



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

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Soccer Gave Me A Place

"Skill is the art of turning limitations into virtues." – Eduardo Galeano

Soccer gave me a place in my travels.

My first place was in kinder garden, between the tree and the school wall. I waited there for the ball and kids to come around, and I could kick the ball away from the other players. That was my place, on the side of the field, away from play, waiting for my moment in the sun. From kinder through 4th grade, I waited on the side of the kiddie soccer scrum (in Cali Colombia in Pance) for my moment. And, yes, I was probably among the last to get picked.

When we moved to Mexico City, I had no place in school. In the American School Foundation, no one played soccer during recess. There was no place for me.

On arrival in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, it looked like there might not be a place. There were cross-burnings on our way to school, and tensions were, umm high. Fortunately, the YMCA started a soccer league a couple of years earlier, and I ended up on a team. I found out which team during the summer after I moved to middle school. I, with the working-class black and white students in the integrated Vernor Elementary made the same jump to Tuscaloosa Middle School. My

classmates – the white children of professors – went to the local Catholic school, even though they were not Catholic. I had the Bad News Bears experience in soccer. However, when we traveled to play soccer in Mississippi, we encountered teams from the poultry farm areas, full of other Mexican kids. We somehow managed to win in those tournaments, mostly because of one incredibly talented kid. Not me. I chased the ball. I also rode my bike to school and practice, mostly to avoid the busing buses. Soccer gave me a sense of independence.

When we moved to Queretaro, soccer gave me a place again. I moved into a neighborhood with many of my classmates. All we did was play in Jose Luis's backyard, three hours a day. I was the least skilled and the youngest player. But I had a place in the neighborhood. A place I kept, for after my father's passing, that was what I had, for myself.

When I left for my last years in high school to a school in New Mexico, I became part of an international cohort of students at the United World College. We were also a very small school, so Toril (Norway) and Victoria (Baltimore) became starting players. I was shocked. We beat every other high school team in northern New Mexico by a margin of at least ten goals. As a result, we played against adult soccer clubs across the state. And we did well. The Los Alamos club had a player who played for the Hungarian National Team (a scientist), and I saw and lived the difference between top-tier and the rest of us.

When I came home in 1986, the World Cup In Mexico started. I then again saw how much better world-class players were than the rest of us. The story of naturally skilled Latin American players began to fall away.

When we moved to the United States, I spent a year in Alabama playing for the University club. Basically, we played pick up every day, and the over-21 adults [Norwegian exchange students, Caribbean veterans, and oddball undergrads] would share stories of battles and harassment in bars. Again, learning my place.

In college, I started the junior varsity club. In graduate school, I played on the History-Anthro team, where Elise Edwards brought Gunn Nyborg to our team. Gunn had, until 1993, played more international caps than any other player in the world to that point. Soccer gave me perspective on the world.

For my fieldwork, I moved to DC. There, I found the African taxi driver pickup location, and – by total accident – got picked up for the Washington Post and the Civil Rights division of the Department of Justice co-ed soccer teams. My frantic running around and passing finally paid off. I learned a sense of DC and the world, simply by showing up on Saturdays.

Today, I still wait on the edge of the field, biding my time for my moment. However, after 45 years of playing, my field sense and my generic athleticism allow me to keep my place. My team has construction workers and tech industry executives. Some can't speak English. Others can't speak Spanish, yet. Here we are, claiming our place on the fields. As Eduardo Galeano said, ““Tell me how you play, and I'll tell you who you are.”