

Mount Mercy men's soccer: Welcome to the United Nations

Written by Tom Fruehling

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The chatter among the players on the Mount Mercy men's soccer team is like listening to a session of the United Nations.

All speak English, but most with decided accents.

To say the team is a global melting pot is a vast understatement.

Of the 34 men on the squad, 26 hail from a foreign country. They represent 18 different nations from all of the seven continents save Antarctica.

Seven of them are from Iowa, one from Illinois. There are more who call Germany home (five) than those from Cedar Rapids (four).

"Our motto is one team, one world," says Coach Amir Hadzic, himself a native of Bosnia who escaped his war-torn homeland in 1994 and took over Mount Mercy's soccer program a year later. "You know it really is a small world."

And from all over they've come here from Australia and Nigeria, Jamaica and Japan, Cuba and England, Ecuador and Egypt. A first this season is a citizen of Vietnam, Hieu Ngo, who was born in Berlin.

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They come together with kids from Marion, Swisher and Wellman, Iowa. Mustang freshman Joe Mulangaliro

, born and raised in Cedar Rapids, jumped at the chance when offered a scholarship to be part of the international mix.

"It's been eye-opening," says the Xavier High School graduate, a prep star on teams there that Hadzic also coaches.

Mulangaliro is no stranger to other customs since his own father Patrick is from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. And he's exhilarated by the diversity of his teammates.

"We've got so many cultures and a variety of guys on this team. But it's fun," he says. "We all adapt to each other. We're all friends. It's like one big family."

Bringing in so many student/athletes from afar is by design, says his highly successful veteran coach. For one, they're all experienced and talented soccer players.

"In every country except the United States, soccer is the number one sport," says Hadzic, who played professionally in his native country.

"So that provides a much bigger pool of players. And their skill level is very high."

But he's much more interested in what takes place away from the playing field.

"I wear two hats at Mount Mercy," notes Hadzic, who is also the school's assistant director of International Student Recruitment and Integration.

"Yes, I'm the soccer coach. But bringing foreign students here to the campus makes us more vibrant and diverse. It works both ways."

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“The fact that I’m able to do both is a good fit.”

He says that several years ago Mount Mercy officials embarked on a strategic plan to increase its international enrollment to the handful then on the 1,600-student campus.

Recruiting soccer players was one way to do it. And when the private university began offering athletic scholarships a few years back, it helped the effort.

Hadzic finds prospective students through regular tips, his extensive contacts throughout the soccer world, videos and at American showcases where foreign players compete.

“There’s lots of leg work,” he acknowledges.

And word-of-mouth is often his best recruiting tool when former Mustangs extol their own Mount Mercy experience.

The one-time refugee who achieved success in Midwest America says his own background is often a powerful enticement, as well. “With many young people and their parents, the personal touch goes a long ways,” he says.

Moreover, Hadzic stresses, the college is committed to the academic and social involvement of each student.

“We just don’t bring them here to play soccer,” he says.

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Milos Draca, 25, for instance, found his way to Cedar Rapids after three years of civil engineering studies in his native Serbia and a year's stint at a small college in Missouri.

He's now a senior majoring in computer science at Mount Mercy and has an internship at Rockwell Collins. Like many of the foreign students, he's planning to apply after graduation for a one-year work extension of his student visa.

"Everyone is so friendly here," he says. "It has been a very positive experience."

There's even a junior midfielder from England named Ben Franklin.

From Hadzic's perspective, the benefits the foreign students gain from an American education and the diversity they bring to the Mount Mercy campus are immeasurable.

"The soccer," he says, "is just icing on the cake."

MOUNT MERCY ROSTER

Goar Kempf-Heitlinger (Germany), Yinka Ajibola (Nigeria), Jordan Torquato (Australia), Monueir Moodie (Jamaica), Milos Draca (Serbia), Fergus O'Connor (England), Mohamed Hamed (Egypt), Sho Takaoka (Japan).

Eric Pfau (Cedar Rapids), Haris Hadzalik (Bosnia-Herzegovina), Michael Tessmer (Cedar Rapids), Wyatt Cady (Wellman, Iowa), Kevon Farquharson (Jamaica), Sanitago Lostao (Spain), Kory Boebel (Swisher, Iowa), Jamie

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Booth (Scotland).

Marko Govedarica (Serbia), Filip Kovacevic (Serbia), Benett Vrbicek (Marion), Andre Vicuna (Cuba), Chris Kapfer (Cedar Rapids), Hieu Ngo (Vietnam/Germany), Marco Fichtner (Germany), Boris Licona Moreno (Honduras).

Ben Franklin (England), Fernando Fernandez (Peotone, Ill.), Jan Niklas Neul (Germany), Juan Mejia (Ecuador), Rodrigo Buendia (Mexico), Ian Matos (Brazil), Joe Mulangaliro (Cedar Rapids), Nathan Chilcott (Wales), Javier Loayza (Ecuador), Tomas Zajfert (Germany).