

NEIGHBORS

of Jarrytown

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GROWING UP
IN WEST AUSTIN

COVER PHOTO BY JACK PLUNKETT



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GROWING UP IN WEST AUSTIN

By Bobby Hawthorne

Dylan Rochlen was barely awake, slumped in a dining room chair, when I asked, “What’s been the defining moment of your soccer career?”

That perked him up.

“For me, it’s when I heard the news that I had made the MLS (Major League Soccer) team and signed the contract,” he said.

“You signed a contract?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “A contract and a shoe deal.”

You signed a shoe contract?

“Yeah. We get free shoes.”

With whom?

“Adidas.”

So, you’re essentially a professional?

“Yeah, I guess,” he said, brushing his long hair from his eyes. “A mini-professional.”

Why should you be surprised? Because Dylan is a 13-year-old eighth-grader at O. Henry Middle School. He’s already made a name for himself locally and beyond Texas through various national and international playing opportunities.

Friends from Brazil who have followed his career call him “Favela.” It means “Shantytown” in Portuguese. More about that later.

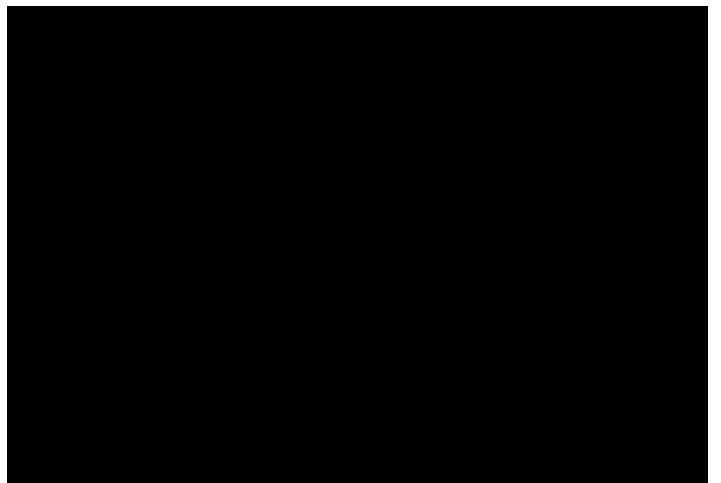
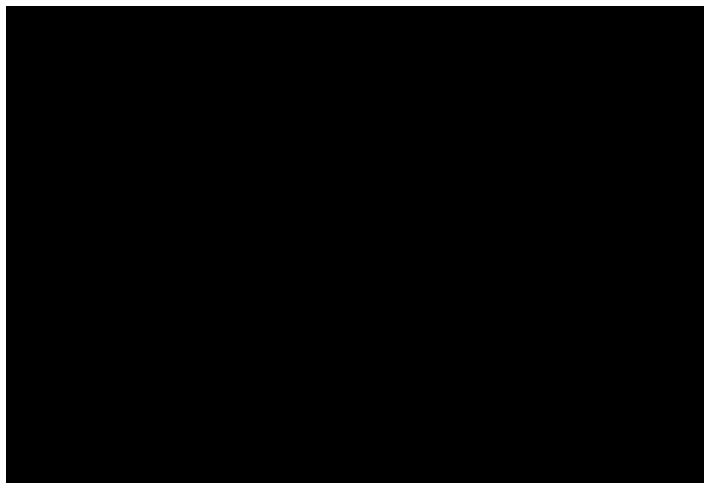
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The contract Dylan signed was with the Austin FC U14 Academy, essentially the farm team of Austin FC, which will begin playing as the 27th team in the fast-growing MLS in 2021. He is one of 18 members in its elite Under-14 team, and the only kid from the AISD school district. The team was culled from thousands of Central Texas soccer players scouted, and then from the 52 invited for tryouts representing 12 Central Texas clubs.

The kids who made the final cut come from all kinds of backgrounds, representing many different countries, with Hispanic and mostly Mexican kids as the majority ethnicity. Dylan fits right in because his Spanish is fluent, his mother is from Argentina, his game is strong and he rarely gets rattled.

“Dylan has never worried about other kids treating him differently,” his father, Aaron Rochlen, said. “He’s always felt very comfortable in new and challenging circumstances — in soccer and in life.”

Speaking of challenging circumstances, Dylan is small.





Dylan about to kick his first ever goal for Austin FC.
Photo by Alex Rubio

Borderline tiny. The last time his parents had him measured, he was in the 2nd percentile in height.

“Maybe less,” Aaron said. “We have had growth evaluations through the years, but apparently he’s just a late bloomer.”

So far in soccer, his weight and height haven’t been major issues. What coaches talk about are his intelligence, instincts, vision, creativity and leadership. They also talk a lot about his passion.

“Dylan is a student, and a student of the game,” said Dewi Hardman, one of his former head coaches at Lonestar Soccer Club, where he finished the last two seasons second in goals and first in assists.

“He is knowledgeable about soccer, the game and its place in the world,” Hardman said. “He understands the game in America and in this community. He understands his role within a team, asks questions about his responsibilities and goes out and tries to do them. It’s this last part when taken in the context of his understanding of the game of soccer that makes him a ‘student of the game.’ Dylan is willing to do the things that are difficult, willing to do the things he might fail at. And that’s absolutely key.”

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Dylan’s always had the passion, and Aaron — a professor in the UT Department of Educational Psychology — said his son would have likely become a good soccer player regardless. However, he would never have become an elite player unless he played against the best. In his opinion that meant playing with and against kids from East Austin, in primarily Hispanic areas where everyone plays the game.

“When Dylan was seven, he was a member of an indoor team I coached,” Aaron said. “We were decent — until we played against a team called ‘Mini-Mexico’ and they started to kick our butts. Then right before the end of the first half, Dylan took a ball right to the face. He cried and had to sit out. I thought he was done for the game.”

Mini-Mexico led 9-0 at the break.

“So, at halftime, I go to Dylan and say, ‘Are you feeling OK?’ And he says, ‘Yeah. I can play.’ He goes back in, and Dylan scores four goals. We lose, 25-4, or something like that, but here’s the good part: After the

game, their coach, Fernando Elvira, comes up to me and says, ‘I like how your son plays. He can play on my team.’

“And I looked at him straight in the eyes and replied, ‘OK, you seem to know what you’re doing,’” Aaron added. “And so that started a very interesting period of him playing on the east side with and against kids who live and die for soccer. While there, Dylan developed his skills and most importantly his love for the game.”

When I ask Dylan about that, he gives me a ho-hum answer, as if to say, “It was no big deal.” That is, playing with and against kids he didn’t know, kids who came from backgrounds he didn’t recognize. None of that bothered him.

In fact, he embraced the ferocity, the intensity of the game, the joy in the atmosphere. He bonded with teammates and their families.

“When I played with Mini-Mexico, the kids there were really nice,” he said. “They took me in. They played with me as if I’d grown up there. They respected me, and I respected them.”

Several became and remain close friends, and are still playing soccer.

Asked about Dylan, Fernando, who still coaches for Millennium Soccer League, said he recalls Dylan’s insatiable passion for the game.

“He plays hard,” Fernando said. “He never stopped wanting to learn — learn and try things that the others didn’t want to do.”

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That’s what earned him his place on the Austin FC Academy Under-14 team.

“Guys with backgrounds from Mexico, Panama, Honduras, Germany, Jamaica, all over. No one sees each other as different,” Dylan said. “We see each other as top-level players who deserve to be on the team, no matter where they came from or how they got here.”

It doesn’t hurt that Dylan spent a month earlier this summer in Bilbao, Spain, getting personal training, and competed in a highly competitive team and Spanish league. He also trained in England briefly and has played in Italy and Argentina — Paula, his mother, is a native of Buenos Aires. All of this has afforded him an opportunity to witness, first-hand, the passion and commitment required to become a world-class soccer player.

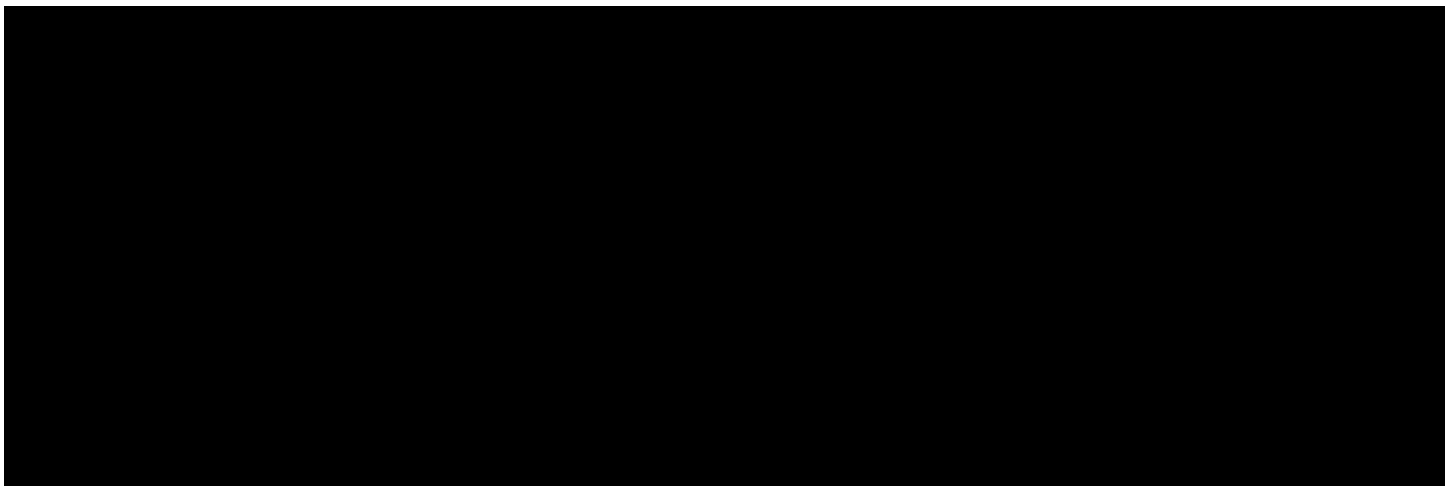




Photo by Alex Rubio



I asked him what he learned about himself since dedicating himself to the sport.

“I also think I show a lot of grit. I always go 150 percent. I can figure out when I need to push and when I need to back off. I try to create strong bonds with my teammates. I play not just for myself but for my teammates and coaches.”

He said he thinks he has a chance to be a leader on this team. “With my teammates, it’s easy for me to help build trust with one another and between them and me,” he said. “I like to stay positive. I’m not going to get down on someone for a mistake. I don’t believe in that. I hold teammates to a high standard, and they know that. When I mess up, they hold me to the same standard, and I like that too.”

I asked him about his “grit,” and he told me a story about a team a couple of years ago that had hit the wall.

“We were a good team, but we weren’t winning,” he said. “Kind of getting crushed actually. And so, rather than giving up or quitting, our coach put in a lot of hard work, and everyone else did too. We wanted to turn it around, and we ended the season strong as a team, not just as

individuals. We were able to tie games and win games that we earlier would have lost. And, at the end, we beat FC Dallas, 4-0. They were one of the best teams in the country. Possibly the best team.”

He also scored one of his most memorable goals ever in that game.

He wasn’t bragging. Again, it’s just a fact. They could have folded, but they didn’t. They closed ranks, refocused and worked harder. It’s a pattern that Dylan has repeated time after time. It’s no wonder his other nickname is “La Máquina.”

The Machine. The Machine That Doesn’t Stop or Quit.

Fernando called him that one game because, “He plays the game with passion and heart. He keeps going and going.”

As for the first nickname, Favela: “They call him that,” Aaron said, “because, while he comes from a fairly privileged background, he doesn’t play like it. He plays hungry — like he’s from a shantytown, aggressive and sometimes kind of nasty. It’s like he’s playing for his next meal. I hope it’s a trait he never loses — in soccer or in life.”

To follow Dylan’s career, including recent video highlights, follow him on Instagram @dylanrochlen.

