



# INTERNATIONAL STRATEGIC ALLIANCES

Humanitarian, Educational, and Leadership Initiatives.

## Birth of a Mission

Michael VanHook and Gregg Shaffer



**“What’s that?”** We jumped up from our lunch at an outdoor café and ran to peer over a retaining wall to see an unusual sight and sound. Parading down the middle of Fort-Liberte’s main street was a small marching band playing Sousa marches, followed by four proud soccer teams in their uniforms. We asked, **“What’s this?”**

A man replied, “It’s Haiti’s two hundredth anniversary of its liberation from the French; it’s a national holiday. We’re closing all of the businesses and holding a soccer tournament at the stadium.”

“What stadium?” we asked, a bit chagrined that two sports guys like us didn’t even know a stadium existed. He pointed toward the east. We finished our business at the cafe and raced to find the stadium by following the noise erupting from a distant crowd. Wandering through unfamiliar backstreets and catching the glances of curious residents, we arrived at the non-descript walls of a dingy stadium and entered through a small opening in the structure. We were dismayed to discover a fervent crowd of approximately 3,500 cheering spectators.

“**We’ve got to do something,**” Gregg remarked. “We should see if we can find the leaders and form a partnership with the teams. Maybe, we can present one of the new balls that you brought at halftime of the championship game as a gift.”

We made connections, the game and our presence were promoted on the local radio station. The next day, we were escorted as special guests by the Fort-Liberte’ Galaxie, the local soccer club, into the stadium for the championship game.



Upon our return to the stadium, we were introduced to coaches and curious players. Holding up a ball, Mike asked, “Could we present this at half time?”

The leader stared at the ball and asked, “Could we use it for the game?”

“Of course,” we replied, handing him the ball, realizing that our donated ball was better than any ball that they had for their competition.

When halftime arrived, we were ushered to the center line and a big ceremony commenced before the hushed masses. They introduced us over a sound system, and Mike made a short speech expressing our desire to form a partnership with the soccer club. Next, Mike presented the ball to their leaders during a photo opportunity.

When their leader spoke, he said, **“We thank you not only for your gift, but also your evangelism.”** Astonished, we looked at each other. We couldn’t believe what we’d just heard. **“Evangelism?”**

**We hadn’t mentioned Jesus, but in some mysterious way, the gift of a mere soccer ball communicated the love of Christ more than words; it took on a sacramental element.**



Fort-Liberte Galaxie coach, Darnley Pierre, David Michel, and Michael VanHook (November 23, 2003)

Later that evening in an office without electricity, we sat down with the leaders and asked a simple question, **“What do you need?”**

One coach replied, **“We have 150 students in our club but only eight old balls.”**

Another added, “Our students beg for cleats before each game. They share their uniforms with each other. When one team finishes a game, they remove their uniforms and give it to other players for the next game.”

Our minds drifted to U.S. kids who discarded good soccer balls and cleats after only a couple of seasons. We knew most players had closets full of used uniforms lying around at home. One word came to mind, “**Doable.**” To every need these coaches expressed, “**Doable,**” was the reaction. “We could get these items to the Galaxie.”

Suddenly, the words of St. Francis took on a new meaning, “Go out today and preach the gospel . . . and if you must, use words.” On that night, a simple vision was born. We could clearly see that God was opening a huge door for us to love people in a tangible way that would allow us to present Christ’s love to the all segments of society. From that single ball, new openings to penetrate various segments of society have emerged. Today, we’re touching thousands by establishing significant and enduring relationships with Haitian leaders and groups that are making a difference.

From these surprising, simple beginnings in November of 2003, the International Strategic Alliances was born. Now when we see and hear unfamiliar sights and sounds, we’re a little quicker to not only ask, “What’s this?” but to wonder how God could turn any situation into an opening to become his instruments of mercy and hope.

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