





# 3 weeks in Mexico



Richard Sanchez is an American citizen through and through. He was born in California, plays professionally for FC Dallas of the MLS and is taking online classes to get his high school diploma. So how did he wind up winning the U-17 World Cup with Mexico this summer to become the first American-born player to win a FIFA men's competition?

AS TOLD TO MATT REMSBERG // PHOTO BY JOHN FEDELE

**T**he night before the World Cup began, I was so nervous I couldn't sleep. I didn't realize it was possible to be that nervous, but it certainly was for me that night. I could feel it in my body, and my mind was racing.

Part of it was pressure. Representing Mexico at the international level and having Mexico be the host country — there's definitely high expectations. And just playing in one of the most prestigious tournaments in the world, you know that all eyes are going to be on you. I was also thinking about my teammates and what I could do to support them in any way possible.

I finally did get a little bit of sleep, but it wasn't much. When we all got together the next morning, we were all asking each other, "Were you able to sleep?" Nobody was. Talking to everyone about how we all felt the same way, I think that actually helped make us all feel less nervous.

After that, we had a meeting and found out who was going to be starting. The coach just drew the lineup on the board and said, "You guys are starting." Thank God I was in that lineup. It was something really cool, something you've worked for a long time to achieve. I

was in a state of euphoria, but there was also a definite sense of relief.

It's weird because it felt like just a short while ago I was 14 and hearing about the U-17 World Cup for the first time. It was always on my mind after that, but it also felt like it was so far away it would never get here. Now all of a sudden it was about to begin.

## I know at heart I'm Mexican

I'll be honest, I do feel more Mexican than American even though I've never truly lived in Mexico. I was born in California and live in Texas now, but I was eligible to play for Mexico because my parents were born there.

My dad would always watch the Mexican league on TV. I always felt something different when I saw the Mexican flag, and I know at heart I'm Mexican.

Ever since I saw Oswaldo Sanchez and Jorge Campos in goal for the Mexican National Team, that's when it really started for me. I grew up wanting to follow in their footsteps. It was never really a decision for me: Should I represent Mexico or should I represent USA? Playing for Mexico is what feels right.

CELEBRATION SHOT BY ALFREDO LOPEZ/LATINCONTENT/GETTY IMAGES



"Playing for Mexico is what feels right."

I do have respect for America and appreciate what this country represents. I have a different perspective than my teammates. They'll say something like, "All Americans are racist." But I know that's not true at all. I tell them, "How many Americans have you met? What would you say if I told you all Mexicans are drug dealers?" It goes both ways.

It's a privilege to live here, and I'm grateful for that. I have the freedom to pursue whatever I want in this country, and because of that I try to do what I can to get people beyond the generalizations they make about both countries.

A Mexican scout first noticed me when I was 10 years old playing at an Olympic Development Program tournament in Ensenada in Baja California. He kept an eye on me, and when I was 13 he gave me a call to go to a camp in Mexico.

Pretty soon after that they started talking about the U-17 World Cup. There were six or seven goalies in contention at that point, all fighting for one position. Eventually it was cut down to four, and then the final three who made the World Cup team.

About a year before the World Cup, the U.S. asked me to come in and see if I was capable of making their team. But I had already been with Mexico three years, so it was just too late to even consider it.

I always had the mentality that I was the No. 1 keeper, no matter how many others were in camp. I knew what I wanted, and I fought for it. Until someone

told me I wasn't the starter or I saw a lineup written down with someone else's name, my philosophy was, "I'm starting for this team."

### My hopes were falling, but I still had faith

Before the tournament started and as it was going on, one thing me and my teammates would do is picture ourselves holding the trophy after we won. I would picture myself holding the trophy — I could see it in my hands. I think that motivated us.

Playing against Holland in the group stage was one of the most exciting games I've been a part of. We were up against a European team with a great history. We ended up winning, 3-2, and I actually helped the team stay on track by saving a penalty. As soon as the ref blew the whistle to start the PK, it was like I could see the play coming. I knew he was going to my left, so I dove that way and made the save.

In the semifinals against Germany, we were losing in the second half, 2-1. My hopes were falling, but I still had faith in my team. I tried to think positively: "We're going to pull this off. We're going to win. We're going to win." I'm pretty religious, so I was praying and praying to help us turn things around. With about 15 minutes left, we got the goal that tied it up. It was just, like, one of those moments that was just amazing. My jaw dropped pretty much to the floor and I ran all over celebrating.

After that, I was ready for overtime and I thought we could win it there,

# STUDY ABROAD

INTERVIEWS BY DAVID AUGUSTE

Most high school basketball players don't get to travel out of state, let alone the U.S., to play hoops. But not so for seniors Tony Parker of Miller Grove (Lithonia, Ga.) and Justin Anderson of Montrose Christian (Rockville, Md.), who are rated No. 31 and No. 61, respectively, in the ESPN 100. During the summer of 2010, the pair helped Team USA win gold at the FIBA U17 World Championship in Germany.

The tournament helped improve their games, and the trip was something they'll never forget.



## PARKER ON THE FANS IN ANOTHER COUNTRY:

It was crazy because they can play instruments during the game and you can hear them playing horns. While you're on the court they hated you, but off the court they embraced you and asked for autographs. They came and asked for hugs and asked (me) to sign their kids' diapers.

## PARKER ON THE STYLE OF PLAY:

They come at you from a whole different level. They play extremely hard and extremely tough. The refs let a lot of things go, so things can get out of hand. You have to be tough over there. They're really physical. Some players didn't like it too much, but you get used to it.

## ANDERSON ON REPRESENTING HIS COUNTRY:

We found out real early we were playing for something bigger than ourselves. Basketball there was totally different. They played tough every possession, and the environment was intense. Guys had to sacrifice their individual talent and come together as a team.

## ANDERSON ON WINNING GOLD:

When the experience really hit me was when we heard the national anthem after we won the gold medal. It just made everything come together and made us appreciate things more. It showed what basketball can do for your life. Our team was connected for life.



but with barely any time left, one of our forwards, Julio Gomez, scored a scissor kick to win the game. It was incredible. When the ref blew the whistle, all the emotions came out.

## I can't put that feeling into words

In the locker room after the Germany game, our coach told us that we needed to keep our feet on the ground, forget about it and get focused on the final.

We were up against Uruguay in the final, and we knew them well. We'd played them a few times, and the results were never in our favor. The last time we played them, we lost, 6-2. But this time we had an advantage. We were playing them in front of 100,000 of our fans in one of the most intimidating stadiums in the world — Azteca.

Walking into the stadium, hearing the national anthem, hearing the fans chanting "Mexico," I can't put that feeling into words. I just know it's something no 17-year-old would ever think they could accomplish.

The game was kind of a blur. We won, 2-0, and I know I held the trophy in my hands. But it didn't feel real. It didn't really hit me until we were on the bus and the trophy was in my lap and I was taking a picture of it with my phone.

## We accomplished something important

Being the first American-born player to win a FIFA men's tournament feels good. At first it didn't feel that important because soccer isn't as popular here as it is around the world. But to be the first is truly an honor and something I'll keep in my heart and save for the rest of my life.

SANCHEZ (FROM LEFT) ALFREDO LOPEZ/LATINCONTENT/GETTY IMAGES; AP PHOTO/CHRISTIAN PALMA; PARKER & ANDERSON COURTESY OF FIBA

# A WHOLE NEW BALLGAME

BY LUCAS O'NEILL



No city in the country represents the American ideal of a melting pot more thoroughly than New York, so it's fitting that even Gotham's high school sports reflect that diversity.

The city's Public Schools Athletic League offers a variety of non-traditional sports, including handball and double dutch. But in the past few years, the PSAL has also introduced two of the most popular sports in the world: cricket and rugby.

Eric Goldstein, the CEO of the NYC Department of Education's School Support Services, which oversees the PSAL, says there were a number of factors that went into incorporating these sports. One was familiarity: Goldstein lived in England for a number of years and witnessed the popularity of both sports.

Then there was the issue of demographics. Cricket is enormously popular in South Asian countries like India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and according to 2010 Census figures, these populations have exploded in many parts of the city in recent years.

"We saw adults playing cricket at the parks on weekends," Goldstein says. "Our desire was to be welcoming to those changing demographics."

Indeed, there were 418 cricket players this spring across 26 teams, and the vast majority were of South Asian descent. Even if their families have been in the United States for years, first- and second-generation immigrants are typically exposed to the game through their parents or grandparents. Many of these athletes play organized cricket outside the PSAL for club and national teams, but there's something unique about suiting up for your own school.

"There's no greater feeling than representing your high school with your classmates and your teachers coming out to root you on," says Donald Douglas, the PSAL's executive director.

The PSAL has leaned on professional cricket and rugby organizations for tactical support — to promote the league, train players and coaches, and provide qualified referees. That means even those students who don't know a wicket from an over (cricket), or a scrum from a maul (rugby), can learn the game.

When the PSAL was created in 1903, the mission was to increase physical fitness for NYC youth. And in light of the nation's current obesity epidemic, the creation of new sports is consistent with that goal.

Bringing cricket and rugby to the PSAL also reflects the spirit of America's most international city.

"That philosophical underpinning of what New York is, and how welcoming it is, is very important to us," says Goldstein.



"It's something no 17-year-old would ever think they could accomplish."

I hope it's the beginning of something big for me. This is just one chapter in my life. Just because I won one tournament will not mean I have a starting position anywhere or guarantee me anything. Now it's time for the next chapter.

I give so much credit to FC Dallas for signing a 17-year-old kid. I'm just taking things day by day, so that whenever my name is called I am ready. I am still the same person I was before the World Cup, so I won't let success get to my head.

Looking back now, considering how well Mexican soccer did this summer with winning the Gold Cup and finishing third at the U-20 World Cup, I'm even more proud. With the whole situation with the cartels, being able to accomplish something like this that helps bring Mexico's reputation up — it feels like we accomplished something important.

Even with the really bad time we may be in, Mexicans haven't lost their pride. When we have a dream, we go after that dream. There's still hope within the youth that we can make a change. It's not all about drugs and killing. We actually dream and fight for what we want. ☺

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