

Fantasy Footballer

By Richard Starnes, The Ottawa Citizen

March 28, 2009

This is a story that began in the poverty and dust on the Liberian-Guinea border in West Africa and wove through a United Nations refugee camp to Ottawa en route to a leading soccer academy in England.

Today, Abe Donzo, 15, is poised for a future in the European soccer firmament.

"I was in a bad mood for a year," he said Friday.

What, I wanted to know, was there to be in a bad mood about when you have won the opportunity to join the Everton Academy, England's Premier League's internationally renowned centre of excellence. The place where Wayne Rooney honed his young soccer skills.

"It was the injury," Donzo said. And herein lies a tale that epitomizes the level of determination required to reach for the stars.

First, I'm taking you back.

Abe Donzo's dad has three wives. Donzo has 15 siblings. Two are full siblings, now living in Australia. With such a large family living in as poor a country as Guinea, it is easy to imagine the conditions. The small boy's parents understood how much he needed to move away to get a chance in life.

So they sent him to a United Nations refugee camp on the Liberian side of the border. The plan was for Abe, his half-sister, uncle and aunt to move to Canada as political refugees. But that took time.

While he waited, young Abe spent his hours doing almost all there was to do there. He kicked a ball about. Unconsciously, he was honing his skills hour after hour. Little did he know where that would lead.

When the call came -- the papers in order, acceptance as political refugees granted -- Donzo was 12.

They began Canadian life in a home in Beacon Hill in Ottawa's east and times were tough. Donzo's aunt left and his uncle, who ironically had been a social worker back in Africa, became the single provider. This is where Phil Roberts comes in.

"He was a good man struggling to make a life for everyone," said Roberts, a Colonel By High School guidance counsellor who doubles as the University of Ottawa's assistant football (that's not soccer!) coach.

"But Children's Aid got involved and told him he could not work and bring up two children. He was proud and would not go on welfare."

That was when Roberts' wife, Susan, started to pay attention. He was attending Henry Munro middle school and she was vice-principal. She noticed the boy not only because of a minor social issue or two, but mostly because she had seen him playing soccer for the school.

"This is a special boy," she told her husband, who was not mightily impressed. After all, he coached the other football.

It was Susan Roberts who made the moves that landed the boy with the Ottawa Fury in the fall of 2006. He had just turned 13.

That Christmas, Donzo was invited to meet Roberts, his wife and two daughters at their Metcalfe home. Phil Roberts quickly realized his wife's "you'll really like this boy" remark was not off the mark. This boy fit with the family and they wanted him to stay. So began a since-completed 14-month move to become his legal guardians.

Meanwhile, Donzo was proving his soccer ability. By the time he turned 14, he was starring with the Fury U-17s.

Earlier that year -- in July -- Donzo's coach, Jason Whiting, had heard of a special "camp" being put on in Ottawa and suggested the teenager signed up.

"When we got there, I thought it odd boys were getting cut," said Roberts, who had provided the \$150 entry fee. "It took me an hour before I realized this was not a camp. It was a TV reality show."

An independent film company -- under the guise of the show Soccer Dreams -- had a deal going with Everton to find Canada's top player between the ages of 14 and 18. It wasn't until it was too late that Roberts realized the boy was under age. The prize was the prospect of a two-year placement with the Everton Academy.

Donzo and one other youngster came out at the top and were sent, separately, to England for a final once-over. That was in December 2007. Three months later, Donzo was invited back. The other boy was not.

"I knew they meant business when they decided to keep him for an extra week," said Roberts. "We were there with the full knowledge of Children's Aid and because I could only stay a week, the club paid to fly over a Children's Aid worker to we with Abe. Now that really does mean business."

Donzo remembers what academy head coach Ray Hall told him.

"He said he liked my skills and they were ready to sign a contract. He told me I could sign for four years if I want," he said.

So the scene was set, Donzo would be returning to the academy for an extended stay in the fall. But hold on. ... In May, he tore an anterior cruciate ligament in his knee. That's a really bad-news soccer injury often requiring operations and lengthy rehab.

That was Donzo's fate. Everton was obviously out. On Sept. 9 -- six days after his 15th birthday -- he went under the knife at the Fowler Kennedy clinic at the University of Western Ontario. It's the place where top athletes go. It does 400 such operations a year.

Then came rehab.

"Here's what most impressed me about the kid," said Roberts. "I have never known an athlete more determined. He would wake at 6 a.m., exercise and ice. Then breakfast, school, exercise, ice; back to class, come home, exercise and ice and bed. That and weightlifting. A month ago he was back on the pitch.

"When he went to London for a check this week, the doctor couldn't tell which knee was the injured one. No scars. He has healed perfectly."

Now it's the psychological side of things for both Donzo and his second dad.

Two weeks ago, Roberts admits to a sick feeling while watching the boy playing. "I saw him tackled in practice and he went down (hard)," Roberts said. "I thought, 'Oh no.' But it turned out to be a little ankle tweak."

Donzo knows he is almost there physically. He's not so sure mentally. "Sometimes I am sad about going to England at all," he said. "Am I ready?"

"Maybe I'm discouraged by my knee."

Then he is reminded about players like leading England striker Michael Owen, who has had the same injury. In fact, the list of star ACL victims is lengthy.

Roberts, doling out a little tough love, believes Donzo is ready.

"I told him: 'It's you against the world now. You're black and that counts against you. You're Canadian and that counts against you. You're Muslim and that counts against you.'

"I know he's prepared for the accolades if it works and he's prepared for the kick in the butt if it doesn't work out."

Time will tell.

RICHARD STARNES' The Beautiful Game column appears Saturdays.