



What does it take to be a survivor? For [Ethan Zohn](#), one of Rush's board of directors, it has taken a variety of things – from drinking a mixture of cow's blood and cow's milk in Kenya to fending off his brothers' backyard power balls to taking a cocktail of cancer treatments.

Along the way, Ethan has brought the complex gift of survival to thousands of young children through the simple game of soccer.

### **\$1 million prize**

While Ethan may be most famous for winning \$1 million on the reality show "Survivor: Africa," it's what he has done with this money – and his passion – that is even more impressive. As [Oregon Rush](#) Technical Director [Brett Jacobs](#) said, "It is so admirable how Ethan has used the power of his celebrity status to influence the world and make a change."

Since winning "Survivor" in 2002, Ethan has turned his soccer skills, love of the game and celebrity status into several humanitarian efforts.

Soccer has played a major role in his success. It all started in his Lexington, Mass., backyard where his older soccer-playing brothers would launch balls at him as hard as they could while he tried to defend himself. These backyard survival skills prepared him to be a goalkeeper. While he also ran track and played basketball, it was soccer that kept tugging at him.



## African adventure

After graduating with a degree in biology from Vassar College, a Division 3 school, Ethan moved to Hawaii and tried out for a new minor league soccer team, the Hawaii Tsunami. This first professional goalkeeping job led to playing in Israel; Cape Cod, Mass.; and then in Africa on the Zimbabwe Highlanders FC team.

In Zimbabwe, Ethan explained, soccer is THE sport, and he wanted to experience what it felt like to be a professional soccer player in a country that embraced the sport on the highest level.

While the experience on the field in Africa was enriching, off the field, the experience with HIV and AIDS was devastating. One of the most popular players on his team had AIDS and died a long, slow death. But no one spoke about it. "It was like there was an official gag order because no one on the field, off the field or in the community talked about this terrible disease," Ethan said. "I didn't know what to do about it, and it really bothered me."

Soon Ethan returned to the US, realizing that he wasn't going to be the next big soccer superstar. He started coaching at the collegiate level, but he had time to spare and knew that something had to be done about the millions of kids in Africa who were impacted by HIV and AIDS.

### 'Survivor: Africa'

One morning in 2001, a roommate suggested as a joke that they respond to a casting call for a relatively new reality show called "Survivor." To apply, they had to make a video, which caught the producer's attention. They were interviewed and eventually Ethan was selected to participate in the series' third show. Coincidentally, the show was taped in Africa.

Anyone who has watched any episode of "Survivor" knows that it is not easy to figure out how to keep yourself alive, get along with others on the show and keep from being voted off the show. With a \$1 million prize as an incentive, Ethan used many soccer skills to eventually be named the winner.

On the food front, Ethan ate anything that would crawl, fly or wiggle. The grossest thing he ate was a mixture of cow's blood and cow's milk, a customary beverage consumed by Kenyans for protein.

And he constantly used soccer skills to encourage teamwork on the show. "I honestly believe that having played soccer helped me on the show," Ethan explained. "The key aspects of the game like teamwork, camaraderie, performing under pressure and competition were important. Just like on a team and just like in a game, you have to make it work. You have to achieve the goal, and you have to win."

Throughout the “Survivor” series, Ethan was pushed to the absolute limit. While he wanted to win, Ethan had an even more important goal. “Having seen the show before, I was really worried about being pressured to act in a way that wasn’t acceptable,” Ethan said. “In ‘Survivor,’ it is a game that really has no rules. It was important for me to come home with my values and honor intact.

“On a minute-by-minute basis I was forced to be in situations where I didn’t get along with everyone,” Ethan continued. “I had to bite my tongue and be smart about how I treated people because they could vote me off the show. Because of this, I made a lot of personal relationships. Eventually people came to genuinely like and trust me. They gave me the gift of winning.”

### **Survivor: Kids**

As the show moved throughout rural Kenya, one day Ethan found himself in the parking lot of a hospital with a bunch of kids. Unable to speak with them because of the language barrier, he pulled out a hacky sack and they started playing. When he asked the nurse why all of these kids were at the hospital, the answer startled him. They all had AIDS. This shocking fact gave Ethan a new reason for wanting to win “Survivor.” He was going to use the skills he learned in soccer to help prevent more kids from this terrible fate.

### **Teamwork**

The teamwork Ethan learned on the soccer field is a theme he mentioned several times while sharing his story. Being part of a team has always been a critical part of Ethan’s soccer game, especially being a goalkeeper. He recalled that in high school and college, he would play the same teams over and over and see the same people. He saw some players’ actions come back to haunt them. The same thing happened on a professional level.

His advice is to be disciplined, to work together as a team and to remember that how you handle winning is just as important as how you handle losing. After a loss, Ethan allows himself a brief mourning period where he can be upset. But then, “You need to learn from your mistakes and bounce back,” he said. “Brush it off and pick up where you left off. Being negative and yelling at other players doesn’t allow you to move forward. Soccer is all about moving forward and attacking as a **team.**”

The discipline and teamwork still continue to come naturally for Ethan. But now, he channels these forces into the charity organization he helped cofound, which is called [Grassroot Soccer](#), and other ways to reduce the number of kids who are shattered by HIV and AIDS.



**Grassroot Soccer**

In 2002 Ethan got a call from his friend and teammate Dr. Tommy Clarke, and together they created Grassroot Soccer, a charitable organization that uses professional soccer players, coaches and community leaders to help educate African kids about the dangers of HIV and AIDS, which can kill them. “Kids will listen because soccer players are their role models, their heroes,” Ethan explained. “Soccer is an integral part of African culture and it connects people and brings smiles to faces, even in the worst of situations. Every place I go, I bring a soccer ball and can instantly make friends.”

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“It’s easy to use the sport of soccer to help others,” Ethan said. “Kids in the U.S. can donate old soccer gear, raise money and hold small tournaments to raise awareness. Everything helps! We have the ability to change people’s lives through the sport just by playing the sport we love.”

Adults, college kids and professional soccer players can help by teaching African kids about HIV and AIDS prevention. So far, 498,000 youth have been educated by Grassroot Soccer. By the [2014 FIFA World Cup](#) in Brazil, the organization’s goal is to graduate 1 million African youths from the HIV and AIDS prevention program.

“What Ethan has done with Grassroot Soccer is worldwide and far-reaching,” Brett said. “He’s given a lot of his time and himself, which is admirable. He transcends the game and is more than just soccer. He’s about people and relationships and helping others.”

### **Survivor: Ethan**

After conquering the TV show “Survivor,” Ethan encountered an even tougher reality: cancer. It’s ironic that after dedicating so much time, money and energy educating kids about HIV and AIDS, Ethan was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma in 2009. He was treated and went into remission. Twenty months later in September 2011, the cancer returned and he underwent chemotherapy and an allogeneic stem cell transplant using stem cells donated from one of his brothers.

Today, Ethan is recovering from the aggressive treatment that has left him physically weak but mentally more committed than ever to teamwork. “It sucks to have cancer and it is horrible!” he said. “I’ve had the best team around me, including my family, girlfriend, doctors and friends, and it’s all about having a team to keep me alive.”

Even in the midst of great personal pain and challenge, Ethan continues to fight. "I know what it's like to be on the receiving end of a life-threatening diagnosis, and I want to do everything in my power to make sure others do not have to go through the same crud I'm going through." So he continues to work hard to raise money and awareness for Grassroot Soccer and

**'Everyone has the power to make a difference,' Ethan Zohn.**

and another charity, Zohn FC, which is using soccer to fight cancer.

"He is a genuine, authentic individual, someone you would always want on your team," said Brett. "What you see is what you get. He is such a wonderful person and a great humanitarian and has given back to society in so many ways. He deserves a big hug."

### **Do something**

Ethan encourages everyone, young and old, to become involved. "You don't have to go out and change the entire world tomorrow," he said. "Go out there and find out what makes your heart break, and then do something about it using the sport of soccer. *Everyone* has the power to make a difference."

To learn more about Ethan, Grassroot Soccer, the three children's books he has authored and other news, go to [www.EZOHN.com](http://www.EZOHN.com).

Ethan Zohn has been a member of the [Rush Board of Directors](#) since 2009. He accepted the invitation to join Rush because he respects what the organization is doing with sister clubs around the world. He also is a fan of the life lessons Rush teaches players, the quality of the coaches and camaraderie amongst the players. Rush jumped out at him because of what happens off the field and the life lessons kids learn from the club.