This is eleven, a north American soccer quarterly.
Celtic's Black Arrow
A portrait of father and son: Gil (Scott) Heron
Steve Welsh

From the Editors

We Play Too
Latina immigrants reshaping soccer and life in North Carolina
Paul Cuadros

Cruijff's American Journey
How Johan's tenure in the NASL changed the Dutch legend
Leander Schaerlaeckens & Pieter van Os

Making it in America
Analyzing "the immigrant's game"
Andrew Guest

Truth, Crushed To Earth, Shall Rise Again
The Howard University soccer team's journey of redemption
Tom Dunmore

Crossing Borders
Americans in Mexico, Mexicans in America
Jeff Kassouf

The Scotch and English Game
The founders of Soccer City U.S.A.
Michael Orr

La Conquête Commence
Constructing the Montreal Impact's unique identity in MLS
Elizabeth Cotignola

Americanizing an Ethnic Game
How youth soccer in Los Angeles redefined the sport
David Keyes

About the Contributors

The Archie Stark Story
America's 1920s Messi – in Kearny, New Jersey

Red, White and Blue
Croatian soccer in Chicago (with added Eusébio)
Marty Groark

At the Back

Dedicated to David Wangerin (1962-2012)
a pioneer historian of North American soccer
Making it in America

Analyzing the immigrant's game

Andrew Guest
The kids on that middle school team were enthusiastic, and I wish I could say that as their coach I had honed their raw talent into elegant teamwork and champagne football. But the reality is that to make the weekend games bearable, we had to spend a lot of time working on legal throw-ins and the vagaries of the offside rule. But many of them eventually jibed well-enough with the team structure to go on and play in high school—including a Haiti-born midfielder named Jean-Marie who played like a whippet and had the bubbly personality of a game show host.

On this particular autumn afternoon Jean-Marie was playing as a serviceable second forward for Jefferson High School, reputed to be the only high school in the state of Oregon with a majority African-American student population. The soccer team, known as the Democrats, was mostly African and Caribbean immigrants who were competent if unspectacular—with one significant exception: a lanky midfielder with sleepy eyes who ghosted around the patchy mud with a grace and precision more suited to La Liga than an American high school game. I lost track of how many goals he scored that day, and when I asked Jean-Marie about him after the game he told me: “He’s from Africa or Congo or somewhere—and his name is Jean-Marie too! But he goes by Danny.”

While this is not a story about Danny Mwangwa, currently a forward for the Portland Timbers and the number one overall pick in the 2010 MLS draft, the outlines of his experience are as good as any to illuminate the distinctive relationship between immigrants and American soccer. Mwangwa ended up on the field that day playing for Jefferson High School after emigrating around the time he turned 15 from his birthplace of Kinshasa in the country then known as Zaire, where his family had suffered from political fallout surrounding the demise of long-time dictator Mobutu Sese Seko. While the details of Mwangwa’s life in the Kinshasa are somewhat vague—in fine American form Mwangwa prefers not to talk too much about the past—the results were definitive: his father died and his mother left for the U.S., with Danny and his sisters to follow over the course of several years.

When I talked with Mwangwa recently after a Timbers training session, he remembered his transition to the U.S. as a time of both hope and trepidation. In Kinshasa, outside of school, Mwangwa had spent much of his time
honoring his soccer skills on the streets with friends and in more formal settings with an uncle who had been involved with local club sides. But did they even play soccer in the U.S.? “I was pretty tall among my friends and basketball was just kind of a fun thing...but I was just thinking in my head, worst case scenario if there is no soccer there I’ll just play basketball. But I still had that little faith that something would work out.” And, with some help, something did. When he first arrived and knew no one, his sister suggested he join a regular Sunday pick-up game played by Congolese immigrants at a Portland park. The group started to play some semi-formal games against local Mexican immigrants, which went well enough that one of the older men started organizing a more formal team for the African immigrants. Recognizing Mwang’s particular precociousness, that immigrant elder also put Mwang in contact with the then minor league Timbers, which in turn connected him with one of the elite suburban youth clubs in the Portland area. His experience in the elite suburban select leagues, and the help of several generous coaches, eventually led to a scholarship offer from Oregon State University, where two seasons of play were facilitated by help from the U.S. State Department, which retrieved his Congolese secondary school transcripts to mollify the NCAA. Mwang reminisces fondly about each experience and each of the people who helped him along the way, even the relatively soccer-poor stint at Jefferson:

“Ever since I got here, every step I took really helped me to get where I am. Being at Jefferson, that was just step one for me. I didn’t speak any English when I got here, I didn’t know anybody, but going to Jefferson I learned English, I made friends, I started to understand a little bit about the culture of America. Jefferson just opened my eyes to what is out there...Club soccer here, it’s not like in Europe where kids come to academies everyday and spend a lot of time at training facilities getting to know each other. Club soccer here, you come in at 7:30 and then by 8:30 or 9:00 practice is over and you go home. In high school you feel part of something.”

When taken all together, Mwang’s experiences are also ‘part of something’ else: a quintessentially American immigrant story. The broad arc is of a family that leaves a challenging past and through a combination of talent, determination, support of their ethnic community, help from well-intentioned individuals, and diverse institutional opportunities, succeeds in impressive ways. And while it is important to not romanticize the American immigrant experience, there is some convincing evidence from outside the soccer world that certain groups of immigrants do surprisingly well in various domains of an increasingly static U.S. social structure. In other words, while the success of immigrants in American soccer has most often been attributed to the clichéd story of soccer as an “immigrant game,” that attribution may obscure a more intriguing story about the American experience.

The immigrant advantage

In the popular imagination, soccer has only gradually become “American.” The legendary 1950 U.S. World Cup team, for example, beat England on a diving header by Joe Gaetjens—who was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and later played for Haiti against Mexico in a World Cup qualifier. But even in 1950, only six of the 17 players on the U.S. roster were born abroad, equal to the number born in St. Louis. Forty-four years later, at the 1994 World Cup hosted by the U.S., the American roster had a nearly identical ratio of foreign-born players: 1 out of 3. So when I first looked at the U.S. roster for the 2010 World Cup I was interested to find only two of the players on the final 30-man roster were born abroad: Stuart Holden was born in Scotland and Benny Feilhaber was born in Brazil, with both moving to the U.S. by age 10. But then, when I tracked down their family histories, it turned out that at least 60 percent (or 18 of players for which I could find the relevant information) had at least one parent who was born abroad. In contrast, only around 20 percent of all young Americans have at least one parent born abroad. If the World Cup team is any indication, immigrant families still have massively disproportionate success in American soccer.

While this does imply that soccer is still something of an “immigrant’s game,” I think there is also something more complicated going on, something that social scientists call “the immigrant paradox” or “the immigrant advantage.” It turns out that when accounting for prior socio-economic status, several first and second-generation immigrant groups do better than expected in multiple life domains beyond the soccer field. Asian
and African immigrant youth, for example, do significantly better than their socio-economic status would predict in the American education system. Likewise, Hispanic immigrants often have better health outcomes than demographically similar non-immigrant American groups. It is worth emphasizing that such successes are relative: while immigrants come in all types, on average the contemporary U.S. immigrant population does face significant economic disadvantage even before accounting for potential political and social marginalization.

Immigrant advantages also tend to dissipate over time, sometimes creating a sadly ironic association between assimilation and vulnerability across generations. But the success stories of immigration do offer valuable lessons, particularly in the face of declining American social mobility, about how the ‘land of opportunity’ could work. Journalist Claudia Kolker has even written a recent book turning the immigrant paradox into advice for the rest of us, subtitling her book The Immigrant Advantage: What We Can Learn from Newcomers to America about Health, Happiness and Hope.

Unfortunately, books such as The Immigrant Advantage and social scientists studying the immigrant paradox don’t tend to pay much attention to soccer. They do, however, suggest several possible explanations for the immigrant paradox that fit reasonably well with the American soccer scene. Kolker, for example, offers several general reasons for the contexts where immigrants succeed: for one, immigrants are a selected group who “tend to be optimistic and committed to improving their lives;” for another, “today’s non-European immigrants come from societies that still rely on dense social and religious networks. They belong to close-knit, extended families. And often, because circumstances force them to, they put off individual gratification to strive for communal goals.” In its broadest American terms, this would translate to a combination of individual initiative and leveraged support from diverse social connections (what social scientists sometimes call “the strength of weak ties”). In the simplest soccer terms, this would translate to working hard and taking advantage of the diverse opportunities available in American soccer—something that players such as Danny Mwanga seem to have done by connecting with an eclectic combination of ethnic teams, school and collegiate teams, suburban club programs and American professional teams.

In this view of things, the diversity of the game in the American soccer scene should be its greatest strength. This may start with the types of ethnic teams and leagues that have long been emblematic of American soccer as an “immigrant’s game”: those 1950 U.S. World Cup players came from clubs such as Fall River Ponta Delgada F.C. and Brooklyn Hispano. And still today, even a relatively un-diverse region such as the Portland metropolitan area supports a “Hispanic League” with over 20 teams representing countries ranging from El Salvador to Japan. But I suspect the process works best when those teams and leagues are integrated to a reasonable degree with other types of teams and leagues. When American soccer works well, and maybe when America itself works well, it combines the best of all its diverse traditions into opportunities for commitment and talent to flourish.

Balancing assimilation and diversity

American soccer does seem to be getting better at using the immigrant advantage in ways that benefit us all. Looking at professional coaches, for example, 13 of 19 MLS coaches at the start of the 2012 season were born abroad—compared with 14 of 14 in the 1982 NASL (used as a somewhat arbitrary comparison year just to consider an even three decades difference). But whereas many of the NASL coaches were relative short-timers in American soccer—with notable exceptions such as Willy Roy—the MLS immigrants include men such as Robin Fraser and Dominic Kinnear, who migrated at a young age (from Jamaica and Scotland respectively) and earned their chops almost entirely in the American game. But through other lenses, American soccer still has significant work to do: the U.S. women’s national team for the 2012 Olympics, for example, seems to have few immigrant connections—Sydney Leroux is the only player born abroad and she hails from Surrey in British Columbia.

Ultimately, however, effectively utilizing the immigrant advantage in America always requires balancing the relative values of assimilation and diversity—and soccer creates many such opportunities. Several recent books, including Paul Cuadros’ A Home on the Field, Warren St. John’s Outcasts United, and Steve Wilson’s The Boys from Little Mexico, offer useful examples of ways that soccer can serve as a trusted fulcrum between immigrants from locales as distinct as central Africa and
Central America and communities ranging from rural North Carolina to suburban Atlanta to the Pacific Northwest.

But other commentators, such as the late political scientist Samuel Huntington, used soccer as one example in proposing “challenges to the salience of American national identity.”

In Huntington’s 2004 book *Who Are We*, he described:

“a Gold Cup soccer game between Mexico and the United States in February 1998, the 91,255 fans were immersed in a sea of red, white, and green flags; they booed when ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ was played; they ‘pelted’ the U.S. players with debris and cups of what might have been water, beer or worse; and they attacked with ‘fruit and cups of beer’ a few fans who tried to raise an American flag. This game took place not in Mexico City but in Los Angeles. ‘Something’s wrong when I can’t even raise an American flag in my own country,’ a U.S. fan commented, as he ducked a lemon going by his head. ‘Playing in Los Angeles is not a home game for the United States,’ a Los Angeles Times reporter agreed.”

Such a scene may well seem like a “challenge” to national identity, but only if we think of American identity as a fixed entity that involves an either/or choice among immigrants. In fact, when an immigrant student of mine surveyed over 50 other amateur immigrant soccer players—many of whom had played at American high schools and colleges—about who they’d support, or want to play for, between the U.S. and their country of birth (in this case, mostly nations from the former Yugoslavia) they overwhelmingly chose their country of birth. But they also emphasized how much their opportunities in the U.S. meant to them, and many continued to find ways to mix playing for ethnic club teams with representing their American schools, states, and regions in the mainstream U.S. soccer system. They sounded remarkably like Danny Mwanga when I asked him what he shared with other immigrants: “We tend to appreciate things a little more. Or a lot more. Like I say, everything was not given growing up and most of the time you come here, you want to work hard, you want to do extra stuff. It’s not a given, it’s an opportunity.”

Mwanga, like an intuitive social scientist, sees the immigrant advantage as a necessary combination of the individual and the opportunity structure: “My main thing is that you come into a country, it’s almost like you’re starting over. You know what you’ve done back home, maybe there’s things you wish you’d have done better. And now you come in a country where people sometimes look down on you because you’re an immigrant, that kind of stuff. But you use that as motivation. You know that you came from a different country, but you come here and there are so many opportunities that people don’t see.” So many opportunities that immigrants, inside and outside of soccer, can illuminate and reinforce. Including, perhaps, the opportunity to appreciate that soccer in the U.S. is neither an immigrant’s game, nor an American one—it is both.

**12%**

2009 U.S. population born abroad (first-generation immigrants)

**11%**

2009 U.S. population native-born with at least one foreign-born parent (second-generation immigrants)

**7%**

Players born abroad on the 2010 U.S. World Cup preliminary 30-player roster

**53%**

Players native-born with at least one foreign-born parent on the 2010 U.S. World Cup preliminary 30-player roster

**22%**

Second-generation players on the 2010 U.S. roster with Mexican heritage

**33%**

Second-generation players on the 2010 U.S. roster with African or Caribbean heritage

**65%**

Children of immigrants living in California, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, or Texas

**71%**

Players on the 2010 U.S. World Cup 30-player roster from those six states
8.3 million
Number of children in the U.S. in 1990 with at least one immigrant parent

1/3
Chances that a member of the 1950 U.S. men's World Cup team was born abroad

1/15
Chances that a member of the 2010 U.S. World Cup preliminary 30-player roster was born abroad

2/3
Chances that a 2012 MLS head coach was born abroad

16.5 million
Number of children in the U.S. in 2008 with at least one immigrant parent

1/3
Chances that a member of the 1994 U.S. men's World Cup Team was born abroad

1/18
Chances that a member of the 2012 U.S. women's National Soccer Team was born abroad

1/1
Chances that a 1982 NASL head coach was born abroad

17
Countries of origin for the 29 players on the 2012 MLS Vancouver Whitecaps

3/16
Coaches in the quarterfinals of the 2011 NCAA Division I men's soccer tournament born abroad

8
Countries of origin for the 26 players on the 1982 NASL Vancouver Whitecaps

4/16
Coaches in the quarterfinals of the 2011 NCAA Division I women's soccer tournament who were born abroad

0
Number of those foreign-born women's coaches who are female

8%
Immigrant amateur soccer players who said they would (hypothetically) root for the U.S. over their country of origin in an international soccer match

6%
said they would (hypothetically) rather play internationally for the U.S. instead of their country of origin