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First, a test.

Juggle the ball for 30 seconds. Then control the ball. Take it through a route. Shoot it.

He continued that for an hour. It was his very first private soccer training session.

It was exactly what then eighth grader Gabe Anaya wanted. Get a private trainer. Work harder. Get better.

So he researched trainers in the area and found instructor Gian Lucca. But what Anaya didn't know about Lucca, beyond his many awards and medals, was that he was a recruiter for Rome City Prep Academy — a school offering an abroad experience for students around the world to improve their soccer skills.

And after six months of training, Lucca decided Anaya was ready. He signed Anaya up and told him to attend a trial at Rockhurst University. It was a three-day camp where players from across the U.S. competed for a position at the academy in Rome.

Anaya agreed. But he knew he wasn't the best soccer player out there. He didn't expect much to come out of it.

His first time on the field was at seven years old. His parents wanted him to take on a sport, and it happened to be soccer.

It wasn't serious to him. He was just playing for the Highlands Elementary soccer team, that was it.

But something changed after a family trip to South America.

Every two years, Anaya flew to visit his relatives in Bolivia. They were a family in love with soccer. So they always had to play some matches together.

During earlier visits, Anaya didn't talk much during their games. He didn't know much Spanish. But after learning more and getting more soccer experience by joining his elementary school team, Anaya was ready for his next visit the summer before fourth grade.

They set up two shoes on one side of the street to mark a goal and two more further down the street for the second goal. Anaya was put on a team with some of his cousins, sometimes even his uncles and maybe some of the neighbors. Then, the match would begin.

They did this almost every day.

When Anaya left to go back home, he was bringing something new back with him. A love and passion for soccer that he never had before. At the beginning of his fourth-grade year, he asked his parents to sign him up for a club team.

A year later, he switched to another club. The team wasn't at a high level, but he knew it was a place to develop more and stand out.

It still wasn't enough for him. So in eighth grade, he found Lucca and went to the tryout.

"I wasn't the best guy on that field, I know that's for sure," Anaya said. "In that moment, I was just proud that I could play against people at that level and still perform, but I was definitely not the best at that camp."

The coaches and scouts weren't just looking for the best players anyway. They were looking for leadership through communication with others on the field.

Then, they got private evaluations — an email stating

what each player excelled at and what they needed to work on.

Just like that, tryouts were over.

Two months later, nothing.

No news. No email. No call.

Anaya expected it.

Then, a couple of days after his 15th birthday, he got the message he was waiting for.

He was selected. He couldn't believe it.

Wrong number?

Meant for someone else?

But after a few days, he realized it was real.

He knew he wanted to go. He didn't need to think twice about it.

So he showed the email to his parents. Like him, they thought it was a scam. But his mom researched it anyway. As she found more information, she started to support Anaya, and after many conversations, both of his parents were on board.

The letter of acceptance, explained what to do next to register and scholarship information.

His parents filled everything out, and a few months later, it was finished. Anaya was going to Rome. He was going to live and play soccer at Rome City Prep Academy for a whole semester.

White walls. A bed in the corner. A window straight ahead. This was his first view of his dorm. His bedroom for the next four months. But it was the strong sunlight from the window that caught most of his attention. He looked out to see a small field below and a group of boys kicking a soccer ball around.

They looked up and saw him watching.

"Do you want to play?"

Anaya joined them. It became a daily ritual — playing on that field below his window. It was the start of his friendship with his new teammates.

His life began to consist of meals with the team, long train rides to the soccer field for practices and studying for his online school program.

Then came the matches.

In the first month, they played a match against an Irish team. At 9 p.m., the stands were full. Filled with Irish people waving the green, white and orange flag.

He played for 60 minutes and got his first assist in a game.

But there was one other thing he wouldn't forget about that night. It was the view of the Vatican while playing on the field.

"I just remember it distinctly, because when you look to the left, you can always see the Vatican with the lights and everything," Anaya said. "I'm never gonna forget that."

It was a moment Anaya realized just how far he had come. 5,209 miles from home. 6,506 miles from the shoes sitting on the road in Bolivia.

All because he went to the trial. All because he reached out to Lucca to get better. **All because of the games he played, running through the streets of Bolivia.**

GABE

ANAYA AFTER ATTENDING A SOCCER ACADEMY ABROAD, SOPHOMORE GABE ANAYA REFLECTS ON THE MOMENTS THAT BROUGHT HIM THERE

“In that moment, I was just proud that I could play against people at that level and still perform at that way.”