

Giants of the World Cup

by Paul Arinaga

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Paulo lived in one of the slums or “Favelas” of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil. He was far away from the piranhas and caiman of the Amazonian jungle. His jungle was a concrete one.

He didn’t know who his father was and his mother was so busy working that he hardly ever saw her.

Even so, Paulo was a happy child. When he wasn’t busy searching for things to sell in the city dump, he played football with his friends. They used an old bundle of rags wrapped around a tree stump as a ball.

“Olá, Paulo,” said Augusto. “Let’s play.”

The two boys started kicking the ball back and forth and even heading it, although the tree stump was pretty hard in some places despite being wrapped up in old rags.

“Whap!” Paulo kicked the ball right into their makeshift practice goal: a rubber truck tire. He and his friends used this tire for target practice. Although it was a narrow goal, they were good at kicking the ball right into it.

“Paulo, Augusto! Come quick!” said an excited João who had burst out onto the weedy lot from behind a pile of tin cans. “Ronaldinho just scored!”

The three boys raced to an old man Jorge’s shack. There, clustered around a small black & white TV was a group of men watching the world cup. It was Brazil against Portugal.

There was a roar and all the men cheered just as the 3 boys arrived.

“Ronaldinho scores again!” shouted the men as they danced around gleefully.

Paulo watched the replay. A beautiful twisting kick by Ronaldinho just out of the keeper’s reach in the corner of the goal.

Without thinking, Paulo said half to himself: "Someday I'll be playing in the world cup, too."

All the men laughed.

"Yes, and my grandmother drives a Porsche," said a young man mockingly.

All the men laughed again.

Paulo's two friends looked at him to see if he would cry or get mad. But instead, Paulo was walking coolly over to an old football lying on a heap of rubble.

He bent down and picked it up.

"Hey!" he shouted. "Let's play a game...and if we win, we get to keep your ball."

"And what if you lose?" asked one of the men, grinning.

"The we'll buy you a new one," said Paulo.

"Paulo, no, are you crazy?" said Augusto in a desperate whisper, "We can't beat them."

"Don't worry," said Paulo.

They started playing. They kicked the ball back and forth across the uneven ground of the overgrown lot.

"Whomp!" Paulo scored with a beautiful header, and Augusto started to think that maybe they could win after all.

"Ga-chunk!" sorry said João after he let the ball get by him a second time.

The score was 2-1 for the men.

"Just 5 minutes left!" shouted a grizzled old man who was bent over a cane holding a watch.

Paulo played like a mad man. Augusto and João had never seen him play so hard.

He twisted and turned, bumped and bruised.

“Time’s up!” shouted the old man just as Paulo kicked a perfect shot.

For a moment it seemed like everything was in slow motion.

“Bink” the ball bounced off the makeshift goal posts.

“Post,” said the keeper for the men, with a smirk on his face.

Augusto and João were demoralized.

“Paulo, we can never pay for a new ball,” they said.

“Don’t worry, I’ll get a ball,” said Paulo, although even he was getting a little bit worried.

That evening three of the men came over to Paulo’s hut to talk to his mother.

Paulo heard shouting. When the men went away, his mother came out with tears in her eyes.

“Paulo, how could you make such a bet with those men? You know we don’t have money to buy a ball,” she said in a very upset voice.

“Sorry, Momma,” said Paulo.

That night Paulo could hardly sleep. He got up and went outside.

The moonlight shining down made even the shanty town look beautiful.

Paulo looked up at the stars and said a silent prayer.

The next morning, Paulo and his two friends walked all the way downtown to watch the world cup on TV. They stood outside the window of an electronics store watching Brazil play against Argentina...on a giant screen color TV!

Brazil lost, 2-1, and the boys started walking the 15 kilometers back home feeling a little bit dejected.

As he was crossing the street, Paulo was lost in thought worrying about how he could get money for a new soccer ball.

“Beep! B-e-e-e-e-e-p!” a large truck drove by missing Paulo by just a few centimeters.

“Are you OK, Paulo?” asked Augusto and João anxiously.

Paulo was bent over on the ground and for a moment the two boys feared that he was dead.

“Look!” said Paulo, and he lifted up a football. A brand new ball had fallen off the truck.

“This is the answer to our problems,” said a pleased Paulo.

“But, Paulo, shouldn’t we return it,” said Augusto who was the most honest boy in the Favellas.

“Augusto, we don’t even know where the truck came from and it’s long gone,” said Paulo.

“C’mon,” he said, and started jogging home.

The boys had the most fun ever playing with the shiny, new bouncy ball. When they got back to the barrio, they sadly gave it to the men.

“Can’t we keep it for one day?” asked João.

“No,” said Paulo, “my mom will worry too much.”

The next day the boys were back playing with their old wooden tree stump.

“I wish we had found 2 balls,” said João.

“Yeah,” agreed Paulo.

Just then they heard a familiar voice.

“Are you Paulo,” asked an old man in a gravelly voice. They recognized the time keeper from their game against the men.

“Yes,” said Paulo.

“I saw you play,” said the old man, “you are a good player.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Paulo.

“Do you want to become a great player?” asked the man.

“Yes, sir,” said Paulo.

“My cousin has a special football camp for training promising young players.”

“Who’s your cousin?” asked João who was always suspicious.

The old man paused and fixed his gaze on João.

“His name is Edson Arantes do Nascimento...but some people call him Pelé.”

And so, it was.

Even though there was no second football, Paulo did start his training with the legendary Pelé.

And even though he and his mom still lived in the same old shanty, they were still pretty happy.

AND, even though the men had laughed at Paulo, he still knew that someday he would become a great football player.

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