

Carlos Menjivar Jr. went south (El Salvador) to help his career go north

by Mark Zeigler

Carlos Menjivar Sr. was born in El Salvador, moved to the United States in his early 20s and became a staff coach for U.S. Soccer from 1997 to 2002. He conducted courses for coaching licenses and oversaw regional player development programs. Another one of his duties was scouring the country for talented Hispanic players to bring into the U.S. Soccer fold.

Carlos Menjivar Jr. is his 26-year-old son. He was born in the United States, grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and played a season at San Diego State in 2000. And now he plays for El Salvador's national team, taking the field last week in the first round of the CONCACAF Gold Cup.

"A lot of people give me a lot of (grief) for that," Menjivar Sr. says.

Chalk it up to a quirk of fate, or the gross inadequacies of U.S. Soccer's outreach programs to the Hispanic community, or the petulance of youth. Or perhaps all of the above.

Menjivar Jr. admits it. He grew up dreaming in red, white and blue.

"My goal was always to play MLS and play for the United States," says Menjivar, who sat out Tuesday night's game against the U.S. with an ankle injury. "I was born here. I watched every minute of every (U.S.) national team game. I was always supportive of the national team."

But the road swerved at age 16, when he wasn't selected to try out for U.S. Soccer's vaunted under-17 residency program in Bradenton, Fla. He wound up at San Diego State instead, recording the first goal and assist by a men's player at the Sports Deck facility. Aztecs coach Lev Kirshner calls him "one of the best individual players we've ever had on both sides of the ball."

The following year, he was gone. A year after that, he was wearing the white and blue - no red - of El Salvador.

There were two reasons for his change of colors, and heart. One is a U.S. Soccer development system that arguably puts too high a premium on athleticism and has historically ignored the technical skills of Hispanic players (Menjivar says he was told he was too skinny). The other, quite simply, is that he grew impatient.

"I liked the school, I liked the program, but I wanted something else, you know?" he says. "I was turning 20 and I wanted to be a professional soccer player. If I stayed in school, I'd be 22 when I finished and I thought that would be too late."

So he left.

"When he turned 20, he told me he wanted to turn pro," says Menjivar Sr., who recently left the Chula Vista (Calif.) Rangers youth club to become director of player development for the 100,000-strong South Texas Soccer Association in San Antonio. "I didn't agree with him, but I told him, 'You're an adult and you can make your own decisions.'"

"All I can do as a parent is help him. I didn't want him telling me when he was 30 that he wasn't happy with his career."

Menjivar Jr. landed in El Salvador with powerful club FAS. In the summer of 2002, he was selected to the under-22 national team that was playing in the Caribbean and Central American Games, and El Salvador beat Mexico in the final in a penalty shootout; Menjivar made one of the PKs.

A few months later he was summoned to the full national team. He has three dozen caps, mostly as a 5-foot-11 defensive midfielder who is responsible for breaking up the opposing attack as well as starting El Salvador's.

El Salvador, which has a population of about 7 million, has been so pleased with his progress that it initiated a program to identify more Carlos Menjivars, particularly in immigrant-rich Southern California. Between Gold Cup games at The Home Depot Center last week, federation coaches scouted local players of Salvadoran descent and plan to invite several to join youth national teams.

"I was very impressed," says Carlos de los Cobos, El Salvador's Mexican national coach. "They seemed to have a greater advantage having been born (in the United States) and having more opportunities and infrastructure here. We hope it reaps fruit for the Salvadoran federation soon."

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