

Portland Timbers' modest Darlington Nagbe enjoys breakout season, but doesn't let soccer define him

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By Jamie Goldberg



In February 2006, **Caleb Porter** found himself watching a practice for one of the top club teams in Ohio, the Cleveland Internationals. He had come out to see a 15-year-old forward on the recommendation of a friend. And he couldn't believe his eyes.

The quiet and composed youngster controlled the ball with ease and elegance, dribbling around his teammates and turning out of pressure with the skill of someone much older.

"I remember my jaw dropping," Porter said.

Even then, it was clear that **Darlington Nagbe** was special.

From the field, Porter picked up his phone and called his former teammate from Indiana University and then-assistant coach of the U17 national team, Brian Maisonneuve.

"This kid right now," Porter told Maisonneuve, "I don't know if you know about him, but he's the best youth player I've ever seen."

Seven years after Porter's fortuitous encounter with Nagbe, the 23-year-old still displays the same poise and humility even as he has developed into one of the elite players on the Portland Timbers. This season, reunited with Porter, Nagbe is finally emerging as a top talent in MLS. He was recently named **No. 1 on the league's "24 Under 24" list** recognizing the best young players. And he is currently tied for the team lead in goals with eight, one away from surpassing the Timbers' single-season record set by Kenny Cooper.

Soccer represents only one facet of Nagbe's life, a journey that has been influenced much more by his upbringing and the values instilled by his family since his birth in war-torn Liberia. But his success on the field has undeniably been spurred by his long-standing connection with Porter, the Timbers' first-year head coach, who is bringing out the best in the young forward.

Not long after he saw a 15-year-old Nagbe on the soccer field, Porter was heavily recruiting Nagbe to join his emerging powerhouse program at the University of Akron, where he was in his first year as head coach.

Nagbe recalls sitting in Porter's office with his mother when the coach offered him a full scholarship. His mother started to cry. Some of Nagbe's teammates from the Cleveland

Internationals already had gone on to Akron, and Nagbe was excited at the prospect of staying close to home. He accepted on the spot.

“I knew that Akron had always had a good soccer program,” Nagbe said. “But mostly the reason I went there was because of Caleb. My mom really trusted him, so I trusted him.”

Nagbe spent three years at Akron under Porter’s guidance. After leading the team to the 2010 national championship and winning the Hermann Trophy as the nation’s top college soccer player, he skipped his senior year and entered the MLS draft. Nagbe wanted to stay in the United States – where his family lives and he is trying to secure U.S. citizenship – so the Vancouver Whitecaps passed on him with the first pick.

That left him open for the Portland Timbers, who used their first-ever **MLS draft pick to select Nagbe second overall** in the 2011 MLS SuperDraft.

“As much as I’d like to take credit for developing him,” said Porter, who would remain at Akron for two more years after Nagbe left, “I think most of what he’s good at is God-given talent.”

A boy and a ball

In the summer of 1990, a pregnant Somah Nagbe was living in Monrovia, Liberia, with her 2-year-old son, Joe, when a civil war that had been raging in the countryside for six months spread into the capital city of the once democratic and peaceful nation.

“We never went outside,” Somah said. “We heard bullets outside all the time.”

On the night of July 18, Somah couldn’t get to a hospital. Instead, she walked through darkness to the house of a former hospital worker who could deliver her child. She remembers hearing gunshots. There was no electricity and Somah found her way with a kerosene lamp. That morning, in the neighbor’s home, Darlington Nagbe was born. He would spend only five months in Liberia.

During that time, Nagbe’s father, also named Joe, was playing professional soccer in France, but as the violence spread, he traveled to Sierra Leone, which borders Liberia, to try to reunite with his family. Joe handed a picture of Somah to a friend heading into Monrovia and asked him to bring the family to safety. The friend brought Somah and her boys to a refugee camp in Sierra Leone, where the family reunited with Joe.

More than 200,000 people died in the seven-year civil war. Thousands of others fled, much like Nagbe’s family. Three years after the fighting stopped, another civil war broke out.

“I realized it was better for me to leave Liberia,” Somah said of her home. “If we stayed in Liberia, I didn’t know what was going to happen.”

Over the next 11 years, the family followed Joe, the captain of the Liberian national team, as he played professionally across Europe. They spent six years in France, a year in Switzerland and then four in Greece.

Through all the instability of moving around, soccer remained the one constant for young Darlington. He and his brother played every day before school, during recess and after school. They looked up to their father and often stood on the sideline as ball boys during his games. Because of Darlington's natural talent, it was always easy to make friends with a soccer ball.

Around the time Nagbe turned 11, his mother decided that she wanted her children to settle down and get an education in the United States. So, as Joe Nagbe continued his career in Greece, Somah and the two boys moved to Ohio, where Somah has a half-brother.

The family had been in Ohio for only a short time when a friend of a friend introduced them to George Nanchoff — the father of Timbers midfielder **Michael Nanchoff**, who is currently on loan to a club in Sweden. Nanchoff established a rapport with the Nagbes and helped Darlington and brother Joe join his club, the Cleveland Internationals.

“When I first looked at (Darlington) I knew he was going to make it to the pros,” George Nanchoff said. “Even at 11 years old, he was a miniature pro.”

Nagbe played with the Cleveland Internationals until he went off to college. He had so much natural athleticism that Michael remembers the team joking that, “for every McChicken Nagbe ate, another bicep would pop out.” Michael Nanchoff remembers meeting Nagbe during a scrimmage at an indoor practice facility in Cleveland. Nagbe brought the ball down with ease and, once in his possession, the ball never seemed to leave his body. He scored maybe five goals that day, Michael recalled.

Michael and Nagbe quickly became good friends, both with big dreams of someday playing professionally.

“My mom and dad never forced me to play soccer,” Nagbe said. “They just told me to do what makes me happy, and soccer makes me happy.”

“A good man”

Nagbe talks to his mother over the phone every day. She calls from Ohio, just to make sure he is well.

“He's the most responsible one of my kids,” Somah said. “He does what he needs to do and does it right.”

Nagbe takes immense pride in the person he has become off the field and the values that his mother instilled in him while she raised him, often alone, in Ohio. Even Nagbe's Twitter tagline fails to mention that he plays soccer. **“Child of God, husband, son, brother, and friend,”** it reads with understated modesty.

As a child, Nagbe had possessed the same quiet modesty. He was always one of the more observant kids on the Cleveland Internationals and tended to open up only to the people he trusted most.

“He’s a really humble person,” said Timbers midfielder **Ben Zemanski**, who played with Nagbe and Nanchoff on the Cleveland Internationals and then at Akron. “He’s a little shy and a little quiet, but once you get to know D and he opens up, he’s funny and he’s one of the most caring people I know.”

Nagbe looks forward to his favorite part of the day, when the Timbers finish practice and he can return home to **his wife, Felicia Nagbe**, and their two dogs. He acknowledges that his family – his wife, parents, brother, and two sisters – and friends ultimately mean a lot more to him than soccer.

“I do my job and I want to do well,” Nagbe said. “But my dream is to be a good man and a good person.”

Moments of brilliance on the soccer field aren’t out of the ordinary for the talented 23-year-old. In his first season with the Timbers, Nagbe **scored the MLS goal of the year**– a spectacular shot where he juggled the ball off his foot twice and then, with the ball still in the air, sent it flying into the net.

But, in the past, Nagbe’s reserved nature has led coaches to tell him he needed to toughen up. If he weren’t such a nice guy, he would be a better soccer player, they’ve said.

“He’s a super player, a super, super talent,” former Timbers coach John Spencer said in the beginning of the 2011 season. “But he’s such a nice soccer player, and I always say to him that he tries to play the game like he lives his life. He’s a super sweet kid if you know him, but he needs to get a little more ruthless.”

Nagbe’s first season with Portland was marred by injury. He entered training camp with a previously undiagnosed sports hernia and missed the preseason and first two regular-season games as **he recovered from surgery**. Even when he was back on the field, it seemed the rookie wasn’t fully adjusting to MLS. He finished the year with two goals and three assists.

Nagbe clearly improved in his second season, scoring six goals. But his play remained inconsistent as the Timbers tried to find a position that suited Nagbe in a system that relied on a direct style of play that didn’t quite fit his skill set.

Still, Nagbe cringes at the idea of changing his personality on the field just to improve his game.

“To me, it doesn’t matter,” Nagbe said. “I’d take being a better person over a better player any day.”

A new arrival

The Timbers won their first road game this season on April 27, **beating Kansas City 3-2**, the sixth game in what would become Portland's 15-game unbeaten streak. Nagbe scored. But he remembers that weekend for a different reason. When he returned home, his wife Felicia told him she was pregnant.

Nagbe's daughter is due on New Year's Day, but he's already swelling with the pride of a young father. The family currently live just outside downtown Portland, but is looking for a bigger home for her arrival and thinking about what color to paint the nursery. His friends have seen him smiling as he holds a onesie for the baby. They've decided to name her Mila.

"It's going to be a dream come true," Nagbe said. "I've always wanted to be a dad."

Many of Nagbe's teammates on the Timbers bring their children to the field on occasion, and Nagbe always loves playing with the kids. Since soccer has been a fixture in Nagbe's life, he smiles at the thought of his wife and daughter one day coming to watch him play. But if Mila decides not to follow in her dad's footsteps, that's OK, too. He wants her to be her own person.

"It doesn't matter to me even if she plays a sport or not," Nagbe said. "If she's a normal person with a regular job, I wouldn't mind it."

With fatherhood comes maturity and, though Nagbe doesn't feel any different as he prepares for that life change, he said that Porter keeps telling him he's noticed some differences.

"He's gotten tougher," Porter said. "He's gotten more assertive. Maybe that has something to do with him having a baby on the way, I don't know, but I think I've seen that happen to guys over the years. He knows he's accountable now, not just for himself, but for his wife and his kid."

A rare talent

Porter has never tried to change Nagbe.

He admits that bringing out the best in the 23-year-old takes a little bit of finesse. But Porter likes the sort of fun-loving naiveté Nagbe displays on the field, and he tries to play off that. He wants Nagbe to understand the gravity of being a professional, but sometimes he just tells the young forward to go enjoy the game.

"I know him inside and out," Porter said. "I know how to push his buttons at the right times. If you cross the line with him, you lose him. If you don't push him enough, you don't get enough."

Playing at FC Dallas earlier this season, Nagbe got his foot on a pass in the box. He didn't seem properly set to take a shot, positioned a little off to the side, and his body was turned away from goal. But these are the moments when Nagbe excels. He's dangerous with a ball at his feet.

With one touch, he turned and fired a shot into the far corner of the net before running to the sideline to hug his teammates. **The June 15 goal put the Timbers ahead 1-0** and was voted MLS goal of the week.

“He’s one of those rare players,” Porter said, “that doesn’t come around very often.”

Nagbe’s performance this season has to be attributed at least somewhat to his relationship with Porter. Yes, Nagbe’s talented. And yes, there’s no doubt that with time and experience he has adjusted to MLS play.

But even Nagbe admits that he looks up to Porter almost as a father and says the coach always has brought out the best in him on the field.

In his first two seasons with the Timbers, Nagbe said he felt like the team was often trying to force things on the field, instead of maintaining control and being patient with the ball. He is more comfortable playing in Porter's 4-3-3 formation and has found a role and position that suits him in a system tailored to his strengths.

“Caleb’s possession style helps me a lot,” Nagbe said. “I feel like as a player, the more I get on the ball, the more comfortable I get and the easier it is to make plays.”

In Porter’s possession-oriented system, Nagbe usually fits in as a wide player who comes in for the attack. As a player who doesn’t shy away from the ball, he can move through traffic deftly with his remarkable control.

“He wants the ball,” Zemanski said. “He doesn’t want to lose the ball, and that’s when he’s at his best. That’s Porter’s style, keeping the ball and hurting the other team with possession.”

Porter vividly recalls Nagbe as the young 15-year-old who he thought was talented enough to someday represent his country. Nagbe’s never really considered following in his dad’s footsteps and playing for Liberia — he’s too much of a “homebody” to be that far from his family. But Nagbe, who received his Green Card last year and married Felicia, a U.S. citizen, in December, is excited at the prospect of being eligible to play for the U.S. national team in the next few years.

“I feel like Darlington has just grown up right before my eyes,” Porter said.

For now, Nagbe is just focused on being a good friend, a good person, and soon a good father. But if Nagbe’s moments of brilliance on the soccer field — his goal of the week against Dallas, his goal of the year in 2011 — indicate anything, the young Timber may possess untapped talent that has yet to be seen.

“I think D continues to improve every day,” said Michael Nanchoff, who still talks to Nagbe on a daily basis. “There's even more room for progression, so it's quite frightening.”