



# The beautiful gap year game

Combining voluntary work, gap year travel and a love of sports can be a winning combination, as Tom Baines discovered in South Africa

Tom wasn't certain about going straight to university. He decided to defer his place and chose instead to join a gap year programme coaching football in South Africa. During his time there, he coached up to 100 children in one session, organized a sports tournament for local schools and extended a wide range of personal skills. He now feels ready for university and is even planning to travel around South America to teach English to young children.

## Sporting gains

One of my greatest sporting achievements while in South Africa was working with the township of Motherwell at the Beach Football Festival. It was great to work with older children, as I usually do back home in England, whilst also

working with older coaching members of the community. I think it was a significant personal achievement because of how disorganized things can be in South Africa.

Numerous schools simply turned up expecting there to be a competition when there wasn't one! We therefore had to organise the whole the tournament between the three of us. We got all the coaches together and explained the rules, then delegated some of them until everyone was happy.

There was such a great party atmosphere when the players reached the final of the tournament. All the supporters were cheering on their own teams, creating a real samba feel to the competition. The skill and talent some of the players had were phenomenal - a much higher standard than I had ever seen before.

## Personal achievements

I think my greatest personal achievement was gaining more confidence. Before I went to South Africa I didn't have a large circle of friends, and I hardly ever went out with others. Being on a gap year in South Africa taught me to just 'be myself' and I think people accepted me just for that. Now I have never felt so popular: I have so many great friends that I keep in contact with and meet up with now I am home.

The other main thing the gap year has done for me is make it easier for me to talk to people on all levels. I used to feel intimidated and nervous by some people when I talked to them. I would even tend to mumble and sometimes stutter: now I can be confident in my abilities and communicate far more easily.

It also helped me domestically: having to do all of my washing and drying for the first time was a scary prospect. The whole experience helped me to prepare for the social and academic sides of university so I won't go there feeling nervous and afraid of the experience anymore. It has also given me the confidence to travel more and see the world.

## Why did I choose this gap year?

I felt I needed a break from education, having spent many years studying and working hard: I just needed to stop for a bit. I thought that before higher education I needed a bit of an experience to prepare me for all aspects of university life: this volunteer programme seemed perfect. I could coach football, which is a great passion of mine, whilst also helping people and seeing a different culture.

## A typical township day

I would arrive at a local township school about 9am or 10am, depending on whether I was on early or 'lates'. I would usually have a rough idea of a couple of drills to do, but you just had to expect the unexpected – one day you could have 20 kids, the next day you could have 100!

We would usually have a chat with some of the children and talk about football and other things before the session started. Then we would get them all warmed up, playing football

and having fun. Towards the end of the session we would usually get involved with the games for a bit of fun. At lunch, we would jump back in the combi and head for the supermarket to get in some quick lunch before we arrived at the next school. The format would stay the same for the next school, but there would probably be a different amount of kids and varying abilities, so every day was challenging.

## So many memorable moments

One of my many memorable experiences was going to a local township jazz club on a typical South African night out. Socialising with the friendly locals after a hard days work was really cool: shooting some pool, having a few drinks and chatting to them was just great. The best part of it was when we told them what we were doing. They seemed to respect us and told us we were really helping to shape the youth of the country. The kids were the other amazing part of the experience: they wanted to know everything about you and just wanted to spend a bit of time with you. They were all legends with great personalities and were really great fun to work with and help out.

If you took a gap year or a career break, why did you do this, and what have you gained from doing so?

This experience has also encouraged me to seek similar experiences overseas in the future. Towards the end of next year I am hoping to complete a TEFL course in Seville. This will mean living in the city for a month learning the language as well as learning how to teach English abroad. If that goes well, I intend to teach English in as many countries in South America as I can get around. This will build on my experiences in South Africa and allow me to soak up some more culture!

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