

Star Profile: Hristo Stoichkov



Stoichkov.net

Hristo Stoichkov, the legendary football player, has a new goal: combating desertification worldwide. The explosive left-footer – rated by some as one of the greatest players of the 20th century – has committed himself to focusing attention on what he calls “one of the most serious problems facing humanity”.

Appointed one of three honorary spokespeople for this International Year of Deserts and Desertification – along with Algerian Environment Minister Chérif Rahmani and the Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai – he aims to promote the message through the “probably most powerful and fraternal sport in the world”.

Born forty years ago in Plovdiv, Bulgaria’s second city “with a ball between his feet” – according to his mother, Penka – he grew up learning to kick it. His father was goalkeeper for the local team, Maritsa, and the young Hristo started as a ball boy for it. But by the age of 10 his talent was already so striking that he started playing for Maritsa in his own right.

Ten years later he was becoming a national hero as a player for CSKA Sofia, and by 24 had won the Golden Boot, as Europe’s top goal scorer, after the team reached the semifinals of the Cup Winners Cup. In 1994 when he led his country’s team – which had never before even qualified for the tournament – into the World Cup semi-finals with a stunning 2-0 win over Argentina, he gained another Golden Boot as the most prolific scorer of the competition.

By then he had led Barcelona to win the Champions League in 1992, and the Spanish Primera Division championship four years in a row. After finishing his playing career with Parma and in Japan and the United States, he was appointed coach to the Bulgarian national team two years ago.

Memorable for his unpredictable shots at goal, his explosive acceleration and speed dribbling, he became equally famous for his relentless singlemindedness. “Soccer is simple”, he says. “You need to have the right mentality, fighting in every game, in every practice, for every ball.”

He told *Our Planet* that he takes the same attitude to the fight against desertification. “This is an issue of such importance that it requires a very focused and targeted approach, as well as sustained effort. There is no short-term solution. My experience as a football player who fights to win can help me keep up the pressure to convince people not to be indifferent to the problem.”

He added: “Since desertification is clearly not just an environmental issue, the only way to tackle it is to look at the broader picture. This means addressing other issues closely linked to it, such as poverty. “It requires a joint effort from the international community in close collaboration with the affected local communities”.

Stoichkov first became interested in desertification through his travels as a footballer. “Although Africa is hardest hit, it is by no means the only part of the world affected. Many European countries, including my own, are suffering from land degradation, drought, soil depletion, and deforestation.

“In the course of my career I had the opportunity to play regularly in countries such as Spain, Italy, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the United States, all of which are affected in one way or another by desertification. I have seen with my own eyes some of the consequences” .

Stoichkov and Hama Arba Diallo, the Executive Secretary of the Convention to Combat Desertification, came up with the idea of organizing football matches and tournaments during the Year, to help increase awareness of the issue. One match is already planned between the Algerian national team and an international European team: it will be played in Algiers in October to accompany a desertification summit.

“Football is probably the most universal and popular game on *Our Planet*, and receives unrivalled attention from the media and public at large”, he says. “With a little effort, it can be an important platform to help raise awareness of desertification and other environmental issues among the broadest possible audience.”

“Just as football unites the world – and is enjoyed by all, old and young, rich and poor – so we can get the message across that desertification also affects us all, and that we have a responsibility to do something about it.” GL