

# Sports for a United World



New strategies for international relations

By FRANCESCO DI CHIARA

**“T**EACHING SOMEONE TO SKI, whether it is a pianist, a lawyer, a priest or a child, makes no difference to me.” Ute Kulzinger, a German ski instructor, said. “To me what counts is to be a key for opening the door to sports for anyone, and help that individual through my knowledge and experience.”

Christian Ciech is a hang-gliding world champion. “When I fly,” he admits, “I admire the wonders of nature; my faith is strengthened and a sincere feeling of gratitude rises up from my heart.”

Felipe Leibholz is a professional swimmer at Virginia Tech University. “In my sport,” he said, “we are taught to develop a winning mentality. Notwithstanding the highly competitive environment, sports help us to grow and to build relationships.”

What do these people have in common? They are members of *Sportmeet for a United World*, a worldwide network of

people who see sports as an important and positive reality. Their goal is to contribute, in their own field, to build universal brotherhood and peace through the Focolare spirituality of unity. They try to put into practice the “golden rule” present in all cultures and religions: “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.”

Athletes of the most varying sports, amateurs and professionals, lovers

of the outdoors and physical education teachers, coaches and technicians, undergraduate and graduate students in sports specialties, referees, judges and sports commissioners, journalists and media professionals specialized in sports, and anyone associated with the world of physical activity, all find common ground through *Sportmeet*.

This new and rapidly growing



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**Left: Sportmeet conference in Vienna, Austria in 2004 on sports as a tool for peace education. Top: Jogging during the first conference in Loppiano, Italy in 2002 where 25 athletes and sports operators established Sportmeet.**



organization started in September 2002, when 25 athletes and sports operators from different countries met in Loppiano, Italy. Their determination and enthusiasm lead to the establishment of *Sportmeet*, the choice of its logo, and the creation of a website which offers a window onto the project ([www.sportmeet.org](http://www.sportmeet.org)). In fact, it gathers and promotes ideas, studies and research, it launches events and activities, and publishes stories of people who share these ideals.

One hundred and thirty people from 17 countries participated in the 2004 conference in Vienna, Austria. They discussed sports as a tool for peace education, a vital need for society today.

Sports are an emblematic expression of our body, which cannot be seen just as an object. "The body reveals the person," John Paul II affirmed in his *Theology of the Body*. "Our bodies give form to our innermost being and unique personality. They give visible form to our inner life." When can sports inspire the spirit? "When it bestows mastery of self to those who practice it," Paolo Crepaz, sports physician and coordinator of *Sportmeet*, explained at the Vienna conference, "and when it endows the athlete's actions with moral vigor."

The concept was emphasized by Focolare founder Chiara Lubich in her message to the participants. "Sports," she said, "can bring out the essential aspects of the human person—as a finite being confronted with defeat and difficulty,

yet called to the infinite and capable of overcoming personal limitations."

Who knows how to educate in this manner? "Just as it takes the warmth of springtime to make a garden bloom," Chiara concluded, "it takes the warmth of love—and especially mutual love—to make the innate truths in the human person sprout and grow."

Several socially oriented sports initiatives, sponsored or encouraged by *Sportmeet*, are already taking place in different countries. In Bogota, Colombia, an entire soccer team of teenagers has been "adopted at a distance" by a professional soccer club in southern Italy. The Seat of Wisdom College in the Focolare little city in Fontem, Cameroon, established "SportsFontem," an organization for promoting athletic activities. In Buenos Aires, members of *Sportmeet* are sponsoring a mini-Olympics for children in disadvantaged neighborhoods, called "Deporchicos." In Jardim Margarida, near São Paulo, Brazil, the promotion of sports is being sought as a tool for human development. The school *Café con Leche*,

a successful adoption-at-a-distance project in an underprivileged area of Santo Domingo, is now planning the creation of a sports field.

*Sport4Peace*, a particularly imaginative initiative, unfolded in Austria during the school year 2003-2004. Over 20,000 high-school students experienced sports as more than physical activity. It offers a way to build a society promoting solidarity and peace.

The participants in *Sport4Peace* played according to six simple rules (play seriously, play honestly, never give up, be considerate of others, play for the fun of playing, and make a difference). The rules, printed on the sides of a cube, expressed in synthesis just one rule, the "golden rule." The young people conducted sports tournaments and musical events where they collected signatures for peace. Every event began with the tossing of the cube. In striving to put into practice the rule that came out on top, the students had a chance to win "Olympic rings." Every peace-making gesture, for example, acts of collaboration or forgiveness, garnered





  
**sportmeet**  
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“golden rings.” The final goal was to win 51,000 golden and Olympic rings to symbolically “cover 51,000 square meters of land with a net of peace.”

The initiative was sponsored and supported by leading Austrian sports and school organizations, by several leading sports champions including Ralf Schumacher, Hermann Mayer, Michael Walchhofer, and others. They all endorsed the cube, expressing appreciation for the originality and effectiveness of the idea. Promoters in other countries are planning to organize similar events.

—with Clare Zanzucchi

**Opposite page: How should one face a defeat? “Learning how to rebuild upon a loss could transform a defeat into an important experience for those who do sports,” Italian soccer champion Gianni Rivera explained at a Sportmeet conference. Above: Christian Ciech, hang-gilding world champion, and Ute Kulzinger, ski instructor, in action. (Right) Austria: the “cubes” of Sport4Peace, which involved over 20,000 students.**

