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A Bird’s-Eye View

I’ve never played soccer – never *really* played it, at least. The sport is in my blood, almost entirely on the side of my dad, whose family came from Germany and the Czech Republic and who played recreationally into his 20s. For a few reasons though, I wouldn’t follow in those footsteps, not even briefly. The most soccer I can say I’ve played was in gym classes when we were given a closet full of balls and license to do whatever we pleased with them. Sometimes we’d even have to settle for using a volleyball (which doesn’t actually look much different from soccer balls of old), and sometimes I’d be quite the oddball – the only white kid, subpar skill, bad vision...even in the most simple of circumstances, even if I blew off some steam and possibly had some fun, a life with the ball at my foot wasn’t right.

Because of the foreignness of playing, I’ve been consigned to watching from afar and usually from a bird’s-eye view, both literally and metaphorically. Normally the idea of relegation isn’t a good thing in the world of soccer, but my exile from the battlefield has turned out just fine, I assure you. That view of matches on TV, from a press box, etc has suited me just fine, as has being an objective observer.

The earliest memory I have of anything soccer-related was actually only in 2006, going to my Aunt Jackie's house with my dad to watch the United States show up late to the party in Germany. A few days later, I'd watch from home as they managed a draw against soon-to-be king Italy, but only via an own goal and with literal bloodshed. That's all I can remember of what was, I believe, my first experience with soccer.

I'm almost sad to say that I took the path of most Americans even to this day: I went a few years without soccer factoring into my life at all. The U.S. men's national team had an impressive run in the 2009 Confederations Cup, that mostly meaningless practice run for the massive event which was to take place a year later. It wasn't meaningless for the Americans though. As the pundits made clear, the U.S. was 90 minutes away from their first international trophy, even if the titan Brazil was in their way. It started well, with the U.S. going up 2-0 in the first half, then Brazil played like themselves in the second. The U.S. wasn't there yet; 3-2.

Because I wasn't setting foot onfield, perhaps my flickering early interest in the beautiful game was caused by its rare occurrences on television. I never really thought about it at the time, but I could've watched Spanish-language channels to learn *two* languages common throughout the world. However, I wasn't watching from my pedestal at all, not for another year.

In the 2010 World Cup, it clicked. ESPN had rethought their broadcast strategy and it was a pleasure to watch matches as if I were sitting in the broadcast booth alongside the likes of Ian Darke and Martin Tyler, in that perfect position broadcasters are afforded with all of the expert analysis to go along. The standout moment would be, understandably, Landon Donovan's last-gasp winner against Algeria, a goal which sent the U.S. soccer world into pandemonium and is arguably one of the most important goals in U.S. soccer history. Though alone, I watched the play build up on TV from my perfect position, thinking "*It's do or die, now or never...it's NOW!*" as I triumphantly ran around the living room in celebration. For the first time, I could feel the *connection* to soccer, and I wanted to jump in.

Just after the World Cup, I'd experience the game in a slightly new way: a computer game. I began beta-testing FIFA Online, really just a computer adaptation of the renowned annual console titles. As could be expected, I'd observe each match as if watching from above, but I at least had some say in the action. Through that game, I was further inspired to watch the real

thing, plus I found my first club team to follow: Manchester City. Really, I just chose them because I disliked their renowned cross-town rivals, but it turned out City was on the rise, there were some talented and interesting players and the club culture was just right for me. I've never looked back, even as they've struggled to live up to expectations.

I watched isolated Premier League matches in the 2010-11 season, almost always with the lovable duo of Ian and Macca, as well as occasional U.S. national team games too – always from the bird's-eye view of broadcasts. I was invested in Manchester City for the 2011-12 season, from the infamous Balotelli backheel to the 6-1 derby to multiple instances of getting back into matches with their backs against the wall, the most noteworthy instance being the two goals in stoppage time on May 13 to snatch the title away from United. Still, I was watching from roughly the same position each time, in front of a TV and the camera angle they use.

That would change in 2012 though with the debut of San Antonio Scorpions FC. For the first time in my life, I was watching live soccer consistently, not from in front of a TV and a camera angle situated perfectly, but from stands and at a flatter angle. After a couple years though, I grew weary of the narrow angle and began to get tickets farther up in the stands, giving me a better view. I feel vindicated when I hear other fans, broadcasters, reporters, etc say they prefer that omniscient vantage point as well.

The next and final step in how I've experienced the beautiful game so far was in May 2016, when I was introduced to a similar viewpoint for matches: from the press box (or similar media accommodations). Having figured out that the world of sports media would be amazing, if however hard to get into, I began to write for a website called Pitch Black, which covers soccer in the San Antonio area. While most of my experience with this has taken place at Toyota Field in San Antonio, I've also covered matches in Arizona, Colorado, Oklahoma and Missouri...from comparable press boxes, a folding chair just a few yards from the sideline or even at a folding table behind some advertising boards and an obstructive ballkid (not my favorite media setup).

In the future, I hope to add to my experiences and hopefully get to see matches in all kinds of venues for a living. Of course there's more to sports reporting than just the competitive nights, but that's the centerpiece.

It should be clear by now that my experience with soccer has by no means been a straightforward journey, with twists and turns taking me in all sorts of exciting directions. One thing has stayed the same though, I've found myself at home watching from up above, from an elevated position, from a bird's-eye view – metaphorically as I can't play to save my life and have to simply watch, as well as physically through TV broadcasts, watching some matches in person and now chronicling them for the world to read about.