



Ellis Culligan dribbles up the field against Princeton.

BROTHERHOOD BEYOND BORDERS

This year's Lakota East boys soccer team is one of the most diverse teams in the history of the school, with players coming from all around the globe. The team has formed bonds like no other.

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Is it soccer, or football? The age-old debate that has Americans pit against the rest of the world's answer isn't as easy as you'd think for Lakota East soccer player Ellis Culligan.

"It's funny, around my friends I call it soccer, but around my family I call it football," Culligan told Spark. "My mom has started calling it soccer though." Culligan moved from England when he was in second grade and is one of the nine soccer players on Lakota East's varsity roster that has an international background, either immigrants or foreign exchange students.

"Being on such a diverse team is really fun," Culligan says.

It brings in a lot of culture and even bigger personalities. Overall it just adds

something different to the team." Head coach Jermy Hilén thinks that the team meshes very well together, describing them as a good brotherhood.

"They lean on each other and they trust each other," Hilén told Spark. "They just like to have a good time and I think that has been important to our success this season."

After starting the season off with five straight games without a win, Lakota East's soccer team turned their season around, winning six of their next eight games. For the first time since 1999, back when Hilén was a player for Lakota East soccer, the team was in serious Greater Miami Conference (GMC) title contention, a race that went up until the last day in the regular season.

Mustafa Ubdullah enjoyed the rush to the

final game in the GMC race, after East beat Middletown 7-2, but needed West to lose or tie against Fairfield, which didn't happen. The team was huddled waiting for the West game score; The Firebirds won 2-0.

"It has been a good race, it was fun and challenging," Ubdullah told Spark.

"Looking back to the first few games, it was an unlucky start, but you know, stuff happens."

Senior midfielder Ubdullah grew up in Sudan and has been playing soccer his entire life. "All we did was play soccer," Ubdullah says. "We did not really have another sport so it is pretty much all we did."

Although Ubdullah does not have another chance to win a GMC title, he stays optimistic as he grabs one of his junior teammates Chris





Mfuranzima.

"I do not have a next year, but my brother here has got next year for us," Ubdallah says.

Mfuranzima, a midfielder from the Congo, says that he is extremely proud of his teammates this year.

"I am so proud of our team's hard work and commitment," Mfuranzima told Spark. "We faced many challenges but we never gave up."

Midfielder Jann Merbitz agrees, describing how the team worked extremely hard. "The team's dynamic was very good," Merbitz told Spark. "Everyone was respectful, dedicated and motivated for games and practices."

Merbitz, an exchange student, previously lived in Germany for his entire life. There he played club soccer for the past 14 years.

"There is no big difference [skill wise]," Merbitz says. "Only difference is that German soccer is more physical." Merbitz says that he loves the school spirit aspect of soccer here in the United States, something that Germany does not have.

"I wanted to play soccer for [East] because we do not have high school soccer in Germany, only clubs," Merbitz says. "All the hard work and desire to make the school proud are what motivates me."

A crucial turning point in the season came when the team delivered league rival Lakota West their one and only GMC loss in a thrilling 2-1 comeback win. The goal to tie

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-Jermei Hilan

the game up came from Juan Bartolon. The Guatemalan forward described his sixth goal of the season as a huge shocker.

"I was super surprised when I scored the goal," Bartolon told Spark. "It was so important for us [mentally]. It motivated us to go get another one."

The game ended after junior Shaun Dickerson hit a crucial penalty to win the game after a called foul in the box. Ubdallah says the game was one to remember.

"Everybody doubted us," Ubdallah says. "We proved them wrong, came back at the last minute, celebrated and went home. I still remember the trip home thinking 'man we beat west'."

Hilan described that game as a crucial turning point for the team. "When you go through an emotional game like that with the frustrations of not being able to finish [as we did the first part of the season], struggling to get the ball up field, it really tests the team," Hilan says. "That game was pivotal for our team this year and I think it really brought us together."

Culligan describes the team chemistry as something special. "The team this year was passionate, relentless, ambitious, and honestly we were like a family," Culligan says. "There is no comparison with any other team and everyone really had a special bond amongst everyone else on the squad." •



Chris Mfuranzima shoots a shot against Princeton.

Where in the World are the Hawks from?



Editors Note:
Two of the nine athletes with international background did not answer where they were from.