

Diego Valeri here to stay: Portland Timbers gifted midfielder finds refuge in the Rose City
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By Jamie Goldberg

On an early autumn afternoon, Diego Valeri stood in the soft grass at the Fields Neighborhood Park, under the gaze of a twinkling Fremont Bridge, watching his daughter, Constanza, giddily race down a pathway on her pink scooter.

The carefree 5-year-old scooted to the end of the path before turning around impatiently to look for her dad. She spotted him in the distance, strolling leisurely toward her.

She never even considered waiting. Instead, Constanza threw down her scooter and made a beeline toward the play structure on the other side of the park.

Valeri, 28, calmly followed her, reaching the playground just as Constanza was now concentrated on climbing a rope ladder. He pulled her into his arms and lifted her above his head as she giggled blissfully.

There in the Pearl District park no one bothered the Portland Timbers icon and emerging MLS star as he enjoyed the peaceful day with his daughter.

In that moment, he was just another Portland parent blending in with the other families nearby.

It was almost easy to forget that just two years ago, Valeri was living in his native country of Argentina competing for his hometown club Lanús for a ninth season. Back then, he had never heard of Portland and had only traveled to the United States once, for less than a week. In reality, Valeri and his family may never have left their home country if they hadn't begun to question their safety.

They came to Portland looking for a safe harbor.

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Like most children in Argentina, Valeri grew up playing soccer as a rite of passage in his birthplace of Lanús, just south of Buenos Aires.

He followed in the footsteps of his father, Luis, who also had been a talented player, but who had been coaxed by his own father to become a farmer, and later the owner of a shoe factory, rather than pursue a career in the sport.

When Valeri was 9, his mother, Monica, who had played tennis for Argentine sports club Lanús, decided to take her talented son to a tryout for the hometown team.

He made the squad, and from there his childhood became intertwined with the soccer club. He played at the amateur level for Lanús for five years before moving up to the reserve team.

Then, when Valeri was 17, Lanús coach Miguel Ángel Brindisi told him he was ready to make the jump to the professional level. The teenager made his debut for the first team in September 2003 as Lanús drew 1-1 with Vélez Sársfield.

From there, Valeri struggled to break into the first team. He would get opportunities in the starting lineup, only to find himself quickly relegated back to the bench. But the challenges only helped Valeri grow up faster and work harder to succeed.

"Playing for Lanús my whole life helped me a lot," Valeri said. "It's hard to find that in soccer because most of the time you are moving and you are finding new teams. I had more time to learn because I could make a mistake and I had time to grow after that."

Valeri and his teammates matured on the field together. He competed with some of the same players from the age of 9 to 25. In 2007, Valeri had a breakout season, scoring eight goals in 26 matches, and helped lead Lanús to the Apertura tournament title, the club's first ever Primera División championship.

That same year, Valeri got married.

"We met when we were little children; we both were around 7 years old," said Valeri's wife, Florencia. "We always knew we would end up together and with a family."

In the beginning, Florencia would attend Valeri's matches, watching from the stands. But when Constanza was born, the family didn't feel like it was safe to bring their baby girl to the games. After a while, the notoriously rowdy and violent crowds led Florencia to stop attending matches as well.

In 2009, the family began to think about the possibility of leaving Argentina permanently. Valeri went on loan to Portugal for one season and won the Portuguese Cup with Porto. He then spent the next six months on loan with UD Almería in Spain.

But in 2011, Valeri returned to his hometown to rejoin Lanús.

"For me, (Lanús) was my second home," Valeri said. "It was part of my identity."

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In October 2012, Valeri, Florencia and 3-year-old Constanza drove to a family friend's house near their home in Argentina in their BMW X1. They planned to celebrate their friend's birthday.

They pulled up to the house just after midnight.

As Valeri turned off his engine and stepped outside, another car pulled up quickly in front of the BMW. Four men burst out of the car.

Florencia ran for the house holding Constanza in her arms, but before Valeri could make a move, the men descended on him. One of them pulled out a gun and held it against Valeri's throat. It was at that moment, Valeri believes, they recognized him for the first time.

Valeri stood petrified in the sinister darkness as the men tried to figure out what they could steal from the pro athlete. They took his wallet and cell phone, and made him hand over some of his clothes. They stole his car keys and then drove away in his BMW.

"In all countries, criminals exist, but the violence in Argentina is the worst thing," Valeri said. "To get maybe a backpack or a bicycle, they can kill you."

Valeri ultimately recovered his car, but it was not so easy for the family to forget about the robbery. The disturbing incident left its mark.

Shortly after, Valeri reached out to his agent with a sense of urgency and told him he wanted to look for a new home.

"That was a big reason why we decided to leave Argentina," Valeri said. "I talked with my wife and we decided if the opportunity was there, we would leave the country."

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The Timbers were nearing the end of a highly disappointing 2012 season when Timbers general manager Gavin Wilkinson received a call from Valeri's agent.

Wilkinson and the Timbers had been aware of Valeri for nearly six months, but up until that point they didn't think they would be able to negotiate a deal to sign the highly coveted player.

So, Wilkinson listened with keen interest as Valeri's agent told him, "He's available. We can make it happen."

"Portland called (Diego) at a sensitive moment for our family, just after the robbery," Florencia said. "We needed something quieter, especially for our daughter."

At the beginning of November, Wilkinson sat in the stands at a large stadium in Buenos Aires, with a notepad and pen, as he watched Valeri compete for Lanús.

"The speed at which he plays the game mentally is remarkable," Wilkinson said. "He's a decent athlete. He competes well, but what separates him is how quickly he settles the ball, how crisp his passing is and how quickly he sees runners and sees holes within the game and utilizes those holes."

With new head coach Caleb Porter at the helm the Timbers were in the process of overhauling their roster. Porter knew the team would need to bring in a creative No. 10, who could be a valuable playmaker on offense, but also a hardworking competitor on defense.

Porter and his staff sat down to watch more than 20 of Valeri's games on tape before deciding that he would be a good fit. But what ultimately sold Porter and the Timbers on Valeri were his work ethic and humble personality.

"His heart was in the right place," Wilkinson said. "His mind was in the right place. He was making the transition for the right reason."

Valeri was intrigued by the Timbers and set on making the move to the United States, but he was still deliberate in his decision. Before agreeing to make the move, Valeri spoke with Real Salt Lake midfielder Javier Morales for more than an hour over the phone.

Morales and Valeri had played together for just six months at Lanús in 2003 when Valeri was just breaking into the professional ranks, but Valeri was intent on learning more about the United States from his fellow countryman.

They talked briefly about Major League Soccer and the growth of the up-and-coming league. But mostly, the two Argentines spoke about life outside soccer.

"Soccer is a lifestyle for us, but it's just a game," Morales said. "We come from Argentina. It's very different there. There's a lot of pressure and crazy things happening around soccer. I told him, 'Here you just have to focus on playing soccer and you don't have to worry about things going on outside of that.'"

Right before Christmas, Valeri finally made his decision.

"The fact that he wanted to come to Portland and the family was a big reason for it, if anything puts more pressure on him to be successful," Wilkinson said. "He's not only coming here to wear the Timbers logo and represent the Timbers in the most professional way and the most successful way possible, but he's also representing his family."

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Valeri introduced himself to Portland in a big way just 14 minutes into his first game.

With the Timbers down 1-0 to the New York Red Bulls in their 2013 home opener, the midfielder displayed some impressive footwork to juggle the ball into the box before calmly tapping it into the corner of the net. Portland would come back to earn a gutsy 3-3 draw with New York.

"You can see the way that he plays that he's a smart guy," Porter said. "He sees things that nobody else sees. Everything just seems to slow down when the ball is at his foot. There are passes he pulls off that I never even saw coming."

Valeri's flair has driven Portland's success over the last two years. Whether it's scoring goals, delivering assists or setting up plays, Valeri's artistry has become synonymous with the Timbers' creative offensive style.

In his first season with Portland, Valeri set an MLS club record with 10 goals and led MLS with 13 assists. This season, Valeri has emerged as one of the best players in the league and has put himself in contention to win the MLS MVP award. Valeri has already set a new MLS club record with 11 goals, has tied the Timbers all-time club record with 14 assists and has lit up the highlight reel with three MLS Goals of the Week.

His teammates and coaches are just as quick to praise Valeri's kindness off the field, as they are to compliment his athletic ability. They even jokingly call him "Saint Valeri."

"He's an example on the field and he's an example off the field," Timbers owner Merritt Paulson said. "He's just a great human being and a good person."

Despite his success with the Timbers, Valeri remains a soft-spoken and humble hard worker. He still considers himself relatively new to the United States and doesn't try to take a leadership role in the locker room. Still, he garners immense respect and admiration from his teammates.

"He's a great player," Timbers forward Fanendo Adi said. "Playing alongside him has helped me a lot."

Just like he is dedicated to continuously refining his game on the field, Valeri has embraced intellectual growth off the field. He often uniquely spends plane rides quietly reading theology.

"I just believe thinking is good," Valeri said. "My mom says that you play like you live. If you live like a good person, then you'll be a good person on the field. If you live lazy, then you will be lazy on the field."

But Valeri believes that hard work and talent aren't the only reasons he has thrived on the field in Portland.

After less than two years in the U.S., Valeri and his family have already grown to embrace Portland as their home.

"On the field and outside the field, I'm feeling good," Valeri said. "I'm feeling happy here. That gives you energy."

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Back at the Fields Neighborhood Park, Valeri seamlessly switches between English and Spanish when he calls out to his daughter.

"Connie, ven acá. Connie, come here."

Valeri studied a little German in high school, while Florencia studied Portuguese. When they decided to make the move to Portland, the couple could barely speak even basic English.

But they never saw Portland as just a stop along the way, so the family put an immediate emphasis on immersing themselves in the language. Valeri had been studying English for six months before arriving in Portland, in hopes of making the move to a team in America. And during his first season here, Valeri met with an English tutor provided by the Timbers three times each week.

Now, the tutor will come to Valeri's home in the Pearl District once or twice a week to work with Valeri and Florencia. She used to teach Constanza, too, but with the 5-year-old now enrolled in school, she no longer needs much help learning English.

For Valeri, it was imperative to learn English as part of his commitment to forming a life and playing soccer in the United States.

"He really wants to be here," Porter said. "He wants to be here long-term. We've got him in his prime and he's not going anywhere. We want to keep him around and he wants to stay."

Valeri and Florencia's parents are still back in Argentina, and it's often stressful not being able to easily visit their family.

But, in the park, Valeri is just focused on Constanza. Watching his daughter's carefree play, Valeri knows he made the right decision coming to Portland.

"I'm glad because she's glad," Valeri said. "I'm glad because she can walk and she can ride a bike in the street."

This year, Valeri and Florencia began to talk seriously about putting down roots. They've watched Constanza make friends and easily adjust to Portland, and the family has grown to love the uniquely laid-back and welcoming environment in the Rose City.

"This place hasn't stopped surprising us since the moment we got here," Florencia said. "Living here is really fantastic. We are very thankful and happy. Portland is becoming our home."

Now, when they think about the future, it includes Portland.

"We love Portland," Valeri said. "We think we'll live in Portland after I retire because this is a great city. We have lived in Spain, Portugal, Argentina, but for me, it's the best city. We have traveled a lot in the USA and we have seen other places. There are really nice places, but Portland is unique."

And Diego Valeri is uniquely suited to Portland.

-- **Jamie Goldberg** | @jamielgoldberg