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Soccer gave FCTB's Pascal Millien the American Dream, now he's using that sport to help Haiti



FCTB's Pascal Millien joins in the schoolyard fun with students from the elementary school, La Redoute in Leogane, Haiti. (Photo: Victoria Lim)



By [Victoria Lim](#), Bright House Sports Network
Last Updated: Thursday, April 7, 2011

3

Leogane, Haiti -- Pascal Millien remembers playing soccer for teams he didn't know – for food.

Millien remembers sleeping on the roofs of his friends' homes after his father kicked him out of the house for defying his demand to forget about soccer.

He remembers running ten miles to practice to make the Haitian national team – then running ten miles home.

He remembers giving up his spot on the national team to stay in the United States, not knowing when – or if – he'd see his family and friends again.

All of this might lead you to believe the midfielder for FC Tampa Bay lives for soccer.

But you'd be wrong.

Millien believes soccer gives him life.

"Without soccer, I wouldn't be here right now," Millien said.

Soccer brought him to this country, but it was his perseverance that compelled those he met to help him stay in U.S.

An international tournament brought a 15-year-old Millien to Charlotte, NC with the Haitian U-15 national team. His father was already living in Winter Haven, Florida and drove up to see his son. He convinced Millien not to return to Haiti with his teammates.

"I didn't know any English back then. What inspired me was a lot of friends said my soccer career is over. You're just going to work in the service industry, in a hotel. I look them in the eye and say 'no. This is not me'," Millien said.

He said he believed then, as he believes now, that education would empower him.

On his first day at Auburndale High School, he recalled sitting in classes not understanding one word spoken by the teacher or his classmates, until math class. A teacher's aide was there to help Spanish-speaking students. As she translated, Millien's ears perked up.

Traveling with the Haitian national team, he visited South America, and picked up Spanish words and phrases.

Piggybacking on other students' translator is how he understood what was happening in class. But watching American TV is how he learned English.

His favorite show: The Jerry Springer Show.

"Seriously! Haitian people like the drama!" Millien said laughing. "I would watch the show with the subtitles, try to read them and repeat what people said."

He was reluctant to speak in school, fearing his accent was too thick. He let his soccer skills speak for him. He scored 114 goals in three seasons for Auburndale.

His play grabbed the attention of then-HC United coach Duke Dunnigan, who recruited Millien to play on the club's Super Y team. He wanted Millien on the team so badly, he would drive back and forth from his home in the Brandon area to Winter Haven to shuttle Millien to practice and games.

"I learned of his struggle, his family background. As it turned out, it was just one of those kinds of things," Dunnigan said. "I took a liking to him. That's where our story began."

The relationship between Dunnigan and Millien went far beyond a coach-player rapport. Dunnigan said he liked Millien's hard work and Christian values. He learned how Millien's biggest fan – his mother – died when he was 10-years-old. Thinking of her still makes him cry today.

Millien and his father had another falling out. So, Dunnigan became a father figure, a stern motivator and upon realizing Millien was in the country illegally, an advocate for Millien to become a legal U.S. citizen.

"I'm a retired marine. I try to take care of people if I can," Dunnigan said. "I saw the potential and the talent he has. I treat him like he's one of my own family at times."

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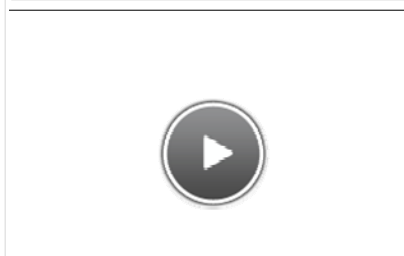
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Forms, petitions, interviews, hearings, documents – for five years, Dunnigan immersed himself in the roller coaster process, driving Millien to government offices and interviews with immigration officers, and finding an attorney who offered his assistance.

It paid off.

"The happiest day of my life was when I got a copy of the INS notification that he'd been approved," Dunnigan said.

During the process, Millien said Dunnigan pushed him to pursue a college education. After a year at Lindsey Wilson College in Kentucky, Millien transferred to the University of Tampa, and played under head coach Adrian Bush.

Millien racked up 79 career points, scoring 25 goals (including 10 game winners) and 29 assists at UT. He's a two-time NCAA Division II All-American.

"He's the kind of guy that money is not a thing of importance but he has a lot of really rich relationships. I think that's something that goes further than if you have a million dollars but who you surround yourself with tells a lot about your character. He's definitely one of those guys and what he's doing is phenomenal," Bush said.

Millien graduated with a Sports Management degree on the same day as FC Tampa Bay's inaugural season home opener last year.

"They help me so much going through everything I've been going through," Millien said of the Dunnigans, Bush and friends from Auburndale. "I had struggles with my family but they pushed me every day. Someone cared for (me), that's the feeling I have to help them kids."

It's that desire to help as he's been helped that compelled Millien to create his Millien Dreams Foundation, an organization that will create a soccer academy in his hometown of Leogane, Haiti. During the pre-season, the team allowed him to return to Haiti for three days to set up the academy, with the help of Score International and Little Feet Sports.

"At certain times, sport becomes secondary," said new FC Tampa Bay head coach Ricky Hill. "It's about social scenarios, social situations, where we can help and...bring a bit of joy to other people's lives."




Millien is hoping donations will help him send the clothes, soccer gear, and food people have contributed for the academy. The majority of the foundation's money comes from his FC Tampa Bay paychecks, Millien said.

"This is the time for me to do something. So if I do something for kids, we hope all of them in life...hope for good in their life," Millien said.

BHSN Reporter Victoria Lim and photojournalist Jon Kilb traveled to Haiti with Millien as he set up his soccer academy. Catch their stories tonight on Bright House Sports Network, ch47/1147HD



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