

USA across his back...

The Diaz Perez family will not be taking its usual vacation this summer to see family in Veracruz. That's because Chico has been selected by an organization called 365 Sports to represent the USA in Sweden in what is billed as "the world's largest youth soccer tournament," involving some 37,000 athletes from 61 countries.

This is not something you just show up for; you have to be invited. Last year at about this time, 365 Sports sent scouts all around the country. "They saw me play against some other team," says Chico softly. He's not even sure which game it was.

They obviously liked what they saw because he was invited to apply for the program. Armed with two letters of recommendation, one from last year's junior varsity coach and the other from Luca Paschina of Barboursville Vineyards, Chico and his parents were invited for a 50-minute personal interview with the 365 Sports

Selection Committee. Within a few days they learned he had been accepted.

That does not mean he gets a free ride. "It's kind of expensive to go over there; almost \$10,000 for both of us." The family has scrimped and saved and sold two cars to raise funds. "We've already almost paid everything. I only have two more payments and that's it." (If anybody wants to help out, you can make out a check to "365 Sports" with the name Francisco

Xavier Diaz Perez on the notation line. Mail it to 4300 Emperor Blvd., Suite 250, Durham, NC 27703).

Just being invited will give Chico a leg up on college recruitment. 365 Sports has been sending kids to various tournaments all over the world for 25 years. "Many members of our staff are former collegiate coaches and we know what the college recruiters are looking for in a young athlete," reads the promotional literature.

"He's got a good touch on the ball," says his proud father who will accompany his son on the trip. Although Chico can play striker, he was

selected as a mid-fielder for this national team. His father advised him to get some practice in at that position. "Ask your coach to play you at midfield all the time."

Chico has had a busy season this spring playing j.v. ball as a team co-captain and conditioning himself for this tournament.

On July 14th, father and son will travel to

Raleigh, NC for three days of intensive training and team building. This is the first time he will meet his teammates. They have a lot to accomplish. In addition to team practice sessions, "athletes will be challenged in the areas of footwork, speed, agility and quickness (SAQ) training," reads the 365 Sports literature.

On July 17, the team flies to Copenhagen, Denmark with motor coach transfer to Gothenburg, Sweden. On the 19th, they will par-



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT

This summer Chico Diaz will represent the United States in the largest youth soccer tournament in the world in Gothenburg Sweden. The tournament draws 37,000 players from 61 countries.

ticipate in opening ceremonies for the Gothia Cup, in the massive Ullevi Stadium, with 50,000 people in attendance. Each team is guaranteed to play four games. They could play more, "based on the success of the initial round-robin format."

So what are their chances, when you consider the fact that they will be pitted against kids from soccer giants like Italy, Spain, Brazil, France, Germany and England. Chico smiles. "I think we're going to win," he says, softly.

Really?

"Yeah. Oh yeah," he nods confidently.

Included in the price of "tuition" is a red and white uniform and warm up suit, bearing the letters USA. Win, lose or draw, the kids get to keep the uniforms. That's good enough for Nino, who, when he was a year older than his son's current age, swam the Rio Grande 21 years and a lifetime ago. Now he will see his son play soccer with "USA across his back."

The American Dream

It was February of 1990, 3 a.m., and 17-year-old Nino Diaz was about to make the plunge. He could barely make out the form of the huge bridge over the Rio Grande connecting Matamoros, Mexico to Brownsville, Texas. On his side of the border, the river is called the Rio Bravo. It means Angry River. Here, it is at its widest point before emptying into the Gulf, right at the southernmost tip of Texas.

Nino did not take off his shoes because he'd been warned that he would cut his feet to shreds for all the trash and broken glass. "Everybody knows not to walk with no shoes," he says in heavily accented English. "The minute you got to the water you start swimming. Don't put your feet down there... The water is very dirty, and it's deep, really deep."



At left, the Diaz Perez family outside their home near Montford. Nino and Lupe are in the middle with Chico on the right. Behind them is Mikey, and in front is Nini, age 11. All three boys are American citizens. Below, at a recent game against Charlottesville, Chico Diaz deftly maneuvers around Charlottesville defenders as he moves the ball up field. Scouts from 365 Sports noticed his play a year ago, offering him an opportunity to play for the USA in a tournament in Europe this summer.

PHOTOS BY PHIL AND SUSIE AUDIBERT



It's also dangerous. "Yeah some people die there; a lot of people die." He and three cousins were making this illegal crossing on their own, without the help of "coyotes," the people smugglers who "take your money... take everything from you."

His own brother had urged him not to do this. "I asked him if he could bring me here because I knew if you were going to be somebody, a doctor or a dentist..." He lets the sentence dangle. "I wasn't going to have money to pay for all this. He didn't want to bring me here. He said I was too young. So, I came with my cousins."

They swam. On the other side, they hopped a freight north, climbing up the ladder on the end of the car and dropping down into the open hopper. They made it to Corpus Christi. "It was cold in Corpus Christi. It was really cold. I was freezing because I only had a T-shirt on and shorts too." No money, no luggage.

They started walking. "We walked one night, and the next day all day, and we almost give up. We said, 'Somebody call us in. Take us back.'" But just as they were ready to throw in the towel, "somebody picked us up and took us all the way to Houston. And I had an address where my brother used to live with some people there. And we got there and they welcomed us and they gave us shelter."

No money. He laughs good-naturedly, shakes his head and replies, "None...We asked for food. People gave us food, drink." They found temporary work. And then his brother came back to the U.S. from Mexico, bearing bus tickets. "And when I came back from work, they've got all my stuff, and we just got on the bus and came this way." He got off in Charlottesville and found work at a horse farm in Keswick.

Nino tells this harrowing story from the spectator stands behind Prospect Heights Middle School. He is watching his sons, Chico and Mikey play in a junior



Nino Diaz watches his sons play in a junior varsity soccer match against Charlottesville recently. He only speaks English to them.

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

varsity soccer game against Charlottesville. His youngest, Nini, is back home. Nini prefers ice skating and at age 11, is a math whiz. Last year he cleaned up at Prospect Heights, winning five academic awards.

Nino, the father, comes to as many soccer games as he can. He hollers encouragement and instructions to his sons in English, just like the other parents in the stands. Mikey, the middle son, is a freshman at OCHS. He's into J.R.O.T.C. and martial arts. Chico, the 16-year-old sophomore, is the one to watch on the soccer field. He's playing midfield, directing traffic, expertly trapping and dribbling the ball, faking out defenders,

rambler, with the newly planted and landscaped flower bed outside.

His mom, Guadalupe, or "Lupe" for short, smiles and nods in encouragement. Her English needs a little work. She too swam that river more than 20 years ago. She and Nino met through his sister. Today she works as a domestic in the household of Nino's boss. She is a tremendous cook.

Nino, which is short for "Saturnino" and not the Spanish word for "child" or the hot wind of that name, works with horses at Nokomis Farm. Both he and Lupe are green card-carrying, fully legal, tax paying resident aliens; have been for 10 years or more. Their three sons are American citizens. He addresses them in English.

Described as "indispensable," and "my left and right hand man," the farm manager of this breeding operation and show barn has nothing but praise for this charismatic man and his family. Mary Lou Yates calls them "good, good folks" and uses phrases like, "always gets the job done," or "never says 'it's not my job,'" or "is a leader, a problem solver." In fact, Nino is an unwitting link to the Hispanic community in this neighborhood. With a warm smile and a certain commanding presence, he is the go-to guy.

As a child, Nino says "We ride, we move cows, we break horses, we do all that." But he adds that dealing with show horses and breeding stock in Virginia is, "a little different, because here, you've got to take care of the horses really well." Although he is not what you'd



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Above, brothers Chico and Mikey Diaz play side by side on the O.C.H.S. junior varsity soccer team. Next year, Chico will go up to the varsity squad.



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The boys are getting bigger, but still playing soccer. Today Mikey, right, is in JROTC, while Chico focuses on "the beautiful game." From the Diaz family photo album.

call a "horse whisperer," he obviously has a gentle and patient touch with these animals. Nino says most of the Latinos living in Orange County "are working with horses or cows. Construction, now not many people, because construction went down, so most of the people that I know around here are working with the horses."

You either have to be an ostrich or a descendant of Rip van Winkle not to notice that a significant Latino population lives and works here in Orange County. Little "tiendas" and coffee shops and restaurants have popped up everywhere. The Mexican food section at the grocery store is ever growing. Although the US Census Bureau says in 2008, the Hispanic population in Orange County was 3.3 percent, we all know it's more than that. This below-the-radar community flows like an underground river throughout most cities, towns and counties in the United States.

Depending on who you listen to, there are between 12 and 20 million illegal Hispanics living in this country right now. "I've got papers now," says Nino, "but people are still doing the same thing; people coming without a future." Without getting into a debate about immigration law and reform, the point must be made that unless you can prove you have Native American blood running in your veins, we are all descended from immigrants, whether your forefathers were from Ghent or Ghana. What makes us citizens is that we were born here; either that or we were naturalized.

Nino and Lupe Diaz were not born here, like their sons. They came here from Veracruz, Mexico, a historic city on the Gulf, 13 hours south by car from the border they both crossed illegally. They would have done so legally if the quota system bore any resemblance to the reality of the situation.

Here's the reality of the situation. The jobs are here. The workers are there. They come to the jobs. Because generally they have a high work ethic, they are hired and they stay. Besides, if they all left, our economy would suffer dire consequences.

Around here, the local Latino community revolves around church and sport. Both are strong unifying factors. "We have this soccer league in Charlottesville," says Nino. "All the Latin Americans go there and play. We have all kinds, from Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Honduras, El Salvador."

We go to church every Sunday and there's hundreds of people there," he continues. Most attend bi-lingual services offered by the Church of the Incarnation. But he adds with a knowing smile, "there are more on the soccer field." From dawn to dusk, on any given Sunday, the entire Diaz Perez family plays soccer, goes to church, plays some more soccer, visits with family, and then maybe plays even more soccer. In fact, you might call Lupe the original soccer Mom.

A running joke in the Diaz household is that Chico can pretend he doesn't understand his mother because his Spanish is not as good as his English. In fact on a family vacation back to Veracruz, the family toyed with the idea of leaving Chico there with her dentist brother-in-law so he could attend a professional soccer school. But his Spanish wasn't good enough!

"Twice they asked him to stay to play soccer because they liked how he played," says Nino. "Even one of them asked me, 'if you leave him here, we can

try to make him a professional because he's good.' But because we live here and the school is here," Nino looks around his living room, "he didn't speak very well Spanish and didn't know how to write. So it was going to be tough on him. We were thinking last year that he would stay. He had all the papers. And in the end, he said 'No, let's go back.'"

At the border, at the exact same place where Nino and Lupe swam the river all those years ago, the family crossed the huge bridge and was challenged by an immigration official. "Some people, they see you like you're a Mexican, that you're not supposed to be here,"



Nino Diaz has a special touch with horses at Nokomis Farm. He's worked here as a legal resident alien for the past 10 years.

PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT

shrugs Nino. "Hey go back home; you don't belong here," are words he has heard. "The immigration guy... he made us come one by one to look at papers, to look at you, and when it got time to go to Chico and Mikey, Mikey started laughing."

"What are you laughing about?" groused the official.

Mikey responded, "Hey look. I'm as American as you are. I was born in this country." Nini echoed, "I was born in this country too."

Is citizenship in the cards for Nino and Lupe? "We want to try to do that...soon," says Nino thoughtfully. It won't be all that soon; the waiting list for Mexicans is years long. He listens intently to a description of the annual naturalization ceremony on the lawn at Monticello every July 4th. "I don't know when, but we're going to try to do that," he says with determination.