

The Godfather of Street Football SPEAKS!

LEENDERT JAN VAN DOORN

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‘Edward is a great personality and a wonderfully humble person who is giving young people something amazing, and I’m proud to be part of that.’

Ronaldinho de Assís Moreira; European Football Player of the Year, World Football Player of the Year, Football Player of the Decade

“A great football player, the ideal professional. A street kid who had to fight to make his dream come true. Someone for whom I have great respect.”

Darrell Bell, Mr. Make It Happen of Masters of the Game



Born on 8 June 1976
45 years old
Serious look
Bald
Two holes in his ears
Toned body full of tattoos
Soft, grey-green eyes
A big heart
Silent
He lets his feet do the talking
An example
for all street football
players and
one of the greatest stars in the
world, he received the honorary
title

THE GODFATHER

EDWARD VAN GILS

A SEVERED HEAD!

It's been a great afternoon. Edward, Rocky, Winston and Feliciano played football for hours in the neighbourhood sports hall.

You can play against another team for a guildler. *The winner stays*, the game is called, and when you lose you have to watch from the sidelines. The boys haven't been spectators that day. As usual, they were the bosses on the field, and they're now walking down the street feeling pretty pleased with themselves. The ball is passed around quickly, and the boys try to panna each other when possible. They're having a good time, but the world of Edward and his friends consists of more than just having fun playing street football. It's the world of the streets, and it's a tough world.

They're on their way to Feliciano's house. Feliciano's mother always gives them a warm welcome. She doesn't ask any questions. She gives them something to drink and she cooks for them. A safe haven in the hard, rough world of everyday life.

They walk onto the Opheusdenhof. On the other side of the street, a delivery driver rings the doorbell to drop off a pizza. Edward considers shooting the pizza out of the delivery driver's hands. It doesn't come to that, though. The door flies open and a voice bellows through the street. Something is thrown outside and Edward sees a ball fly right past the delivery driver's head. The ball bounces over the pavement, leaving behind a red trail. The ball has two eyes. It's a head, a severed head. What the fuck, thinks Edward.

I was quite the tough guy in the neighbourhood, but not at that particular moment.

Edward van Gils

WOLF AMONG WOLVES

You can't expect someone to become a tame and innocent sheep if they grow up surrounded by wolves. I grew up on the streets, among the wolves. To outsiders, it may seem like a disorderly, wild mess, but it's just a very tight-knit family with laws and rules that you have to abide by. There's a fixed structure with a clear hierarchy. It's not written down anywhere, but you feel it, you know it. Everyone knows and has their own position within the family. We have our own place, the streets. Our territory, where we rule, and we make that very clear.

Just like in a wolf pack, we communicate in our own way with a lot of body language that only we understand. The way we greet each other, an approving nod or a look of contempt, a small hand gesture. Everyone understands this language perfectly. It's a world in which you have to fight hard for your place. You have to bare your teeth and growl, threaten, at the right times. And sometimes you just have to bite. Hard. I did a lot of biting.

You only learn to ride a bicycle by falling, getting up and trying again. Your whole life is one big learning process. You become a better person by making mistakes, doing the wrong thing and learning from that.

Johan Crujff once said: 'I never learned anything from a victory.' I lost a lot of games. I fell down many times and always got up and kept going. That doesn't automatically make me a good person, but I learned a lot. I still fall sometimes and behave like that wolf from long ago. Sometimes I think I'm there and I know it all. By now, I know that all you can do is your best. Let's just say I'm getting there. I do my best and that's still a struggle, but now in a good way.

Street life gave me a lot. Despite the fact that I did many things I'm not proud of. I did many things I'm even ashamed of, but this made me the person I am today. I learned a lot. Luckily, also a lot of good things. Loyalty, comradeship, sharing, courage, these are the beautiful things I got from the streets.

Many of the people I met are still close friends. Although I don't see some of them too often any more, I can still call them in the middle of the night and they'll be there for me. They're friends I can count on. Old wolves from the pack, loyal friends. I've also lost a lot of friends. Friends that literally did not survive. Friends that were a bit less lucky than I was.

Of course you're responsible for every part of your life, but sometimes you need support, a nudge in the right direction. At important times, there were people who gave me the support I needed. And I have been lucky to have Ilsa beside me, who protects me and sometimes pushes me in the right direction. I was lucky.

I came a long way. I didn't have the best or easiest start. A father and mother want the best for their children, but are definitely not always able to provide this. Over the years, I've become more wary of judging. You rarely know all the ins and outs, even when you're right on top of them. When you read the story about my youth, it might sound strange that I now look back on it in a positive way. Not that it was all good, but it shaped me and made the person I am today. I have noticed that because of my background, my baggage, I can sometimes make a difference for a child. That small push that I got and that can make that difference.

Many things are more important than the honorary title of Godfather, more important than being friends with Ronaldinho or a video clip with Neymar. If I could say at the end that I made a difference to a child's life, even if it was only one, I think I could look back with satisfaction."

Edward van Gils