



Refugee Council
of Australia

LES MURRAY, AM – A REFUGEE KID WHO BECAME AUSTRALIA’S FACE OF FOOTBALL

Les Murray AM will be guest speaker at the NSW launch of Refugee Week 2008. The launch will take place at the Barnet Long Room, Customs House, Level 1, 31 Alfred Street, Circular Quay on Friday (June 13) from 11am to 12.15pm. The launch will include:

- Sher Mu La Wee speaking of her experience as a newly arrived Karen refugee from Burma;
- Entertainment from musicians of refugee background from Sri Lanka and Congo.

At the launch, NSW Minister for Sport and Recreation, the Hon Graham West MP, will announce a new partnership between the NSW Government and the Refugee Council of Australia to promote sporting initiatives for refugees.

Les Murray’s journey to becoming the face of football (soccer) in Australia began as a frightened 11-year-old boy fleeing with his family from their home near Budapest, Hungary in 1956.

“We were political refugees, compelled by the circumstances in our country to leave, after the 1956 uprising was crushed by Soviet tanks,” Les recalls.

“My parents saw no hope for the future in their country because they knew that, more than likely, my father would be in trouble with the law for his involvement in political activities.

“The situation was quite precarious but my two brothers and I weren’t fully aware of what was happening. My parents were trying to protect us and so everything was told to us on a need-to-know basis.”

Les (then known as Laszlo Urge) and his family fled across the Austrian border and spent the next six months in refugee camps, hoping for the opportunity to find a safe and permanent home somewhere. Eventually, word came through that the family would be resettled in Australia.

The adjustment to life in Australia in 1957 was not easy for the Urge family – the challenges of starting again in a new land, learning a new language, adjusting to unfamiliar and uninspiring food and understanding different social expectations and attitudes. After three weeks in Bonegilla migrant camp near Wodonga, the family moved when Les’ father found a job at the Port Kembla steelworks. Their first home in Wollongong was a small house shared with another Hungarian family, with Les, his parents and his two brothers crowded into one bedroom.

“As a refugee who came here with nothing, I am very grateful to this country for the opportunities I have had,” Les says. “Refugees, perhaps more than other immigrants, are more likely to make a positive contribution to their new country, driven by a need to give something in return for being given a chance to start again after a terrible experience.”

Growing up in Wollongong, Les grew in his love for the game he had played on the streets as a child in Hungary. However, he was shocked that the game he viewed as “the world game” created so little interest in this country.

“Migrants bring things with them in their baggage and those positive things are often taken up by the host country,” Les says. “Football was a minority sport in Australia, played on suburban cow paddocks with no spectators watching. Migrants and refugees have changed all of that.”

Les has played a major role in building the popularity in Australia of the world game. He began his journalism career in the newspaper industry in 1972 but his big break came when he joined SBS Television in 1980. Originally employed as a Hungarian sub-titler, Les became a football commentator, presenter and eventually a producer.

Over two decades, Les was anchor and executive producer of SBS’ coverage of numerous international and national football championships, including the FIFA World Cup, the UEFA European Championship, the UEFA Champions League, the FA Cup Final, Australia’s National Soccer League and successive Australian campaigns for the World Cup. Les was appointed SBS Head of Sport in 1996 and served in this role until 2006, when he returned to sports journalism to become SBS Sport’s editorial chief, his current role.

Les’ contribution to football and to sports journalism has been broadly recognised. In 2006 he was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia (AM) and is a member of Football Federation Australia’s Hall of Fame. He is chairman of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union Sports Group, is a director of the Johnny Warren Football Foundation and serves on FIFA’s Ethics Commission. Les has written or co-written four books, among them his autobiography, “By the Balls”, published in 2006.

Les says that people who came to Australia as refugees will continue to play significant roles in all aspects of Australian life – including in football.

“Australia’s under 17 national football team, the Joeys, has three African refugee kids in the current squad. They were picked the same week that Kevin Andrews (the then Minister for Immigration and Citizenship) was blaming African kids for not integrating in Australia,” Les says.

“Refugees have gone on to play for Australia at the highest level in the past and we will continue to see it in the future – refugee kids and the sons and daughters of refugees playing for Australia in the World Cup.”

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