

BOWLED OVER



Southwestern ran wild over Moorpark College in the Coaches Fight Cancer Bowl, 31-7. SWC won just three games combined in 2023 and 2024 but finished 8-3 this year to qualify for the bowl game. Quarterback Brayden Silbor ran for two touchdowns and passed for another. **SWC JAGUAR ATHLETICS**

Hoops dreams play out for team leader given second chance

BY JULIO RODRIGUEZ

Julian Blessid Soares was heartbroken after a three-point playoff loss.

It meant the end of the season for the Southwestern College Jaguars and the end of his unlikely college basketball career.

It was also a bittersweet moment of personal triumph for the 28-year-old who traveled across the continent to chase a fading dream. Soon he traveled across the commencement stage at the football stadium to receive his Associate's degree in psychology and start chasing another.

Soares said he did not get serious about basketball until middle school in Rhode Island. By high school it was everything. He played whenever he could, even sneaking out when grounded. He studied NBA legends Magic Johnson, Tracey McGrady and his idol Dwyane Wade.

"I was trying to paint my game around him," he said. "I watched highlights for hours. He played both sides of the ball and that stuck with me."

By his senior year in 2014 he was known around Central Falls, RI as the "basketball guy." He tried out for a community college team, but that did not go as planned. He was no longer "the basketball guy." Four years ago he moved to Chula Vista with his aunt, looking for a fresh start.

Tyrone Shelley, then the assistant SWC basketball coach, met Soares during try outs prior to the 2021-22 season. Shelley said he was impressed with his game, but it needed refinement. Soares did not make the Jaguars.

"I didn't think it was right or fair to Blessid," Shelley said. "I (saw) him in the summer and told him I might be getting the (head coach) job and to try out (again)."

Shelley did become head coach, but Soares declined the invitation to try out, choosing instead to focus on his education and music. Shelley called again in 2023, but Soares told him he was considering enlisting in the Navy.

"I was conflicted," Soares said. "I still loved basketball and I wanted to play at the collegiate level. Coach Shelley was giving me an opportunity and I felt like I would do my younger self an injustice if I didn't at least try it out."

Shelley got his man the third time. Heading into the summer workouts Soares was the oldest player on the team, a fact his younger teammates did not let him forget. One day teenage freshman Jayden Barnett strode into the gym loud and proud about his birthday.

"It's my birthday too!" Soares told him.

The moment sparked the beginning of a lasting friendship.

Even as Soares won over teammates, the season was not easy. He played out of position when he played at all. Soares expressed doubts, but Shelley encouraged him to stay. Soares finished the season with the 14-14 team.

Over the summer, Shelley said he saw significant growth from Soares.

"We played together in a men's league in Chula Vista and he was a lot better," Shelley said. "He was dominating open gyms averaging 40 (points per game). I told him 'you evolved and got to the point I need you to be, now come back for your sophomore year and be better.'"

As the season got underway the Jaguars were struggling with a 3-4 record. Shelley wanted a change at center and challenged Soares to move into a new role.

"Putting him at (center) opened up everything for us,"



On his third try during his age 27 season, Julian Blessid Soares made the basketball team and became a star. **SWC JAGUAR ATHLETICS**

Shelley said. "His ability) to guard stronger big helped us. He put them in check. (He) became a better defender and helped us win more games."

SWC kept winning through December and

January and Soares became the team leader. After a rough first half in a game against Miramar, Soares publicly owned his poor play.

"If I'm not playing well or the team is not playing well, I'm going to attribute that to me," he said. "I let the guys know that I'm going to do better. I expect them to do the same thing."

Community college student-athletes can face a grind, especially at low-income Southwestern College where most athletes also work. Soares maintained a grueling schedule. Six days a week in the gym, 18 units and working nights as a caregiver in Pacific Beach.

"I worked from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m.," he said. "I would get off work, go to class, then go to practice. It was a little tough if we lost a game because I'd have to work (a shift) on an L (a loss)."

In February Soares suffered a broken nose and fractured cheekbone in practice and was sidelined for the last five games of the regular season. Shelley made him player-coach to keep him involved.

Guard Ayden Lockett said teammates loved having Soares in the role and he was great for morale.

"I appreciated him showing up when he didn't have to," Lockett said.

SWC finished the season 19-9, qualifying for the SoCal Regionals. Soares was cleared to play in the first-round matchup against Santa Monica College as long as he wore a protective face mask.

"I wanted to do as much as I could to help our team win," he said. "I wanted everyone to be locked in. We didn't have any experience in the playoffs. We didn't know how things would go, how tough it was going to be."

Soares was a masked marvel in a 90-70 win.

"It was great to see him back," Shelley said. "I knew he was going to have a terrific game."

A showdown with Fullerton proved to be the grand finale.

A much bigger Fullerton squad dominated the game until Southwestern mounted a furious fourth quarter comeback. Down 11 with four minutes left, Soares fouled out. Walking to the bench, he took off his protective face mask, swinging it in frustration.

"I didn't know I had the fourth foul," he said. "I blame myself for fouling out. It was frustrating because we were right there. Not being able to finish out the game was heartbreaking."

From the bench he cheered his onrushing teammates until the final buzzer of a 70-67 loss.

"It was sad it ended like that, but (the season) was a great experience," he said.

Soares said he is happy he was able to play college basketball.

"If you have a dream as a kid and have the opportunity to chase it, you should go for it," he said. "I'm happy I did. It will stick with me forever."

Softball players are an international force

Exhibition with Tijuana's CETYS university is SWC's first international game

BY GABRIEL GORDILLO

TIJUANA—Jaguar softball has gone international.

Southwestern College squared off against los Zorros of Tijuana's CETYS University in the first ever international athletic contest.

Even though the colleges are less than 10 miles apart, the distance can seem vast when an international border is factored in—particularly in the Age of Trump.

SWC star Gloria "Go-Go" Morales called it a great experience.

"I enjoy meeting new girls and developing friendships," she said. "There is nothing more enjoyable than being able to play the sport at a high level. Being on the softball team here at Southwestern has taught me so much about not only the game, but myself as a person."

Morales said she enjoys the comradery, but when it comes time to play, it's game on. Her third inning double started the Jaguars' route of los Zorros.

It was a solid coming out game for the Lady Jaguars, according to head coach Michael Gross. It gave him an opportunity to get



MEXICAN STANDOFF—CETYS University and Southwestern College played the first-ever athletic contest between international teams. Southwestern won the game, but players from both teams said they came away winners. **JOSH WHITEHEAD / THE SWC SUN PHOTOS**



SWC star Gloria "Go Go" Morales led the Lady Jaguars.

who my starters are and I need to see who I can count on."

Southwestern has many new faces, including freshman Lynette Demumbra.

"Being from San Diego, and not Chula Vista, I didn't know any girls coming into this program," she said. "I'm glad I joined because I feel lucky to have made great friendships with some of the girls."

Centro de Enseñanza Tecnica y Superior (CETYS) is a highly-regarded science and engineering university in the order of a California Polytechnical university like San Luis Obispo, Cal Tech or Humboldt. It is a 15 drive from the border and accepts American students. Southwestern has been exploring ways to build a meaningful relationship with CETYS and other Northern Baja California universities.