

Baylor athletes find needs, joy on Kenya trip

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NAIROBI, Kenya—Everywhere the Baylor athletes turned, glaring needs hit them in the face. Nothing could prepare them for the sight of homeless street children in Nairobi—many of them addicted to glue to mask the hunger pains that never go away.

Baylor's 16-member sports ministry team, led by Athletics Chaplain Wes Yeary (far left) spent two weeks in Kenya.

"There's just so much that your mind just can't wrap itself around—the need and the suffering that goes on there. But right along with it is the joy that's found in Christ," said Bryan Swindoll, a sophomore football player from Miami, Fla.

Swindoll traveled to East Africa as part of a 16-member [Baylor University](#) sports ministry team led by Athletics Chaplain Wes Yeary.

In the midst of suffering, desperate need and devastating hunger, the student athletes noted, they discovered among the Kenyans the kind of joy that can only be found in Jesus Christ.

"They find joy in the simplest of things," said Lindsay Palmer, a sophomore basketball player from Tulsa, Okla. "They're so excited when you give them three pieces of bread, whereas we complain when the buffet is out of macaroni and cheese or something ridiculous like that."

One day when the team helped Pastor Boniface Mwalimu feed and minister to street children, Yeary and junior basketball player Melissa Jones had a

breakout session with three boys.

“One of them was already high on glue. And it was just so sad to see the emptiness in his eyes and the fear in him as well,” Yeary said.



Baylor athletes (left to right) Lindsay Palmer, Melissa Jones and Andrew Sumpter show some Nairobi children how to do the “Sic’ Em Bears” cheer.

But the other two boys, Paul and Peter, served as an inspiration for the remainder of the trip.

“One of them asked us to pray for his chest. He had tuberculosis,” Yeary said. “We later found out that he literally would have died on the street had Boniface not reached out to him and taken him to the hospital. And the other guy had a deformed leg that came down to where his knee did on the other leg. Yet those two guys had such a joy in their heart.

“Even though they lived on those streets, they loved the Lord, and they weren’t addicted to glue. They were just overcoming some adversity in their lives. It was a really stirring time ... to see the joy in those two young men, while at the same time seeing the fear and emptiness in the other one.”

When Yeary first started planning the trip, he was working with an almost-

blank itinerary and was not really sure who would go with him.

Through occasional low-key plugs at Fellowship of Christian Athletes meetings, Yeary eventually was joined by Kim Scott, director of campus recreation and the McLane Student Life Center; Tanna Burge, assistant strength and conditioning coach; soccer players Lindsey Johnson, Amanda McGrath, Lindsay “Lotto” Smith, Nicky Smith and Rachel Stepp; Palmer and Jones from the women’s basketball team; Swindoll and football teammate Andrew Sumpter; athletic training graduate assistant Shellie Spiers; student manager Leah Capps; Baylor club soccer player Laura Smith; and Baylor student Brittany Berg.



Melissa Jones uses her love of basketball as a way to connect with children on the mission field in Kenya. (PHOTOS/Baylor University Athletics)

Baylor had a previous connection with Mwalimu, who spoke at university chapel in February. Former Baylor volleyball player Jenne Blackburn had helped raise money to build a rehab house for Mwalimu’s street ministry—the Omega Kids Home—and the sports ministry team followed up with some painting and yard work, getting a good shoulder workout using an antiquated sickle.

At the rehab house, they met Jambani, one of the children Mwalimu had

rescued off the streets of Nairobi.

“It was just cool to see (the street children) that morning and then see him that afternoon,” Nicky Smith said. “He was really quiet, but he was well-spoken and seemed fairly confident. It was just a complete 180 from the kids we saw that morning. But to know that that’s where he had come from and what Boniface had been able to do is just amazing.”

The sports ministry team’s trip itinerary included leading sports clinics at multiple locations, feeding street children, visiting orphanages and schools, scrimmaging with Kenyan national athletes, and doing yard work and painting at a ministry site.

“It was just confirmation that God’s hand was in that,” Yeary said, “and that he was really leading the whole way. The people that he connected us with and the opportunities that we got through them—that was part of the encouragement while we were there. Every day, you recognized what God had done and what he was doing while we were serving.”



Bryan Swindoll’s size and strength capture the hearts of local children in Kenya.

“It might not have been the way we would have written it or scheduled it,” Swindoll said. “But because of that and the way everything working out so perfectly and not all how we planned it, that definitely showed the hand of

God through this entire experience.”

Everywhere they went, the team members were met by children starving for food and attention.

“Kind of the eye opener for me in just going and loving on those kids is seeing how giving just a little goes such a long way,” Yeary said.

“They were telling us that for most of these kids, we were the first Mzungus—or white people—that they had ever seen in their lives,” Nicky Smith said. “And maybe they were just super fascinated with that. But they were just so happy all the time. And just the smallest thing would make them burst out laughing or smile. They just had this pure joy. They were always singing and dancing and teaching us stuff.”

“I remember one of the first days we were there, we were at one of the schools, and they started singing this song in Swahili, a worship song,” Palmer said. “And it hit me that for the first time in my life, I was worshipping God in a different language. It didn’t matter exactly what they were saying. We had the same love for him going up at the same time. It was really powerful to me. It was like the different faces of God. They don’t all look like me. They don’t all act like me, talk like me. But we’re all made in his image.”

While the sports ministry team obviously made a difference at every stop, one of the most difficult things for the group was not being able to meet every need.

“The hard part is the amount of help that they need that we can’t give them ourselves,” Spiers said. “You want to fix everything.”

The Baylor student athletes recognized they couldn’t meet every need, but the team plans to return to do more.

Walter Machio, who was described as the “sports ministry team’s BFF” (texting shorthand for “best friend forever”), has grand plans for next year, Yeary said.

“Walter’s already talking about multiple teams coming at the same time. ‘I can send one here and another here.’ Instead of us going to one place, we can hit four,” Yeary said. “Lord willing, we can build on these relationships and continue to take teams.”