**“Football is my life” – Abubacarr Konta**

**“Football unites people – that’s what I love about the game.” – Abubacarr Konta, a young migrant from The Gambia, who is building a new life in Italy.**

Every month, as part of its #EqualGame campaign, UEFA is focusing on a player from one of its 55 member associations. This person will be an example that disability, religion, sexuality race and social background are no barriers to playing and enjoying football.

The teenage years are a tender time to bid farewell to one’s childhood roots. For 16-year-old Abubacarr Konta, however, the moment was right to embark on a journey towards a new life by leaving his African home in The Gambia and seeking a fresh beginning in migrating to Europe.

The loss of his parents in the preceding years had left Abu bereft of familiar help and comfort. Life became difficult without this parental love, so he looked for new feelings of security.

It meant sacrifices and saying goodbye to loved ones as he set out on the road to a new existence that has since seen him settle on the island of Sicily, at Italy’s southernmost tip.

His love of football, his enthusiasm for playing the game and the friendships forged through football are proving to be crucial foundations upon which the young migrant is shaping a bright future.

Abu’s journey into that future began on 2 February 2016, along with several friends. “I left The Gambia for Senegal,” he recalls. “On the day I was leaving, most of my friends told me not to go – I wept – but I felt I had to go.”

His route was to take him across the Sahara desert. “I spent two weeks in Senegal, and moved on to Mali for three weeks. I passed through Burkina Faso and Niger, and then arrived in Libya, where I stayed for three months.”

As has been the case with so many other migrants from Africa, Libya was the departure point to cross the Mediterranean Sea by boat to Italy. The sea crossings can be fraught with peril, and this particular crossing brought a tragic event.

“[Me and my friends] were on the same boat, sailing,” Abu remembers. “But the boat developed a fault. We were not sitting together - water engulfed the boat at the end where my friends were sitting.”

“One of my friends fell into the water with others who were sitting with him. He called out my name, but I couldn’t help because I was trying to save my own life, and they drowned.”

Abu reached Sicily – his sole possessions were a shirt and shorts. “I wasn’t even wearing shoes,” he says. He took his first fledgling steps in his new life in the city of Messina, before being re-located to the SPRAR centre in the town of Giammoro, on the northern Sicilian coast.

The centre is home to a small group of youngsters between the ages of 15 and 18, who are attending Italian language classes and learning additional life skills. The centre’s coordinators act as mentors and chaperones, and Abu soon relished the warm, safe environment. “The people there are very kind to me,” he emphasises.

Tree-planting, watering and using his cooking skills occupy Abu’s working time – but there is also plenty of time and scope to play football, an overriding passion since his childhood.

He shows talent as a player. “I feel happy when playing football. I love football,” he says. The SPRAR centre footballers play at a training ground near the town of Milazzo, and football has helped them to bond as a group of friends.

“Football brought us together and made us one family,” Abu reflects. “We are there for each other.”

He has taken vast inspiration as a player from Xavi Alonso, the recently retired Spanish midfielder who played, among others, for Real Madrid, Bayern Munich and Liverpool, as well as winning 114 caps for his country. “I like the way he played,” Abu says. “When I was in The Gambia, people used to call me Alonso…”

Abu feels great respect for the Sicilians. The delights of Italian cooking have also hastened the integration process, with outings to local restaurants fuelling a fondness for pizza and pasta.

“I’m grateful to the people of Sicily,” he reflects. “They have changed my life, and the situation I was faced with. If they had not helped me, I could have died. They bought me clothes and shoes, and found me a job.”

“This story clearly illustrates that football can be an important tool for the integration of migrants in Europe,” said UEFA President Aleksander Čeferin.

“I am pleased that this project in Sicily, supported by the FIGC, is helping young African migrants integrate into European society and culture.”

The Italian Football Federation (FIGC) has been doing its bit to try and help young people like Abubacarr. It is supporting a project that is dedicated to the development of the potential of youngsters in difficulty through a campaign built across football and enhancing the values it brings to society.

“The FIGC wishes to play an active and pro-active role in UEFA’s #EqualGame campaign through the “Rete!” project, which has been developed over the last three years with a series of field initiatives aimed at the integration and inclusion of more than 500 unaccompanied minors who are being hosted at reception centres in Italy,” said the general secretary of the FIGC, Michele Uva.

Abu’s ambitions are crystal-clear. “I want to work hard and take care of my family,” he says, thinking of his brothers and sisters back in The Gambia, with whom he remains in contact through regular telephone calls. “I’m young and can still do more in the future.”

And, who knows? Perhaps a fulfilling career in football awaits him. “Football is my life,” he says. “Football unites people – that’s what I love about the game.”