



Dave Hughes, shown here with his Rwandan rugby union proteges, has received generous help from the Hong Kong sporting community, but is still searching for more sponsors to ensure they realise their dream of playing in the territory. Photo: SMP Pictures

From killing fields to rugby pitches

Hong Kong-born Dave Hughes is helping young Rwandans leave behind the tragedy of the 1994 genocide, writes **Alvin Sallay**

The past – not so distant – is an horrific nightmare. But Dave Hughes is hopeful that a groundbreaking visit to Hong Kong by the Rwandan national rugby team in March will go a small way to putting the smiles back into the lives of the players from a country which has been a living hell.

A small band of players from Rwanda will be appearing at the Kowloon RugbyFest in the week before the Hong Kong Sevens in March. Their journey from the killing fields of Rwanda is nothing but a miracle, one that would never have happened if not for Hughes stumbling on a book about the Rwandan genocide by chance.

Hong Kong-born Hughes, 26, was working as a surveyor in England a couple of years ago when a friend of his loaned him a book, *Shake Hands With The Devil*, about the 1994 Rwandan genocide where an estimated one million people were killed.

"It was a case of neighbours killing their good friends. I was stunned as I read it and couldn't comprehend what happened and why people, who had lived side by side for years, suddenly turned on their neighbours," Hughes said.

The book, written by Lieutenant-General Romeo Dallaire of the Canadian Forces, who was in command of the United Nations forces in Rwanda in 1993-94, chronicles the fateful months of the genocide when the world watched and did nothing as the Hutu hacked to death the Tutsi.

Dallaire's hands were tied and he could not intervene as the UN, Belgian policymakers and senior members of the Clinton administration chose to do nothing and ignored the general's plea for reinforcements. The subtitle to his book, "The Failure Of Humanity in Rwanda", says it all.

Hughes read the book in one sitting. The next morning, he went to work and

handed in his notice. He then booked a flight to Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, with plans to work for a charity organisation.

"I deeply felt I needed to go and see for myself and try to understand why this tragedy happened," said Hughes, who is now back in Hong Kong and occasionally turns out as a hooker for Hong Kong University in the Fourth Division.

"I was working in Britain and knew nothing about Rwanda. I was insulated from all the troubles in the world and reading that book opened my eyes. It shocked me out of my complacency," Hughes said.

Like everyone else, Hughes who used to go to French International and then Bradbury as a child, went on the internet and searched for Rwanda and charities and found work with an NGO – non-governmental organisation – in Kigali in 2008.

It was soon after he arrived that the next fateful turn took place. Riding to work one morning, Hughes saw a small band of street children kicking a tatty rugby ball by the wayside. "I couldn't believe my eyes. I hadn't seen anyone playing sport, but to find a rugby ball in Kigali was amazing," Hughes said. "I stopped and joined the kids. I thought they had stolen the ball."

Many of these guys saw their friends being killed and raped. They don't talk about it. That is in the past. For all of these guys, this will be a life-changing trip

Dave Hughes, who is helping a Rwandan rugby team to play in Hong Kong

He soon discovered that everything was above board. The group of children were part of a club that had received some equipment from a club in China – the Shanghai Hairy Crabs – and they were willing away their time with a kick-about.

"I went back the next day and met them again and one thing led to another and soon I was playing and coaching a team called the Kigali Sharks, one of five or six teams in a small league," Hughes said. As a child, Hughes was no great star with the oval ball. His father, David, who arrived in 1972 to join the Hong Kong Police, was not a rugby fan, but he still encouraged his son to play at school.

"I wasn't such a great player. And I knew virtually nothing about coaching rugby. But I still felt I had to get involved with this club," said Hughes who has now set up his own charity in Kigali, the Akilah Institute, which is a school to educate women in the hospitality industry.

Soon he was at the forefront, organising sevens tournaments as well as "internationals" against teams from neighbouring countries. It was during one of the tournaments that he was hit by an idea – why not take the Rwandan national side to Hong Kong during the Sevens weekend?

"My Dad and Mum were down in Kigali, and my Dad commented that, 'these guys are good enough to play in the 10s in Hong Kong'. That set it all off," Hughes said.

The original hope was to enter the Hong Kong Football Club 10s, but it was soon decided that this was one step too far for a ragtag band of players. Instead they decided to play in the more friendly and social Kowloon 10s.

Hughes, who now spends his time between Kigali and Hong Kong, said: "The Football Club 10s was too professional for a team of amateurs. So we decided to enter the Kowloon tournament and I made inquiries."

He has received nothing but generous help right along. Kowloon Rugby Club lynchpin Anson Bailey, who is also a director with the Hong Kong Rugby Football Union, waived the entry fee for the tournament. Andrew Chambers, from Tsunami Sports, has donated all the kit for the Rwandan team. Niall Donnelly and his public relations company have agreed to help with the publicity free of charge.

"The support I have received from the rugby community in Hong Kong has been amazing. People have gone out of their way to help us. The Hong Kong Rugby Football Union has given the team free tickets to watch the Sevens, and this will be a dream come true for them," Hughes said.

The obstacles are still many. While they have a place and berth in the tournament and kit to wear and be presentable as rugby players, the biggest hurdle is funding to buy the airline tickets for the 13 players.

"We need at least US\$30,000 for the airfare and other incidental costs. I hope people who read this story will support this cause. But I'm convinced that this is going to happen, even if I have to sell everything I own," Hughes said, hoping to drum up corporate backing.

Those who want to help, may write to rwandarugbyhk@gmail.com, says Hughes. "For all of these guys, this will be a life-changing trip. Rwanda is a landlocked country and none of them has seen the sea. It will also be the first time they will be travelling in an airplane. It will be wondrous eye-opening journey for them," he said.

Just imagine the Rwandans when they see Hong Kong for the first time. Or when they run out to play at the Kowloon RugbyFest, or when they turn up at a packed Hong Kong Stadium to watch the Sevens for the first time in their life.

"My dream is one day for Rwanda to play at the Hong Kong Sevens. Who knows, it might happen. They are a bunch of naturally talented athletes who, with proper training and guidance, can go far," Hughes said.

He refuses to say what the make-up of the team is – how many Hutu and how many Tutsi. He says no one wants to talk about the horrific past. They would rather dwell on the present.

"There is one guy in the team called Kamanda, who runs the 100 metres in 11 seconds. I have a lot of hope for them and hope down the road they can soon play in the Football Club 10s and then the Sevens.

"Mozambique have shown us what they can do at the Sevens, Look at Kenya, who no one took seriously at the start, but today are one of the core teams in the IRB Sevens Series and one who beat the opposing sides regularly. Anything can happen."

Indeed, Tragedy has been part and parcel of the life of these Rwandan players. Now the chance to give them a little bit of joy is here for those who care.

"Many of these guys saw their friends being killed and raped. They don't talk about it. That is in the past," Hughes said.

And has he found out why the world went mad, back in 1994 in Rwanda? Hughes sighed and said no.

"I went to try and find out, but I still don't know why human nature collapsed and why people turned on their neighbours and friends."

Belgium's colonial legacy helped breed ethnic tensions that sparked violence in which 800,000 people died

An estimated 800,000 people were killed from April to June 1994 in landlocked Rwanda. In the space of 100 days, hell visited the "Land of a 1,000 hills" and home to the silverback mountain gorilla.

Most of the dead were Tutsi – and most of those who perpetrated the violence were Hutu. The genocide was sparked by the death of the Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana, a Hutu, when his aircraft was shot down above Kigali airport on April 6, 1994.

Current president Paul Kagame – at the time the leader of a Tutsi rebel group – and his supporters were held responsible by a French judge for the rocket attack. Kagame vehemently denied it and said it was the work of Hutu

extremists, in order to provide a pretext to carry out their well-laid plans to exterminate the Tutsi community.

Whoever was responsible, within hours a campaign of violence spread from the capital throughout the country, and did not subside until three months later.

Ethnic tension in Rwanda was nothing new. There had always been disagreements between the majority Hutu and minority Tutsi, but the animosity between them had grown substantially since the country was colonised by Belgium in 1916.

The Belgians exacerbated the situation when they introduced identity cards based on ethnicity. The Belgians considered the Tutsi to

be superior to the Hutus. Not surprisingly, the Tutsi welcomed this idea, and for the next 20 years they enjoyed better jobs and educational opportunities than Hutu.

The Hutus resented this, culminating in the riots of 1959 when 20,000 Tutsi were killed. When Belgium relinquished power and granted Rwanda independence in 1962, the Hutu took their place. Over the decades, the Tutsi were portrayed as the scapegoats for every crisis.

Today, hundreds of suspected perpetrators of the Rwandan genocide are still at large, and in exile, living under false identities around the world.

Alvin Sallay



A Red Cross worker checks Hutu refugees at a border camp in 1996. Photo: AP