

Getting back to the game

Substitute, graduate pursues pro soccer career

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The boys' varsity soccer team battled against Plano Senior High School. The winner of this game would advance to the 2005 playoffs. The school was down by one when suddenly freshman standout Sam Garza scored the equalizing goal.

Now tied, the teams continued fiercely playing. But Plano made a fatal mistake - a foul in the penalty box. The team had a penalty kick that could win the game, but nobody was stepping up to take it. Thoughts raced through Garza's mind as head coach John Gall turned to his star of the game, the freshman forward.

"Sam, you take it."

Taking a deep breath, Garza stepped up.

With confidence he sunk the ball into the back of the net. Cheers erupted from the stands. The school won the game 2-1 with Garza scoring both goals. They were headed to the playoffs, all thanks to the talented freshman.

"All the players were looking around in bemusement that I was picking a freshman to take the penalty kick, but he stepped up like a veteran and stuck the ball in the back of the net and took us to the playoffs," Gall said. "That's the type of kid that Sam is."

Throughout his high school career, Garza continued to excel in soccer. During his junior and senior year, the team won back to back state championships. In 2007 they were the top-ranked team in the nation with an undefeated 30-0 record.

Because of Garza's combination of natural talent and ability to learn new skills, Gall remembers their interactions in high school fondly. The relationship between the two grew throughout Garza's high school career, so much so that Gall said he regards him as one of his favorite players.

"[He was] very, very coachable and always took advice the best way possible, whether it was trying to improve his game or it was asking questions to see what could get better for the team," Gall said. "Certainly a tremendously talented individual, but the best team player that I've ever coached."

During his time at the school, Garza worked tirelessly to improve his skillset. From early practices for his high school team to games for his club teams, the Dallas Comets and later the Solar Soccer

Club, Garza's life virtually revolved around soccer. Afternoons. Mornings. Weekends. Breaks. All of them were filled with soccer practices, games and tournaments.

"I definitely didn't have any time to have a job or to do much else," Garza said. "I had to sacrifice a lot."

All that work ultimately paid off because Garza continued his soccer career at the collegiate level at the University of Denver and then the University of California-Santa Barbara. During this time, he was even playing for the Under-20 U.S. Men's National Team and was picked to go to the Under-20 World Cup in Egypt. However, before his sophomore year in college, he tore his ACL, a ligament in his knee, an injury that took him out of the game for about ten months. This injury was remarkably similar to an injury in Gall's collegiate career and strengthened the pair's relationship.

"I had gone through a cruciate ligament tear when I was playing in college and he kind of went through the same thing," Gall said. "I was able to help him through some of the difficult times with that."

After playing at Santa Barbara, Garza signed a Generation Adidas contract. The Generation Adidas program allows players to leave college and join Major League Soccer (MLS) early. Players like Garza receive their paychecks directly from Adidas, making them a free commodity to whoever drafts them. Soon, Garza found himself in a Kansas City convention center with his family at the 2012 MLS Superdraft, waiting to be picked by a professional club.

"I was just super nervous," Garza said. "I didn't know when I was going to get called."

After a nerve-racking wait, Garza was drafted in the first round, sixth overall to the San Jose Earthquakes. Back in Texas, Gall was watching his former star with pride as Garza was presented with his blue San Jose scarf. The pair hadn't lost touch in college. In fact, their relationship had significantly strengthened since Garza left Flower Mound. Having

faced a similar ligament injury during his collegiate career, Gall was able to assist Garza through this and many other trials. He was thrilled when Garza headed to the MLS.

"It was just a super proud day for me," Gall said. "I knew he would go in the first round and I knew he was a highly-talented

collegiate player. Nobody more than Sam deserved that."

Over the past couple of years, Garza is one of a small number of alumni that went on to play professionally, among those being Zach Barnes, who played for DC United. Nevertheless, Garza stood out to his former coach. Gall said he largely attributes the success Garza has found to an incredible work ethic, combined with his athletic ability.

"There's a lot of people with talent around the country who want to become professional players," Gall said. "What separates a lot of players is that drive and desire and Sam had that all the time from his freshman year."

But once he began his professional career, it was little like he and Gall hoped it would be. Shortly after arriving at San Jose, Garza faced a series of injuries that made for an inconsistent rookie year. He was in and out of the team due to fractured ribs, a sprained ankle, and he aggravated a previous wrist injury from his high school career. His second year ended with little playing time. By the time he reached his third year, a very frustrated and mentally-exhausted Garza was waived by the Earthquakes last July.

"A lot of outside factors played into why I wasn't playing well," Garza said. "It probably was one of the worst times of my life to be honest with you, the last year at San Jose."

Garza moved around from the Earthquakes to Real Salt Lake for a brief trial, before ending the season with Arizona United, a United Soccer League team. After the season ended, he found himself back at home not playing soccer, which had been the one consistent element in his life since he was 5 years old. The college studies that had been on the backburner of his mind, now seemed more and more pressing.

"I was idolizing soccer," Garza said. "Obviously, you have to have a backup plan and I was too naive at the time coming out of college."

Last December, Garza took some advice his mother gave him and applied to be a substitute in the district. Since then, he has substituted at schools of various age groups across LISD. Additionally, he has been assisting Gall

with the boys' soccer team. Among the many things he has learned about himself in this time away from the professional world was an interest in coaching.

"It's definitely catching my eye a little bit," Garza said. "I think that would definitely be something that I would be really interested in."

His time back at home has greatly impacted members of Marcus FC. Players like varsity goalkeeper junior Landon Plunkett have grown up hearing the name Sam Garza and his achievements even prior to joining the school's team. Plunkett said that working with Garza over the past several weeks has put professional ambitions into perspective for the team.

"He was just an average high school player that cared more than anyone else and worked harder than anyone else," Plunkett said. "It makes it more reasonable that you can reach those goals."

For the time being, however, Garza's primary focus is on returning to the professional sphere. On Feb. 14, he traveled to Seattle to try out for the Seattle Sounders 2, a reserve team for the MLS club, the Seattle Sounders. He is still waiting to hear if he will sign a contract to play for S2.

"They have a team in the MLS so they're a second tier team, but I still have the opportunity to move up," Garza said. "That's my goal, obviously, to get moved up to Seattle Sounders I, the first team."

While it might not have been the way he envisioned his career working out, Garza said he is grateful for the tougher times over the past couple of years. He said it allowed him to discover life beyond soccer while also preparing him to return to the professional world.

"Everyone has their own path in life and this is my life," Garza said.

Since Gall has been a part of Garza's life for the past ten years, he has seen Garza work through times of both triumph and trial. He said Garza's determination has been the largest contributor to his maturing process.

"He's become a great person to be around," Gall said. "I mean, he always was, but now he's mature and now he sees things differently, and it's been great to be around him through those stages of his life."

Garza's past teams:

Marcus High School



Denver University



University of California Santa Barbara



San Jose Quakes



San Antonio Scorpions



Arizona United

