**‘Football opens hearts’
UEFA #EqualGame story of Oleksandr Fomichov in Ukraine**

Friday 25 May 2018

Oleksandr Fomichov aims to use the "power of football" to improve the lives of the community around him. Based in the Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk, he is promoting the need for "inclusion" so there are no obstacles to playing or enjoying football.

Every month, as part of its #EqualGame campaign, UEFA is focusing on a person from one of its 55 member associations. This person will be an example of how football promotes inclusion, accessibility and diversity; his or her story will exemplify how disability, religion, sexuality, ethnicity and social background are no barriers to playing and enjoying football.

"I am a coach, but football has become more than a game to me," says Oleksandr Fomichov, who is using "the power of football" to improve the lives of people in his community. "It's an education, a philosophy and a phenomenon."

A lawyer and businessman by profession, the 32-year-old, who is originally from Donetsk, moved from the eastern Ukrainian city following the outbreak of unrest in 2014. He left behind his business, while some family members were unable to follow him. However, he has succeeded in creating a new life for himself in the western Ukrainian city of Ivano-Frankivsk.

He now works for the League of Tolerance charity, whose goal is to teach people about common values and the importance of inclusion, enabling them to look at life from a different perspective, which ultimately leads to positive change.

In a compelling analogy, Oleksandr explains: "Football pitches mirror society as a whole. We use football to show that we all should be involved in the game, and that in the same way we should all be involved in society.

"I see how people change when they start working together, they forget about stereotypes and prejudices," he reflects. "They simply meet and want to find out a lot more about each other. They become friends and then change their own lives and include others in their hobbies."

In 2016, Oleksandr noticed there were a number of different organisations in Ukraine helping those who were internally displaced. He decided to try something similar, and so the League of Tolerance was born.

"We are always looking for ideas," he says. "We are always ready to improve our projects, and we want to try and spark a response in the hearts of other people." Aside from promoting the need for inclusion, the programme is having a wider footballing benefit by helping to give quality training sessions to those involved.

"In the first year we held eight training sessions around Ukraine and produced 97 coaches," he said. "They are the graduates of our programmes, and each one has contributed to the communities in which they live."

Oleksandr has also realised that football is "a phenomenon" which can be used as a tool to draw children into education. He believes any subject at school can be related to the game, thus making it more interesting for youngsters to learn.

The same criteria apply on the football field. For him, it is vitally important that "everybody is included and nobody is excluded", with these rules relevant not just to football but to society in general.

"In life, if we show that we are all equal and that we are all included, then social life becomes brighter and helps us to all open up," he explains.

This ethos is shared by one of Ukraine's greatest-ever sportsmen – former multiple world heavyweight boxing champion Vitali Klitschko, who insists that everyone has the right to achieve the goals they set in life.

"Every person can play football. We must deliver the message to every person that nothing is impossible. Everything is possible if you have the will, the fire and an understanding that you can achieve new goals," says Klitschko, now the mayor of Kyiv.

"The most interesting and important thing is that everybody has a dream. It's important to dream, but it's more important to do everything to make this dream come true."

Oleksandr's love of the game shines through in all he does. A decent footballer in his youth, he is now showing through his role as a coach that the sport has the unique power to foster inclusion.

"We invite people from the whole of Ukraine, irrespective of their background: some may have disabilities, some may be from ethnic minorities and some might be internally displaced," he says. "Thanks to our work, we can get all these groups together and show that, on the training ground, people communicate with each other and realise there is actually no difference between us at all."

Andriy Shevchenko, one of Ukraine's best-ever footballers, is also of the opinion that everyone should have the right to play football, adding that it is of paramount importance to have "respect for everyone".

"Football is an international game. It has nothing to do with politics or religion. It's a game that's accessible to all and it should be pure, not only in the top competitions but also among children," says Shevchenko, currently the head coach of Ukraine's national team.

A modest and articulate man, Oleksandr Fomichov pours his heart into what he fiercely believes will result in a better future for his community and country.

"Keeping faith in people is the most important factor for the development of every country and the world as a whole. We can build a sustainable society and use football as one of the tools that brings us together."