



Center for the Study of the Southwest Texas State University San Marcos

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Soccer as an isolator, identifier, and a way of life, 09/25/2017

When I was in elementary school, my family and I lived on the Southside of Houston in an extremely impoverished area of the city. As an elementary student, I was sent to a school that was completely dedicated as an elongated ESL (English Second Language) program, not because of state-designation but because of necessity. After the first day of school, the principal called my parents and let them know that the school could not accommodate an English-only speaker and recommended a transfer a few miles away to a primary English school. My parents unable to afford the gas, told the school that I would remain enrolled within the program. Within the program, the students would receive instruction and converse with each other mostly in Spanish as their written work would slowly be done in English. The only problem was I did not speak Spanish. I felt isolated.

Quickly I felt validation in academics, as English work was significantly easier as it was native. However, during recess, we would walk out of the building and to the public park. While playgrounds and jungle gym were evident, the students holistically ignored the equipment and headed out to a large soccer field. Before classes the older kids could be found having pickup

games, during recess entire classes would play against rivaling classes. After school, students would practice for the next day. Many kids wore their favorite jerseys. If you could not afford a jersey, you would take a color shirt and write a number on it. In a way, the sport was a culture and a lifestyle for most of my classmates. At recess, everyone played no matter how good they were. Except me. Do not get me wrong, occasionally kids would motion for me to join, but each early attempt was throttled by a language barrier that prohibited me from ever understanding the rules or the sport was so important. As such, I sat under trees and hoped for loose balls that I could return to the game. It was a feeble attempt to feel included in a sport that I was clearly isolated from.

My older brother, on the other hand, loved soccer. He picked up Spanish a lot more quickly and loved the rush of watching a game. As I graduated to middle school, we moved up north to a more affluent area of town. There was a huge decline of soccer jersey, in terms of sports, football seemed to be a major focus at the school. However, if you went to the park on the weekends you could watch neighborhood leagues play. My brother would bash the new games saying that private coaches and private leagues made the game less authentic. I, not too concerned authenticity, remember thinking that their soccer seemed a lot cleaner and lot less scrappy, and as such, I stopped watching during my free time. Nobody wanted a random kid returning balls during their tournaments and practices. My concern and interest receded as it was no longer a major part of my every day experience.

However, for years to come, I remember hearing my brother yell at the television in excitement during FIFA games. Annoyed, I would often tell him to turn it down, in which he would yell “Real Hispanics like soccer.” My cousins not just half-Hispanic but fully Puerto Rican would join in when they were around. Somehow soccer remained a divider and an isolator in my life. As years passed, my major identity formed external from soccer, I found inclusion in other sports such as martial arts. However, my experiences taught me that soccer could be regarded just as an isolating game (from my early perspective), an identifier (for my brother), or a way of life (for the kids that went to my school).