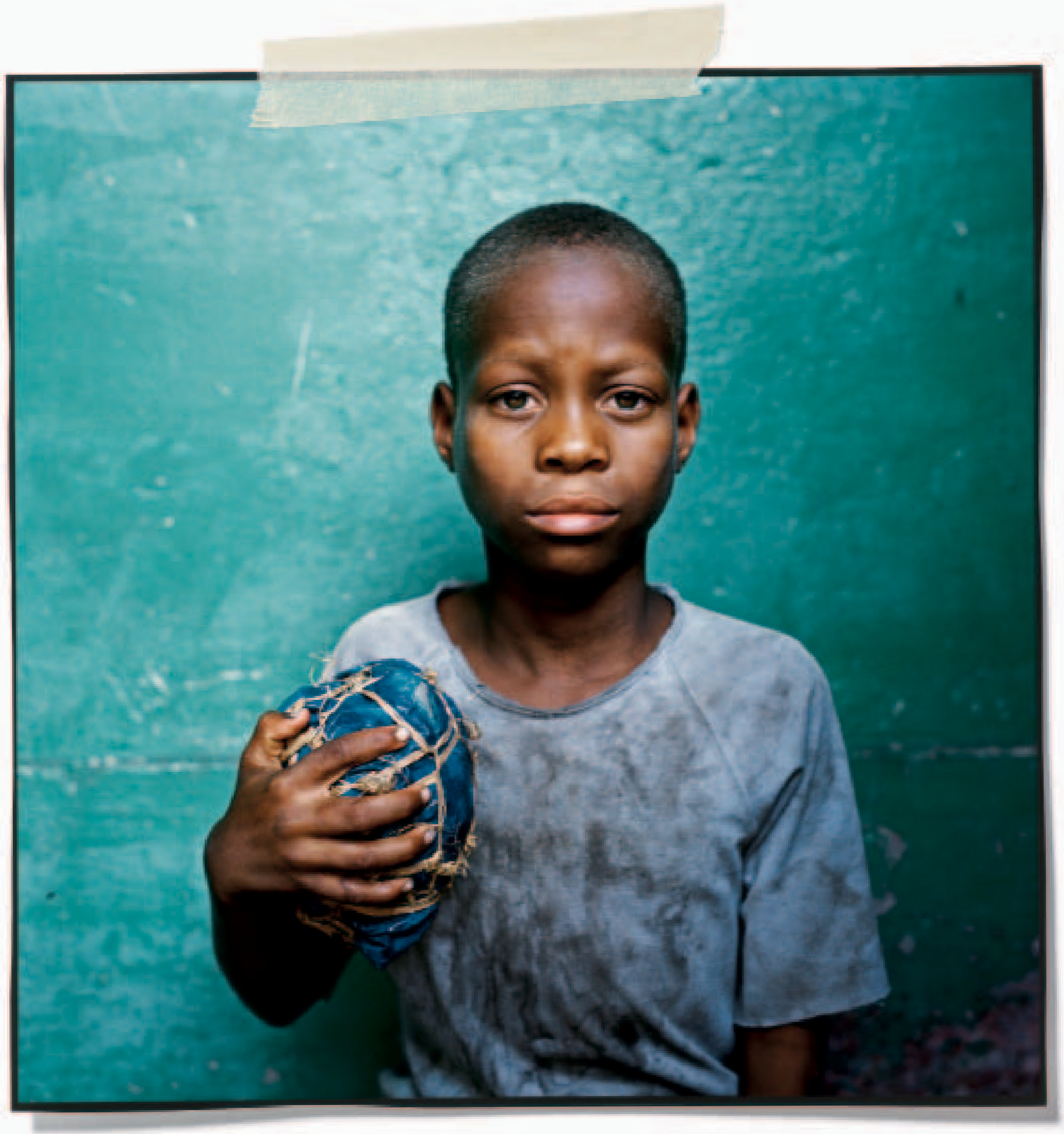


In Chicome, Mozambique, Orlando's soccer ball is made from plastic bags twined with tree bark.

Joy. is Round

On fields throughout Africa, plastic bags, old clothes, and shredded tires transform into magic orbs—soccer balls.

Photographs by

Jessica Hilltout

Miles from the main roads, in rural Africa, soccer balls bounce unevenly.

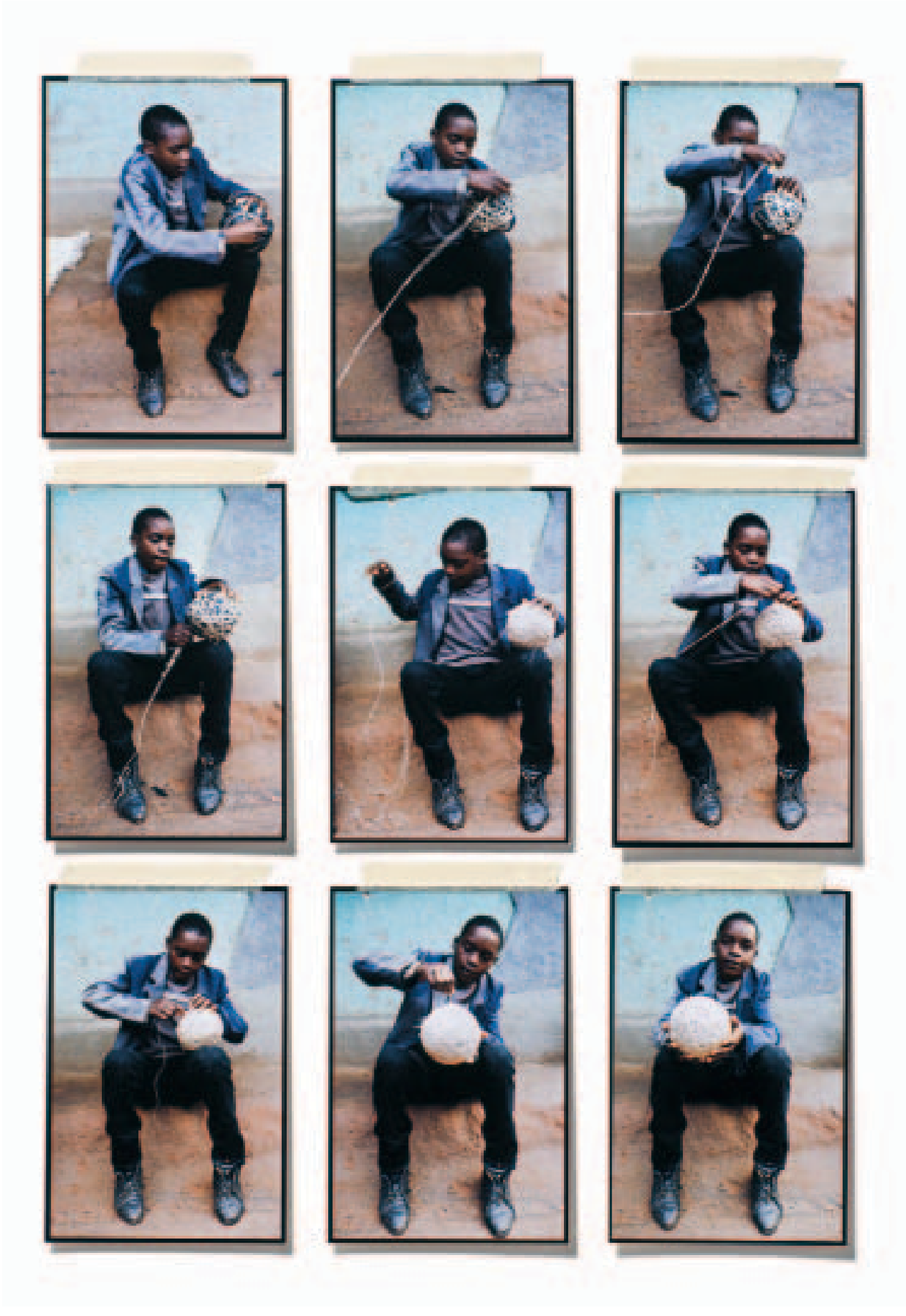
Playing fields are arid, lush, weedy, sandy—any flattish space will do. Goalposts might be made of gathered mahogany or driftwood. Some feet are bare, others shod in fraying sneakers, boots, rubber sandals. Yet children kick and chase handmade, lopsided balls with skill and abandon, competing for pride and joy—for the sheer pleasure of playing.

Has the "beautiful game" ever been lovelier?

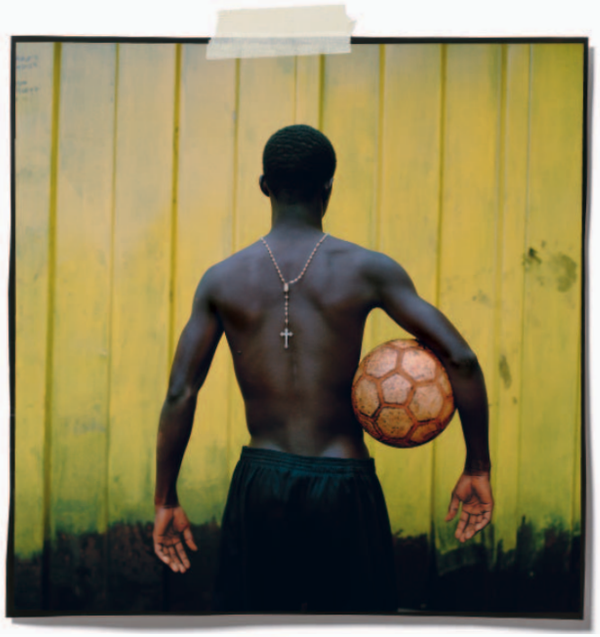
Jessica Hilltout doesn't think so. In 2010, when the World Cup came to Africa for the first time, the Belgium-based photographer set out to see what soccer looked like far from the bright lights and big stadiums. What she found—over seven months, ten countries, and 12,500 miles—was a grassroots game where passion trumped poverty, a do-it-yourself ethic prospered, and one ball could "bring happiness to an entire village."

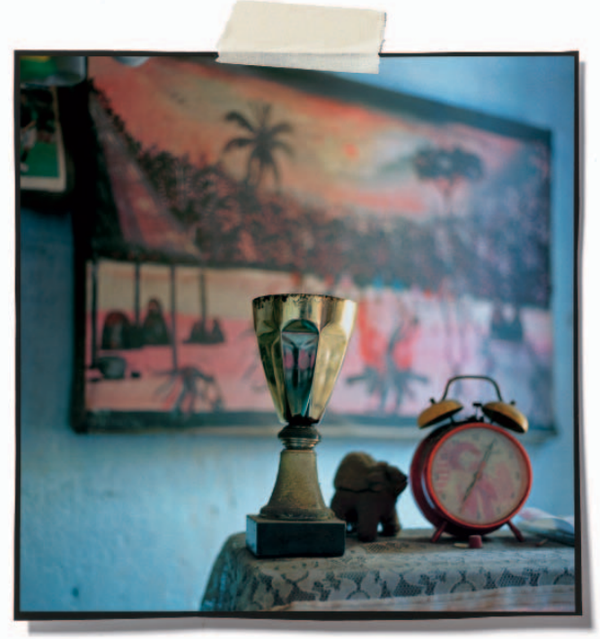
In the 30-odd soccer-loving localities she visited, in countries from South Africa to Ivory Coast, balls are spun into being with whatever's at hand: rag or sock, tire or bark, plastic bag or inflated condom. Each might last days or months on a field of gravel or hard earth. Wherever Hilltout went, she swapped the store-bought balls she kept in her car for these "ingenious little jewels," most of which were made by children.

The story of soccer in Africa is a long one, says Peter Alegi, author and history professor at Michigan State University. In 1862, a year before the game's international rules were codified in London, matches were played in Cape Town and Port Elizabeth. The game vined its way across the continent via European colonialism, *(Continued on page 122)*

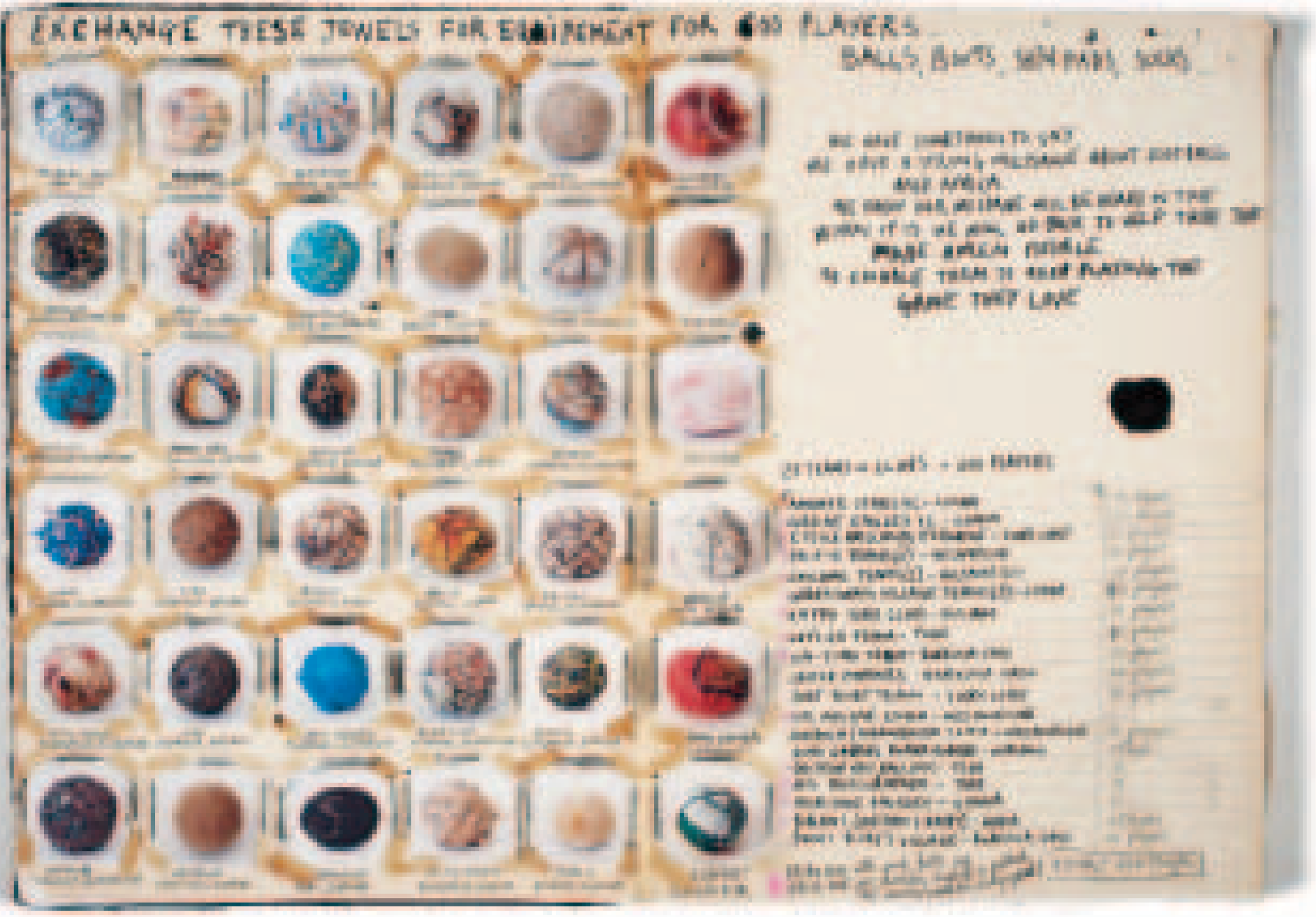


Before his school day starts in Gondola, Mozambique, 13-year-old Isaac demonstrates his ballmaking technique. Using yarn, worn fabric, and an inflated condom, he can make a soccer ball in about 30 minutes.

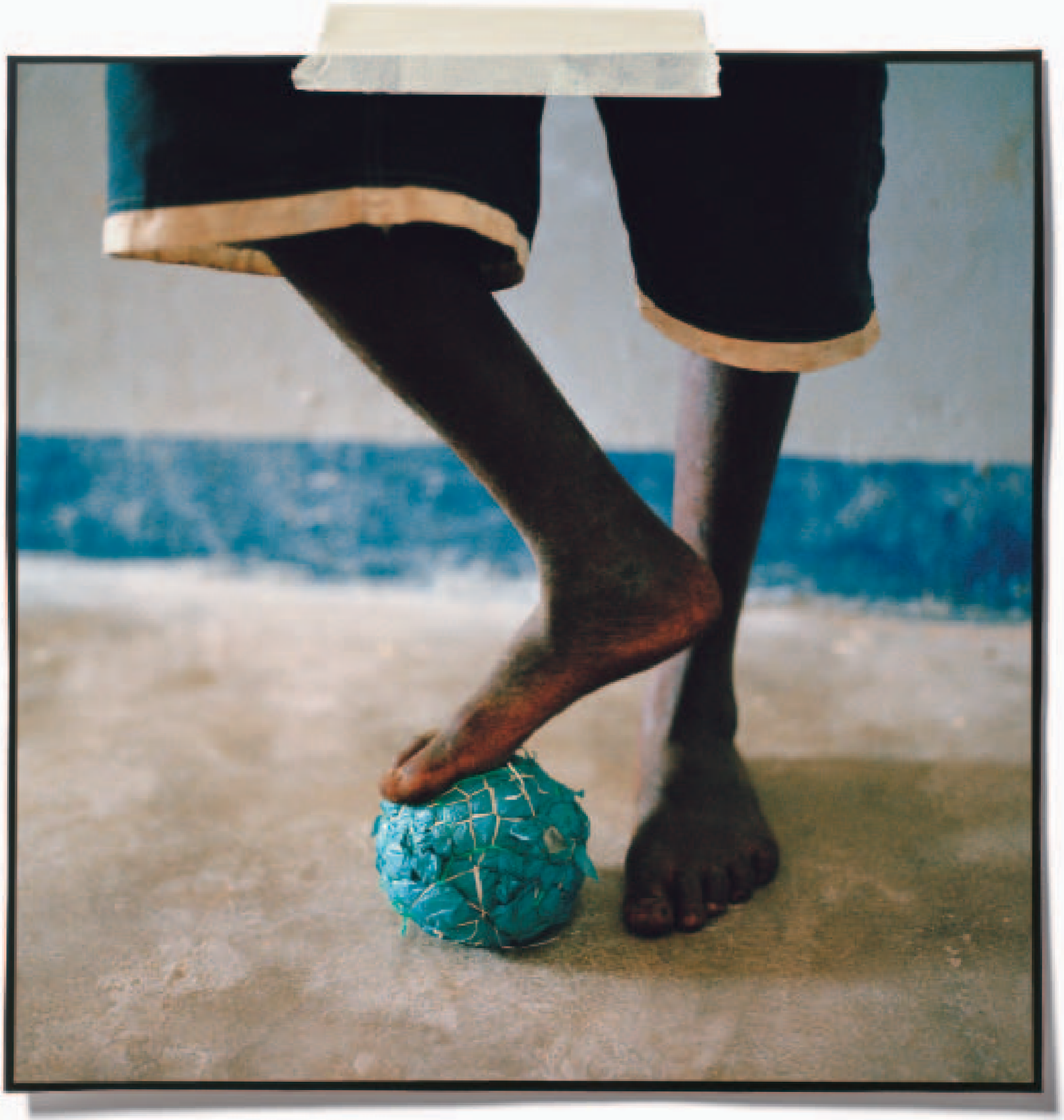




Bound with rope, plastic bags equal a ball (left) in Bibiani, Ghana. A golden plastic trophy (above) is proudly displayed in a home in Lomé, Togo. In urban Kumasi, Ghana, factory-made balls abound. Michael Sarkodie holds one on the Anokye Stars field. Sani Pollux started the club in 1956. "Soccer keeps them out of trouble," he says of the 150 boys he coaches.



Handwritten journals helped Jessica Hilltout explain and document her project. At the top of this entry is a promise she made to herself to return to Africa with new balls and equipment. A year later she did just that.



Carlos Ribeiro stands on a ball he made from rubbish (right) in Inharrime, Mozambique, where boys learn to make balls at age five. Young Thandile keeps his head in the game (top) for South Africa's Cape Town Stars. Mensah Dosseh bought his soccer shoes (above) at a market in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, then adorned them with the name of his favorite team—Barcelona.

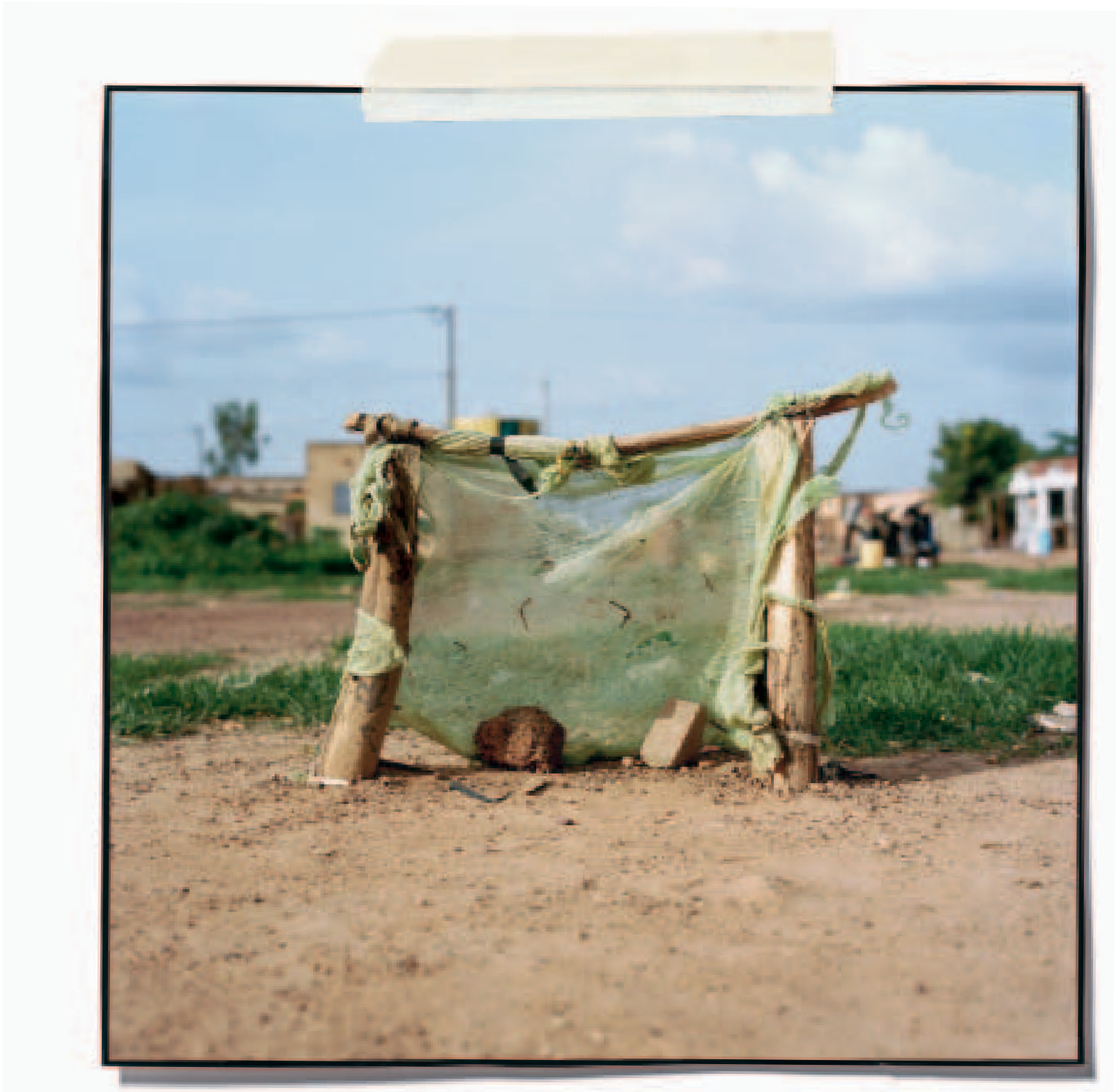
(Continued from page 114) spread by soldiers and traders, railway lines and missionary schools. Locals quickly adopted it, then imprinted it with their own regional playing styles. It has flourished here ever since. "If anything can be salvaged from the harsh and unequal encounter between Western and African cultures," writes soccer historian David Goldblatt, "then the list must include the arrival of football."

In the past century African players have changed the face of the global game. As countries have urbanized and declared independence, they've joined the International Federation of Association Football (FIFA) and competed well at the World Cup level. Today thousands of African soccer "academies"—some licensed, some not—recruit boys from cities, towns, and remote places, where playing conditions breed toughness, daring, ball control, and improvisation. A select few go on to play in Europe or join national squads; the vast majority don't make it to the pro level.

But that's not the point of the "raw game" played in the hinterlands, says Abubakari Abdul-Ganiyu, a teacher who oversees youth clubs in Tamale, Ghana. "It is the passion of everyone here," he says. "It pleases us and unifies us. The moment there is a match, we throw away all our quarrels." He adds: "Most clubs don't allow boys to play if they don't go to school. We're trying our best to mold young people and make them responsible in society. So for us, soccer is also a tool for hope."

Hilltout agrees. "Soccer is the most democratic sport in the world," she says. "It's accessible to everyone. The people I met do so much with so little. It's easy to look at a tattered ball and feel sadness. My aim was to make you look at the ball and feel uplifted." *—Jeremy Berlin*

More of photographer Jessica Hilltout's work can be seen at jessicahilltout.com *and in her book,* Amen: Grassroots Football.



Players in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, aim the ball at this *petit poto,* or mini-goal—two and a half feet high and wide. "You don't need to be rich or have a manicured pitch to play soccer," says historian Peter Alegi. "You just need a flat space and a makeshift ball."