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Last Man Crouch

“Do you play futbol?” It was the main question I received during my initial visit to my village, my future site for 2 years. I wasn’t even sworn in as a volunteer yet, and still soaking in the new culture of Belize. “Yeah...well, I used to.” I played soccer back in high school. But this question was a quick reminder that time flies, as sheesh, high school was 10 years ago! As a tall, 6’4” dangly guy, Basketball was always my sport. Along with some approval nods to my response, there were certainly some snickers as well. This American is a good foot taller than 90% of the village, he’ll sure look funny playing on the field!

Six months later I’m participating with the village team in a Marathon. Marathons, here, are one-day single elimination tournaments with short games of maybe 20-25 minute halves. The marathons are great for the villages as it draws people from all over the district, and concession sales give the poor people a few extra bucks for the month. This Sunday, it was a marathon to kick off a league – a mini world cup of 14 local villages. Each team had a country: there was Brazil, Argentina, Spain, Italy, etc. My village, being the runt of the local villages population-wise, was given Switzerland.

Even with my past soccer experience, I was overwhelmed against the people of Belize. I could hold my own in practices, but it was obvious (to me) that I should not be on the field during game-time. Well, the village had other ideas. After some fidgeting with the lineup, I ended up as Sweeper, or last-man-back on defense. I had played defense in High School, but never as Sweeper. This was a little more pressure than I wanted, especially as I was sure to be outmatched against the opponents.

“Maybe I should be a sub in case someone gets hurt...”

“No, Chris, we found your position. You are good for Last-Man!”

This was only my second marathon with the team. Besides 2 other friendly games, the competitions were completely new to me. In one of the friendlies I had hurt my ankle pretty bad and had to come out of the game. Although my ankle still hurt, I continued to play the following week, probably against better judgment. The team had just invited me to join them, and I didn’t want to seem like the “American wuss”.

Just after the marathon started, a pouring rain that is so common for Belize hit us hard. The players weren’t fazed, although the puddles provided hurdles. My village, Switzerland, came out with a bang and won our first 3 games. The third game, a semifinal matchup, even included playing one man down because of a red card. The championship pitted us against the village hosting the marathon. It was now late and the home crowd had gone through quite a few Belikin Beers. Many of these fans had been very nice to me, joking with me throughout the day. They even started my long-lived nickname “Crouch”, after Peter Crouch, the tall Soccer player from England. Now, though, the smiles weren’t all there. I was part of their enemy.

My ankle was hurting, but not all that bad. I was tired as I stayed up late the night before with a volunteer from the village for his birthday celebration. The puddles of water were now swamps of mud. My left cleat had a huge gaping hole at the front, making a comical mouth figure. Despite all of this, I can say I held my own and played pretty well during the marathon. Despite all of this, I made perhaps the biggest blunder in Indian Church football history during the championship.

It was the 2nd half of a 0-0 game. Our team, coming from a village with no electricity, were in a new situation playing at night under lights. The game was tight. There was a corner kick, and I was covering the near post. The ball had a wicked swerve on it, coming right towards me. Me being the tallest player by far, I'd have no problem reaching it first. I misjudged the swerve of the ball, and knew I couldn't head it out to clear it. Instead, I chose to head it back out of bounds for another corner kick. As you can probably guess, I headed it directly into our goal. I mean this would've been a nice goal, had I been on offense! Ten minutes later, the game and marathon was over, with no other goals being scored. Talk about an absolute choke-job!

I didn't respond to the "Crouch" jeers from the crowd. I didn't even say goodbye or happy birthday to the volunteer from the village. I just trudged to the back of the pickup, and quietly sat down with the majority of the team. Some were quiet. Some were happy about just making the championship game. Although English is the official language of Belize, my village is made up of refugees from Guatemala. While my Spanish was improving, I couldn't understand all that was being said in the back of that pickup. I knew the context. Another volunteer texted me on the way back, saying that their team was toasting their victory to my name. I wanted to crawl in a hole and die.

When we reached back to the village, word had already spread about the outcome. I expected cold stares. I expected laughs and jeers in my direction. I expected dirt and stones to be thrown at me. What I received instead were handshakes, and kind words.

"Mistakes happen, Chris."

"It's part of the game."

"It was just the marathon. We'll get them back in a real game."

"You made the championship! They need to take us seriously now!"

I'm not sure why I expected a harsher reaction. This village had been nothing but kind to me ever since I arrived. Maybe I thought that way because they take soccer so seriously. Or maybe I was so caught up in being a Peace Corps Volunteer that I couldn't accept not helping the village in some way. The fact is, they knew I was human. A tall, lanky human that looks more goofy than ever while out on the field with the guys, but human nonetheless. The team, and some of the villagers, still bring up the "incident" from time to time. It's always brought up in a light-hearted way, and has really taught me how to laugh at myself. By the way, we did play that team again in a real game, and avenged our loss with a 3-0 victory. In that game I was playing the far-post on corner kicks!