

Soccer's Lost Boys, Stranded in Istanbul

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Highlight: In 2010, several Nigerians jumped at what they thought was a chance to play soccer professionally for Turkey. Upon arriving, they learned they had been swindled. Jason Andrew photographed these **stranded** players.

Body

The light was dim, and the room dank. The photographer [Jason Andrew](#) descended the basement steps. A single television displayed the English Premier League match between [Chelsea and Tottenham](#), as flickering light of the television illuminated nearly a dozen dark faces in the room.

They watched intensely, their eyes fixed intently on the white ball being kicked back and forth across the field's brilliant green grass.

In March 2010, more than 40 Nigerians flew to **Istanbul**, carrying an invitation to try out with Turkey's professional soccer teams. Within a week of arriving, the players realized that the promises had been false, that their money had been stolen and that they had nowhere to go but the streets. They've been there ever since.

Mr. Andrew, 36, flew to Turkey in late April 2011 searching for his next photo project. He wanted to find migration stories along the country's Edirne border. He soon found himself in an Internet cafe in **Istanbul**, talking with African migrants to whom few had paid any attention.

"I've always been interested in getting deep into human lives," said Mr. Andrew, who studied history at San Diego State University before completing a certificate program at the International Center of Photography in 2007.

Born and raised in Alameda, Calif., Mr. Andrew said he grew up alongside immigrants. Driven by a desire to travel and explore, he said that issues of immigration, and cross-border transit, became significant parts of his personal and professional lives.

Mr. Andrew said photography was his attempt to explore important issues like, "Where people come from, and why they do the things they do?" In his latest project, "[Football's Lost Boys](#)," Mr. Andrew quickly uncovered some answers.

The African players said a manager they called Okpos had advertised a training camp with ties to European soccer. The program was simple: if the players were good enough, and they paid a fee, they would have their shot at playing professional soccer in Europe.

Turkey was their dream, Mr. Andrew said. "It was their gateway to Europe and the height of professional soccer," he said. So when the aspiring players arrived in **Istanbul** only to find that their manager had fled the country with their money, they were left with nothing more than a fake invitation, and receipts for the nearly \$5,000 they had spent on the trip.

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Mr. Andrew said this project has become a modern meditation on the question of immigration.

"We always picture illegal immigrants as people who have jumped the fence," he said. "In Turkey, these individuals were invited into the country. Immigration is no longer black and white."

Beyond the missed opportunities on the field, the African soccer players felt considerable animosity on the Turkish streets. They were often cursed at, spat at and could rarely hail taxis, said Mr. Andrew, who, as a Caucasian, witnessed this treatment.

In one of Mr. Andrew's favorite photographs (), four players lay in a single bed, a tiger-print blanket pulled up over them, each set of eyes scanning a different direction, as three of the four men listened to music. There is little in the photograph that identifies this as Turkey, were it not for the large photograph of a woman praying at Mecca hanging crookedly above them.

This single frame hints at the complexity of their experience in *Istanbul*, Mr. Andrew said. They have been **stranded** in a country that speaks a different language, and many of them live without visas necessary for gainful employment. Yet in their marginalization, the Nigerians have carved out a niche, he said.

When Mr. Andrew visited the players last year, they were sleeping eight to a room, crammed into an old converted industrial building with unreliable water and electricity. They nicknamed the complex "The African Ghetto." Players said that their landlord would threaten to assault tenants whose rent was late, and was said to have once stabbed a tenant.

The aggressive tactics continue, in part, because of lacking police response to issues facing African immigrants, the players said.

"When you go to these stations to make complaints, they ignore your reports," Jerry, a 22-year-old player who works in textiles to try to pay the bills, said about the police. He asked to not be fully identified because of his precarious visa status. "They just tell you that you are a foreigner and that your rights don't matter here," he added.

Despite the challenges they face, many of the Nigerians choose to stay in *Istanbul*, Mr. Andrew said. Not because they believe it is the best option or that it provides the best opportunities in the long-term, but because the shame involved in returning home is too overwhelming, he said. Instead, the players suffer quietly.

"I don't open up to my family about this," said Akeem, an 18-year-old still battling for a spot on a Turkish soccer team. "I don't want to make my mother cry."

As Mr. Andrew prepares to return to Turkey next month, he'll do so with a 2012 [Photographer Giving Back](#) award in the sports category for this body of work. He hopes that these accolades will stimulate discussion about the soccer players the world may never see.

"This is the ugly underbelly of professional sport, and one of my biggest struggles is to make sure that my photography can communicate that to the audience," he said. "I want my photographs to tell the story that my eyes and ears and heart have witnessed."

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