

Using Football to Integrate Disabled Into Society

By [Howard Amos](#)

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Children from four cities took part in the "All Are Equal in Sport" tournament at the Lokomotiv Moscow stadium. **Kristina Bogacheva**

Eric, 11, came on as a substitute in the semifinal at Lokomotiv Moscow's indoor stadium, but his side from Sochi lost, missing out on a trip to London to see English Premier League side Arsenal play at the Emirates Stadium later this spring.

"It was good that we came, but a pity that we lost," he said gravely. As he walked away with his teammates, he tripped and fell on the AstroTurf, and his coach helped him to his feet — one of the many times he fell that day, including during the match. Eric has cerebral palsy and extreme difficulty walking.

"It's a great achievement that he even comes to training," said coach Roman Borisov, who led the nine-strong team accompanied by three parents to "All Are Equal in Sport," a Moscow tournament designed to encourage disabled children to integrate into society.

The tournament was set up by Perspektiva, a charity promoting the rights of the disabled, and is backed to the tune of 4.5 million rubles (\$144,000) by health and beauty company Amway.

Fifty-one children aged between 11 and 14 took part in the final, the culmination of 12 months of training for the seven teams selected as the best in their region. Perspektiva used its connections with local disability charities to organize teams in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Samara, Nizhny Novgorod and Sochi. The program is hoping to add Omsk, Khabarovsk and Rostov-on-Don next year.

Each five-a-side game was played on a small, specially marked-out field and lasted 20 minutes.

Russian Premier League footballer Yevgeny Varlamov from CSKA and Lokomotiv's Dmitry Sennikov were among the local celebrities who were on hand for the final, a closely fought game between Desnitsa Samara and Alfa Nizhny Novgorod, which was won by the Samarans 4-3.

Samaran captain Igor, 13, said they had battled right up until the final whistle and that he was "overwhelmed with emotion." But, he added, victory "was exactly what we came to Moscow for."

All of the teams who play in "All Are Equal in Sport" are made up of a mixture of children with and without disabilities. Competition rules state that at least one-third of the players in each side must have either physical or mental disabilities.

The silver-medalist team from Nizhny Novgorod came from correctional orphanages — institutions for kids with mild learning difficulties and development delays. Many of Russia's 600,000 children with disabilities end up in the care of the state.

One of the major difficulties of teaching the team was managing the different levels of capabilities of the disabled and nondisabled children, said Dmitry Sergeyev, coach of the Samara team, but it worked when the children helped each other out.

Borisov, the Sochi coach, told The Moscow Times that "All Are Equal in Sport" was a "big jolt" for changing local attitudes toward the disabled.

Although football was the focus, the teams who were flown in for three days also enjoyed visiting tourist attractions and a tour of Lokomotiv's stadium and grounds. The matches themselves were enlivened by the presence of volunteers from the Moscow State Humanities University in bear costumes, a performance by a dance troupe clad in silver and minor celebrities including singer Kornelia Mango.

Lokomotiv is not the only football club to have been involved in the project. CSKA Moscow arranged for some of the local children participating in "All Are Equal in Sport" to join the club's players on the field before the start of a game.

The idea for "All Are Equal in Sport" began after Amway sponsored two inclusive schools in Ulan Ude, the capital of the Buryatia republic, said Irina Platonova, head of corporate social responsibility at Amway.

Seeking a way to give disabled children more opportunities to play sport, Amway approached Perspektiva to create such a program.

"Disabled children are very isolated from society and do not get out very much," Platonova said.

With a relatively modest presence in Russia — sales in 2010 were \$485 million — Amway's 2011 philanthropy budget of \$1 million meant that it was ranked the country's sixth-largest corporate donor in recent research by PricewaterhouseCoopers and Vedomosti.

Perspektiva is already organizing this year's tournament and welcomes any help.

A film of the tournament can be seen on Lokomotiv's web site: www.fclm.ru. Details about the charity Perspektiva can be found on their web site: www.perspektiva-inva.ru. Tel. 725-3982.

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