



**From the Ethiopian slumchild
to an excellent tennisplayer
with a full scholarship in the USA
The incredible story of Yonas Gebre Woldetsadik**

Some stories only exist in books, cinema or on television. This story tells a true tale of hope overcoming adversity. The central character, Yonas, grew up in a slum in Addis Ababa. Today he is a scholarship student at Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho (USA).

Nußloch 13th of July 2013

It is the evening of the Racket Center's (RC) summer celebration. The band is playing on stage, a circle of around 100 friends are present, among them, a small group of Ethiopians. They are from "Tariku and Desta Kids' Education through Tennis Development-Ethiopia (TDKET)" program. The coach and co-founder of the organization, Tariku, is also present. Unexpectedly, a young Ethiopian man goes up on stage and takes the microphone, something he has rarely done before. Obviously the 18 year-old is nervous, but he feels he has something important to say. While he is standing on stage a silence falls over the crowd, it takes a short while before he starts to speak. Once upon a time ...

11 Years earlier -

Addis Ababa, September 2002

The fire radiates a warm glow. After so much rain it is hard to believe. Seven year-old Yonas adores his mother for this and much more. The kitchen, an open fire beside their hut has a roof made out of plastic garbage to protect the flames from the rain. From June to September the wet season brings heavy rainfall to Ethiopia. Yonas' family's hut is built of plastic, discarded wood and rusty corrugated iron. It is often flooded during this season. The damp fire wood which Yonas and his brother have taken under their blanket while they sleep is not drying; it means the fire will not burn well. The fire is critical to the family, it means a warm meal – if his father is able to buy some teff, a grain which is the main food source for the poorest inhabitants of Ethiopia; mixed with water, the dough can be rolled into Injera. Yonas loves Injera that he eats in the traditional way with his fingers. It is rare his mother can offer a meat stew, but this day the family is lucky. The hun-



A young man takes the microphone ...

ger is gone – at least for this evening and the rainy season is mostly over – these are the reasons to be happy. If his parents are in a good mood they will hopefully allow Yonas to participate. He will tell them after supper, what happened this afternoon. And he will ask them the question...

The dry season is close and with this, the tennis season at the Greek Club will soon be in full swing. Tariku Tesfaye and his brother Desta are head tennis coaches at the club. During their playing careers they both represented Ethiopia, Tariku at the Davis Cup level and Desta in the African Junior Championships. Their stories are also incredible. They achieved all this in a

family of 8 children who struggled since the early death of their father. At just 25 years of age, Tariku realized how fortunate he has been and decides to make a plan. He wants to give something back to his community. Yohannes Kifle (a prominent businessman and Tariku's mentor) – expresses his concern, yet backs Tariku. This step means to risk a secure job as a tennis coach and the opportunity to earn a good living. But Tariku and Desta are adamant; they want to help the poorest children in Addis find meaning in their lives. To find these children they do not have to venture far. Close to the Greek Club there are neighborhoods containing several slums.

Greek Club, September 2002

It is drizzling as Tariku starts his search. In alleyways between the busy streets he sees plenty of children playing soccer with plastic bottles or old fabric tightly woven together to form a ball. He hands out slips of paper: "You are invited to learn how to play tennis. Please come next week to the Greek Club." Norbert Klevenz, a teacher at the German Embassy School, helped Tariku organize the first training. Both Tariku and Norbert thought that as the children could not read or write, the letter was best directed at the parents. Tariku is immediately taken by Yonas' eagerness, so he takes him aside and explains to him personally what the invitation is about. Yonas is excited and safeguards the slip of paper inside his raggedy pocket less trousers. Deep inside he knows that his parents could not read it either. They are among the thousands of illiterate adults in Addis Ababa. He will have to explain to his parents what he wants to do and ask for their authorization.

As the rain taps away on the tin roof, Yonas' family sits quietly in their one room hut. Yonas is waiting with increasing doubt for a response from his parents. The silence is deafening for our young Yonas. And then, yes, he receives the answer he was praying for, they will accompany him, next week, to the Greek Club. The tennis club seems to be surreal when compared with the heartbreaking poverty in the neighborhoods at its doorstep. For the first time in their lives Yonas and his family see a tennis court, a restaurant and toilets (later, Tariku will need to show the kids how to use it). In years to come, the group of children will be allowed to use the showers. They will marvel at the fact that warm water out of a silver water-tap is actually possible. Still, reaching this stage is a long way off. On this, the first day, Yonas and his family are not alone. 120 kids are organized on the three courts. To Yonas, the courts look like a playground. The children partake in different exercises with balls and a strange looking thing they call a racket. Tariku and his brother Desta are giving instructions. After two hours Yonas and the



Yonas and his family at their hut in Addis Abeba



Yonas in front of his families hut

other kids are sent home. Yonas receives something special – a piece of chocolate and an invitation to return next week. From that day on Yonas is thinking of only one thing; how it feels to hold the racket and hit the ball and how he must improve every day. From this point forward, Yonas has a dream: “I want to be a professional tennis player!”

From the day the project starts his life changes. Yonas is one of 20 children chosen to form the original group. Tariku, the coach, explains the rules unequivocally, “From Monday to Saturday, there is training at 6 am for one hour or longer depending on when school starts. Right after school, you must return to the “Greek Club”, where you have to study and complete your homework. If we are allowed to use the tennis courts, we are going to train; if not, we will go running. Lack of discipline at school, or poor attendance means you will be barred from the project; this also applies to any of you who are impolite or late for tennis. Maintaining good grades is imperative! At 7pm when it starts to get dark you have to be home and get ready for bed so that you are ready to get up early in the morning. Think hard, and if you agree and follow these rules, you will stay in the program.” Tariku closely follows up on all the children to see that they are abiding by the rules of the project. This strict discipline, in part, is the reason behind the number of children eventually falling to 12.

After two years, the program can now offer a warm daily meal for the children. Norbert Klevenz is back in Germany and headmaster at the Friedrich-Ebert-Gymnasium in Sandhausen. He and some of his pupils travel to Addis Ababa once a year and donate money to the “Ethiopian Kids’ Tennis Program”. This name originated from combined ideas from Tariku, his brother Desta, their circle of friends, and Bruno Böhler and his wife Susanne. The project now has direction and is better organized.

For the first time in his life, Yonas finds structure and purpose. He not only wants

to be the best in tennis, but also at school. He can only reach these goals through consistent work. The feeling he gets when he perfects himself such as improving a volley or winning a point only increases his self confidence. Achieving something in school, learning to read and write and

receiving top marks in math or science, makes Yonas happy. He realizes that with hard work and good results at school and in tennis, anything is possible. His comprehension, willingness to learn, discipline and seriousness are exemplary.



Education in the classroom at the facility, Guenet Hotel



Trainings group 2004 at the “Greek Club”, Yonas bottom left

Addis Abeba, November 2004

Yonas' thoughts are filled with Tariku's words: "This weekend, you are playing your first tournament. At the "Hilton Hotel" you are going to play against other kids and show what you have learned and what you are able to achieve".

After a sleepless night, Yonas, now aged 9, finds himself in a car (for the first time in his life) going to the Hilton Hotel. It seems to be another world. The other competitors are dressed with new, brand-named tennis clothes and are playing with the latest rackets. All kids from the "Ethiopian Kids` tennis Program" are wondering if they are in the right place. Their shame is blown away when they start winning their first matches. They are better than the kids in the same age group and even better than children in the category above! The finals are fought between children from the program. Yonas wins his age group dreams of the time he will be able to bring food home and help contribute towards his family's wellbeing.

But he is winning much more than just a tennis tournament: he is gaining attention, empathy and respect. From this day on, Yonas Gebre Woldetsadik becomes



Trainings group 2008 at the Racket Center Nußloch; Yonas bottom left

a well-known face at the tennis clubs in Addis Ababa. A child from the slums wins the famous Hilton-Youth Competition for under 10 year olds. He becomes a symbol without knowing it or willing it. After

a few years, the children from the program are some of the best tennis players in Ethiopia. Nevertheless, the Ethiopian Tennis Association choose other children to represent Ethiopia in international competitions. The project must therefore find other ways, their own way. That is how the program arrived in Nußloch, Germany.



Kids with their new rackets while eating, Yonas right

Nußloch, May 2008

At the end of 2007 the headmaster of the Friedrich-Ebert-Gymnasium Sandhausen came to the Racket Center in Nußloch and introduced the project, which sounded surreal. Poor kids having tennis training in Addis Ababa at 2500m above sea level? Is there nothing better to do than play tennis? A social project... ok. But what does the sports angle mean? Curiosity was the first point for the invitation to Germany. During the holiday period in Whitsuntide 2008, some of the children and Tariku arrived at the Racket Center. Amongst them Yonas, intimidated and exhausted from a night flight from Addis Ababa to Frankfurt, and then the commute from

Frankfurt to Nußloch. Never before had he seen an airplane so close, let alone flew in one. Tariku organized everything and swiftly, and simply announced to the six chosen children, “pack your bags, we are going on a journey tomorrow. You won’t be home for two weeks.”

Now Yonas is sleeping in a real bed for the first time in his life, a bed all to himself. The Racket Center seems to be on another planet. As a welcoming meal, a buffet is served. The selection is total agony for Yonas. That he can go and get food for a second or third time took him some time to realize. Is that possible? The twelve year old is overwhelmed. It is not surprising that the six tennis kids are not able to play at their best. The circumstances are totally different than in Addis. The children are playing on perfect courts with new balls, which move differently than the balls at home. In addition, Nußloch is only at 150m above sea level. The kids may not be winning the first tournaments, but they are having a different impact: they are captivating the audience’s hearts. The second and third tournaments are different. They win with ease. The kids of the “Ethiopian Kids’ Tennis Program” are true ambassadors of the project, of tennis and of their country. Unfortunately, the visit is over much too soon. Yonas has a wish: “I want to come back every year!”

And so he does: he is the only one who comes back to Germany each year. The length of the visit increases from year to year. His life is a contrast: between Addis Ababa and the Racket Center, where he gets regular food, access to warm showers, toilets and his own bed.

He recognizes Germany as a country with strict rules but which enjoys comfort and security. In Ethiopia, his destitute family struggles from day to day. It is the summer of 2009 and Yonas is in Germany again. Meanwhile, in Addis Ababa, demolition workers and soldiers are in front of his family’s hut. His family is barely able to gather the most essential belongings and help his father, who has been ill for several months. The bull dozer tears the hut



Meron and Yonas visiting their German tennis Idols, Haßloch 2009



Expansion of the project, 66 kids are part of it

down within seconds. A poorly housed family with little in the way of income in Addis Ababa makes for a very difficult situation. Who cares that Yonas is the best tennis player in his country at that moment? Who cares that he had won international competitions and has been interviewed by the media?

In the end, Yonas places his trust in Tariku, who is fighting hard for the family. With help he finds them a clay hut in a legal settlement and organizes official documentation to secure their stay. It is the ability not to despair but to make the best out of a very bad situation. The project and particularly Tariku have come to the family’s rescue.

Nußloch/Addis Abeba 2010

Yonas and his friends are allowed to stay at the Racket Center for nine weeks. The

Ethiopian tennis group of children is now well known in the neighborhoods of Nußloch. But every time they return to Ethiopia they greet reality. The management at the “Greek Club” tells Tariku, that it won’t be possible to play on their courts anymore due to overcrowding. The project is getting too much attention and envy grows. The project’s focus of high quality work is no longer possible in the present conditions. Tariku will have to evolve and demonstrate once again an ability to adapt and innovate.

Tariku shows courage in forging a new vision. In a complicated process and with the assistance of Yohannes Kifle, the project becomes a non-governmental organization. From that point the project has a new name: Tariku and Desta Kids’ Education through Tennis Development-Ethiopia (TDKET).

As TDKET they rent a ramshackle, two court facility at the Guenet Hotel. Together they rehabilitate the courts and make it possible to play. After eight years they leave the Greek Club with a farewell performance. The guests, including the Germans with the Rhein-Neckar Television, are astonished by this performance. Even Manfred Lautenschläger is won over and decides to get the “Kindernothilfe” to support the project.

The credibility of this project is what makes it so attractive. Furthermore the aim has embraced a new goal. Education is now a major part of the children’s development. “We want to make the children professional”. This statement does not mean turning the children into professional tennis players, but showing them a path to a professional life through learning. They must learn to become responsible for themselves and for others. “Finding solutions in adversity, in cooperation and for each other”, that is the aim of the project. The project embodies a deeply meaningful, transformational, inter-generational contract among Ethiopian youth.

Two promising children, Yonas and Meron, receive a scholarship for a private schooling. Both of them attend the Andinet School in Addis Ababa. They have the opportunity to obtain a quality education with international credentials.

Through all this Yonas refocuses his goal: he now recognizes his future depends on more than tennis. While he has relinquished his dream of becoming a professional tennis player, the fifteen year-old aims to earn a scholarship to the USA, and he wants to graduate from college. Confidently he explains this in a television interview: “You know, people have dreams, but they do not know how to get this dream”.

He knows – and he is working harder than at any other time in his life to achieve his new dream. For now, he jumps onto to several buses to get to Andinet International School. Of course, there is always



Dr. h. c. Manfred Lautenschläger and Tariku Tesfaye

the added commitment of tennis training each morning.

He is determined to gain his High School diploma, while studying in his family hut in the evening, learning by candle light.

American donors Noel and Linda McIntosh along with Brian Barry and Louise Aubin from New Zealand and Canada, support with the daily taxi drives, school fees, a meal a day and even the candles. To pass through high school successfully depends on a great number of candles!

Addis Abeba, Frühjahr 2013

More than a year has passed since Yonas traveled to Germany. This past school year, the journey was impossible, as his racket sits in the corner collecting dust. Of course he uses it from time to time, but the school books and learning are much more important than tennis so close to final exams. That it is impossible to be a professional tennis player in his country - Yonas has accepted. That it won’t be possible to achieve his High School diploma due to his circumstances is something he is unwilling to accept. All his free time ac-

tivities are on hold, including his beloved tennis. Most nights he studies late into the evening before stumbling to bed. He must pass these exams!

At the end of June Yonas finally receives his results. He is the most outstanding student in his class. At the graduation ceremony, the headmaster will award Yonas the “most valuable Student of the Year” prize. In advance of the ceremony, Yonas grows increasingly nervous. He has nothing to wear for such an event. To his astonishment, Yonas’ classmates, most of them from prosperous backgrounds, show their respect to the tennis star. They present Yonas with a special gift: shoes, a pair of socks, a shirt, a jacket, trousers and a tie! Yonas is overwhelmed. Thoughts of his childhood start flooding back to him – what a road he has travelled since... And with this in mind, he receives his High School diploma among applause from his teachers and fellow students. Soon after, Yonas passes the American SAT college entrance exam. With these results and the kind financial support of the Roecks family from the USA, Yonas secures a tennis scholarship at Lewis and Clark State College in Lewiston, Idaho (USA). The next chapter of his dream begins.



University campus (with the friendly assistance of the Lewis-Clark State College)

Nußloch, July 2013

Returning to the evening of the RC summer festival, Yonas squeezes the microphone in his nervous hands, and with a deep breath he starts to speak, “I want to say thank you. Thank you for the invitations over the years and the opportunity that I had to travel here. I passed my High School diploma and now I find myself at a point that was once only a dream. The Racket Center is my second home. Thank you to all the people who welcomed me here. You cannot imagine what it has meant to be allowed to come here again and again. The last weeks and months were the hardest in my life. Often I was thinking about the time after the exams and that I would be standing here. It gave me power. I want to thank Tariku, who has given so much to me. Without him, there would not be this Yonas. I wouldn’t be the guy who is standing in front of you. Especially I want to say thank you to Manfred Lautenschläger, who supported our project in such a positive way and even visited us in Addis Ababa last year. I am a young man and have been blessed with many fathers and with their support I knew I could do it. The project formed me as a person. I swear today in front of all of you that I will always be associated



The most outstanding student of the class

with TDKET throughout my life. In a few days I will travel to America to fulfill the next stage of my dream. But I swear, I will come back to Addis Ababa one day to give everything back to the project that it gave to me. This is my oath, that’s the way it should be...!”

Later that evening Manfred Lautenschläger took Yonas aside to speak to him, “Yonas do you know that you will be in America next week, far away from home, in another world and find new friends. Are you fully aware of what you have just promised in your speech?”

Yonas looks directly into his eyes, and responds in a clear and purposeful voice, “Yes Manfred, I am really aware of it...!” The story ends here. But not the story of Yonas. It will continue – in Addis Ababa, his home. Yonas embodies the ideals of discipline and hard work and is an example of what Ethiopian youth has to offer Ethiopian society: a generation of young women and men rising through their own strength, and with the support of each other, with a determination to give back to their communities. Strongly influenced by his background, Yonas is shaped also through a wonderful project that is TDKET. Yonas, a young man who evolved from the slums of Addis Ababa and is now a beacon for the positive development of youth in Ethiopia.

The project has now expanded to 66 children. With generous donations from Germany and the IC international tennis club, it was possible to build a class room, and support the project in its day to day running. Tariku and TDKET continue their eager work with the newest generation!



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