all the way home, on the



Courtesy of Society of Community Organisation

Wahid playing against Argentina Team in the Homeless World Cup Tournament.

"I love playing football. It makes me very happy. How much money I would make is not so important as long as I can make enough to live."

flight and after he got off the plane," says Ho.

Wahid agrees he has gained a lot. He has developed a sense of responsibility and learned to control his temper. "For instance, when it is busy at work, I will get frustrated. People might complain that I am too slow and ask me to be quicker. I will just take it, I don't get into fights."

From Brazil, he has taken home the kernel of a dream. He tells *Varsity* that after watching him score four goals against Argentina, a member of the England side's coaching staff called him over.

"He said I played really well and that he wanted to see my passport to see if he could help me go to England to play football."

Nothing has come of the encounter so far. And for now, Wahid is content

to work hard and save money. He is currently working as a waiter at a restaurant on The Peak. He gets on well with his manager there, who has been very supportive of his football playing.

Like many young men his age, he likes cars and girls. He hopes to pass his driving test, buy a car and find a girlfriend. On the home front, he is supporting his family by contributing 70 per cent of his salary.

Eventually, Wahid says he wants to qualify as a football coach. "I love playing football. It makes me very happy. How much money I would make is not so important as long as I can make enough to live." But for now, his priority is to save money so his family can live better.

For the past three months, he has also severed his links with the old gang associates, "I haven't been in contact. I don't take their calls. I never, ever want to go back," he says of his previous life.



Courtesy of Society of Community Organisation



Snaps of the Hong Kong team during the Brazil trip.



Courtesy of Society of Community Organisation

The Hong Kong team poses for a picture before the trip to Brazil.