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# Freestyler gets ball rolling to World Cup in June

**Relay involves one ball being played with by as many people as possible**

**Neil Maidment**

LONDON: From smashing windows to breaking world records, football-freestyler Dan Magness has enjoyed a bizarre career which has offered him the chance to travel and rub shoulders with big names.

The Englishman's latest exploit was to kick-start a ball relay that will end at the World Cup in South Africa in June.

After he was released at the age of 16 by ex-English league side and 1988 FA Cup winners Wimbledon, Magness' football career looked as doomed as his old club, who were dissolved in 2004.

"I was always the player in the team where the ball would come to me, and no one else would get it back," he conceded rather proudly.

However, the ball-hogging skills that no doubt contributed to his Wimbledon downfall soon became an ally when he began performing football tricks to busk around Australia in 2001.

"I put my hat out, started busking and before I knew it I was making some good cash. I've been doing it ever since," Magness told *Reuters*.

Now 26, the bubbly man from the central town of Milton Keynes has a list of keepy-uppy world records and tales of kickabouts with England international Joe Cole and FIFA world player of 2009 Lionel Messi of Barcelona.

"I'm glad Messi is playing football as opposed to freestyling, otherwise I wouldn't have a job," said Magness, who filmed a commercial with the Argentine forward in Spain.

Among other world records, Magness has notched up the longest time controlling a ball (24 hours), set last year in London's Covent Garden, and the most consecutive touches on his shoulders.

His skills now provide a living, which he makes through corporate events that have taken him across Europe and beyond, including to Dubai and South Africa.

"My career has been amazing. I can't believe I am lucky enough to visit all these countries, meet so many people and do all these things," he said.

Training involves lots of running and walking and an apparent die-hard habit of practising risky kick-ups around the house.

"I have broken my mum and dad's window when I was little, I also broke the patio chair and blamed it on the dog," he said.

Last month, he walked 58km around London's Premier League football grounds to record the long-

est journey while continuously kicking or heading a ball.

His unusual journey was the first leg of "The Ball" — football's equivalent to the Olympic torch, a relay set up by a not-for-profit company called Spirit of Football which invites organisations to promote their causes on a journey to South Africa's World Cup opening ceremony on June 11.

The relay involves one ball being played with by as many people, as many times as possible, on a four-and-a-half-month trip through Europe and 17 African countries to the finals.

Thought up by three friends, the relay started in 2002. This year it is being used to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS in Africa.

"Football's such a universal language, it breaks barriers and that can help build on raising awareness of AIDS in Africa," Magness said.

The ball used in the relay is made by another non-profit organisation, Alive and Kicking (A&K), which em-

ploy 150 people in Kenya and Namibia to hand-stitch footballs which are then distributed to children's projects across Africa and used as visual aids for HIV/AIDS education.

The relay also promotes the Special Olympics (SO) which is involved in sports training and events for mentally disabled people in more than 180 countries.

After touring Europe, The Ball will head overland to West Africa, down the coast and through the Sahara before rejoining the coast in Ghana. From Cameroon it will cross to the east of the continent and head south to eventually arrive in Johannesburg on June 6.

During the trip, anywhere from big stadiums to backstreets will be used for kickabouts with everyone invited — an ethos which provided a memorable experience in 2002.

On The Ball's journey that year to the South Korea and Japan World Cup, organisers were taken by minibus to a pitch in the mountains of China's Gansu province for an impromptu football match with Tibetan monks.

"Football had broken the barriers of distance and language, but we had yet to find a way to nutmeg a monk," The Ball co-founder Christian Wach told *Reuters*.

A&K want to distribute 100,000 balls to African children by the start of the World Cup and will also supply balls for the Special Olympics' "Unified Sports", which pairs athletes without disabilities with SO athletes in training and competitions.

"Africa is unlikely to have the privilege of hosting the World Cup again in the near future so it is incumbent on Special Olympics Africa to ensure that we capitalise on this opportunity," SO football initiatives manager Ancilla Smith said. — *Reuters*

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