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COMMENTARY

America's Soccer Story: William Gordon on appreciating the builders

by Mike Voitalla (/publications/author/40/mike-voitalla/) @MikeVoitalla
(<https://www.twitter.com/MikeVoitalla>), Jan 8, 2019

William Gordon has been traversing the USA to document, in the most extensive manner ever, the history of American soccer.



SOCCER AMERICA: Give us a brief introduction to the project and what it will look like when it's finished.

WILLIAM GORDON: In August 2016, I began interviewing modern American soccer's builders, driving to meet those whose involvement with local, national, and international soccer organizations and events most impacted soccer in the United States from the 1950s to present.

In May 2018, a group of founding directors began organizing a nonprofit to establish an oral history archive, locate uncollected soccer archives, and produce a documentary series.

When complete in 2020, our American Soccer Oral History Archive will make publicly available the ethnographic histories of 250-plus builders, likely 750 or more hours of recorded interviews. We're just past halfway there today.

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America's Soccer Story (<https://www.americansoccercorps.org>) emerges from

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these interviews – our documentary series will present for the first time a complete story about soccer in the United States.

SA: What inspired you to pursue this project?

WILLIAM GORDON: The idea for the oral history project was born in conversation with **Joe Machnik** in a Fort Worth establishment in 2001. It was late in the evening, and he told me about **Walt Chyzowych** the way few friends can do.

Joe was visibly moved by his memories -- you can't help but understand that there was something unique about Walt when you see such affection and reverence for a friend. Over the years, my conversations with Joe led me to imagine driving around the country to speak with all the people. But it always seemed that the project would take a year of steady travel, a length that my teaching and coaching career couldn't allow. Yet the idea grew over time, and eventually combined with other interests, especially photography, and listening to the conversations generated by amazing interviewers.

One weekend in May 2016, I read an article about **Robert Frank**, who spent 1958 driving across the U.S. taking photographs, from which he selected 83 for his great book *The Americans*. And then I remembered **Alan Lomax's** project collecting ethnographic histories of the bluesmen in the Mississippi Delta and American folk music in many different places. Then I thought of the great interview shows, like **Dick Cavett's**, **Gretchen Helfrich's** *Odyssey* on WBEZ in Chicago, and *Fresh Air* with my hero, **Terry Gross** – they were all long-form interviews, the best of which are models of great conversation and, I believe, make our civic culture better. And then I thought 'if I don't begin this project now, when will I?' and 'if I don't gather these stories, who will?'

Many things go into a decision to start a project like ours -- I thought about family commitments in Memphis, ran a few budgets to see how long my savings could last, and considered the consequences of a year-long absence from teaching. By the end of that weekend, the final thought was, "I have a year to give – I owe to soccer all the opportunities and great experiences I've had, all the people I've known and loved best, and the stories of those who made it happen are too important to lose. And next year will be a great adventure."



The USASA National Amateur Cup
(<https://amateurcupmedia.com/about/about-the-u-s-amateur-cup/>), named

the Fritz Marth Cup in 2017 after the man who served as United States Adult Soccer Association Administrator in 1981-2002, was founded in 1924. (Photos courtesy of America's Soccer Story (<https://www.americansoccercorps.org/>)/© 2017 Open Source Soccer)

SA: What's your soccer background?

WILLIAM GORDON: I was born in Memphis at a fortunate time soccer-wise, 1973, the year the Southeast Memphis Soccer Association began. My mother registered me through a school team in '78, and that led to different things -- playing through college, amateur leagues during graduate school in Chicago, collegiate and high school coaching from 1996, directing No. 1 Camps for many years.

What holds this together with our project is simple -- had I been born in the same place 10 years earlier, the game may not have found me. My soccer opportunities reflect the efforts of people who were mostly amateur coaches and volunteers, the most tireless of whom were driven to make soccer available for their children and others without hope for building great wealth from the game.

SA: How did you choose whom to interview?

WILLIAM GORDON: Everything begins with the builders, some of whom were known to me and others you learn about along the way. Joe Mac connected me with a great many people, **Thom Meredith** connected me with several. One conversation leads to the next, and leads to research, and leads to particular places around the country -- you follow the story where it goes.

And you read all the histories, of course, old and new.

And impromptu interviews happen all along the way -- you stop mid-day to catch a Champions League match and visit local pubs on Saturday and Sunday mornings to talk with people there about their soccer experiences. And with over 500 nights on the road in hotels, there are many, many dinners at the bar of a local restaurants and breakfasts in small town diners, speaking with locals about their lives and many things, and always their awareness of our game. Soccer looks very different in Claremore, Oklahoma, than it does in Westlake Village, and different in Dripping Springs, Texas than Oneonta, New York.

You can't get that online, you can't learn it from our rich collection of soccer reports in early 20th century newspapers, though those are fascinating and essential -- you have to see soccer for yourself on location to learn how the United States are both different and the same as everywhere else.



William Gordon has driven through 40 states, including this stretch of US 12, researching the history of American soccer. (America's Soccer Story (<https://www.americansoccercorps.org/>)/© 2017 Open Source Soccer)

SA: I understand you drove around the country to do the interviews. What were the advantages of traveling by car?

WILLIAM GORDON: Driving allows flexibility to follow the story where it leads. And once you learn how to use the time between interviews, following a story on the road creates access and opportunities you can't otherwise have. [See the story below about my time in the Bay Area.]

You have time to think and reflect on what you see and hear and learn -- and once the story began emerging from the interviews, time on the highways and off the beaten path helped it develop proper scale, scope, and perspective. You also learn patience while it all unfolds.

During our first talk in October 2016, Thom Meredith suggested asking each builder "Where are we as a soccer nation?"

I learned that our nation is too vast to pursue this question genuinely without driving the country because you can't see things for yourself otherwise -- our geography and population and culture are too diverse, with too many places that soccer has not yet penetrated deeply.

So as far I can see, the main advantage of driving the country many times over is that you can't learn or tell the whole story any other way.



Lothar Osiander (America's Soccer Story

(<https://www.americansoccercorps.org/>)/© 2017 Open Source Soccer)

SA: Any remarkable experiences on the road?

WILLIAM GORDON: Everyday on the road is a remarkable experience. Some of it you plan, some is good fortune – like how it happened that I met **Lothar Osiander, Derek Liecty, Ernie Feibusch, Jeremy Gunn, Clay Berling, and Hugo Perez** within 14 days in May and June 2017.

Terry Fisher invited me to Washington State Youth Soccer's AGM, which was a few days after **President Trump** fired **James Comey**. That day concluded a two-month stretch of non-stop interviews and research travel, so I built in a seven-day break to drive backroads south to Walnut Creek, California, to meet Derek Liecty.

On the way down I scheduled a meeting with Lothar Osiander for two days prior to my meeting with Derek. When I interviewed Derek, he asked if I'd have interest in speaking with Ernie, Jeremy, and Clay. "Absolutely." He made a few phone calls and soon those meetings were arranged over the next two weeks.

In between, there was time for archival and field research because the interviews would not happen on consecutive days. So, I spent parts of eight days in a local library with a rich soccer archive, another tip from Derek.

And because you don't schedule interviews on Sunday mornings, and because libraries are closed, you have a few hours to explore. There was morning sunshine and clear skies on the western side of the Bay that Sunday, and I found a little place in Redwood City for coffee and the paper. **On the window was a poster giving notice that a Juventus youth club was holding trials that afternoon, with Hugo Perez listed as one of the club's directors.**



As I was leaving my car to walk to the fields, Hugo pulled up, parking next to me. I introduced myself, told him what I was doing, why I was there, and asked to contact him later to arrange an interview. So it was that I saw his Development Academy tryouts on June 4, then met him to interview the next Wednesday.

On May 21, only an interview with Derek was scheduled. Two weeks later, I had met Lothar twice, Jeremy twice, met Mr. Berling in Carmel, Mr. Feibusch in San Francisco, had time for field research and several days in a great library.

In the meantime, Hank Steinbrecher returned my call and we met five days later in Tucson.

You couldn't make such a thing up -- and it's a great example of why you drive. It happened many times and starts to explain why I stayed on the road almost two years straight.

SA: In most cases, you met at their homes, right? How much did that add to the experience?

WILLIAM GORDON: In many cases, yes, the builders invited me to their homes. The drive to meet them, through the neighborhood, seeing the homes, all the little things that furnishings and mementos reveal -- it's all deeply humbling and adds a very human element to the interview.

SA: Any particularly impressive memorabilia?

WILLIAM GORDON: The new National Soccer Hall of Fame has a few old national team uniforms that made quite an impression, and my visit was deeply and unexpectedly felt.

Every piece of personal memorabilia leaves an impression because there's a reason it's been kept, and it's very compelling to hear why.

The most surprising thing I saw is our federation's first European cup, a small gift which sits in an archive in Edwardsville, Illinois. The gift was to **Thomas Cahill**, U.S. Soccer's first secretary and the person most responsible for stitching together the far-flung associations to start the United States Soccer Football Association in 1913, which now is U.S. Soccer. Cahill took a national team on our first European

trip in 1916, to Norway and Sweden, and our hosts honored the team with this cup. Captain **Thomas Swords** wrote to **John Fernley**, second USSFA President, requesting the cup be given to Cahill as reward for his “faithfull and untireing efforts” [sic].

SA: Were people generally enthusiastic about speaking with you?

WILLIAM GORDON: The response far exceeds what I imagined or dreamed. I think many builders enjoy remembering, reflecting, and speaking about their experience because they are properly proud of their work, their work with others, and their accomplishments. In that sense, not much has changed since Thomas Cahill's day – his archive wound up in Edwardsville, just across the river from St. Louis, because a lifetime soccer man there, Hap Meyer, wrote to him. They developed a correspondence, and Cahill eventually sent his collection to Meyer because his family had no interest, and maybe otherwise it would have been lost.

SA: Can you choose a few people you interviewed and give examples of some of remarkable impressions they left on you?

WILLIAM GORDON: Each interview is a whole, and impossible to summarize. A few thoughts for now:

Bob Gansler and **Fernando Clavijo** stand out for the quiet power and depth of their contributions and because theirs are deeply informative and compelling immigrant experiences.

Mickey Cochrane and **Al Miller** spoke about the relationship between the military and the soccer community in the 1940s and '50s.



Mickey Cochrane (Photos courtesy of America's Soccer Story/© 2017 Open Source Soccer)

Tony DiCicco told me about his master's thesis at Southern Connecticut State, a physiological (and frame-by-frame video!) analysis of a goalkeeper's most essential movement. **Jim Lennox** used **Jay Miller** and **Dusty Hoffman** as subjects for his master's work, the first independent study of the Cybex machine.

What fascinates me about these studies is that they wouldn't capture public attention even though they speak clearly about how serious and professional our coaches were becoming by the mid-1970s. In part, this is a United Soccer Coaches legacy – and certainly a major reflection on **Dettmar Cramer, who in July 1970 at the Moses Brown School changed the direction of American soccer** (<https://www.socceramerica.com/publications/article/65829/remembering-dettmar-cramer-reminds-us-its-all-ab.html>).

Because so many of my lifelong friends are “soccer women” who first were soccer girls, there was a particularly special ferry ride across Elliott Bay to meet **Mary Harvey** on Bainbridge Island in May 2017. Her story about becoming a goalkeeper, how she trained early mornings at Cal and then kept her energy to play while working in Germany tells a lot about how our soccer women first became world-class.

This visit led later to a question about standing on the podium in Athens in '96 – gold medal around her neck, the national anthem begins playing – and she said a most beautiful thing. One part goes like this: “For whatever reason, at least as players whenever the national anthem played we typically weren't a singing group – we didn't typically *sing* the national anthem prior to games ... I would listen and I love the music, but to sing it ... I would listen and have my hand over my heart when it would play – but for some reason, maybe it was because it was the first time we were hearing the anthem after a game [she laughs], everybody sang. At the top of their lungs ...”

Brilliant image.

And when you know that women's soccer was first made an Olympic sport in 1996 because *another* American woman made it happen -- a person whose name is mostly unknown -- you begin to see a quintessential American story about imagination, self-less work, and persistence to ensure that, in the United States, girls and women have world-class opportunities, too.

SA: Were there any common themes about American soccer that came up during the process that you found remarkable? Or maybe some issues that that the interviewees felt were important to American soccer history that future generations should be cognizant of?

WILLIAM GORDON: I mentioned Thom Meredith's question “where are we in our development as a soccer nation?” – usually this was put in terms of our life cycle, and the overwhelming consensus is that we're leaving adolescence and entering young adulthood -- think of a kid 18-21 years old, heading out into the world with great hopes and talents, with all the maturities and immaturities this entails.

Soccer is a plural, ambiguous game in the U.S. -- it is loved for different reasons, and it has long served distinct purposes here -- educational, social, sporting, personal.

Soccer's history here is marked by internal conflict, rather than adequate cooperation, as our social and economic history makes clear -- it is an underdog game that very few Americans thought would become a major sport here, and until 20 years ago, there was no money to truly begin strategic planning and growth at national scale.



SA: Anything else you'd like to add or address?

WILLIAM GORDON: American soccer is a few years into a quantum leap forward in terms of our professional and international quality of play, both men and women, and I encourage everyone who loves a great underdog story to pay attention again in France next summer and to what happens between now and 2026.

Despite notable exceptions, my view contrasts with many mainstream and cottage-industry soccer journalists and a surprising number of historians.

On the whole, there's a troubling distance between those aware of our history, especially since the 1950s, and those who first experienced soccer in the U.S. within the past 30 years.

The former understand that soccer exists where it does because people in those communities built it, not because someone in national soccer leadership decreed or granted that it be made available in some places but not in others.

They also offer reasonable perspective about becoming an excellent soccer nation – starting from statistically zero American children playing soccer in the late 1960s, what country has come farther, faster and more enduringly than the United States of America?

The latter, quite normally, look at what they see on TV from England and Germany and Mexico, or what they experience when traveling to long established soccer nations, and then compare their experience here. Practical analysis that flows from this can generate great progress, as we see from those working in our high-performance youth, collegiate, pro, and international environments.

Too often, unfortunately, one hears comparisons used to support conclusions that, directly or indirectly, claim that those who've done most to create opportunity and improve our quality of play have failed, are incompetent at best, or are corrupt.

Such are our times.

What I'd like to add is a simple thought that if more of the latter would seek out more of the former for genuine conversation and understanding, we could hold together our excellent traditions and accomplishments with a sober, resolved recognition that work remains to expand the game to all children in the United States, to improve and mature the quality of experience for all, and to sustain our leap toward excellent quality play.

A proper sense of pride in our soccer inheritance need not blind us to work we must carry on. For me, this offers a compelling sense of purpose, a call to continue the intelligent and dedicated effort to leave our game, when our time comes, more perfect than we found it.

I spoke with people everywhere around our country who practice this preaching every day.

6 comments about "America's Soccer Story: William Gordon on appreciating the builders".

Rick Golden (/people/goldenr/), January 8, 2019 at 9:25 a.m.

Absolutely fantastic article. It gives a wholistic view of the history of soccer in America. I would like to watch the documentary when it comes out. Does anyone know what platform it will be on?

Reply ()

R2 Dad (/people/R2Dad/), January 8, 2019 at 1:48 p.m.

This is a great feel-good story and article, and I look forward to the documentary Mr. Gordon produces. I'm glad this guy spent the time he did to reach out to all of these founders of the sport, before their stories and history become lost. Perhaps this might run as a AV element in Frisco?

However, I do take exception to some of the content here as a misreading of the dissatisfaction with USSF in this country:

1) "On the whole, there's a troubling distance between those aware of our history, especially since the 1950s, and those who first experienced soccer in the U.S. within the past 30 years." - We don't live in a vacuum. Great progress has been made, but if we look around greater progress has been made by countries with fewer resources and fewer people.

2) "what country has come farther, faster and more enduringly than the United States of America?" Iceland, North Korea, Wales, Japan, off the top of my head. The smug attitude of American exceptionalism is still alive and well without any triumphs to back this up on the men's side (ladies of the USWNT, you have kicked ass for 20 years now).

3) "claim that those who've done most to create opportunity and improve our quality of play have failed, are incompetent at best, or are corrupt." People are allowed to make a living in this sport, but when their vested interests combine with voting power to sustain those vested interests, righteous indignation will inevitably bubble up should the status quo not deliver for the greater good. It's been 15 years since the 2002 world cup and the status quo has not delivered on that promise. All is not well, but this is no disrespect to the builders mentioned above.

4) "Such are our times" is a nod to the current political mess we're in, but that has nothing to do with soccer, the USSF, or professional soccer in this country. Maybe wrt FIFA and the world cup, but I see these as totally separate.

Good call-to-arms at the end, but the problem we have in this country is structural--more of the same will expand rec pay to play, which is OK I guess. But that won't help us get over the hump at the international level, and failing to qualify for the 2018 world cup is exhibit A on How we are failing. I'd like to see more analysis on the Why we are failing, but those vested interests are incapable of such objective analysis. This doesn't need to be personal; we don't need to freeze out non-believers; this isn't a religion.

Reply ()

Kevin Leahy (/people/colleen1/), January 8, 2019 at 6:15 p.m.

I find this work fascinating. Wish he would have had the opportunity to speak with Nicholas Kropfelder. He played in the 40's & 50's. He became a referee & coach. Even in his retirement days still took in games @ every level. I know there are people all over this country from that era who did a

lot for the game out of pure love of the game. These are the people that made me fall in love with game.

Reply ()

Bradley Rogers (/people/bradrogersau/), January 9, 2019 at 9:14 a.m.

Excited to learn more...it seems so easy to lose important parts of history in our patchwork quilt of a country.

Reply ()

Comment

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