

“I thought blind people could never play football”: Implementing Blind Football in Southern Africa through TIAS Internship – A Report by Keon Richardson

INTRODUCTION

Blind football—also called football 5-a-side—is an adapted version of Futsal designed for people with visual impairments. The sport has been governed by the International Blind Sports Federation (IBSA; <http://www.ibsasport.org/>) since 1996 and is played with modified FIFA Futsal rules. With no official history, the sport started as a playground game from special schools and educational institutions for the blind in Spain during the 1920s. Thereafter, the sport diffused to blind institutes in Brazil and England during the 1950s with primitive rules and equipment. Today, blind football is played in over seventy countries worldwide, and features as a prominent sporting code at the Paralympic Games since its debut at Athens 2004. In recent years, blind football has grown apace in Africa. The 2019 IBSA Blind Football African Championships in Enugu, November was the largest edition in history. The following eight national teams competing: Mali, Libya, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Cameroon, Niger, and Egypt. In addition, four female athletes from Nigeria and Zimbabwe participated in 2019 IBSA Blind Football Women’s World Training Camp and Games in Tokyo, Japan, for the very first time.



Caption: Nigeria v Ivory Coast at the 2019 IBSA Blind Football African Championships

Despite the encouraging signs of participation in blind football increasing exponentially across Africa, Southern Africa is bereft of coaching clinics and adapted equipment for this sporting modality. Consequently, people with visual impairments in Southern Africa are omitted from participating in blind football. With this in mind, I have dedicated a significant amount of time introducing blind football to students with visual impairments in special schools for the blind and mainstream schools in Zimbabwe. Prior to joining TIAS, I successfully implemented blind football in eight of the country’s ten provinces and also facilitated a national blind football coaching clinic last August. In addition, I raised funds for a female athlete and female coach to represent Zimbabwe at the 2019 IBSA Blind Football Women’s World Training Camp and Games.

I completed my TIAS internship from Sunday 12th January 2020 to Saturday 14th March 2020 at the National Paralympic Committee of Zambia (NPCZ), Paralympic Association of Botswana (PASSOBO), and Zimbabwe National Paralympic Committee (ZNPC), delivering blind football coaching clinics in various educational institutions and communities. With support from the IBSA Blind Football Committee, I provided adapted equipment and coaching manuals for the continuity of blind football participation in each country. Moreover, for my thesis and future publications, I conducted research interviews with Zimbabwean sport participants with visual impairments using Rowe's concept of sporting capital to analyse their perceived barriers and determinants to regularly participate in blind football.



Caption: Tactile coach demonstration with an athlete at the IBSA Blind Football Coaching Clinic in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe

ZAMBIA

The National Paralympic Committee of Zambia (NPCZ) was founded in 2005 with the aim of developing athletes and coaches in sporting codes for people with disabilities in Zambia. The introduction of blind football in Zambia arrived at a critical point in supporting the NPCZ's objective to increase the number of sporting codes available for people with visual impairments. NPCZ Vice-President Charles Mwamba believed that blind football was "very appealing because of its potential as a tool to advocate for inclusion and create a platform for people with visual impairments to fully participate in sport and society". The NPCZ intend to pilot a blind football league once the sport is established in provinces that have a high prevalence of people with visual impairments. I delivered coaching clinics for the NPCZ in Lusaka province and Copperbelt province, which were identified as key catchment areas to recruit people with visual impairments for the sport. Coaching clinics scheduled to take place in Northern province and Southern province were cancelled due to the clearance delay of the adapted equipment.

The first coaching clinic was held from Wednesday 15th January 2020 to Thursday 16th January 2020 at a community sports ground in Matero, Lusaka province. Ten coaches and fifteen participants engaged in ten hours of training over the two-day clinic. Following the introduction from Mr. Charles Mwamba, I introduced the audible balls and blindfolds to the participants and proceeded with the practical activities relating to orientation, mobility, and the importance of saying “VOY” (meaning I go in Spanish) whilst defending. The practical activities focusing on ball control and dribbling were broadcasted live on local television by Diamond TV, who also interviewed me and Charles Mwamba.



Caption: Interview with Diamond TV

The second day focused on the procedure for taking corners, in addition to dribbling the ball in different types of slaloms by using participants as human cones. As the basic skills were covered, I then introduced participants to the match and explain that differ between blind football and 11-a-side football, such as five players per team, no offside, and the duration of matches (two halves of twenty minutes). The participants successfully implemented the basic skills into an end-to-end match. As everyone thoroughly enjoyed the game, a second match was played. After the second match, the coaching clinic closed with a certificate ceremony for all the participants.



Caption: Participants demonstrate their triangle-shape dribbling slalom Player dribbles the ball during the match



Caption: Player dribbles the ball during the match



Caption: Coach uses tactile demonstration to create a map of the pitch on the hand of a totally blind athlete

Implementing blind football in the community as an integrated setting was beneficial in changing the perception of people with visual impairments amongst local people, who were able to see their capabilities first hand. In addition, it also facilitated the engagement of young people in the township, who were keen to get involved and played in the match as sighted Goalkeepers.



Caption: A coach receives his certificate from NPCZ Vice-President Charles Mwamba

The second coaching clinic took place from Tuesday 14th January 2020 to Wednesday 15th January 2020 at Ndola Lions School for the Visually Impaired in Copperbelt province. I departed for Ndola from Lusaka on Sunday 12th January with Para-Athletics athlete and NPC Member Lassam Katongo, who was a participant from the clinic in Matero and a former Ndola Lions student. Ten teachers and twenty students from the school were put through their paces over the two days, learning ball control, dribbling skills, the importance of saying ‘VOY’, and shooting.



Caption: Participant passes the ball to his partner

The final day culminated with a match between the students in their respective age groups, which was enjoyed by all involved as well as spectators. Ten audible balls and twenty blindfolds were donated to the school in the presence of the Head Teacher. The students involved were delighted to have a tangible sport to play whilst at school, as they are generally

excluded from sporting activities. Whilst some students have played (to different degrees) the core game of 11-a-side football, many if not all were not aware of blind football and enjoyed the multifarious techniques involved: *“For me, I was very happy in the manner we were dribbling the ball. PA PA! There was an issue of controlling the ball, so you push with one leg and stop the ball with the other”*, said TF, a ten-year-old student. *“I’ve learnt that as a blind person playing football, to avoid accidents during the game and when running you have to say VOY. When it is a free kick, two people have to be on the ball, so that the ball can be easily moved from the place where it is”*, said TS, a nineteen-year-old student.



Caption: Two participants position themselves to take a corner



Caption: Group photo with students and trained teachers at Ndola Lions School for the Visually Impaired

BOTSWANA

The Paralympic Association of Botswana (PASSOBO) is the mother body of all sporting modalities for people with disabilities in Botswana. As Athletics and Goalball are well established sporting modalities in Botswana, the introduction of blind football added a third sporting modality for Botswana with visual impairments to enjoy.

Five participants and five coaches attended the coaching clinic, representing the following institutions: Linchwe Junior Secondary School, Linchwe Secondary School, Linkokwing University, Ministry of Health, Matsieng Primary School, Botho University, and Gaborone Institute of Professional Studies (GIPS) University. Students and teachers from other institutions in Francistown and Mochudi Village failed to attend due to an influx of administrative duties around the dates of the clinic. I started the first day of the coaching clinic a presentation on the following: history of blind football; rules of blind football; the benefits of blind football; and orientation and mobility.



Caption: Coaches and participants watching footage from the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games football 5-a-side competition

After the classroom presentation in the morning, I delivered activities focusing on orientation, controlling the ball, and passing the ball. The second day continued to focus on ball control, with another classroom presentation analysing ball control and reviewing footage from numerous international competitions. In the practical activities, the participants were introduced to free-kicks, corners, and penalties, finishing with a penalty shootout competition.

The third and penultimate days focused on showcasing different activities that coaches could use to improve orientation, ball control, goalkeeping, and shooting accurately. Underpinning the activities was the STEP model from Black and Stevenson's Inclusion Spectrum framework, an activity-centred approach to change the way an activity is presented for all participants to be fully included. From the STEP model, this includes modifying the space, task, equipment, or number of people in an activity. In a Goalkeeping activity that I delivered, for example, three players were stationed by a marker which was five metres away from the Goalkeeper in the 5x2m area. Players that were positioned on the marker at the

middle and the right had a non-audible football. The player to the left threw to the Goalkeeper in the area. After receiving the ball, the Goalkeeper threw the ball to the player to the right. Once the Goalkeeper threw the ball, the player in the middle threw their ball to the Goalkeeper. The Goalkeeper then threw the ball the left and the receiving player on the right threw the ball back to the Goalkeeper to repeat the sequence in the opposite direction. The sequence would continue with the focus on catching the ball with two hands, quick reactions, distribution, and decision making. As two of the players were partially sighted, I changed the equipment by using a bright yellow ball. Additionally, to make the activity more inclusive for those who are totally blind, I changed the equipment and people by replacing one sighted player with a totally blind player who threw an audible ball instead of a non-audible ball. When the Goalkeeper wanted the ball from the totally blind player, they called his name or clapped their hands so the athlete could audibly measure where to throw the ball. When the Goalkeeper would pass the ball back, they then rolled the ball on the floor for the athlete to audibly locate the ball. The coaches found the concept of the STEP model very interesting and began to suggest ideas of ways to implement the STEP model in other activities.



Caption: Coach giving a tactical demonstration to a totally blind athlete on how to shoot using the toes



Caption: Participants orientating themselves around the pitch



Caption: Two players stationed to take a corner kick

The final day involved introducing a two versus two non-contact matches and the full contact match. Using the STEP model, I changed the task of scoring a point in the non-contact match. To score a point, an athlete had to pass the ball to the guide (positioned behind the dotted lines) and the guide must stop the ball with their foot or hand. This helped improve passing accuracy and dribbling to unbalance the opposition defence. As there were not enough athletes and coaches to play a full five-a-side blind football match, using the STEP model, the number of players in the match was reduced to three players per team (one Goalkeeper and two outfield players). The time was already reduced to ten minutes per half considering the temperature and the intensity of playing three-a-side. The participants reported that the match was highly intense, but they gained regular touches of the ball and a better understanding of the concepts of defending, attacking, and counter attacking. The coaches also enjoyed guiding their athletes in the match under high intensity. The participants were proud to be the first cohort in Botswana to be trained in blind football and intend to impart the skills to their students at their respective institutions. The next page highlights the anonymous feedback on the coaching clinic from the coaches and participants. *“I was impressed with the facilitator. He was knowledgeable and if it was not for him, we would not have known there is blind football”*. *“The coaching clinic was very important and needs to be given higher priority. There is a need to do this once every four months for students to gain experience”*.



Caption: 2 v 2 non-contact match



Caption: Full contact match using three-a-side format



Caption: Participant group photo with their certificates

ZIMBABWE

The Zimbabwe National Paralympic Committee (ZNPC) is responsible for developing sporting codes for people with disabilities in Zimbabwe from grassroots to elite level. The ZNPC enlisted my services to introduce blind football in Zimbabwe through a one-day workshop at the University of Zimbabwe on Tuesday 6th April 2018. Since then, I have frequently returned to the country to deliver provincial and national coaching clinics in supporting the ZNPC's goal to implement blind football in all ten provinces within Zimbabwe. The aims of my internship were threefold. First, to implement blind football in the remaining two provinces (Mashonaland Central and Midlands). Second, complete follow-up coaching clinics at schools where blind football had already been implemented. Third, introduce blind football in educational institutions that have not been engaged previously.

From Monday 3rd February to Sunday 9th February 2020, I delivered blind football coaching clinics at Mahuwe Primary and Secondary School in Mashonaland Central for two days. Thereafter, I conducted follow-up coaching clinics at Jairos Jiri Association School for the Blind in Mashonaland West province for three days and McKeurtan Primary School in Bulawayo province for two days.



Caption: Student takes a penalty amid a large crowd of spectators at Mahuwe School



Caption: Kick off for the match between the female students at Jairos Jiri Kadoma



Caption: Group Photo at McKeurtan Primary School

I then proceeded to the remote areas of Matabeleland North province, from Tuesday 11th February 2020 to Saturday 15th February 2020, to deliver two-day coaching clinics at Fatima Primary School in Jotsholo (Lupane district) and Chipale Primary School in Lusulu (Binga District).



Caption: Hundreds of spectators from Lusulu community gather to spectate the blind football coaching clinic at Chipale Primary School

After that, I was situated in Matabeleland South province, delivering follow-up blind football coaching clinics for primary and secondary students Solusi School and Mtshabezi School from Monday 18th February 2020 to Friday 21st February 2020. A match was scheduled to

take place between the two schools at Mtshabezi High School on Friday 21st February 2020, but Solusi School could not source fuel to make the trip.



Caption: Student with a hearing impairment supports a totally blind student dribble the audible ball at Fatima Primary School



Caption: A totally blind female student from Fatima Primary School dribbles the ball with freedom

The seventh week involved facilitating a five-day blind football coaching clinic at Copota School for the Blind in Masvingo province from Wednesday 26th February 2020 to Sunday 1st March 2020, which included two students and four teachers from Mutendi High School,

and one teacher from Great Zimbabwe University. The trainings at the clinic were separated according to gender and age.



Caption: Female student from Copota School for the Blind takes a six-metre penalty

My penultimate week started at St Faith Primary School in Rusape, Manicaland province, for a follow-up blind football coaching clinic from Monday 2nd March 2020 to Tuesday 3rd March 2020. I then proceeded to Murewa Primary and High School in Mashonaland East province for a two-day blind football coaching clinic from Wednesday 4th March 2020 to Friday 5th March 2020. The two-day clinic introduced the Primary School students with visual impairments as well as follow-up training with the High School Girls Blind Football Team. I completed the week with a two-day coaching clinic at Nyamuzuwe High School from Saturday 6th March 2020 to Sunday 7th March 2020 in the same province.

I concluded the last week of my internship by introducing blind football at St Giles Special School in Harare province from Monday 10th February 2020 to Tuesday 11th February 2020, and Lower Gwelo Adventist School in Midlands province from Wednesday 12th February 2020 to Thursday 13th February 2020. I delivered a training session at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare on the morning of Saturday 14th March 2020 before flying to Tokyo.



Caption: Group Photo with Murewa Primary School students and teachers from the Primary and High School

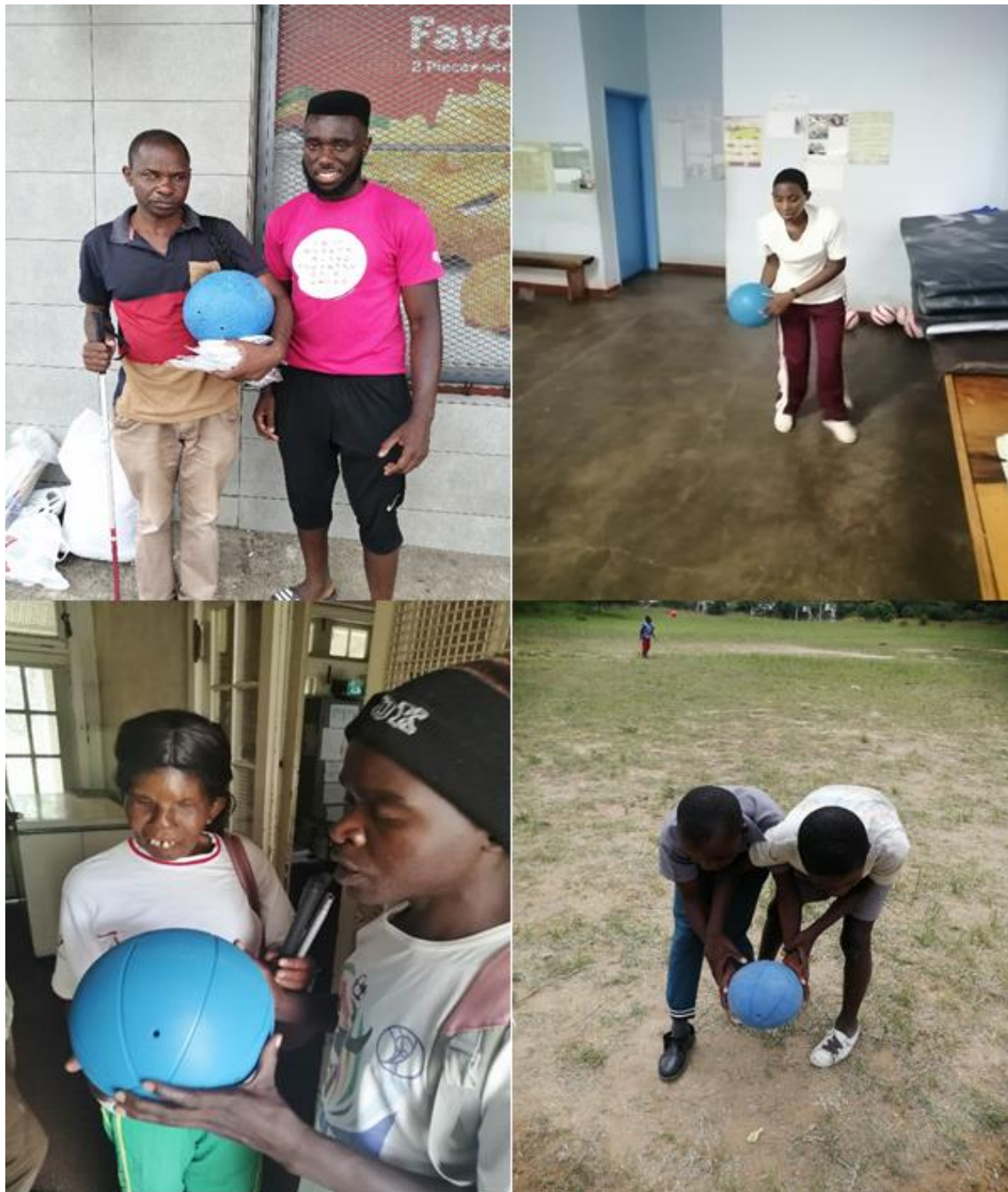


Caption: Former St Giles student (white shirt) and current student (red shirt) enjoy a trust building activity



Caption: Female student from Lower Gwelo High School takes a strike at goal

Each educational institution that engaged in the clinic received audible footballs and blindfolds as an incentive to continue practicing blind football. In addition, I also sourced goalballs and blindfolds to provide to the following goalballs teams: McKeurtan Primary School, Copota School for the Blind, Redbull Sports Club, Mtshabezi High School, Bulawayo Sports Club, St Faith Primary School, Bindura Sports Club, Chitungwiza Sports Club, and Matebeleland North SRC.



REFLECTION

Completing my internship in Zambia, Botswana, and Zimbabwe allowed me to identify and comparatively analyse the external factors which influence (or hinder) the development of blind football in all three countries. The external factors included the following: regional economy; societal attitudes, media, financial resources, human capacity development, governmental support, parental support, and geographical location. The coaching clinics were extremely beneficial in boosting the participants' self-perception, social interaction, and mobility, in addition to how their parents, teachers, and sighted peers view their capabilities. For some participants, it was their first time to kick a ball, let alone play a game of blind football. This is highlighted in a conversation with RS, a primary school student at Ndola

Lions School for the Visually Impaired: *“The football I used to play was only one tactic where you kick the ball then wait for it to come back to you. We were just passing to each other. But here there is even dribbling and running. There are a lot of things involved. Learning all those techniques made it very wonderful compared to the football I played in the past”*.

From the research interviews conducted in Zimbabwe reported that blind football has increased their self-esteem, fitness, and proprioception. In addition, their daily life skills, such as confidence to walk independently, have also improved. Participation in blind football has led to some students feeling equal to their sighted peers, whilst others are striving for a career in coaching: *“I want to be a coach, not to be coached always. I am aspiring to be a coach so I have my own team. I want the whole nation [of Zimbabwe] to know that I can coach blind football”*, said RT, a high school female player at Jairos Jiri Association School for the Blind, who also coaches the school’s Primary Blind Football Team. *“I thought blind people could never play football. We are now being recognized that blind people can also play football. We are playing like the sighted people. I no longer look down upon myself, because I know that I can also do what my sighted peers are doing”*, said DT, a primary student from Copota School for the Blind.

RECOMMENDATIONS

For all three National Paralympic Committees to sustain participation in blind football (and other sporting codes), affiliated federations which cater for a specific sport should be created. For example, Blind Football in Botswana should be developed by Botswana Blind Football Association as an affiliate member of PASSOBO.

In **Zambia**, the NPCZ should use trained coaches from Matero and Ndola Lions School to implement blind football in communities and schools. As Ndola Lions School has a strong catchment area of athletes for blind football, follow-up coaching clinics should be held. The NPCZ should also attempt to partner with the Football Association of Zambia (FAZ) to support their objective of establishing a blind football league.

In **Botswana**, follow-up training should be completed in the institutions that attended the maiden blind football coaching clinic. Moreover, introductory training workshops should be held at the institutions in Mochudi Village and Francistown that failed to attend the coaching clinic. As well as engaging the Botswana Football Association in their development plans, PASSOBO should also collaborate with the ZNPC to gain advice on strategic plans for challenges such as engaging women in blind football.

Zimbabwe can be seen as the hub for blind football in Southern Africa, boasting international participation, women’s blind football, and blind football in all their provinces. The ZNPC should hold regional coaching clinics for men, women, and youth from across Zimbabwe and its neighbouring countries, such as: Zambia, Botswana, Malawi, South Africa, and Namibia. To change the perception of people with visual impairments amongst parents and communities, a parent-child blind football programme should be implemented and more coaching clinics should be conducted in communities where people with visual impairments are situated and also hidden. The ZNPC should also identify coaches who could be coach developers to implement blind football in neighbouring countries to bolster the development of the sport in throughout Southern Africa.

CONCLUSION

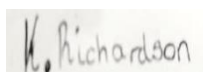
The internship was a huge success, from introducing blind football in Botswana and Zambia, to successfully implementing blind football in all ten provinces of Zimbabwe. The synergy and reciprocity between all three NPCs and key stakeholders (parents, coaches, and educational institutions) allowed the people with visual impairments to fully enjoy the sport of blind football and its numerous benefits. I felt appreciated and valued by everyone I worked with, particularly the participants. The two-month internship in all three countries enhanced my coaching and coach developer practice, allowing me to trial and modify different activities. Both the expected and unexpected issues during my internship boosted my confidence to remain calm in conflicting situations and my ability to apply practical and applicable solutions to problems. Engaging in dialogues with NPC members, athletes, coaches, parents, and advocates for people with disabilities benefited my research project and my overall understanding of the reality of promoting blind football in Southern Africa.

I would like to deeply thank Mr. Michael Bulagango, ZNPC President, Mr. Titus Kebuileng, PASSOBO President, and Mr. Charles Mwamba, NPCZ Vice-President, for allowing me to intern at their respective NPC. In addition to that, I wish to thank Mr. Nesbert Hokonya (ZNPC), Mr. Boikanyo Ratlou (PASSOBO), and Mr. Moses Chishimba (NPCZ) for their unwavering support in mobilizing people with visual impairments, media, specialist teachers, and key personnel for the coaching clinics to be a success. I wish to also thank the IBSA Blind Football Committee for their ongoing support with donations of adapted equipment.

My thanks also go to Associate Professor Yukinori SAWAE (Academic Supervisor), Assistant Prof. Xiaojie TIAN (Internship Committee Chair), and Prof. Randeep RAKWAL (General Mentor; who encouraged me to pen down the experiences in the field for sharing the experiences with the sport and scientific community, and reading and checking the article), for their guiding support both before and during the internship. Last but not least, I would like to extend my thanks to the Internship Committee, TIAS Office and University of Tsukuba for making the internship a success from a logistical and financial standpoint.

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