

Opportunities

A Piece by Mike Brienza

I began playing soccer at five years old; I played in the Kiwanis soccer league at Lane Road Park (now Thompson Park) every Sunday. A few of the players I played with Kiwanis, I would eventually play with again in high school. I was a kid who had a little extra weight on him and not the best touch on the ball, but I had a real love for the sport. In 4th grade, we became interested in club, however I was hesitant. I believed if I played club that I would eventually have to play high school soccer, and that was something I was not interested in.

My mom convinced me to try out for the Santos Futbol Club. To this day I can still remember the first try out and the nerves. I felt out of place and the speed and skill all the other players had been far superior to mine. I remember seeing two coaches standing at the sideline staring intently at me as I tried out. I made the team and the first camp I attended for pre-season I played under Coach Seymour and then Coach Mazi, getting to know both of them from camp on. As the year went on, I grew more comfortable with the group and played under Mazi for two years. I gained skillful moves, tactical awareness and agility.



By 7th grade, the team found out there was going to be a new and different coach for the coming season. On the first day of practice he told us with sternness that we can refer to him as Coach or Coach Clint. We were his first team as a coach with Santos, and to this day he is by far one of the best coaches as well as being an inspirational Coach that I have ever had. From the beginning he stressed not just fitness and skill, but your attitude on and off the field. He honed me into the player that I am today, emphasizing that even when you may not have the most skill you can make up for it with hard work. While traditional, his motto of working hard was something that taught me more lessons than I anticipated.

As the seasons and the years went on, I stopped drinking soda pop and ran three miles outside weekly at the recommendation of Coach Clint. I never had the skill or as good of a shot in my younger years, but I worked hard day in and day out. I began to understand as I grew into my teen years and entering high school that soccer was not just the game I played, but it was teaching me about life. If you work hard at something, you will achieve it. I entered the high school team, playing high school soccer in the fall and then club in the winter and spring.

High school soccer had a different atmosphere than Club; it was a lot more intense, faster paced and more focused on the results. Santos provided me with not only the skills to play at the high level but also the mentality too. From working hard not just in games or practices but also at the little things, helped me be able to play JV for my freshman and sophomore years and then both JV and Varsity junior year, until eventually playing Varsity my senior year.

There was something different and special about playing Varsity at high school than playing Club or JV. Santos prepared me for it and to this day, I still smile at my words when I first joined that I would never want to play high school soccer. So many special images come to mind of playing at that level: to play under the lights, be a part of the fast-paced intense games, play in the thrilling playoff games, scoring goals and looking at the newspaper the next morning at your name.

My last competitive soccer season was the Fall of my senior year in High School playing for Varsity. By the end of it all and looking through all we had accomplished, I can only think of those times with fond memories. Being a part of the team that went the furthest any Upper Arlington's Men's soccer team had ever gone in the playoff. We won the first District Championship ever and are one of the 23 players to have the medal. While also being the first to win the OCC title in 18 years. I still treasure the accolades but what really have stood out are my memories. Standing in the November cold with my arms wrapped around my teammates watching the shootout and then sprinting to our goalkeeper in celebration. The friendships I was able to find playing Club and High School are still as strong as ever, and the moments are made even more special with those people during the times of loss and victory.



One of the final games of my High School season, I sat on the bench much of the first half and waited for my chance to go into the game, we were playing Beaver creek (ranked #5 in the state at the time). When I finally got the chance to go into the game, I took full advantage of it, scoring two goals and receiving the player of the game. I could have sat on the bench and wasted the opportunity I had on the field by sulking, instead I went in ready to prove myself and scored to help win the game against the #5 team in the state.

I was never the most skilled player, I didn't win the awards, I was never the captain. But I worked hard and I enjoyed every moment I had the privilege to step onto the field and play for my city, for my team, for my family and for my friends. If you give it your all and know that every time you step off that field, that you did your very best then it won't ever matter whether you won or lost. Sure, it would be nice to win, but if you did your best then there is nothing to be ashamed of, ever.

I played competitively from five years old till nineteen and don't ever regret a minute of it, I still play to this day whether it's a recreational league or playing in the hallway of the dorm in college. Sure, Soccer is a game about a ball and a goal, but what is it really about? For me it has always been about life. It teaches patience, it teaches teamwork, failures, and victories. Soccer, like life gives you the incredible opportunity to learn from your mistakes and triumph in

your victories. Don't waste the opportunity sitting on the bench sulking, get right into the game and make a difference.