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**For Giouloulou Ioannis, being part of an international football tournament was a big change. But the biggest change for the Greek player was not about the football or travelling abroad. It had all to do with being part of a team.**

"Ten months", he says with a mix of pride and relief in his voice. "Ten months clean now." It is not the first time Giouloulou Ioannis has tried to recover from drug addiction. He first checked into rehab back in 2012, when he became involved with Greek street paper Shedia. Selling the magazine helped him earn an income and bring back some routine, but it could not stop him from relapsing. "When life gets tough, I know I can relapse. I have a tendency to fall back. I am learning to say no." The most dangerous moment, he says, is when he feels isolated. "For a long time, I preferred isolation. Because social life is harder."

A psychotherapist at a public rehab facility in Athens suggested Giouloulou could add new activities to his life as part of his recovery process. He attended drama lessons and wondered what else he could do. The social enterprise that publishes the magazine also runs a football programme. Although he had not played since he was a child, Giouloulou decided to go down and see what it was all about. "I needed to create a new energy, open up new roads. Football is about solidarity and values. I enjoyed that."

After years of battling alcohol, cocaine and heroin addiction, playing sports again was no easy transition for Giouloulou. "Physically, it was very hard to train even once a week at first. It was painful. But then you get into a flow, and you forget about the pain. You can carry on even without all the physical strength. I can only describe it like a flowing river stream. It drives you forward."



| Image: Anita Milas

Midway through his two year rehab programme, Giouloulou was invited to join the Homeless World Cup team. Alongside some friends and others he knew from the rehab programme, he would wear the national jersey and represent his country in South Korea. He was honoured, but also found it hard to imagine what it would be like. The football programme organised some workshops to cover the tournament essentials, but nothing could have prepared Giouloulou for what it was like when he arrived. The size of the city of Seoul overwhelmed him, but also sparked his curiosity: "I would like to find more about the city's history and how it got the way it is today."

The tournament itself also made a big impression on Giouloulou. Midway through the week, the Greek team had yet to win their first game. But focusing on that would take away from what matters much more to him: the connection to players from other countries and cultures. "We don't have a very strong team in terms of football. But the friendly spirit with the opponents is what makes it special", he says. "It feels like I knew some of these players from before. It is a special feeling, hard to describe. You can look another player in the eye and recognise something. You recognise yourself."

After the Homeless World Cup ends, Giouloulou has another year of rehab ahead of him. Next to finding a job, he aspires to finish his degree. He studied psychology before but dropped out, and if he could choose again, he would also like to study philosophy. His eyes light up as he ends with a big smile: "I could be a Greek Philosopher, you know. But they don't pay you for that!"

#### **Giouloulou's Lessons:**

Walking across the training pitch after a photo shoot, Giouloulou shares the most important lessons he learned while in rehab and preparing for the event. "You have to make an effort to succeed. Put in the work before you get the reward."

For him, that meant overcoming his fear of connecting with others. "Loneliness is the hardest isolation there is. If you talk with your shadow, it takes you straight to drugs. Coming here has convinced me that I no longer want to be alone. I am not me. We are all us."

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Words: Danielle Batist

