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Writing Portfolio

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trim 2014

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Self published on *Medium.com*

This article was written for the second issue of trim magazine, published in May 2014. It is a short profile of the photographer, Joni Sternbach, who captured the issue's cover photo.

"Perspectives"

For Joni Sternbach the ocean is more than a vast body of saltwater sitting on top of the earth's crust; it is the embodiment of revival. She calls it the most emotional landscape on earth and she is drawn to the coast where the surging surf meets the impressionable beach sands. It is no wonder that she is also drawn to surfers, the living connection between the water and the earth.

"Returning year after year to the same location has led me to examine the juncture between land and sea, exploring subject matter in a constant state of transition. Surfers are an integral part of this liminal state. I am fascinated by the physical and poetic way that they inhabit America's watery landscapes."

Sternbach's photography transcends typical ocean scenery with her blend of a unique medium and captivating subject matter. She uses an instantaneous wet-plate collodion process to capture portraits of surfers and create one-of-a-kind tintypes that harken back to the mid-nineteenth century. Her photographs are ancient memories reflected in the bodies and landscapes of our contemporary world.

She remembers her first introduction to the wet-plate technique as a life changing moment.

"So beautiful. So immediate. So primal. Very raw and engaging. I felt a connection to our photographic forefathers."

The same description could be used for the surfboard in her photograph. Shaped by Duke Kahanamoku for Gerald Vultee, it stands solitary and timeless in the sand. The raw wood grain is magnified by the raw nature of the collodion print and, just like Duke, the board becomes a monument to the past, a warden of the present, and a shepherd for the future.

This is a travel article self-published on Medium.com. It describes my experience during Brazil's heartbreaking loss to Germany in the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

"Anatomy of a World Cup hangover"

Mariana's nose wrinkled as she pushed the plastic cup away.

"Muito forte," she said.

Bruna took a sip of hers and coughed.

"Is it too strong for you too?" I asked.

She smiled, "It tastes like a hangover."

I grabbed Mariana's rejected caipirinha. The sweet and sour of the sugary lime juice mixed in my nostrils with the aroma of cachaça. The sugarcane spirit had been poured with a heavy hand.

As I took my first sip I heard the introductory notes of the Brazilian national anthem which is so long that FIFA cuts off the sound halfway through. But the Brazilians don't mind. They belt out the whole thing anyway, on the field, on the stands, in the bars, and in their homes.

None of us knew it at the time, but this moment of pride was Brazil's *saideira*, the nightcap to their World Cup revelry.

Germany's first goal was greeted by nothing. Only 11 minutes had passed since the kickoff and most of us were still deciding between the French fries and fried polenta. The second was greeted by gaping mouths and the third by shouts of anger.

"You only lost by 1 goal and your team sucks. How is this happening?" Bruna was more than scowling as she shook my shoulder.

I couldn't explain it. I was in so much shock that I even stopped yelling #forçaneymar at the TV. There was no more joy in teasing Brazilians for their passion, especially as I watched it begin to turn against them.

The sky darkened with our moods. The sun literally set on Brazil's defeat. Ironically, the darkness made the television brighter as the fourth and fifth "Fuck you"s

created ripples in the back of the net. By this time, the Brazilians at the bar were cheering for the German goals.

The beginning of the second half was a non event. The men had turned their attention to the women and nobody near me was even watching.

Sixth goal.

Victor waved at me and spun his thumbs around, suggesting we go home and play soccer video games instead.

Mamá was the only one in the bar with a genuine smile on her face. Brazil's loss meant she would get to watch them play on Saturday in Brasilia.

Seventh goal.

Zapa asked the staff if they might consider flipping the channel to a music station, moving the tables, and change to a dancing club. They laughed. Her expression remained sincere.

Brazil scored. It was barely noticed. Everyone was too busy saying, "I knew this was going to happen."

Zapa is now trying to start a new movement. She is sure it won't be difficult to rally support, maybe even more than the dwindling World Cup protests have managed to stir up. It is a campaign to convince FIFA to declare that Brazil's third place consolation game will be the new World Cup final.

The entire night I could feel the eyes on me. *He's the American, probably even part alemão. Does he care that we are being humiliated? Is he happy? Did he wish it on us?*

They told me that when they lose they want to fight. I exaggerated my depressed face and sank slowly into a fresh caipirinha.

Ahhh the morning after. Bruna's prophesy has manifested. Welcome, nausea, to the wasteland of broken dreams. Yes, you may as well bring your friend headache along too.

But this hangover is more than just a physical reaction. The commute to work is the walk of shame. Conversations with family, friends and coworkers carefully dance around the embarrassing events of the night before. The game may be talked about, but only in skirting tangents. It is never mentioned specifically.

All symbols of national pride have been hidden away in shame. The clotheslines strung across the street corners that were hung with Brazilian soccer shirts and scarves have disappeared. The men selling Brazilian flags at stop lights, the kind that roll up in the windows, are no longer there. Actually, the flags have already been removed from the cars on the street as well.

But probably the newspaper was the harshest symptom of all. The almighty Globo waxes poetic without sensitivity.

These are the ones that failed us! Mere mortals we took for gods delivered humiliation to our soil. We will take our pound of flesh by staining all media of media with your chagrin.

The front page is plastered with the tear-stained faces of Brazilian soccer players, hanging their heads in self-disgust.

American soccer fans don't know what heartbreak is.

We were ready for our fate. We even found a touch of pride in our loss. Our hopes were always anchored in the clouds and we knew it. We will watch the rest of the Cup and enjoy it for what it is.

Brazil's hopes, however, were buried under the stadiums that built with their sweat and blood. And they sprouted from the soil, twisted with the grassroots of each pitch that was played upon. When Brazil invited the whole of the world to visit, they bared their soul. Imagine the pain when it was trampled by those 22 spiked German feet.

So where can this country find a World Cup hangover cure? They won't find solace in the third place game, there is no glory in consolation. A Bloody Mary mix of their humiliators being slaughtered in the finals won't help either; the Germans will be playing Argentina, Brazil's most bitter rival.

No, they will need a hair-of-the-dog cure, much like the cachaça pumped caipirinha I just finished. It won't be until the Russian World Cup, four long years from now, that Brazil will finally have a chance at redemption and, hopefully, a bit of relief.

This article is a write up on the fifty-four hour entrepreneurial event Start Up Weekend Honolulu. It was written for the first issue of Summit Magazine.

“Pitches and Programming in Startup Weekend Honolulu”

As I enter The Box Jelly, I run into a wall of people. Rechung Fujihira’s normally quiet coworking space is loud and packed with people. The areas where you would expect to find desks and chairs and computers are now crowded shoulder-to-shoulder by over 100 developers, designers, entrepreneurs and observers.

Honolulu’s entrepreneur community is motley bunch. Everyone is dressed for a different occasion, wearing anything from aloha shirts to sleeveless hoodies. But, much more importantly, it is a community that is growing by leaps and bounds.

“Danielle Sherman brought Startup Weekend out here [in 2011] and it just changed the game,” said Bryan Butteling, organizer of this year’s Startup Weekend Honolulu. “The first batch we had like thirty people, then it grew to like 50, and now we’re having events where it’s like 80 to over 100 people coming out here.”

That isn’t to say, however, that you must be an entrepreneur to participate in the whirlwind fifty-four hours that is Startup Weekend. In fact, most of the people I talk to have a regular day job. Take Anze Znidarsic for example. He works for UI Evolution as a developer during the week, but he plans on spending this entire weekend helping a team of strangers develop a brand new business.

Over the din of networking, Butteling announces that dinner is being served. But the slew of last minute registrations means the pre-ordered pizza boxes will soon be empty, even after an emergency call to Papa John’s. The first keg of beer was drained before they even started to serve the food.

Thirty minutes later the event “facilitator” Andy Sparks grabs the microphone. Sparks, a cofounder of Mattermark and a Startup Weekend specialist, was flown in from San Francisco to ensure that the event runs properly. He begins to set the ground rules.

Startup Weekend is a non-profit organization based out of Seattle, Washington. They have held events in over 100 different countries. On this same weekend there are 12 other Startup Weekends happening across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. There is even one in Kuwait.

According to Startup Weekend’s website, the mechanics of the event are simple:

All Startup Weekend events follow the same basic model: anyone is welcome to pitch their startup idea and receive feedback from their peers. Teams organically form around the top ideas (as determined by popular vote) and then it's a 54 hour frenzy of business model creation, coding, designing, and market validation. The weekends culminate with presentations in front of local entrepreneurial leaders with another opportunity for critical feedback.

According to Sparks, the official judging criteria evaluates execution, business strategy, and user experience. But, in the end, each judge has their own predilections. Judge Eric Nakagawa's philosophy is a mix of abstract and concrete: "I'm gonna be looking for a couple things, something that tells a really good story [...] next after that, it's gonna be how far along technically they've gotten," he said.

Sparks then launches into an icebreaker which is really a clever ruse to teach participants the proper formula to use while pitching their startup idea: state your name, the problem, your solution, and your needs. It also warms the crowd to the launch of the competition, business pitches.

Then we hear thirty-ish startup pitches—only the top twelve will be used. One entrepreneur wants to turn the skills of video gamers into competitive job resumes, another gives a very vague pitch about a new marijuana startup that is interrupted by cries of "What do you need? Testers?"

Unimpressed by the ideas he has heard so far, Znidarsic takes the microphone and pitches an idea that has been percolating in the back of his mind. It is an app that will help roommates organize household chores. He calls it Tidy Panda.

Even University of Hawaii student Amanda Nelson, who told me earlier she had no intention of pitching any ideas, gets caught up in the excitement. "When I found out it was just sixty seconds of talking I was like 'what the heck, I gotta do this,'" she said. So she formulates a business idea that aligns with her passion for elementary education and pitches the hell out of it.

After the pitches, Znidarsic is approached by three participants, all of whom he adds to his team. "I accepted everyone who wanted to join. I think I shouldn't judge. It's startup weekend. It should be open-minded. I think any help on the team is helpful," he said.

The four members of Tidy Panda immediately begin making vital decisions about the app. Should they market to college students or to parents? How will the app make money? If a roommate doesn't do their chores how will they be punished?

“Maybe it will post ‘I was a dirty girl this week’ to their Facebook page,” Znidarsic suggests and the table erupts in laughter.

On Saturday afternoon, The Box Jelly is much quieter than the night before. White construction paper sheets covered with mind maps, to-do lists, drawings and doodles stretch across at least fifty percent of The Box Jelly’s surfaces.

It is lunch, but between mouthfuls of spring rolls the teams continue to discuss their projects. I watch the Tidy Panda team draw mock ups for the screens in their app and debate which of their brainstormed features to include and which to trash.

I ask them how their night went. It was fine; they left Box Jelly around midnight. Were they planning on working late tonight? No, tonight they are going to Znidarsic’s house to have a party. I guess not all the teams feel the pressure of fifty-four hours.

The Sunday night venue for the final presentations is a large warehouse off Cooke Street in Kaka’ako. This time, there is more than enough room for the crowd of at least 150 to swing their elbows, though many still have to stand. There is a stage front and center with a projector splashing huge PowerPoint slides on the wall behind. It is here that each team gives a final presentation to the panel of six judges.

Traditionally, the teams are given five minutes to impress the judges; however, today that time gets cut by forty percent. It is a major disadvantage for the Tidy Panda team who has a live demo of their app. They aren’t able to complete their presentation within the three short minutes they are given.

“We had had some funny ideas to put in there, but we kind of ran out of time to even put it in the presentation,” Znidarsic said. Despite the hitch, Tidy Panda garner enough respect from the judges to earn an Honorable Mention.

Third place is given to the Bitcoin wallet startup Karat. Second place goes to nameHUB, a social network designed around sharing, selling, and collaborating with domain names.

The first place prize—a \$500 credit for the ride-sharing service Uber—goes to Green Apple, a website that will enable school teachers to crowdfund their classroom supplies from parents and other benefactors. It isn’t much of a surprise; the team won the popular vote conducted on livesift.com a few minutes before.

If Amanda Nelson is sad that her startup idea Superhero Factory didn't place, she doesn't show it. Even after fifty-four intense hours she is chipper and beaming. She is still wearing her t-shirt cape and exuding the same intensity and passion for her cause as she did in her Friday night pitch.

She has nothing but enthusiastic words for Green Apple, "I loved that the team that won was based on education." Then she offers a prophesy that perfectly encapsulates the purpose behind Startup Weekend, "I think [Green Apple's success] will transcend into the community."

Expect big things from the entrepreneurship community in Honolulu.

This is an article written for The Hawaii Independent offering a first-person perspective on the protests occurring across Brazil.

“The true cost of the World Cup”

I lost my voice in Rio. I didn't lose it in the chorus of one hundred thousand voices singing songs of national pride and hope for a better future. I didn't lose it in the streets while pumping my fist in the air and chanting demands from the powers that be. I didn't even lose it while choking on the tear gas that erupted from the hot canisters that rolled on the ground and filled the air around me.

When I returned to my rented room, I turned on the Brazilian news. I wanted a third person view; to see the historic protest I had just experienced up close through a wide-angle lens. Instead I saw a gang of impudent youths, beers in hand, telling a reporter that the protest was a fantastic party.

I was in shock. How many interviews had the reporter conducted before he found these hooligans? Where were the songs and the signs, the passion and the pride? How could one hundred thousand voices be so casually silenced?

That is when I lost my voice. I lost it yelling at that negligent reporter, trying to tell him that he was wrong.

June 18, 2014 – Argentina Square, Porto Alegre

Exactly one year since the protest in Rio, I'm standing in the center of Porto Alegre, a metropolitan city near the southern tip of Brazil. Over the past 365 days, a social movement has continued to pulse through Brazilian society. The first wave took the form of a protest against rising transportation costs. As the protests gained traction, activists used the opportunity to call for social reform. The protesters began demanding education reform, an improved healthcare system and the end of privatization of public services.

The newest swell is a campaign against the World Cup, an international soccer tournament currently running within Brazil's borders. The change in focus has been accompanied by a significant shift within the ranks of the movement. The small group of 150 people milling about Argentina Square, sharing pens, cardboard and other poster making materials, is a far cry from the thousands of zealots that attended the 2013 protests.

The justifications given for such poor protest attendance are peripheral. Many of the protesters are students who have obligations to school and work; nobody can afford to take three months off to “Occupy Wall Street.” In addition, the political parties that had been sounding their trumpets and encouraging the call to arms have suddenly tiptoed to the sidelines. Apparently the violence and riots that often follow huge protests are bad press, and this is an election year.

The *unspoken* reason for the decline in attendance, however, is more uncomfortable. As recently as April and May, there were marches against the World Cup that boasted 10,000 strong—especially in World Cup host cities like Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre. But as soon as the first ball of the World Cup was kicked, the protests shriveled in size. Thousands of zealous Brazilian activists retired their gas masks in favor of the green and yellow jerseys of Brazil’s national team.

Those who remain are the true revolutionaries. They stand under the trees in Argentina Square, pitted against Brazil’s favorite past time. It is a paradoxically patriotic yet un-Brazilian stance to take. At noon the group assembles. They briefly discuss their plan and then step out into the brisk, winter sunlight. One woman holds her cardboard sign above the rest. It reads, “FUCK FIFA.”

FIFA, a company with a reputation shrouded by shady business practices and accusations of corruption and bribery, is an easy target. Sure FIFA pockets every cent of the sponsorship deals, ticket sales, licensed merchandise and television rights associated with the World Cup. And yes it demands tax-exemption from everywhere it conducts business. But it was the Brazilian government who invited FIFA in and it was the Brazilian government who promised to spend billions of public dollars to prepare for the tournament.

“In a few days the World Cup will end, but the Brazilian population will pay for it for a long time,” said Gabriela Féres, a journalism student who has been a loyal Porto Alegre protest attendee for almost two years. Her words echo the concerns of the movement. The fleeting bliss of the Cup does not outweigh the burden on the Brazilian people.

From a financial standpoint, the argument is difficult to disagree with. In all, the government officially dropped a cool \$11.3 billion on World Cup preparations—although it isn’t hard to find economists who theorize that the amount was actually much more. Almost one third of that money was spent on the stadiums—both new and refurbished—which was over budget, but stadium preparation was the priority.

Several of these stadiums have no long term value. Take Manaus for example; a city so deeply buried in the Amazon rainforest that building materials had to be brought in by boat is now home to a \$350 million stadium. After just four World Cup uses, it will probably never be filled again.

The rest of the money was put into infrastructure such as highways, public transit systems and airports; a supposed investment in the future. But, since the burden of the stadiums cut into the cash flow, several projects initially included in Brazil's World Cup bid—such as Latin America's very first bullet train—never made it past the “let's do this” phase.

Up to this point, only half of the infrastructure additions promised by Brazil's government have been finished. Corridors in Galeão International Airport in Rio are lined with plywood panels to hide evidence of unfinished construction. Around the country, light rail tracks leading to nowhere stand alongside highways with graveled lanes that may never be opened.

I think most Brazilians find it easy to forgive their government for a little splurge. \$11 billion is minuscule in comparison to the \$385.4 billion it spent on social programs over the same period of time. When we're talking about the great Brazilian past-time, will anyone really sweat the few extra billion?

Of course, most “progress” comes at a price that can't be quantified in government ledgers. A street called Avenida Tronco has been a part of Porto Alegre's city master plan since the 1950s, but has never been completed. After Brazil won the World Cup bid, the city finally had the motivation and the federal funds to finish it. But in the 60 or so years since the street was planned, seven different neighborhoods housing almost 1,500 families had sprung up in its proposed path. The fact that the avenue's planned path went straight through these neighborhoods made no difference to the Brazilian government, which was perfectly content to relocate all of them.

“Most of these displacements are done in benefit of a small group with economical potential,” said Féres, who points out that not only has the World Cup led to elitism in soccer (those within a penalty kick's distance of the poverty line can only dream of attending the expensive games), but it has also exacerbated the difficult living conditions of Brazil's impoverished.

Féres created a short documentary called *The Foreigners of Vila Tronco*, which focuses on one of the neighborhoods from which families were relocated to build the Avenida Tronco. Within a handful of interviews, Féres picks apart the

government's relocation process. Resident after resident describes the ways in which the government has failed to provide indemnity to the evicted and how many of them are now stranded in the cold Porto Alegre winter.

It is possible that most Brazilians have also forgiven the poor treatment of their neighbors at the government's hands. The country has enjoyed recent success in its fight against poverty. The poverty line has sunk to include just 18.6 percent of the population, down from 38 percent of the population a mere 10 years ago.

It is more likely, however, that many citizens simply have no idea what is happening. Brazil used the money left over from the new stadiums (and the somewhat-improved infrastructure) to invest heavily in World Cup security and protest suppression.

"When [a World Cup game] is in the city, they close all the streets the protesters could possibly go, they trap it and don't let the protest move. Doesn't seem like a democracy," explained Féres.

The word "trap" is no exaggeration. As the protesters step onto the street and begin their march, they see a thin line of caution tape strung across the street, not even a soccer field's distance away. A wall of police in full riot gear stands just behind.

It's like attacking the walls of Troy with a handful of pebbles. As soon as the line of tape is breached, gas grenades drop into the crowd and the protest is scattered. A few fight through the stinging tears and regroup, but no matter which street they turn down, they only find more riot police; grenade cannons cocked, bearing down against them.

In a matter of minutes, the street is bare and silent, save only the hissing of the gas still leaking from the canisters. As the haze drifts away, it takes the muffled, choking chants along with it.

June 23rd – City Hall, Porto Alegre

Five days later the protesters gather again, chanting the slogan, "We are in the street again." Once again, there are less than 200 people present, but their hope is not anchored in numbers.

"Most of all, the protesters want to be heard, want people to see the problems, and want to participate in the construction of the society," said Féres.

But besides the occasional favela uprising and the story about the two CNN employees who were injured by gas grenades, international journalists have moved on. Locally, the news has whittled its coverage down to general, weekly statistics at the very most—this many were arrested, this many were injured and this many were killed. The protesters blame Globo.

Globo Organization—the largest mass media conglomerate in Latin America—maintains virtual monopolies on broadcast television, newspaper and radio media. Rede Globo, its television subsidiary, reaches 99.5 percent of the Brazilian population. It has such hegemony that most Brazilian households don't even change the channel on their T.V. Of course, even if they did, they would probably land on one of the other 30 channels owned by Globo.

“All the media in Brazil is under the possession of 11 families. It's not democratized,” explained Féres. This is the piece of the puzzle I was missing back in 2013 when I was screaming at the T.V. It explains why the news station made such a mess of their report about the Rio protest.

Globo has interests in the government, the transportation sector and, of course, the World Cup, all of which are targets of the recent protests. Rumor has it that despite its 10 international Emmys, the conglomerate reports the news with less-than-strict adherence to the Journalism Code of Ethics.

“They feed only their own interests,” Féres warned. “And, as the media is always discredited in protests, they criminalize protests.”

Féres alleges that when it can, Globo completely ignores the protests. But, when the protests become as large and violent as they did in 2013, journalists either report superficially or they demonize the protesters and discredit their cause. As a result, the millions of Brazilians who watch and trust Globo news have probably never heard the full story.

“People think they can see the reality through television, and the television criminalizes the protests, so people are afraid and angry at protesters, without really understanding [them]” said Féres.

That is why protesters today have taken exception to the power of the media, with special focus on Grupo Rede Brasil Sul (RBS), southern Brasil's local Globo affiliate. The demonstrators fling accusations heavy with Orwellian hyperbole which, when a single television station has such command over the population (not to mention

one of its most popular shows is actually called Big Brother), becomes appropriate. Seven people carry a banner that spans the entire street and reads, “RBS... yesterday an accomplice of the dictatorship, today a partner of the transportation mafia.”

Since there is no World Cup game in Porto Alegre today and the streets are void of tourists, the protesters are allowed to flaunt their signs and march unmolested through the streets of downtown. The police remain quiet on sidewalks—though they still outnumber the protesters five to one—and not once will they unleash their gas canisters.

Besides a few stragglers, there aren't many people to witness the protest wind its way through the main streets of downtown Porto Alegre. It is Brazil's final game in the group stage of the tournament, an event with real and immediate consequences. If their team loses, the country will have nothing in front of them except a terribly large bill.

But the protest continues, whether the rest of the country is listening or not. These are people who will never lose their voice.

A blog post from a travel series about my time in Brazil. The series was published for *INh*, an online magazine based in Honolulu, Hawaii.

“How to drink tea like a Brazilian”

I stared down at the light-brown gourd. The bottom half of a metal straw was jammed into the water-soaked, grass-green mixture inside and the top half curved about five inches into the air above the rim of the gourd. The whole contraption looked like a magical pipe, something that the caterpillar from *Alice in Wonderland* might have puffed on between his curt remarks.

But instead of magic, my mouth was filled with near-boiling, earthy tea. And after just three sips my tongue was having a mass funeral for several thousand taste buds.

My mind was filled with panic, “Will I be able to taste the Brazilian barbecue with a mouth full of second degree burn blisters?”

A few minutes before, I watched Beatriz Zaparoli carefully compose the drink. First, she filled two-thirds of the gourd with a finely ground mix of dried yerba mate stems and leaves. Then, holding the gourd horizontally—with one hand covering the bottom half of the mouth to keep the yerba mate in—Beatriz soaked the organic mixture with lava-hot water. When she turned the gourd right-side up, the tea was glued to the side wall. She filled the remaining space with more lava-hot water and jammed the round, sieve-like end of the metal straw into the bottom.

“Quer um?” she asked me.

Yes, I wanted one. We had been eating *pinhão*, the pine nut that grows on the Dr. Seuss-esque candelabra tree, and I needed something to wash the nutty, rubbery remains out of my mouth. It was a painful choice.

The super-heated brew of yerba mate tea she handed me is called *chimarrão* (pronounced sheema-hoe) by the Brazilians, but most people know it as *maté*. *Maté* is a regional beverage, traditionally drunk by the cattle herding *gaúchos* of southern South America.

Paraguayans, Uruguayans, and Argentinians have their own versions of *chimarrão*, each with distinct qualities. Paraguayans drink with cold water, or sometimes even juice. Argentineans use a rougher, more bitter mix of the tea leaves and show little care in the manufacture of the drink. Uruguayans are known to take their gourd and a small thermos everywhere they go, loving to drink *maté* alone.

For the residents of Rio Grande do Sul—the only state of Brazil that drinks *chimarrão*—the other countries’ attempts to prepare yerba mate are unacceptable. They will tell you *chimarrão* only tastes good if you use their finely ground, powdery tea mix. And the added water must be at a temperature so hot the metal straw is in danger of melting.

But most importantly, drinking *chimarrão* is a social event. Anywhere people are gathered—work, school, parks, the beach—you are sure to find a group drinking passing a the drink around. Each person drinks one gourd-full then hands it to the next friend, family member, or stranger. The same batch of yerba mate is rebrewed over and over again until either everyone gets tired of drinking it, or they just get too lazy to heat another batch of water.

As I ran my tongue along the edge of my teeth, searching in vain for an undamaged nerve, I noticed that everyone in the room was staring at me.

“*Deu?*” Joanielso, Beatriz’s husband, asked.

He was curious what was taking me so long; why hadn’t I handed the *chimarrão* to him already? These Brazilians with their mouths of steel usually guzzle down the piping hot tea in less than a minute. I was taking considerably longer and everyone was waiting anxiously for their turn.

Embarrassed by my wimpy mouth, I struggled to finish the drink as quickly as possible. It wasn’t as difficult as my first sip since I had destroyed as many pain receptors as taste buds. When the water level reached the bottom of the straw, I exaggerated the slurping noise. Brows were unfurrowed and the smiles returned. Everyone knew their turn with the *chimarrão* was a little bit closer and I was left alone to nurse my blistering tongue.

Oh well, at least I pumped myself full of enough caffeine to stay awake until dinner time.

This is a self-published work on Medium.com that I've accepted into the "ESPN FC Kick Stories" collection. The article answered the prompt: Is Major League Soccer a positive or negative influence on the U.S.'s chance to win the World Cup?

"The proof is in the passion"

My earliest World Cup memory reaches back to 1994, when I watched the Americans climb gloriously over a huge pile of doubts into the rather inglorious round of 16.

It is such a clear image in my mind: sitting cross-legged in front of the television, completely captivated by Alexi Lalas's majestic orange mane, laughing with delight at the dreadlocks dancing on top of young Cobi Jones, and marveling at the beauty of Marcelo Balboa's bicycle kick, a moment which still causes me to clench my hands in anticipation as I watch the ball fly across my memory toward the Colombian goal.

It was then—as a six-year-old boy who barely understood the offside rule and who thought a "nine" was simply the number on John Harkes's jersey—that I first felt the conviction that the U.S. would someday win the World Cup. I suppose it was a mix between childhood confidence and ingrained nationalistic arrogance.

But now—as an adult—I understand the role of the number nine as a position on the field and I can clearly explain the offside rule with a well-rehearsed sixty second spiel. However, I have yet to let go of that early, unshakable faith that my country would someday win the Cup. I don't think the reasons have changed.

Unlike most Americans, I was raised with a deep-seated passion for soccer. It must have trickled down from my parents who were both raised overseas. I would guess my love for the game is similar to people who were raised in countries that passion for soccer has been woven directly into the culture.

When I traveled through Brazil last summer, it was almost like a homecoming. I remember watching two young Brazilian boys chase a soccer ball around a park. No matter which bystander their errant passes rolled to, the ball was lightly trapped and chipped back with nonchalant skillfulness. Everyone at the park handled the soccer ball as well as most Americans can order a pizza. They were all unassuming, kindred soccer spirits.

It is no surprise that a country like Brazil holds the record of five World Cup titles. They have their nation's entire population to choose from for their national team. And it is that same level of cultural saturation that enables tiny countries to

overpower juggernaut nations (with ten or more times the population) on the field. Imagine if Americans felt the same way about soccer. Do you doubt that we would be unstoppable?

Honestly though, I doubt the U.S. will probably ever be so devoted to a single athletic discipline. But luckily, I don't think we even need soccer to be the dominant sport in our country in order to win the World Cup. We only need enough devotion to the sport to show the youth of our nation that soccer is not only a valid pursuit, but also an attractive one. So how do we develop such an environment?

Well, the World Cup itself is a good start. Every four years it raises a bandwagon of soccer fans with more fervor than Michael Phelps fans after the summer Olympics. Unfortunately, an event that only happens once every four years is hardly good for building a tribe of devoted soccer fans.

We need some longer burning fuel for that brief flare of passion to ignite. European soccer is great, but it takes more time than the average American is willing to invest in order to untangle that mess of tournaments and interconnected leagues, especially when it is happening so many time zones away. Not to mention they don't even have playoffs.

A sustainable passion for soccer must come from a domestic system that fits in with American expectations for competition. Throughout the years we've had plenty of domestic soccer leagues rise and fall. Usually they have waxed and waned in sync with the World Cup tournament. Other times, two leagues have risen together, eventually destroying each other in a battle for soccer hegemony.

Fortunately those patterns were finally broken in 2002 when our team of World Cup heroes made it into the quarter-finals, losing to Germany by a single goal. The fickle fanaticism made its quadrennial pilgrimage into the hearts of American sports enthusiasts, but this time, with more force than ever. A few months later the MLS Cup Final drew its largest crowd ever, and a shrinking league that had hemorrhaged money since its inception was snatched back from the brink of death.

In the 12 years since, soccer in America has enjoyed undeniable growth. Families are choosing to spend those long summer Saturdays at the soccer stadium rather than the baseball diamond. Games both foreign and domestic are getting airtime on television. New clubs representing all levels of skill are popping up across the country. It seems that we finally have a sustainable and accessible soccer passion-producing machine. It is a foundation upon which we can start building a successful national team and it is called Major League Soccer.

I am pretty sure my praise of MLS is not really the popular opinion amongst the soccer “purists.” I often hear that MLS is nothing better than a roadblock to the success of our national team. The league is often criticized for its low level of play. Naysayers argue that our best American prospects are being enticed to snub the elite leagues of Europe and join the sub-par MLS, thereby never reaching the peak of their potential.

Others claim the league is bringing in too many foreign players and losing the chance to nurture a consistent American playing style or camaraderie or whatever. It is a controversy much like England’s prestigious Barclay’s Premiership. 70 percent of the players in England’s top league are foreign, and many blame that statistic for the country’s World Cup woes.

But no matter how much mud the critics smear on MLS, the benefits always prove to outweigh the deficits. Landon Donovan, though he forsook the elite competition of Europe to remain in our local league, has inspired thousands of young soccer fans during his stint at the Galaxy. And if it weren’t for dreamy David Beckham hopping the pond and gracing us with his magical right boot, the majority of Americans probably wouldn’t even know that we have a professional soccer league.

Nothing will diminish the power behind the passion smoldering in the heart of America. The hype and excitement has been compounding on itself. All we need is to have patience and wait for that passion to reach a critical mass. With the growing fan base, investors have begun to pour their money into MLS teams. With the extra money, teams have started to build youth development programs, and are making it easier for homegrown talent to pursue their dreams.

Watch the next few generations—the ones who have grown up with Donovan and Dempsey, who have studied the majesty of Robbie Keane and Thierry Henry, and who have chanted to their team while standing for 90 minutes in cold Cascadia rain—carefully. Soon they will be the Americans leading our nation in the world’s greatest tournament. And it will be them who have been roused by our nation’s growing passion soccer to finally bring home the World Cup.