

Zack McMillin: Brazilians imported by St. Jude helped build soccer in Memphis

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It was on one of those trips from their native Brazil back to their adopted hometown of Memphis, sometime in the mid-1960s, that one of Dr. Rhomes and Celina Aur's five children walked off the plane carrying a soccer ball. That was how Celina, now 81, recalled it on Tuesday, the day before what she calls Brazil's "awful, awful, awful" World Cup game with Germany. It was probably Amin, the oldest, or maybe the second son, Zito.

"Someone at the airport, they stop him and say, 'Is that a soccer ball?' " Celina remembered.

At the time, to a Memphian, a soccer ball did indeed seem an exotic import, but in the half-century since Dr. Aur became one of the first doctors to join St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, the game has become woven into the fabric of the Memphis area. It did so in no small part because of those like the Aurs who spread the gospel of the beautiful game -- or, as they call it in Brazil, ITAL Jogo Bonito -- with so much passion and persistence.

When Brazil takes to the pitch Saturday for its final game as World Cup host, in a third-place game against the Netherlands, the Aurs will be watching and hoping, as Celina's youngest son Paulo put it Friday, "that they can restore some of the honor."

Because of summer travel schedules, only Celina will be in Memphis, most likely with some Brazilian friends — Dr. Aur died in 2009, Amin Aur passed away last year — hoping Brazil can rebound from Wednesday's 7-1 loss to Germany.

"I will be watching and hopefully they will win — if they lose, I don't know, it feels like maybe that's the end of the team," she said Friday, adding just a touch of a chuckle. "Third place is not so bad, but, you know, it's not first place."

Beach soccer

Didier Aur, second-youngest of the four sons and now principal at Resurrection Catholic School in Hickory Hill, remembers vividly the summer vacations spent back in Brazil.

"You'd get up in the morning, walk to the beach and you'd just start playing soccer," said Didier. "You'd find sticks, make goals and start playing."

Paulo Aur, who now runs the Bartlett 3-D glasses company American Paper Optics, remembers gathering around the TV at his grandfather's house in Sao Paulo and watching Brazil in international competitions — something that could never happen in their permanent home in Memphis.

"Whenever I see the yellow jerseys and blue shorts, just something about it brings a good feeling," Paulo said. "I love the Titans, I love the Grizzlies — but there is just something about it, my heart is with that team. Maybe it's the good childhood memories -- I guess part of it reminds me of being in Brazil with my family."

Zito Aur, now an executive with First Tennessee Bank, recalls being 17 and attending the Maracana, the nation's revered stadium in Rio de Janeiro, for the game when Pele made his final appearance with the national team.

"At halftime, he basically did a lap around the stadium waving his yellow shirt," Zito said. "It's 150,000 fans in there, and they are yelling 'fica! fica! fica!' which is 'stay! stay! stay!' "

In Memphis, the Aur kids excelled at American sports, too, but soccer remained central to their athletic identities. At their house near what is now called White Station Middle School, their father constructed homemade goals out of 4x4s so they could play small-sided games in the backyard.

"We'd have neighborhood games in the backyard, everybody would come over," Paulo said. "These are kids who had never played soccer but it was just a lot of fun, just pickup games in the backyard. It was a blast."

For Zito and Amin, the oldest, there was never an organized youth soccer league. At 14, Zito played in the adult soccer league his father and other immigrants organized, the games at Overton Park often played alongside American football games on an adjacent field.

They played on a team with mostly South Americans, that called themselves the Butterflies. There was also the Internationals, composed mostly of Europeans and featuring some other Memphis soccer pioneers like Sepp Huber from Germany and Hans and Peter Bermel from the Netherlands.

For the younger Aurs — brothers Didier and Paulo and sister Monica — youth soccer leagues had begun to form, the earliest of which was so small the squads were just referred to by their team's jersey color -- "Red" and "Blue" and "Yellow" and "Green."

Their father, Dr. Aur, often attended, cheering from the sidelines, still in his St. Jude lab coat.

The Aurs became, unsurprisingly, among the best in not just in Memphis but the entire region, their skills honed on the beaches and neighborhoods of Sao Paulo. By the time Huber and the Bermels organized competitive, traveling youth teams, the Aurs had become early role models for younger guys like Steve Bradshaw, a Memphian who went on to play professionally and still coaches here.

Didier and Paulo each played on some of the University of Memphis' first varsity level men's soccer teams — Zito had played there when it was a club team, overseen by Peter Bermel.

"He worked two different jobs and he coached," Didier Aur said. "I was captain and a lot of times, he'd say, 'Dee, I gotta go. You run the second part of practice.' We had a lot of fun and we truly enjoyed it."

The U of M coach now is former Major League Soccer all-star Richard Mulrooney. One of his club coaches was Paulo, and Didier coached him at Christian Brothers High School. It is that transfer of wisdom and passion, from one generation to the next, that has helped the game grow in Memphis, and other places, too.

"What's happening today is awesome, where there are so many people who played and watched soccer growing up," Zito Aur said. "At the bank now, I'm one of the old guys and we have these folks in their 20s and 30s who know so much about soccer, and they're just trying to get a glimpse of a game at work.

"It's amazing to see that for me, who remembers the World Cup in the 70s and nobody knowing anything about it."

On this final weekend of the World Cup in soccer-obsessed Brazil, it's worth remembering that Memphis soccer owes much to a Brazilian family imported by St. Jude.

"My husband, he was modest about medicine and didn't want to talk about himself," Celina said. "So instead he would say, 'Hey, what do you know about soccer?'"

After Dr. Aur passed away in 2009, a St. Jude nurse wrote a moving letter to the editor about his contributions to the hospital. His kids remember being told after school to call him at the hospital, to remind him of their schedule.

"I'd call and say I have a game at 6 o'clock or whatever at McFarland or Wilson (fields)," Didier said, "and he'd say, 'Well, I don't think I can make it, I've got too much going on.' But then a lot of times, there he was on the sidelines in his lab coat, cheering you on."

World Cup Memphis

• **Caption:** Photo by Karen Pulfer Focht, The Commercial Appeal Courtesy Paulo Aur Dr. Rhomes Aur (left) was among the first doctors to join St. Jude Children's Research Hospital and he brought his passion for soccer to Memphis and instilled it in his children and those he met in the community. November 12, 1970 - Dr. Rhomes J.A. Aur, of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, with Steven Ray of Jackson, Miss. who has been receiving treatment for leukemia for two years. Announcement of a 17 percent cure rate in leukemia was made at the hospital today. Danny Thomas revealed the news last night on Johnny Carson's "Tonight" show. Hospital administrator, Carl Simmons, explained this involves cases on which work started six years ago under a treatment called Total III. Dr. J. Simone, head of St. Jude's hematology division, said the cure rate was among those with lymphocytic leukemia, the most prevalent type of the disease, found among 75 percent of the children stricken. (James R. Reid, Special Collections/University of Memphis Libraries) The Aur family played in an adult soccer league in Memphis in the 1970s. Amin Aur and his brother Rhomes "Zito" Aur are in the back row. Paulo and his dad, Dr. Rhomes Aur, are in the front row. Dr. Rhomes Aur AKA "Coach Doc" was among a group of immigrants who helped grow the game of soccer in Memphis after moving from Brazil to work at St. Jude Children's Research Hospital. (Courtesy Paulo Aur) Dr. Rhomes Aur AKA "Coach Doc" (far right) is credited with getting Memphis excited about soccer after he and his family moved to Memphis from Brazil. (Courtesy Paulo Aur) Rhomes "Zito" Aur says he likes working for First Tennessee because of its commitment to Memphis' success. Paulo Aur of American Paper Optics, the world's largest manufacturer of paper 3-D glasses, attended the Leadership Academy Fellows program. November 12, 1970 - Dr. Rhomes J.A. Aur, of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital, with Steven Ray of Jackson, Miss. who has been receiving treatment for leukemia for two years. Announcement of a 17 percent cure rate in leukemia was made at the hospital today. Danny Thomas revealed the news last night on Johnny Carson's "Tonight" show. Hospital administrator, Carl Simmons, explained this involves cases on which work started six years ago under a treatment called Total III. Dr. J. Simone, head of St. Jude's hematology division, said the cure rate was among those with lymphocytic leukemia, the most prevalent type of the disease, found among 75 percent of the children stricken. (James R. Reid, Special Collections/University of Memphis Libraries)

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