

**Speech by H.E. Mr. Kofi Annan
SportAccord International Convention
Dubai, 29 April 2010**

Thank you Mark for that introduction and to all of you for that kind welcome.

I am delighted to be here at this important conference.

It is clear, from the breadth of topics already covered and the expertise of the participants, how seriously you take your responsibility to sport and wider society.

It is fitting that this conference is taking place here in Dubai and that you have just heard from HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum.

For Dubai, under his leadership, has become a stunning example of the wider benefits of sport.

Dubai is now a true centre of sporting excellence, hosting major events in a whole range of sports and offering world-class facilities for competition and training.

HH understands, as I know you do too, the huge economic benefits that sport can bring to communities.

The unifying force of sport is also critical for his vision of Dubai as a place where people, cultures and ideas meet and flourish.

It is this unifying potential I want to talk about today and how we can do more to harness sports' ability to be an agent of social change, to shape our societies and world for good.

Indeed, when Secretary-General, I admit we at the United Nations were often a little jealous of the power, and indeed, universality of sport.

Both the IOC and FIFA have, for example, more members than the UN. At the last count, the UN has 192 members compared to 208 who belong to FIFA.

[I will have to ask Sepp how he manages this....] .

It was why I was so determined at the UN to use sport more effectively to achieve development goals.

I knew already, of course, how much individual sports – and athletes – were doing in this area.

It is a huge tribute to sport in general – and to all of you here – that you have long recognized sports' wider responsibility to society and its ability to drive social change.

A great deal of this work was in partnership with agencies within the UN system but often in a piecemeal way.

I wanted to work with you to maximize and mainstream sport into the development work of the UN and, in particular, to accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals.

As Secretary-General, I appointed the former President of Switzerland, Adolf Ogi, as the first Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace.

This was followed by the establishment of an Inter-Agency Task Force and, in 2005, the UN's successful International Year for Sport and Physical Education.

Our aim was to ensure sport was seen not as a by-product of development but as one of its engines.

It's a goal taken up with enthusiasm by the UN's present Sports special adviser Wilfried Lemke who is, I know, with us in the hall today.

But some outside this knowledgeable audience might ask whether we are not asking too much of sport.

They are right to remind us that sport, above all, is a game to be enjoyed whether as a participant or as a spectator.

But this is to underestimate its convening power and far-reaching potential. Sport is the universal language, understood from Milan to Manila, from Montreal to Montevideo.

It engages and brings our world together in a way few, if any other activity, can manage.

It has an almost unmatched role to play in promoting understanding, healing wounds, mobilizing support for social causes, and breaking down barriers.

It can – and does - encourage pupils to stay in school and parents to get their children immunized.

It is used effectively to promote HIV/AIDS awareness and has helped drive global campaigns against such evils as child labour and landmines.

It provides both a powerful symbol for national identity but also brings people together across continents.

At its simplest, of course, sport and physical activity directly builds fitness and co-ordination, improving mental and physical well-being and resistance to disease.

Sport teaches the values of team-work, discipline and leadership as well as the reward of effort. Each are valuable lessons for life.

It builds confidence and social skills and is key to the healthy development for our children.

And in a world in which billions of us live a more sedentary lifestyle than even a generation ago, it is increasingly vital for all of us.

But the positive benefits of sport go much further than its physical and mental impact for the individual. It is vital, too, for the health and strength of our societies.

Sport, used properly, challenges prejudices, heals divisions and champions tolerance.

I have seen time and time again how sport helps overcome the most deep-rooted conflicts and tensions.

The annual Twic Peace Olympics in southern Sudan takes place in a region which for many years has been scarred by ethnic and tribal conflict.

War was still raging when the first games were held a decade ago after organizers spotted how make-shift games of volleyball allowed refugees from different tribes to play together.

Sports fields, no matter how rough, have been places for centuries where fears and suspicions can be put aside.

The Twic games allow those from different communities to meet and compete with and against each other in friendship.

Now supported by a whole range of different organizations, the annual games attract global interest and are seen as a symbol of what sport can achieve in the most difficult situations.

Sport has, of course, frequently been used to cross divides between countries from the days of ping-pong diplomacy between the US and China to the way North and South Korea appear together today at international sporting events.

But it can also help heal divisions within countries and enable countries to come to terms with past and present tensions.

Just think of how the success of the Iraqi national football side in winning the Asia Cup in 2007 sparked scenes of jubilation in every community.

The side which included Sunnis, Shias and Kurds showed their fellow citizens – and the world as a whole – what could be achieved by working together.

The 400 metre gold medal won by aboriginal athlete Cathy Freeman at the Sydney Olympics did more to bring Australia together and enable it to face up to the past than any number of Government task forces or report.

And, of course, the far-reaching impact of South Africa's triumph in the 1995 Rugby Union World Cup was recently portrayed in the film *Invictus*.

President Mandela understood that, just as the sports boycott had helped undermine the apartheid, sport could also heal its deep scars.

[As I am frequently mistaken for Morgan Freeman at airports– I have to admit I found it very confusing to see him playing my good friend in the film.

Sport promotes social integration, overcoming prejudices of race, background and gender.

It is sadly not yet the case that racism has been rooted out of sport. There is, as I know you fully recognise, much more to do.

But without sport, I believe racism would be much more prevalent in many of our societies.

It is hard to continue thinking yourself superior to those of other races or backgrounds, if your sporting hero has another skin colour or religion.

The selection of players from backgrounds for national teams has helped bring races together – and also built a new sense of national pride and belonging.

France's World Cup triumph in 1998 – a team which featured Zidane, Desailly and Blanc – had a positive effect on how the country saw itself.

Sport is also proving important in breaking down gender barriers, and providing role models for empowering girls and women.

The international success of female athletes in many parts of Africa is giving the continent new heroines role models, challenging prejudices and helping girls achieve their own ambitions.

This is another important impact of the Twic Games at which girls, in a very traditional society, are treated as equals.

We have all seen, too, how sport helps people look anew at those with disabilities and provides a valuable route for integration.

The Paralympics and Special Olympics have been an extraordinary success, enabling us to focus on what people can do rather than what they can not.

I know this is an area where the UN hopes, with your help, to put an even greater emphasis in the future.

And just as sport helps undermine myths and prejudices for individuals and groups, I believe this summer it will have the same impact on a continent-wide scale.

I am passionate about sport in general. But I am, I must admit, a football fanatic.

So I am looking forward tremendously, along with a good proportion of the planet's population, to the World Cup this summer.

As an African I am doubly excited – and not just because my own country Ghana has a strong team going into the finals.

There is a tremendous pride across Africa that we are hosting this true global sporting event.

Africans know that the eyes of the entire world will be on the continent.

It is an opportunity to show how, out of the headlines, the continent has changed for the better.

There are, of course, countries where problems, conflicts and abuses have worsened.

But these are very much the minority. There are many more where democracy and human rights have taken root, governance has improved, civil society has strengthened and opportunities are being extended.

I believed the media attention which will be focused on what I am sure will be a highly successful tournament will help alter perceptions and play its part in increasing investment and support.

The performance of the African sides which have qualified – and of the African stars whose skills light up the top European clubs and leagues – will also send out a strong message.

It will underline the rich talent and potential that there is in Africa not just in football but in every area if the right framework is put in place.

And, of course, the World Cup is just one of a series of global sporting events taking place outside the traditional venues of Europe and North America.

We will see, for example, the Commonwealth Games in Delhi and the first ever Youth Olympic Games in Singapore this year.

This will be followed by both the 2014 FIFA World Cup 2014 and 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro Brazil.

These are all new important opportunities to drive social change locally and wider and to communicate key development and peace messages.

The International Olympic Committee has, for example, been working closely with the United Nations to develop joint programmes on a whole range of important issues.

I know that many other organizations represented here have been taking similar steps.

These range from your efforts to back international relief efforts as in Haiti to imaginative community-based initiatives to boost school attendance.

From countries as far apart as Liberia, Colombia and Georgia, sport is being used to re-integrate refugees into society and heal the traumas of child soldiers.

Street soccer is used in many countries to stop young people turning to violence and to extend opportunities.

But we need together to build on these projects, to learn the lessons of what works and provide the support and encouragement to expand successful initiatives within communities and countries.

We consistently have to make better use of large scale sporting events – as is happening with the World Cup – as a platform for practical innovative initiatives and a global communication tool.

There is a responsibility here, as well, for sports commercial partners to increase their support, building on the many examples of successful projects around the world.

Sportsmen and women must also be helped to use their influence for good.

Their position as role models, particularly to the young, gives them great power but also a huge responsibility.

We can see how this can be used to extraordinary effect. The US basketball star Magic Johnson has proved a tremendous advocate on HIV/AIDS.

Kenyan marathon runner Tegla Loroupe has been a champion of peace and women's rights in her own country and wider region.

Roger Federer, Lionel Messi and David Beckham – all UNICEF international goodwill ambassadors – are among many athletes who give freely of their time.

But we also have to remember that athletes are young men and women, often exposed rapidly to fortune and fame.

It is up to sports bodies like you to help prepare them so they can use their voice effectively for wider goals.

Maybe the most important aspect of our joint future is linked to the environment.

Climate change and the environmental impact that follows will influence all of our lives, including the sporting world.

It is extremely important that athletes, as role models, and sporting federations show pro-activeness in caring about the environment.

This can be done in a variety of ways, including ensuring the environmental impact is fully considered in sports infrastructure and events.

It is good to see the Olympic Movement putting such a strong emphasis on environment responsibility in the games in Beijing, Vancouver – and in London in 2012.

So there is a huge amount of good work going on. We now need to maintain the momentum and build upon what has been achieved so far to tackle poverty, hunger, disease, protect our planet and extend opportunity.

International Sports Federations and national federations have an important role in engaging and convincing governments that sport is a valid, efficient and cost-effective tool for improving our world.

Ladies and gentlemen, this audience, above all, understands the value of effort, of team-work and partnership.

It is through partnership, not only with development agencies but with civil society and the private sector that we can maximize the impact of sport for good in our world.

Thank you for all you are doing. With clear goals and renewed effort, we can achieve together a great deal more in the years to come to harness the potential of sport to improve lives across our planet.

Together we can break new records, achieve new goals and prove an unbeatable team. Thank you.

– Ends –