## **Serving In Africa**

By Geoff Bower

"DO YOU EVER ALLOW VISITING PROS? IF YOU DO, I WOULD LOVE TO COME."
"WE'D LOVE TO HAVE YOU."



It was last February, when I found myself at the PTR tennis symposium in Hilton Head, South Carolina chatting with Dr. Liz Odera, a warm and friendly coach, from Kenya. She began telling me about her tennis facility (Sadili Oval Club) in Nairobi, Africa. Little did I know that chance meeting was to later catapult me to an international voyage that was to be one the best experiences of my life!

Teaching tennis to African children, living in the local community and going on a safari sounded very exciting. My boss, Karl Hale, who's been to Nairobi, strongly encouraged me to go. I was a little nervous; I didn't really know quite what was in store, but I figured that was

part of the excitement. I knew the deal would be teaching the kids camp for a week, they'd take care of meals and accommodations and I'd get to go on a 5 day safari!

In December, I boarded a plane from Canada to the Kenyan capital of Nairobi. On the drive to the village from the airport, we drove through various police check points which I later found out was common place around Nairobi. I spent the first week of my African adventure at the Sadili Oval Club where I helped run a tennis camp for 40 kids, ages 5 -16. Going to work was pretty fascinating; I'd pass the local women returning from the market with live chickens under their arms or goats over

their shoulders, kind of the Kenyan version of going to Pusateris! I was a little uncomfortable about walking around by myself early on, but people got to know me pretty quickly. Word gets around fast when there's someone new in the community.

I slept under a mosquito net and each new day I awoke to the Kenyan Alarm Clock (dozens of roosters) at 5:30am. My morning routine consisted of teaching yoga to Billy (local tennis coach and my amazing tour guide), cold showers, yummy instant coffee and a breakfast of mango and sim sim (sesame snaps). I introduced myself as "Coach Pinky" (kids I taught in Jamaica called me this because of the effect the sun has on my

pasty Canadian skin, so it stuck!)

Camp started at 9:00am. 15 of the kids from the camp were from Kibera (Kibera is the largest slum in Africa 1.5 million). In the beginning I had a difficult time remembering the kid's names. Mose, Zablo, Jamin, Amon, Kibet. One little guy, Mose, became my close friend - he would fall asleep in my lap during lunch break. One of the kids had this old metal racquet that looked like the end had been gnawed off by a rabid monkey. It had no grip whatsoever. A lot of the kids play with broken strings, they don't know any different. In place of tennis shoes, some of the kids wore cheap, plastic flip-flops. I also learned quickly that in Nairobi there's no such thing as a new tennis ball – they're all completely bald. Sadili's four courts were in similar shape; the asphalt was chipped, the nets were worn through, and the posts were homemade - built out of wood. Thanks to Doug Coombs at Wilson Sports, which supplied the equipment, I brought over balls, 25 racquets and plenty of string. For many, Sadili, which is partly funded by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and helps sponsor the Kibera children, provides an escape - a safe place to play a game they love. Fortunately, the club has satellite TV, and they get to watch their heroes Roger Federer and Andy Roddick; they were the two more frequently tossed-around names. The kids arrived wearing big smiles - an hour before camp officially started - and played until the sun went down, since Sadili doesn't have outdoor lighting. If it did, the kids may have played all night.

The club, which emphasizes nutrition, provided two snacks and a lunch every day. Some of the kids from Kibera only have the opportunity to eat when they play tennis, and that is why the club includes snacks and meals in their training. Monday is usually a low energy day for the Kibera children because they often don't get proper nutrition over the weekend.

I was pretty impressed with the gener-



al tennis knowledge and overall skill of the campers. The club is in a relatively safe area (10 km outside of Nairobi City Centre), but is nevertheless surrounded by high walls - topped with broken glass - to keep out intruders. The walls do nothing, however, to detract monkeys from stopping by to watch the action. In the same way we see squirrels around, they see monkeys.

Aside from getting used to the wildlife - which I saw plenty of during a five-day safari during the latter half of my trip - I also dealt with ball-control issues, because of the extremely high altitude, the balls just take off. I was completely baffled why I couldn't keep the ball in the court (not that it's much better at home). It wasn't until I met a local pro who used to work in Toronto who shared with me his experience of

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getting used to the off-putting near-tothe-equator-strange-gravity conditions.

In addition to coaching, I traveled to Kibera with some of the kids, a 10 minute walk from Sadili. Kibera's corrugated iron roofs reflect the sunshine, a familiar and consistent sight all around Nairobi. - . I was shocked by the conditions (lots of tiny mud huts with no plumbing, no running water, really grim conditions). The children swarmed towards me in a big pile as I entered the village. They all greeted me with "How are you?" in English. I responded with

"Mzuri sana" - in Swahili, which means "I'm fine." They all laughed.

It was an extremely emotional experience. All I could think of is how grateful I am for what I have. It was a roller coaster of emotions. I experienced so much joy, sadness, hope and laughter all within minutes. I made the rounds to all the homes of the boys and girls I coached. The children were so proud and excited to show me their homes. One of the fathers stayed home from work just to meet his son's tennis coach. I was overwhelmed by the children's pride and heart. It's amazing how happy they are and how little they have. What really amazed me was how close they are to one another. You could really feel their love for each other.

I came away from Kibera wanting to help. Tennis is giving these kids opportunities, hope, and something to look forward to and get excited about. My goal is to start a scholarship fund to give the Kibera children an opportunity to play tennis. I'm currently working on this with Dr Liz Odera (owner of Sadili). For \$300.00 a year the children will be able to play tennis twice a week for a year and have meals included in their training. My goal is to sponsor 10 children a year. Through tennis and the Sadili Oval, these children can have a place to go where people believe in them and provide a positive, safe and healthy environment. What a great feeling it would be to be able to be part of that.

If you're interested in learning more about Sadili Oval (www.sadili.com) or are interested in supporting the Kibera Tennis program please contact me at gbower@donaldaclub.ca