

During his career with the Ducks from 2003-06, Nick Gkionis developed into one of the top players in the history of the Stevens Institute of Technology men's soccer program. In fact, as a senior, he was named a first-team All-American by the National Soccer Coaches Association of America. Gkionis was just the second player in program history to earn the award.

In the summer of 2007, Gkionis signed a contract to play professional soccer with MEAP Nisou of the Cypriot Second Division in Cyprus. Since that time, he has been training with the team and preparing for the season.

Starting in August of 2007, Gkionis began working with Assistant Athletic Director for Sports Information Brian Granata to provide an inside look at life on the road and life as a professional soccer player through a weekly blog entitled "Beyond the Pond." Through this blog, Gkionis will discuss many of his experiences in Cyprus and recount his travels with the team.

Feel free to join us as we go Beyond the Pond with Nick Gkionis. Enjoy!

Opening Commentary

Hello friends! Before I begin my blog, I would like to introduce myself to all who are reading. My name is Nick Gkionis, and I recently graduated from Stevens with a degree in Chemical Biology. However, unlike many of my colleagues who proceeded on to medical school, graduate school or high-paying jobs after graduation, I decided to pursue a career in professional soccer. Ever since I was a kid, I dreamt of playing soccer professionally so once it became a realistic option, I decided to go for it.

Recently, I signed a contract to play for a team in Cyprus named MEAP Nisou. This blog will give you an interesting perspective on my life in the Mediterranean as I try to progress as a professional athlete. I would like to thank the Stevens Athletic Department for allowing me to do this in my free time.

Leaving Home

Entry Date – August 29, 2007

The toughest part about pursuing a pro soccer career in Cyprus was leaving New Jersey. I knew I would especially miss Hoboken, not only because of the strong friendships I established there, but also because of the diverse activities that Hoboken offers. I would now have to start a whole new life in a place where the culture, food, language and weather were all different than what I was accustomed to; however, being half-Cypriot and having visited the island for vacation in the summers, I knew I would get acclimated after a few weeks.

So, as I arrived on the island and settled into my new living quarters, I realized the experience was much like when I was a freshman coming into Stevens. I would be moving into a new dormitory with a new roommate. The difference is that the dormitory in this case is my grandmother's house and the new roommate is my grandmother.

After getting settled, I had to meet with the coach and the president of the club to speak about what they expected from me. It was a good meeting and helped me understand more about the organization and how they do things.

In the days after the meeting, I had to do a couple of different things before I could start training. First, I had to go to the physio (trainer) to test the strength in my legs and to see what muscles needed to be stronger. This helps the coach get an understanding of what I need to work on in terms of strength. The second thing I needed to do was to get a full medical to make sure I was healthy. I had to get x-rays of my chest, blood and urine tests as well as an echocardiogram. Luckily, everything came out normal, and I passed the medical. After that, I was free to begin training so I was excited.

Preseason Training & Heading to Moldova

Entry Date – September 5, 2007

So, preseason training was set to begin, and I was very nervous because I did not know what to expect in terms of how hard it would be. Then, a few days before the start of preseason training, I picked up an intestinal virus. This was a huge setback because I had been training for many months prior to coming to Cyprus, and I did not want anything to get in the way of training.

Nevertheless, I was extremely ill for about a week and a half which made me miss the first few days of training. Luckily, we have about two months for preseason so missing a couple days was not a big deal. Once I was fully healthy, I began training with the team and got to work.

After a couple of days of training, I was no longer nervous because I saw that it was not so bad after all. The coaches have more time to get the team to full fitness so getting in game shape is more of a gradual process. Obviously, coming to a new team, I knew it would be difficult at first because I did not know the players well and the drills in training were new to me. However, soccer is soccer no matter where you are so I knew I could fit right in once we got playing.

After a few weeks of training in Cyprus, we were set to leave for Moldova for 12 days in order to do more preseason training and play some scrimmages. The preseason trip would allow for the team to get closer and allow for better training environment because in Cyprus it is very hot during the summer. In Moldova, we stayed at the grounds of FC Sheriff, which is a team that competes in the Moldovan First Division. Their facilities were the best soccer-specific facilities I have ever seen. They had an Olympic-size pool, a full-size indoor turf field, an indoor futsal arena, eight outside grass training fields, two saunas, a cafeteria with a full staff, a masseuse and two stadiums. They also had dormitories which we stayed in that are for the players in the FC Sheriff system.

The schedule in Moldova went something like this: We would get up at 8 a.m. and eat breakfast, then train from 10 a.m. until noon, eat lunch at 1 p.m., relax/massage/therapy from 2 until 5 p.m., training from 6 until 8 p.m., dinner at 8:30 p.m. and then curfew at 11 p.m.. After about six days of this schedule, the coach gave us the morning off and allowed our curfew to be until 4 a.m. The coach and president stressed that we should act like adults when we are out and that anyone who comes back after the allotted curfew would be fined and punished.

After a night of team bonding, it was back to training and we continued our normal schedule for the rest of the trip. We were scheduled to have another free night to go out on the town, but one of our teammates decided to miss curfew so we were all punished. We ended up playing three friendlies in Moldova in which we went 1-1-1. I played in all the games and started the third one. I think the trip was a definite success for me because I got to know the players a lot better and now I felt like part of the "family." I also got more accustomed to the level of play and the tactics the team uses.

Now, we were on our way back to Cyprus and even though the preseason training was done in Moldova, we still had a lot more time before our first real game. Our first cup game is September 8 with the second leg on September 15. The season begins September 23 so we still have many more training sessions along with a couple of friendlies.

I would also like to wish all the Stevens athletic teams good luck. I am confident all of the teams will be successful.

Weigh-in & First Earthquake

Entry Date – September 12, 2007

We returned from Moldova early on a Saturday morning, and I was glad to hear that we had the weekend off. It was a much needed rest because the training was taking a toll on me. Over the

weekend, I went out with a couple of teammates to see the city and just got away from soccer for a little bit.

We began training again on Monday and coach talked to us about the importance of being under the designated weight that they set for us. Prior to preseason, we were all weighed and given a "playing weight." This was the weight the coach wanted us to maintain during the season. They wanted me to play at 184 pounds (83.4 kilos), which was a 4-5 pound difference from what I was during my senior year at Stevens. I had been watching my diet so I knew I was losing weight, but I did not realize that the next day they would be weighing us and whoever was overweight would be fined. So sure enough, I got on the scale and was less than one kilo overweight so I did not get fined.

After training one night, I stopped by my cousin's house for dinner. After I was finished eating and hanging out, I went in the house to get my keys to leave. As I went to pick them up, I noticed that the wall to my left began to shake. I did not think anything of it until I looked around and everything was shaking. Next thing I knew, my cousin was yelling "EARTHQUAKE" and said to get out of the house.

The shaking only lasted about 10 seconds, but it was crazy. We later found out on the news that it was a 4.6 on the Richter scale, which is light and not very harmful. It was actually one of the most interesting things that has ever happened to me, but I would not want it to happen again.

A few days after the quake, we played our last scrimmage against a team we would be competing with this year in the league. I was informed the day before the game that I would be getting the start so I was excited. Although I started a game in Moldova, I felt that after a long preseason, I knew the team better and was a lot more comfortable than before.

It was a very physical game, and we ended up with a 1-1 draw. I had the assist on our goal and could have scored the game-winner in the 90th minute, but I hit the post. It would have been too good to be true. Overall, the game was a success for the team because we played well enough to win but were unlucky. I was also happy that the coach trusted me to play the full 90 minutes.

The Cyprus Cup

Entry Date – September 19, 2007

So, finally after about a month and a half of preseason training and friendlies, we were ready for our first real game. This game was not a league game, but it was a cup game. The Cyprus Cup is a separate tournament in which teams from every division in Cyprus compete in a knock-out competition much like the NCAA Tournament. There are five divisions in Cyprus and all teams compete until there is one eventual winner. My team competes in the second division, and our first opponent in the cup turned out to be a team from the fourth division. Our opponents won the random draw to see who hosts the game so we traveled to play them at their home field.

We knew we were in for a tough game because even though the team we were playing was two divisions below us, they were not going to make it easy for us to win on their home field. We also knew that their home field was not the best playing surface and that the conditions would be tough. I found out the day before the game that I was not in the starting lineup, and I kind of expected it because I knew they would start the more experienced players in the first game.

The game turned out to be a complete nightmare as we went down two goals early on and never fully recovered. The final score was 2-1. A big disappointment overcame our team. We had many chances to score, but we were not successful. We also made a couple of crucial mistakes and our opponents punished us. At the end of the game, it's not the team with the most chances that wins. Rather, it's the team that makes the most of their chances.

I was disappointed I did not get subbed into the game. In the pro game, you are only allowed three subs with no re-entry, and I was not used in the match. It was disappointing because I wanted to help the team but could not.

There was some disappointment the week after the loss but the coach explained that now that we were knocked out of the cup we can focus solely on the league which, in the club's mind, was more important than the cup. So, we got back to training and preparation. I had a lot of motivation the week after the cup because I did not play in the game. It was also tough the week after the loss because family and friends read the newspapers and heard we lost. Overseas, you have to explain the same thing to everyone when you lose.

Anyway, I would also like to tell the Stevens men's and women's soccer teams that I have been watching their games on Empire8.tv, and I like what I am seeing. Along with the soccer teams, I follow many fall sports teams including field hockey and women's tennis. I see all the teams are taking care of business. I hope to have the same success over here on September 23 when the league officially begins.

Season Begins

Entry Date – October 3, 2007

So, all the excitement and hype for the season to begin finally reached its climax because September 23 was here. Our coaching staff stressed the fact that we need to start off the season well and to make sure we establish the fact that's its tough to win at our field. I was not in the starting lineup for the game; however, we had a few injuries so I believed I would get my chance as a sub.

The day of the game was exciting, and it started off with our second team playing at 2 p.m. The second team consists of younger players on the team who are being developed for the first team. It is also used as a game for any first-team players who are recovering from injury or are suspended from the first-team game due to yellow or red cards. Our game was set to begin at 4 p.m. and the turnout wasn't bad. We do not have a big stadium as it can probably only hold about 1,000 people, but it looked like the stands had a good amount of people. The younger kids in the crowd were shooting off fireworks and confetti so it was interesting.

The game went relatively well, and we won 4-2. I was substituted in the 60th minute, and I assisted on the fourth goal. I was pleased with my debut, and it was fun to get in there in front of the home crowd. Everyone on the team was happy after the win and was ready for the next game.

We went back to the usual routine after the game, and it was fun to have a win under our belts. Coach still gave us criticism on Tuesday as is always the tradition, and we were now focusing on the next game which would be a tough away game.

We also had a team dinner in the middle of the week at a restaurant in the capital city of Nicosia. It was cool for everyone to get together and relax outside of the soccer field. Ironically, we were watching the cup games on television, which we were supposed to playing in if we hadn't lost a few weeks earlier.

So, now this past weekend we had a tough away game versus one of the bigger teams in the league. We were scheduled to play them at their home field, which is never an easy place to win. The coach told me I would be starting the game so I was nervous and excited at the same time. I always get nervous before a game whether I am starting or not so this just added to it. The temperature at the start of the game was in the high 90's and because the field was near the sea, there was added humidity so it was difficult conditions.

The game did not go very well for us, and we ended up losing 2-0. I did some good things on the field, but overall I would consider it a mediocre performance by me. Mediocrity doesn't win games though so I was disappointed.

Now it is back to training and getting ready for our next game, which is at home. That is the difficult part about playing in the pros. You have only one game a week and if you do not win you are stuck thinking about it for a whole week. Anyway, my father is flying out to Cyprus this week to visit so I am excited to see him and for him to watch a game. I will keep you all posted on how it goes.

Visit from Dad & Cyprus vs. Wales

Entry Date – October 18, 2007

As the week dragged on, the time drew close to when I would get to hang out with my dad. I had to get up early on a Saturday morning to go pick him up from the airport. It was good to see him because we had not been together since July. I took my dad to training later that morning and just showed him around. Coach had just posted a sheet in the locker room with certain team rules so I showed my dad what is expected of us. Also, he was interested in the list of fines, which are given to players for certain things like yellow or red cards, fights, tardiness, etc. My dad was happy to hear I had not been fined yet.

So, the time came for the game, and it didn't turn out to be a good day. We lost at home, and I did not get used in the game. I would have liked to play in front of my dad, but he will be here for the next game two weeks from now so hopefully I will be used in that game. I stayed after the match and did a workout that included running and weights because I did not want to lose any fitness. The following weekend we do not have a game because all leagues were off due to the international games.

We had Monday off as well so my dad and I went to the mall and checked out the Bourne Ultimatum. It was a really great film, and I would recommend it to anyone. It probably came out a few months ago in the States, but we are a little behind over here. It was nice to have a day off and to do something that did not involve soccer. I am glad my dad is getting a taste of my new lifestyle, which is a little different than it was back in New Jersey.

Having the weekend off for the international games was good because we were given Saturday and Sunday off. I was interested in seeing the Cypriot national team play so I got tickets for the game versus Wales. I was very excited to go because Wales had many players that played on very big teams in Europe, specifically England. Cyprus also had some good players, but most of the players I have seen play before.

Cyprus dominated the contest and ended up winning 3-1. Overall, it was very inspiring to see the famous players I used to watch on television in America play in person. Aside from the game, I went out with some friends for a coffee on Friday night and just relaxed the rest of the weekend. Training continued on Monday and it would be time to get serious for our next game.

I was told by the coach that I would have to go to this training center one morning to get a couple of tests done. These tests included a strength test for the legs, body fat, flexibility test, and another test where you run on a treadmill while they monitor your breathing. The coaching staff does this to check the overall progression of the player throughout the course of the season. I had no problem with going even though the tests were at 9 a.m. Luckily, because we have a game on Sunday, we are given off on Thursday.

I feel like I am having a good week of training so I am happy. I find the best thing to do is to always try to improve in training because there is always something to learn and get better at.

Blast from the Past

Entry Date – November 7, 2007

It is crazy how things work in this world. This blog has helped reunite me with a childhood friend. Many years ago, a friend who lived two houses down from me moved away, and I lost touch with him. Back in the day, my brother and I along with the kids in the neighborhood used to play soccer in my backyard until we wore out the grass. Then, my mom made us find another place to play.

Years later, my friend somehow found my blog online and got in touch with me through the Stevens athletic department. So, thank you Brian and Russ for helping in reuniting me with a childhood friend.

A big highlight of the past two weeks was that I got my first pro goal, and luckily, my father was in the crowd to see it. It was a decent goal off a corner kick; however, we ended up losing 2-1 in the last second of play. The other team had a corner kick in the closing seconds and scored as the final whistle blew. Right now, we are on a four-game losing streak and not in a good position in the standings. We have 21 more games and this gives us a lot of time to gain points and move up in the table. I find myself getting more comfortable with the level of play. It's tougher because as the weeks pass, your body begins to get a little tired, and you really need to take care of your fatigue.

I also got the first yellow card of my pro career the other day, which was for a stupid reason. The other team had a free kick, and I was simply standing in the wall and an opponent decided to try to stand there to open space for the shot. I simply nudged the player a little bit to get him out of the wall, and he dropped to the ground. We both got yellow cards, and I will probably also get the first small fine of my career. It's ok though because coach said he liked my intensity.

For our next game, we go to Paphos which is a team who came down from the First Division last year. It is also very tough to win there because they have a very good team and very supportive fans. Regardless, we played them in a friendly and tied 1-1, so hopefully we can get some points when we go there.

My full-body test results came back, and they were fine. My quadriceps and hamstrings are strong; my heart pumps well; my body fat is low; and my breathing is good. So, along with a functional brain, I am all set for soccer.

I want to wish all the Stevens sports teams good luck in postseason play. This time of year is always exciting around Stevens, and I hope to catch a few webcasts. Good luck to all!

I'm Back

Entry Date – November 27, 2007

It's crazy how I feel like I haven't written an entry in forever, but it has only been a few weeks. I know the winter sports season has begun, and I want to wish all of the teams good luck. I also want to congratulate all the fall sports teams for their success. I heard about the men's soccer team losing in penalties, and I want to tell them that I know what they're going through. Believe it or not, I have never won a penalty-kick shootout in my life. I ended my high school career in the state sectional final by losing on penalties. I lost in the national final in penalties when I was playing with the Metrostars (N.Y. Red Bull) youth team. My college career ended the same way in the Sweet 16. Most of the time, the weaker teams get bailed out in penalty kicks, but that is just my opinion.

So, the season continues for us over here, and we are coming off a huge home win against the top team in the standings. The team we were playing was 6-0-0 with only one goal against, and we barbequed them 4-0. It was 0-0 in the second half, and I was getting ready to go in. Then, we

started scoring so I didn't go in until the game was out of reach. We really needed the win, and I was happy to help.

Since there was another international break this past weekend, there were no league games. That was disappointing because we were in good form after the big win. We practiced all week and scheduled a friendly against the first-division team Olympiakos Nicosia. Playing a first-division team is always exciting because it is a nice challenge. We scored first, and they tied it right before half. In the second half, they scored two goals to make it 3-1. I felt like I had a fairly decent game, and I am beginning to understand what is needed to become a higher-level player.

After the game, I went to the Euro Tourney qualifying-game between Cyprus and the Czech Republic. The Czechs are ranked somewhere in the Top-10 in the world so I really wanted to check out the game. I was looking for the upset, but it was not meant to be because Cyprus lost 2-0. The high-level teams make soccer look very simple although what their doing is very difficult. And whoever said soccer players are small guys obviously hasn't seen these teams play. Some of the players are so massive that it was unbelievable. There was a forward on the Czech Republic that was 6'9" and 220 pounds. He was fast and had good control. One day, I hope to face players like that.

Other than that, the weekend ended with a little Cypriot barbeque at my teammate's house in the mountains. I also booked a ticket to come back to New Jersey for Christmas and New Years. I wasn't planning on coming back for the holidays, but the coach gave us an extended break so why not come home and enjoy the holidays in the States. Plus, I am dying for that good food that we eat in New Jersey - pizza and diner food to be specific.

Anyway, we are preparing for our game on Saturday, and hopefully, we can continue winning. We will see how that game goes

I hope everyone in the States enjoyed their Thanksgiving weekend. They do not celebrate Thanksgiving here because they are not familiar with this holiday, but I ate a turkey sandwich for lunch just to keep the tradition alive.

Getting Back to the Winning Ways

Entry Date – December 19, 2007

So, Thanksgiving just passed and now it is time for me to focus on Christmas, which is my favorite time of the year. I am a rare breed who actually likes the cold of winter. The one problem with all of that though is that it is really not that cold around here so it doesn't feel like winter. I want some snow! I'm not used to all this nice weather.

As much as I complain though, the conditions make for good soccer weather so I guess I am happy for that. Speaking of soccer, our team has been in good form lately. Since Thanksgiving, we have won two games and tied one. With the recent results, we have climbed to the middle of the standings.

On a personal level, I have played in all three of the recent games, and I have started two of them. It has felt good to contribute to the team's success because we were in a difficult position earlier in the season when we were towards the bottom of the standings. I also found that during this part of the season, I have to be extra focused on taking care of my body because we have been playing pretty much six days a week since July. I twisted my ankle a little in the last game, but other than that, I have been relatively healthy (knock on wood).

The last two weeks we have also had some players on trial with the team. I guess you could call them recruits where they get a week to train with us and then the club decides if they want to sign them. Since I am one of the few players that speak English fluently, I usually communicate with

the players on trial and translate certain things. We had one player from Slovakia and another from Holland. They were both nice guys. The guy from Slovakia actually played for the Slovakian national team in the Olympics in Sydney in 2000. He told me a funny story that happened there.

One of the teams they played in the Olympics was Brazil. It is customary in soccer games to exchange jerseys with your opponent after the game. So, with it being Brazil, my friend from Slovakia had a few superstars to choose from. He went to go exchange with Ronaldinho (maybe you've heard of him as he is probably the best player of the last decade); however, as he went up to ask Ronaldinho to exchange jerseys, Ronaldinho refused. I guess he wanted to keep it as a piece of memorabilia for himself. After seeing all the other stars had already exchanged jerseys with his teammates, my Slovakian friend was left with nothing. Sorry buddy!

Anyway, this week's game will also be my first Cypriot nationally-televised game. They usually show all the first-division games, but sometimes they put some second division games on. It will be pretty cool to make my television debut as weird as that sounds. It's not ESPN, but I have to crawl before I can walk.

After the game, I will be hopping on a plane to come back to America for Christmas and New Years. I won't be here for long – only about 9-10 days. It will be nice to see everyone and everything after being away. The one thing I'm dreading is my 11-hour layover in Athens after a 90-minute game, but that's the sacrifice you make to see your family.

I would like to wish everyone reading this a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year. I especially hope my friend Brian Granata enjoys his holiday vacation because I know I have added to his workload with this blog. Anyway, good luck everyone! We will talk in January.

Home for the Holidays

Entry Date – January 8, 2008

Since the last time I wrote the blog, I have had a pretty crazy schedule with all the traveling and activities in America; however, my holiday break was great, and I am glad I got to visit my family and friends in New Jersey. Before I get into my trip to America, I should mention the game we played right before I left.

The game turned out to be my best game so far. We won a very important match, 3-1, and I scored 2 goals (the first and the game-winner). Since I am more of a defensive player, my main offensive opportunities come when I go into the box for corner kicks and free kicks, and that is how I scored both goals.

Towards the end of the game, I could have completed the hat-trick because the ball was coming right at me for a tap in on the goal line, but my teammate slid and kicked it in right before it got to me. He, jokingly, apologized to me after the game about stealing my goal, but I didn't care who scored as long as we sealed the victory.

Within a few hours after the game ended, I had to get to the airport and start my trip back to America. Since I was happy with the result of the game, it made the long layover and plane ride more bearable.

It was good to finally get home and see all the things that were familiar to me. Not many things were different from what I remember. I felt like I was away from America for six years, but it was only six months. I noticed my little brother has gotten taller, my friend Jerry started lifting weights, and my other friend Teddy has grown a goatee. Otherwise, things were pretty much the same.

I enjoyed hearing that my dad, mom, brother George, sister Katerina, and little brother Photi are all doing big things which is great. I also got a chance to hang out in Manhattan and Queens with

the family which is always a fun experience. My brother also took me down to Atlantic City. I have always drive down there with a dream of driving back in a Ferrari, but then I end up losing my money and driving back angry at the world.

I stopped by Hoboken one night with my brother but did not get the opportunity to meet up with anyone because everybody was out of town. Most of the soccer alumni work on Wall Street and have little free time. Nevertheless, I visited the Stevens campus and my old place of work (Mikie Squared). I also got a chance to see the brand-new turf on De Baun Field. The last thing I made sure I did was to get a slice of pizza from Gio's, which I have been craving for a while because their Sicilian pizza is the best I have ever had.

My time in New Jersey went by quickly and came to an end on New Year's Day when I headed back to Cyprus. After a few delays and layovers, I got back safely in time for practice. I was surprised to find out when I got back there were some additions to the team. We had signed two new players and one player had left the team. I met the two new players at practice. They were both older players with a lot of experience.

It's back to reality now, and I am looking forward to the New Year and to the second half of the season. I picked up some books in America because my New Year's resolution is to read more. I just started reading a book called *How to Be Like Mike*. It's a book about Michael Jordan, and so far, it is really inspiring. I will keep you posted. Anyway, that's about it from here. Good luck to everyone in the New Year.

A Reflection during Massage Therapy

Entry Date – January 30, 2008

There aren't many things in this world better than a body massage. Ever since I signed with the team, I have had the privilege of getting a massage on a regular basis. The team brings in a massage therapist whenever needed, which is usually the day after a game. Some players skip out on the massage because they don't feel like waiting around, but I always hang around and get one even if I don't play. This week's massage was especially relaxing because I reflected on the big win we had over the weekend and the upcoming week's events.

We played a solid team this past weekend called Digenis Morphou at their home field. They play at Makario Stadium, which is a well-kept stadium with a capacity of about 16,000, so it's easy to get excited for this kind of game. I got the start at the defensive-midfield position, and I had the challenge of guarding their leading goal-scorer. The game started off well and we had some good chances, but our forward got his second yellow card for diving in the box. I am 100 percent sure my teammate got taken down for a penalty kick in the box, but the referee deemed it a dive so he gave him his second yellow and ejected him from the game.

We went into halftime with 10 men and the game at 0-0. I knew it would be a very difficult second half, but our coach assured us to stick with our tactics. Basically, in that situation, while you are playing away and with 10 men, chances are that you are hoping to hold the game for a draw. Little did I know, we would get a golden opportunity towards the end of the game and steal the victory. It was a hard-fought 1-0 win and everybody in my team (including the board members and president) were ecstatic.

The game was a huge success, but there was also some bad news for me personally. During the second half of the game, I picked up a yellow card, which was my fourth of the season. Throughout the course of the season, if you collect four yellow cards, you are suspended for one game by the league. Some of my other teammates have already served suspensions for yellow cards so I figured my time would be coming soon. Since I am 22 years old, which is under the age limit for the reserve team, the coach suggested that I play with the reserve team on Sunday

in order to maintain game fitness. The reserve game is played an hour before the first-team game and is basically a developmental league for younger players.

We were also told that since it has been a long season and sometimes practice gets a little monotonous, our coach scheduled a scrimmage during the mid-week instead of a practice. This week, we have a game versus FC Viktoria Plzen, which is a first-division team from the Czech Republic. They are here in Cyprus for preseason training since their season runs differently than ours. I am looking forward to playing them.

In the past couple weeks, I also came up with an idea to maybe do a mix tape or a highlight tape of some sort and post it. The idea came up because a friend of mine over here is into video production/multimedia. I mentioned that we should make a video to showcase his production skills. We will see in the future how we go about it but it is definitely a fun project.

By the way, while all you lucky people in America will be attending Super Bowl parties and watching the big game, I will be in my bed sleeping because they don't show it around here. I even mentioned it to my teammates, and while most don't really know what football is, others don't really care. I guess the reason I am disappointed is because I am going to miss the Giants upsetting the Patriots. My prediction is 27-24.

I recently checked out the Stevens athletic website and I see the sports teams are doing well. I take particular interest in the basketball teams because of my love for basketball (sorry fencing team), and I see both teams are taking care of business. I do not know why but reading those articles reminded me of when I used to play pick-up basketball with the athletic staff. Those guys used to barbeque me. Believe it or not, Russ Rogers doesn't miss a shot, period! Anyway, all joking aside, I would like to wish all the Stevens teams continued success.

That is it from over here. I hope everyone is having a good New Year because I was reading in the newspaper that January is a depressing month. If you are feeling down, I hope after reading this you feel a little bit better. Good luck to everyone!

Injuries are Part of the Game

Entry Date – February 20, 2008

In my opinion, injuries are the most frustrating part of sports. To put it in Stevens' terms, an injury can ruin my day much like the computer science pop-quizzes that my professor used to give me back at school. I shouldn't be complaining too much because I have stayed injury-free all season so far, but last game during the second half, I suffered a hamstring strain. I didn't think it was anything until after the game when I felt the pain as I cooled down.

It has been a week since the injury, and I have visited the physio (trainer) for every day. The physio refers to me as "The American," which is kind of interesting because people in America think of me as "The Greek." Regardless, the therapy he puts me through really does work because I feel a lot better, even though he was doing some weird acupuncture stuff. I am generally not a fan of people sticking pins in me but whatever works. This situation proved to me that wisdom comes with time, because when I was younger I was an idiot and never believed in treating injuries with therapy. Finally, at the ripe old age of 22, I have seen the light.

I mentioned in my last entry that I was going to suit up for the reserve-team game because I was serving a one-game suspension. It turned out to be really fun because it was a change of environment from the pressure of the first-team games. Most of the players were younger than me, and it was entertaining to be around because I remember what it was like to be that age.

At halftime, the game was 4-0. I had a goal and a couple assists. During the second half, my team decided to get a little rowdy. Since we were ahead by four goals, the other team decided to

give some cheap shots and say things, which I can understand because that's what always happens when you are beating a team bad. The thing is that my younger teammates decide to start dishing out pain in the form of elbows and kicks when the ref wasn't looking. A few red cards later the game ended 4-2.

The other day I was thinking how time is flying by and it is crazy that the season ends April 6, which is not far away. I have been in Cyprus for eight months so far, and I am really enjoying it. I have seen a whole different culture and have experienced a ton of new things. I was very fortunate to have family and make some good friends because if it weren't for that I would have had a tougher time getting settled. A special thanks to my grandmother, who is a wonderful lady. I appreciate all the things she has done for me.

Speaking of family, I got a chance to visit some family who live in a nice town in the Troodos Mountains over the past weekend. There were no games due to the presidential elections taking place, so our coach gave us Sunday off. My family's house is about an hour drive from where I live, but it is insane because it is a completely different climate up there. I never thought Cyprus had harsh winters because it is known as a beach vacation island but up there it snows and is freezing. I enjoyed it though because it is very serene and relaxing up there.

In the coming week, my team has scheduled a friendly against Dynamo Kiev, which is a powerhouse team out of Ukraine. This is a team that plays in the Champions League almost every year and reached the semifinals in 1999 (I think). I'm pretty sure we won't play the full first team because they would probably give us a beat down, but we will see.

I mentioned in last blog that we had a friendly scheduled with a Czech Republic first-division team. We ended up losing that game 1-0. One thing I noticed is that those guys tackle hard. Our starting forward had to leave the game in the second minute with a dent in his leg. I don't know what they feed the players over there in the Czech Republic, but whatever it is, I want some. All joking aside, they were a strong and skilled team, but it was a close game.

I always believe anyone can beat anyone and that was proven by my prediction in the last entry that the Giants would upset the Patriots. I was reading all these stories about how the Giants didn't have a shot, and I didn't understand why not. I actually found a bar to watch the game, but I was so confident that the Giants would win that I didn't go. Instead, I fell into a deep peaceful sleep.

Anyway, that's about all from here. I hope all you seniors out there (including my brother George) are staying focused because graduation is just around the corner. I'll be graduating this year also since I finished in the summer. It will be cool to walk with my brother. Big congratulations to him because he has a job lined up already. Good luck to everyone!

It's a Small World & Mix-tape Preview

Entry Date – March 12, 2008

Everyone has heard the saying that "It's a small world." I have heard it many times, and this past month, it was proven to me that that saying was a fact. It all started when I got invited to this American-themed party by two friends that I had met in America and who now live in Cyprus. I should clarify when I say party because I mean like a grown-up party where you sit and have dinner and good conversation over a glass of wine – not the parties that college kids who are reading might think of.

So, this guy Dino who I never met sits down at the dinner table and starts telling the group this story about when he was at his friend's barbershop in New Jersey. Dino said he mentioned to the barber that he was moving to Cyprus, and the barber said that he met some kid who comes in to get his hair cut that is moving to Cyprus to play soccer. Dino was curious to find out who the kid

was and how his soccer experiences are going. Once he said the story, I knew he was talking about me so I calmly raise my hand and said, "That's me, what do you want to know?"

It turns out Dino's friend's barber shop is in Hoboken and was the same place I used to get my hair cut. It is pretty crazy to think that we ended up at the same dinner table halfway across the world.

Soccer has also been going well over the past month or so. My team is unbeaten in four out of the last five games against some of the better teams in the league. We were down 2-0 to the top team in the league at halftime and then fought our way back to a 2-2 draw at their home field. It was a really good result because I don't think anyone in the stadium thought we were going to come back except for all my teammates. To be honest, if we had another five minutes, we would have won the game. I assisted on the second goal, and I actually was planning on kicking it in before I fell off balance so my teammate did.

It has been a little frustrating this past month because whenever I feel like I am playing well, something happens where I get a suspension for yellow cards or pick up a little injury. I hope in the final month of the season I can get into a good rhythm and finish out in top form. Since we had a game this past Sunday, I missed the last day of this feast/party called Carnival. Carnival is feast period that goes on 10 days before the start of the Orthodox Lent. I would consider it a cross between Halloween and Mardi Gras. It is a feast period where everyone dresses up in costumes and attends some different parades/parties. I did not get a chance to go to any of the big parade days because they were on the other side of the island. Nevertheless, it was something I didn't even know existed because Greek/Cypriots don't do it in America, so it was cool to experience.

Finally, the wait is over! This past week, my production friend (Pavs Productions) has released the 40-second preview for the soccer mix-tape I decided to do for fun. I wanted to give him special thanks for all his hard work on this project. This is just a preview/teaser for the real mix-tape that will come out soon. You can watch the preview here at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TkbD2MMGN2c>.

I have always watched soccer mix-tapes on youtube and wanted to do one but never got the chance. So now that I had some free time and a friend who is good with producing these types of videos, I figured to go for it. Another friend of mine named Lyrical Eye (stage name), who is an aspiring Cypriot rapper and has done some shows around Europe, is making a freestyle song for the soundtrack. We will see how it turns out. I am planning on releasing the official mix-tape later this month, so look out for it on the blog.

First Year Coming to an End & Relegation/Promotion

Entry Date – April 3, 2008

It feels like just yesterday that I got the approval from Russell Rogers and Brian Granata to do this blog. It has been almost nine months since I got to Cyprus, and it is crazy to think that my first season is almost done. During the past nine months, I have really settled in well in Cyprus.

When I got here, everything was different to me even though I had family ties on the island. It was not the same family that I saw for 21 years in New Jersey. This past year, I have made some good friends inside the soccer team and outside of soccer. I have learned the language and the culture better. I have gotten closer to family that I only saw once every few years when I was young. I have visited every part of the island and really got accustomed to Cyprus. Cyprus is generally known for its good hospitality, and that fact was proven to me this past year. Some people around here really went out of their way to make me feel at home and I will never forget that.

Switching gears to soccer, we have two games left and mathematically we are already safe from relegation. I don't know if I explained how relegation/promotion work, but I will summarize what that is in case you don't know.

There are 14 teams in the Second Division in Cyprus. You play 26 games throughout the whole season. There are no playoffs. It is just 26 games where you receive three points for a win and one point for a tie. After all of the 26 games have been played and the points tallied, the last three teams in the Second Division standings are "relegated" to the Third Division, and the top three teams from the Second Division are promoted to the First Division. All the divisions in Cypriot soccer work like this so next year the three teams that were relegated from the First Division will play with us in the Second Division, and the top three teams from the Third Division will play in the Second Division. This is generally how all of the European soccer league works, and this is why every game during the season is important because relegation/promotion is a very big deal.

So, our team is right in the middle of the standings where we cannot be promoted and we can't be relegated. We can now play the role of spoiler in the last two games and beat teams that maybe need the points more than we do.

One thing that is kind of cool is that the preview of the soccer mix-tape that I posted in the last blog got over a thousand hits on youtube. I was told by my friend and CEO of Pavs Productions that the actual mix-tape will be "coming out of the oven" in the very near future so stay tuned.

Last week, I was browsing through youtube and saw a little highlight tape from one of our games from back in November. It was probably some kid from the opposing team with a digital camera because it is not the highest quality, but I actually have some highlights in the game. We lost the game 2-0, but check out some of the highlights at

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o_uM3GFB5pc&feature=related

Anyway, I am going to write my last blog when the season is completely over around April 15 so this is not the last time you will hear from me. This blog has been great not only in that it allows me to show everyone a perspective into my soccer life in Cyprus but also to serve as a diary/journal for me. One day in the distant future I will be showing my kids this.

Finally, I wanted to offer congratulations to my sister, who just received a scholarship from a magazine. She got invited to this big formal dinner at the Waldorf Astoria to receive the scholarship. I am a guy so I forgot the details but that's the general gist of it. I wanted to congratulate her because she deserves it. Good luck everyone! See you back here in about 13 days for the final blog.

Season 1 is Complete

Entry Date – April 16, 2008

Now that the season is officially complete, I have been thinking about the season and its ups and downs. This past year hasn't always been smooth as the blog might portray, but to be honest, it has been a very successful year. I do not judge whether my first season was a success merely by how many goals I scored or how many tackles I won. I judge success by what I have learned and how much I have matured. Failure happens when you go through experiences and don't learn anything from them.

To give a quick summary of the season, the team finished mid-table and is looking forward to having a better year in the same division next year. We had a few big wins throughout the year that showed a lot of character, but we also lost some points when we shouldn't have. If we get a little more consistent with our results, then we can finish higher in the standings.

Personally, like I said in a previous entry, I think the first half of the season was better for me because I found a rhythm and wasn't hampered by suspensions for yellow cards or little injuries. It is all about having good performances consistently rather than have one good game and then one bad game. That sounds cliché, but in a 10-month season, some days you feel better than others and it is hard to perform at a high level consistently; however, in order to become a big-time player you have to.

Switching to a more informal subject, the full-length mix tape is finally here. It is two minutes and 40 seconds of absolutely jaw-dropping entertainment, and I think everyone will enjoy it. Interestingly enough, I am not a fancy, flashy player that does all these crazy tricks with the soccer ball when I play, but I had to do the mix tape simply for entertainment purposes. Special thanks to Pavlos Georgiou, CEO of Pavs Productions, for making it happen. Here is the link: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvaMi1phvpE>. Enjoy!

I also wanted to say thanks to my family, which has really helped me this year. Obviously, first and foremost, I wanted to say thanks to Dad and Mom. I am a lucky person to have them because they helped me a lot, especially since my Mom is my personal shrink. I also wanted to thank my brothers and sister for their support and love. In general, thanks to everyone for their help while I have been over here. I would name everyone, but I am starting to sound like I am giving an Academy Award acceptance speech.

I hope I have helped the readers see a little into my life over here and maybe if Mr. Granata or Mr. Rogers still like the blog they will renew my contract for another year (sarcasm!). Anyway, I don't know what is in store for me next year. One thing I am sure of is that I am going to continue to play soccer. I have a few options as of now, but I have no idea what I will do. We will see what happens. See you for Season 2!