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Marco Farfan: A rising star from Southeast Portland emerges for Timbers

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By Jamie Goldberg

While some of his Centennial High School classmates earn extra cash by working minimum wage jobs making sandwiches, flipping burgers or frothing up Grande Lattes at Starbucks, [Marco Farfan](#) plays soccer for the [Portland Timbers](#).

That's right. Marco Farfan - high school student/professional athlete.

As the youngest-ever player to sign with the Timbers, Farfan has followed an unusual path. He made the leap this year from the Timbers youth academy team, signing a contract with the professional club worth \$53,000 per year.

But while his life has changed dramatically over the last eight months, the 18-year-old is quick to downplay his achievement. That might be because he doesn't quite grasp how unusual his experience is.

"It took me about a month to get used to it, but now I'm just focused on working hard, so I can get better down the road," Farfan said. "I'm 18 right now, but that's not going to last forever. I have to have the right mindset that I can go out there every day and compete."

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Farfan grew up in a modest home on the border of Southeast Portland and Gresham dreaming of one day becoming a professional soccer player. But neither he nor his family imagined that he would make it to the pro level before earning his college diploma - let alone before finishing high school.

His father, Roberto, who spent his own childhood in Mexico surrounded by an intense soccer-crazed culture, made sure to teach all three of his children about his beloved sport. Games from Liga MX, Mexico's top pro league, could often be heard blaring from the television in the family's home.

It was Marco's older brother, also named Roberto, who was the first to show real talent for the game. The younger Roberto played for Oregon State University and the Timbers U23 team and the family would make long drives to Corvallis on weekends to watch Roberto play. It was while watching those games that Marco fell in love with the sport.

By the age of five, Marco was spending sunny days in the yard with his close-knit extended family using extra pairs of shoes as goal posts to play pick-up games. His mother, Marisela, still keeps a box of photos for each of her three children and Marco's box is full of smiling childhood pictures of him with a soccer ball.

"It just runs in the family," Farfan said. "My dad and my brother introduced me to soccer when I was around five-years-old. I just liked it from the start."

By the time he was in middle school, Farfan had joined the [Eastside Timbers](#), one of the best club teams for top youth soccer players in Oregon. When he reached high school, he made the decision, like many of his soccer-obsessed peers, to try out for the varsity team. He lettered as a freshman.

But everything changed for Farfan as a sophomore.

He left behind varsity soccer to join the Timbers U-16 Academy Team. Afternoons playing video games with friends were soon replaced with regimented workouts at the Timbers practice facility in Beaverton.

"I do think a lot of it is mental," Farfan's brother, Roberto, said. "He's a lot more mature than I was at that age and that's helping him a lot."

Last year, the Timbers made the decision to give Farfan an initial opportunity with their lower division team, T2. Despite understandably feeling nervous in his first weeks playing alongside pro players, Farfan exceeded expectations.

Still, his family was caught off guard when the Timbers offered Marco a contract in October. There are currently 10 other American players Farfan's age or younger competing in MLS and the league has a history of signing high school-age players, most prominently Freddy Adu, who joined MLS at the age of 14 in 2002. But Farfan is the first academy product and youngest-ever player to turn pro with the Timbers.

"It was a surprise for me to see how far he has gone," said Marco's father, Roberto, through a translator. "But slowly we are getting accustomed to it. Clearly, there is more that he has to accomplish. Nothing has been won as of yet. He knows that he has to work daily and be humble and keep his feet firmly placed on the ground."

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On a recent Tuesday afternoon, Farfan tossed his backpack into the backseat of the car he borrows from his dad and anxiously checked his watch. It was 12:30 p.m.

He had spent the last few hours fiercely going toe-to-toe on the field with his Timbers teammates, some of whom are more than a decade older than he is, and hadn't realized how

late practice was running. He would have just enough time to make the 45-minute drive from the Timbers training facility to Centennial and slip into his English class before the bell.

"Sometimes I forget that he's going to school on top of the soccer and having to commute back and forth and compartmentalize everything," Timbers coach [Caleb Porter](#) said. "That's not easy. It shows his maturity. He has a great head on his shoulders and that's a big reason why he is able to do what he's doing."

While his daily routine can be hectic, Farfan never considered sacrificing his education for professional soccer.

Roberto and Marisela always emphasized the importance of earning an education to their three children and, while the walls in the family living room are devoid of photos displaying Farfan competing for the Timbers, there are prominent spots for the diplomas of his two siblings. Farfan plans to soon add his high school diploma to the wall before beginning to work toward earning a college degree - likely in marketing - through an online program with Southern New Hampshire University, the official education sponsor of MLS.

Still, Farfan had to work with Centennial to make his dual life as a professional athlete and high school student possible. The school generally requires students to take at least four classes, but administrators waived that requirement for Farfan, who was on track to have the minimum number of credits to graduate if he took just one class this spring. They allowed him to pick an afternoon timeslot, so he could come to school after practice.

"Obviously, my parents and I wanted me to keep going to school because soccer isn't going to last forever," Farfan said. "After soccer, I really want to already have my degree and be able to find a job."

When he reached the parking lot at Centennial on that recent Tuesday, students were rushing to class, and no one seemed to take notice of the pro soccer player walking into the school.

A humble and quiet person by nature, Farfan didn't tell any of his friends when he signed with the Timbers. But the news, of course, slipped out through social media. His friends had a hard time believing it was real. Some of his fellow classmates gawked in the hallway. And others suddenly tried to befriend the new pro athlete.

But the novelty of having a pro athlete at Centennial has worn off over time.

In his English class - a difficult college-level course - Farfan pulled up a chair next to two friends and grabbed his laptop to work on his final project, a paper and PowerPoint on strengthening gun control. Every so often, his friends would make a joke and the three teenagers would try to suppress laughter. The topic of soccer hardly came up.

"I think there's kind of some teasing that goes on, but it's good-natured," Centennial English instructor Beth Lifson said. "He's pretty well-loved because of his demeanor. He's humble and he's laser-focused on his goals."

Still, Farfan is no longer a normal teen.

Even though he resides in the same house where he has lived with his parents since he was six, he rarely has time for outings with friends. He's missed group get-togethers and Centennial basketball and football games. He was asked to prom last year but had to say no because he had a game with T2. He didn't ask anyone and no one asked him this year because everyone already knew he'd be at a Timbers game.

While he sometimes misses the ability to have those casual outings with friends - instead of days structured from morning until night - Farfan says he has no regrets. As long as he is playing soccer, he's happy. But his family admits that the transition has been challenging.

"To run from home to practice and then school, to go to bed early and wake up early to go to training, is not easy," said his father. "It's difficult for him traveling and spending two or three days away from home and missing classes that he needs to make up. But he is doing it."

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On April 2, Farfan walked onto the field at Providence Park with the rest of the Timbers starting lineup ahead of a game against the New England Revolution.

As he heard the cheers from the crowd and the chants from the Timbers Army, he could feel his palms getting sweaty. In that moment, his youth betrayed him and he was overwhelmed by the experience of playing for the hometown team.

"We would always get season tickets to go watch the team and just looking at the Timbers Army and the fans, I would just think to myself that it would be crazy to be down there playing," Farfan said. "I was actually pretty nervous. I've never been in an atmosphere that big."

But Farfan didn't look like an overwhelmed high schooler once the game began. It was clear he belonged.

"He doesn't play like an 18-year-old," Porter said. "I think he has really shown his maturity this year in playing well when he has played, working hard in training every day, managing the school and still staying humble."

Despite his youth and a lifestyle that is unlike that of any other player on the roster, Farfan has yet to feel out of place in a pro soccer environment. The defender has already made four starts this season and even earned a spot on the MLS Team of the Week in April.

He has quickly bonded with his teammates as well - particularly the fellow Spanish speakers. The group recently made the mistake of sitting in the bar area of the Cheesecake Factory in Seattle when they went to dinner on the road, before realizing that Farfan wasn't allowed in the over-21 section.

"We still know he's a young kid, but nobody thinks about it anymore," Timbers forward [Fanendo Adi](#) said. "He knows that he's in the team and he has to be up for it." On Friday, Farfan will walk to the podium and proudly accept his high school diploma alongside his fellow Centennial classmates at the Portland Expo Center. The next day, as his friends begin their summer vacation, he will be in uniform with the Timbers at Providence Park for a game against FC Dallas.

It won't be a conventional weekend for an 18-year-old. But he's earned his spot on both stages.

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