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This is America!

Playing soccer when you are fifteen is hard enough, but playing soccer in America when you are fifteen is even harder. Physicality, domination, competition- these are my everyday instructions.

With an average of eight goals per game with the U15 team -under fifteen years old-, my soccer coach realized that I was good enough to play with the “big boys”. Therefore, he asked me to join kids who play for U18 -under eighteen years old. I spent a week sleeping over the idea. I had already seen a few of the players and, to be honest, they looked far older. Some wore even beard! Despite the fact they were older, taller and bigger than me, I decided to join them. My first game was a complete disaster: I was like a juicy fish swimming aimlessly in a shark tank. Push after push, and fall after fall, I tried to kick the ball with a purpose while the players were kicking me. The soccer I know and I have been playing since I was five, is all about precision and technique. However, the soccer I had to play that day was anything but that: it was about running away from the beasts, preventing a contusion or an injury. After that game, all I wanted was to run away from this American soccer experiment.

After playing a couple more games with my new team, I started reflecting more and more on the lack of skills and tactics of my teammates - especially after failing in the attempt to pass the ball to any of them, so anyone could score. I started to realize most of the players just wanted to shot the ball around with no direction. Sure, they were fast and big, and aggressive but, within soccer kicking a ball means nothing- it is what you do with that ball that matters. In my next game, I thought I should try something by myself- as there was no one to team with me, I would play 'solo'. My first opportunity came the moment I received the ball and, it was my turn to stick to the ball, make it follow my mind as my mind was following my instinct. My goal was to leave the players behind me and go on my own. One trick and all of the midfielders were on my back, another trick and two defenders were down. It was my opportunity to score. Just as I reached the goalie and prepared to aim my missile, I felt a shove from behind. A player from the opposite team hit me square in the back and stole away the ball. I looked over at the referee, confidently waiting for him to blow his whistle and call the penalty kick. Nothing happened, he didn't say a word. I then turned to my team looking for their support and all I found was my coach screaming at me- "Jacobo! What are you doing?! Be aggressive! If they push you, push them back! Don't be a girl."

Since that game, he has repeated the same thing over and over again, like a mantra. "Jacobo forget about your soccer, be aggressive. This is America!". Sometimes, I just want to tell him, "Well, this is America but this is no soccer!" Sadly, I know I can't tell him what is on my mind because he would take my comment as a personal offense. There is something in this country about the physical contact in sports, no matter how young you are or how amateur your

league may be. There is also something sad about this “American” soccer - like an intoxicated version of what the rest of the world knows is the art of soccer. Strategies, tactics, kicking the ball for an hour without even scoring once! I know, it looks slow pace for most Americans but, you better know this is the art the British invented in 1365.

You do not get to master a sport in a few decades, Americans. You got to enjoy it slowly and get the most of all the countries and players who have made soccer the real foot-ball, an art that uses the ball and the foot - no hands, no push, no dirty games. I feel sorry as it seems most Americans, and sadly most coaches, do not seem to understand and appreciate the beauty of the technique and the team work soccer is all about. I feel they don't comprehend that it is not all about running after the ball, as felines would do after its prey. What I have been taught is that your goal should make the other team run after the ball because if you make them run eventually they will become tired. So, when my coach goes on with this “aggressive mantra”, I nod my head and respond, “Alright coach, whatever you say”.

Today, two years later, I have finally understood what he meant by saying: “This is America”. Sadly for me, people in the States play soccer in a different way. I have realized this is neither good nor bad. It is just the way soccer is played best here. I was so focused on trying to make Americans change their mindset, that I didn't realize that the one who needed to change was me. As my coach says, this is America and, I finally get it, he means I am not in Spain anymore. Although I wish I could play as I've been taught all my life, I have come to the conclusion that sometimes in life you just need to adapt to new ideas and contexts because if you

don't, you will be left out. That evening was my opportunity to show my coach that I got his message- I got the ball, I pushed two defenders out of my way, I looked at the referee- he didn't say a word, I encounter the goalie, I kicked the ball and scored.