



Young people playing cricket on a makeshift pitch in the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu. Narendra Shrestha / EPA

Caught in Nepal's protests, I witnessed how sport can bring people hope during times of crisis

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On September 8, the day before my holiday in [Nepal](#) was scheduled to end, police in the capital, Kathmandu, and other cities opened fire on young members of the public who were protesting against government corruption. At least 19 people were killed across Nepal that day, and over 300 more injured. Images of police brutality quickly spread throughout the country and internationally.

More people took to the streets the following morning to [show their dissatisfaction](#) with the government. My walk from the tourist area of Thamel in Kathmandu to Tribhuvan International Airport put me in the front lines of these [protests](#).

The country descended into anarchy. Nepal's parliament and the homes of several politicians [were set alight](#), and 13,500 inmates [escaped from prisons](#). For the best part of a day, the sky was filled with smoke and all I could hear was constant gunfire.

Protesters gathered at the airport to try to stop government officials fleeing the country. Alongside the smoke from burning buildings, this forced flights to be suspended indefinitely. With nowhere to go, I befriended some local people who helped me find somewhere to stay.



For the best part of a day, the sky above Kathmandu was filled with smoke. Ross Walker, CC BY-NC-ND

Next morning, heading back to my hotel in Thamel, we travelled through a local housing area. Between the buildings was a large, muddied patch of land with people of all ages playing football.

Throughout my time in Nepal, which also saw me travel to the Everest region in the country's north-east, this was the most I had seen anyone playing sport in public. In general, public spaces seemed to be used for anything but sport, often becoming car parks during the day.

However, as the tensions escalated, I saw more people playing sport across the Kathmandu valley. Almost all of the Nepalis I spoke to suggested they were out enjoying sport because, after the protests and police crackdowns, people needed a purpose – something to fill them with joy, because the past 48 hours had been an expression of sadness.

For those who indulged, sport had become a beacon of hope during a time of uncertainty. Two of my most compelling memories were seeing people out on their morning run, and a local football team practising on a rural, mountainous pitch.



A grassroots football team practising on a rural pitch in the Kathmandu valley. Ross Walker, CC BY-NC-ND

The power of sport

Research, including my own, suggests that sport can play a role in improving the quality of life for people and communities – and even build the capabilities of entire nations. The power of sport as a tool for development and peace – especially during times of civil unrest, conflict and tension – has been evident for decades.

One famous example occurred during the first world war. Soldiers along the western front arranged unofficial ceasefires around Christmas 1914, five months after the hostilities had begun, before meeting in no man's land to play football.

A more recent example can be found in war-torn South Sudan. The success of the men's national basketball side, which qualified for the 2023 Basketball World Cup and 2024 Paris Olympics, has seen the country forge a new identity. South Sudan remains unstable, but basketball is now one of the country's most celebrated exports.

The impact was highlighted by Luol Deng, a South Sudanese former professional basketball player, who told BBC Sport Africa ahead of the Olympics: "Since I was born, I have known nothing but conversations about war." Yet now, he said, people in South Sudan can't wait to tell you about basketball, even if they don't play the game. "It's a relief. Finally, we have something positive to say."



South Sudan came close to beating basketball heavyweights the US in a warm-up for the Paris Olympics. Alex Plavevski / EPA

During my extended stay in Kathmandu, I got to know a local gym owner and competitive bodybuilder, members of a Kathmandu boxing club, and several trekking guides. People also approached me in the street.

These conversations taught me about the passion and pride Nepalese people are starting to take in sport. At the Paris Paralympics, Palesha Goverdhan won a bronze medal in para-taekwondo – Nepal's first ever Paralympic or Olympic medal.

Cricket is one of the fastest-emerging sports in Nepal. In 2024, its men's team qualified for the T20 World Cup for only the second time, and they are currently playing the West Indies in a T20 series. In the new year, Kathmandu will host a 21-day qualifying tournament for the 2026 women's T20 World Cup.



Nepalese people clearing a street in Kathmandu damaged during the demonstrations. Ross Walker, CC BY-NC-ND

Some of the Nepalese people I spoke to fear that images of the protests will discourage people from visiting their country, which is heavily dependent on tourism. At a time when the Nepal's future remains unclear, sport can unite the country and make a statement for its people on the world stage.

Not long ago, Nelson Mandela used the 1995 Rugby World Cup to help unite a divided post-apartheid South African nation. As the first president of South Africa, he famously wore the country's green rugby jersey during the tournament. Mandela also delivered the trophy to the team's captain, Francois Pienaar, after South Africa won the final.

These powerful symbols laid the foundation for the Rainbow Nation, the term now used to reflect South Africa's diverse and multicultural society. The legacy of Mandela's efforts remain evident, despite the various societal challenges South Africa continues to face.

Siya Kolisi became the first black captain of the South African rugby team in 2018, leading his nation to World Cup victory the following year. I hope that sport can, in a similar a way, help build a more united Nepal in the future.