

# CLASS ACT

article and photos by Brandi Ortega

If you're a fan of lush, green scenery, take the drive out of San Francisco to Walnut Creek in the San Francisco Bay Area. Once across the Bay Bridge, merge onto CA-24E, a designated scenic highway by the California Department of Transportation. Through the Berkeley Hills by way of the Caldecott Tunnel, the route winds its way in and around miles of gently sloping hills.

If you're a fan of soccer, continue onto Ygnacio Valley Road and take the exit to Heather Farm Park. There, nestled among baseball fields, a pond and a lake, trees, picnic areas and tennis courts, are two neatly manicured soccer fields. Walk across the bridge that spans the small stream separating the two fields and you'll find Magnatude, a

girls' U-9 team from the Walnut Creek Soccer Club, training in the early evening. If you happen upon Field Two on a wintry Tuesday as I did, you'll find the girls running up and down the lighted field under a gray sky streaked with oranges and pinks as the sun sets behind distant mountains.

In the midst of the gaggle of girls stands a slim figure in soccer warm-ups and cleats directing the defense. She stands only a few inches taller than some of the girls and from a distance she could easily be mistaken for one of the players. What really sets her apart — other than her shortly cropped hair in a sea of ponytails — is the air of calmness that surrounds her as she brings the ball down with her left foot, never once looking down, eyes on the goal.

The girls swarm around her, each trying to take the ball away. She steps over the ball, sending two players in the wrong direction, and then stops, foot on the ball, surveying her options.

The girls pause and then one yells out, "Don't let her trick you!"

The girls advance and a smile spreads across her face. It's too late. She executes a series of moves that throw the remaining defenders off. Still smiling, Sisleide do Amor Lima, better known as Sissi, pushes forward, ball never leaving her feet.

## Order of Magnatude

The fields at Heather Farm Park are a far cry from the streets of Esplanada, Brazil, where Sissi grew up playing futsal and soccer. Gone are the days of playing with anything she could fashion into a ball, including rags, socks and the heads of her dolls.

Still fit at 45, the mother of two still plays whenever she can and trains by herself to stay in shape. Coaching, however, now fills up much of Sissi's time. Along with her head coaching job at Las Positas College in Livermore, Calif., she coaches





competitive club teams in the WCSC. Since the college and club teams aren't in season, Sissi helps train Magnatude, a U-9/U-10 team in the WCSC.

The Walnut Creek Soccer Club has competitive soccer teams but roughly 75 percent of the kids in the club play in the recreational division, as does Magnatude. The players' different playing levels, combined with their ages, has made for a different coaching experience for Sissi, but one that she relishes.

"This U-9 team is a delight, but you're going to have kids that struggle and you need a lot of patience," she explains. "You can see the way they process information is very different, so you do have to have a lot of patience at this young age. You see that they are hungry to learn and I enjoy it. I really do."

When I ask the team how they're doing, the kids pause and then speak up.

"Well...", several start to answer, shrugging their shoulders as their voices trail off.

Magnatude's head coach, Maurice Plaza, says the team has had a rough start but that it hasn't deterred the players.

So I ask if they're having fun, and this time the answers are instantaneous.

"Yes!"

Will they continue playing?

"Yes!" the team calls out.

And that's the reaction that pleases Sissi.

"I tell them not to look for results. It's not about winning. It's about every day learning something and becoming a better player."

## Your Attention, Please.

Working with younger players can present a unique challenge for coaches. Players need to work and develop the technical skills at an early age but keeping them engaged is sometimes a problem.

"What I try to make sure is that even though we work one-hour-and-a-half, they work hard," Sissi says. "But I have to make sure I let them have fun, because it's very important at this age that the kids have fun, but honestly, this group I'm working with right now are very serious about learning. Yes, once in awhile you have to stop and say, 'Hey, you have to pay attention.' But they are a very dedicated group, and I think they are starting to say, 'I want to be like Abby Wambach. Oh, I want to be like Alex Morgan.'"

Factor in the multitude of other sport options players can choose and coaches face a real problem trying to keep the talented athletes involved with soccer. Coupled with burnout, coaches must find a balance between work and fun for younger soccer players.

"I understand that it's very different here because all these kids do different sports. At this age they need to be able to do these things and later on make a decision," says Sissi. "You have kids that can be very good in lacrosse, in soccer, and you cannot at this age make them make a decision."

"I always say make sure kids have good coaches at this young age because that's the age when you can definitely develop skills. When they're 16, 17, they should already have the [skills] package and that's when you work more on the tactical stuff, but for the technical stuff, this is the age you make sure you work with them."

## Snap Judgments

Not all players develop at the same rate, and young players pegged early on as stars may not ever reach their full potential. Conversely, young players can fall through the elite club cracks, written off too early.

Morgan, a teammate of Sissi with the California Storm of the Women's Premier Soccer League, started club soccer at the age of 14, an age at which many players have already been playing competitively for several years.

So do we in the United States write off players too early and perhaps miss the diamonds in the rough?

"Yes, it's hard sometimes when coaches make a judgment too soon and say, 'Oh, yeah, I don't think she's going to be able to play.' You're going to see a kid that maybe doesn't have the same skills," Sissi says, "but you have to make sure you give the kid a chance to develop. It's all about you as a coach: what you want, what you're looking for and making sure you give kids a chance to develop. You can't always start to judge, especially at a young age."



## Two-Year Adjustments

Against a backdrop of vineyards and hills sits Las Positas College, roughly 40 miles southeast of San Francisco. Sissi started as an assistant coach with the college in 2004.

Soccer at the junior college level was a shock for Sissi. Having played with several players out of the NCAA's Division I, she was accustomed to a certain level that wasn't there with the players.

"I was invited as an assistant coach and honestly, at the beginning, I didn't know the difference between JC [junior college] and university. I thought it was the same, so I was shocked when I went to my first practice with the team because of the level, the quality of the players, the desire, everything was very different."

Soccer coaches at junior colleges face a hurdle their four-year counterparts don't. At most, coaches have players for two years before they transfer or quit playing altogether, making it tough to establish continuity from season to season. Recruiting, competitive at any level, is hampered by commitment levels often dictated by outside factors such as jobs. For Sissi, preparation is key, whether in

training or managing expectations, and it's a theme she comes back to time and again during our talk.

"Every season is very different so you never know how many players you're going to get, the talent. All these things that you always have to prepare yourself for — that you might not have a good team every season."

She is self-admittedly an "intense" coach so I wonder how she has adapted her coaching philosophy to handle the player turnover. Being upfront and direct helps.

"Because the commitment is not going to be the same, I try to say what I'm looking for: This is who I am, so are you in or are you out?" she explains. "You have to be prepared that you might not have excellent players. It's very hard because a lot of kids, what they want to do is basically be part of the team but they don't want to transfer to a four-year college and play."

## Coach to Parent

Sissi is a mother to two children: Michael, 7, and Madison, 5. Michael started playing soccer last year. I wonder if she's ever been the "crazy" parent that she deals with as a coach.

"When I go to his games, I try to be his mom and support him and try not to coach," Sissi says. "I've been on the sideline as a parent and it's crazy to see how the parents can be out of control. Calm down. Don't already create high expectations. The kids want to go and have fun. It's tough, he knows that. When I go, I try to be quiet and talk after when he wants to address something but try not to go and be screaming."

It's easier to tell parents how to support their soccer-playing kids but it's often a different story when the shoe is on the other foot.

"I try to teach him to listen to his coach — you're going to go out there and you're going to have fun, okay? I try the same

thing talking to the parents. I try to get them to let those kids make mistakes but it's hard because every single parent wants to coach their own child."

## Brazilian Coaching Flavor

When Sissi arrived in the United States to play in the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) for the San Jose CyberRays, the direct, physical style of play was an adjustment for her.

"It was hard for me, when I came and played in the WUSA, it was very different for me because in Brazil everything there is about finesse, the possession game, the creativity — that sometimes is a natural for us."

She adjusted her game and in doing so, added to her understanding of the American player that has helped her grow her overall coaching philosophy.

"It was hard for me to ask them [the players] to put that [the Brazilian style] out on the field, to change, because everything here is direct, fast-paced, very physical. I had to make some adjustment to my game itself. I think it helped me to have a better understanding."

Most of Sissi's time in the beginning of a season is spent working on players' technical skills, instilling in them the need for repetition with the promise that it will yield results on the field.

"I try to work more on technical skills. There are a lot of things these kids still miss — composure, patience with the ball — because everything's fast-paced, long balls. Of course, when you are 18, it's very hard to break habits."

"There are times that I get frustrated," she admits, "because I know it's very hard to change that. But I see kids later on change and that for me is more [rewarding] than anything."

"They start to understand why you have to do a lot of repetition — that's what we did

in Brazil is a lot of repetition. I understand that sometimes it's very frustrating [for them] because they want to kick and run, you know?"

"Sometimes it's a challenge but as a coach that's my job and I try not to change and make sure that I still keep the Brazilian style with me because it's very important."

## Futsal to Futebol

Sissi grew up playing futsal, as most players do in Brazil. The smaller futsal space lends itself to producing creative and technical players comfortable with possession. On the men's side, the FIFA Futsal World Cup Championship has never been held by a country other than Brazil (five titles) or Spain (two titles). FIFA has yet to sanction a women's tournament but there is an international tournament in which Brazil has won all three times it has been staged.

"I played futsal in Brazil for seven years and I believe that I was a better futsal player than outdoor player. Futsal helped me in terms of thinking because you have to think very fast. You have to move all the time. You have to have good control of the ball."

She believes in futsal's benefits so much that she makes it mandatory for her players to play. At Las Positas, Sissi teaches a futsal class in addition to teaching a class on the traditional version of soccer many are more familiar with.

"Now that I'm coaching for Walnut Creek [Soccer Club], we have a league here in Concord, and I make it mandatory for the kids to play futsal. With the outdoor team, I try to make sure they play small-sided games, five against five, and they start to see the difference."

"It's hard at the beginning and I know the first thing they want to do is run but I have to explain to them that this is very different. You have to keep the ball moving all the time, and everything's about how fast you can think in a small space. You have to make sure you work on your touches. Some of the kids change a lot. I see, especially here in my club, a real change from the kids that start to play futsal at a young age. My team sees the difference when they go to the big field."

Futsal favors the fleet of thought and not necessarily the fleet of foot, a point Sissi explains between the differing playing styles in Brazil and the United States.

## That Messi Guy

Watching soccer isn't only for her players. Sissi watches a lot of soccer, including Barcelona and Arsenal. Since she mentioned Barcelona, I ask Sissi about Lionel Messi.

"Oh, my gosh, the only thing that I don't like about Messi is he's from Argentina, but that's the only thing that I don't like. Why wasn't he born in Brazil or even another country, but why Argentina?"

"I always say when I go to the field, I talk with the ball. I try to have a conversation with the ball. I believe that's exactly where you can see he loves what he does. It's unbelievable. It's rare for you to see and it's natural. It's unbelievable. I do love Barcelona not only because of Messi but because of the way they play."





“Here, there is a taste for players that are very different than in Brazil. There, it’s not how fast you can be but how fast you can think,” she says. “It’s very important to us to use that on the field. You don’t necessary have to be freaky fast — the game’s about thinking.”

### Watch and Learn

Soccer in the United States consistently ranks among the top participatory sports. Yet, getting those same kids who play soccer to attend a match or sit and watch a game on television is difficult, a problem Sissi knows all too well.

“Before it was hard. When I asked them if they knew who Marta was? ‘Oh, I don’t know.’ Do you watch soccer? ‘Oh, I don’t.’”

“So I made the U-9 team watch the tryouts for the WPSL. I encouraged them to come to my tryouts because you have college kids, you have players that played professionally before, so come and watch and see the environment.”

“If we have a good game [on television] over the weekend,” she continues, “I say watch for 20 minutes and I want you to learn what they did, what you think you can add to your game.”

Watching US Women’s National Team players such as Abby Wambach and Alex Morgan has inspired Sissi’s U-9s to work harder. She says her U-9s now want to “be like them.”

“So you want to be like them?” she asks her players. “You have to work hard every day. You need to make sure you watch soccer, even if it’s for 10 minutes.”

Her encouragement is paying off, though slowly.

“They’re all finally recognizing these athletes. If I go now and ask them, do you know who Alex Morgan is? ‘Oh yes, I know.’ I try to make sure they know exactly what’s going on around the world – the league in Germany, in France and in England. It’s not there yet but it is changing.”

### Brazilian (Non)Development

Brazil. The United States. Brazil + The United States = Compelling soccer moments. None more so than the quarterfinal match between the two teams during the 2011 Women’s World Cup.

Since Sissi is an avid watcher of the game, I ask if she watched the match.

“I did watch and couldn’t believe what happened, and to explain to my friends the next day was almost impossible. I think we played well and had our chances to move on but when you play against a team like [the] US you cannot relax for a minute [...] Anyway, that loss was hard to digest.”

It’s been more than 10 years since Sissi has made an appearance for the Brazilian National Team. In 1999, the team placed third in the Women’s World Cup. The next seminal moment for the team was beating the United States in the semifinals of the 2007 Women’s World Cup. It wasn’t just that Brazil beat the US. They *beat* the United States, and would eventually fall to Germany in the final. Add two Olympic silver medals to the mix and expectations have been increasingly high for Brazil.

Though expectations have increased, support from the Brazilian Football Confederation has not. I ask Sissi how she feels about the development of the women’s side in Brazil.

“You have one of the players [Marta] that delights everybody when they watch her but the way our Confederation is doing things in Brazil, unfortunately, is not helping women’s soccer in Brazil.”

“Every time we have a competition, the time for preparation is not enough,” she explains. “They think the problem is solved by talent alone. It’s not going to happen because the game has changed a lot. When you have a competition and you get together one month before, that’s not enough [time], so that has to change.”

Coaching stability is also a factor, Sissi says.

“And now we change coaches every year, we are always bringing in a new coach and I don’t know if that — we have to stick with one [coach], plan something, plan ahead of time.”

The lack of competition, both within Brazil and in friendlies, has also hindered development.

“Give a chance to the kids to be in competition. We don’t have any competition before World Cup. We don’t go and compete against the best teams. We don’t have that and it’s very sad because we do have a lot of talent in Brazil, but I don’t think talent [alone] is going take to the next level.”

Sissi says the Brazilian Confederation has changed and not for the better. And lest you think the rivalry with the United States is recent, note that Brazil has always made it a goal to beat the United States.

“We [prior squads] had a chance to be together three or four months before. Our goal was always to beat the U.S. It was always there, yes. We always want to beat U.S. so we had a goal and we had the support, even though it was not that much, but our confederation was very different at that point.”

“Right now, I don’t understand why they don’t pay attention. We don’t have the competition in college, so sometimes the kids go play futsal. If not, they’ll not do anything so it’s hard. At the last minute, they’ll call the national team in and go and play. And I know players are frustrated because of that. We don’t have the resources. We should, but we don’t. All the effort is put toward the men’s side more than the women’s. I don’t know when it’s going to change. We’ve been discussing this for many, many years and it’s hard to change them.”

## Foreign Exchange

The National Women’s Soccer League is set to launch league play in April of 2013. The United States Soccer Federation, the Mexican Football Federation and the Canadian Soccer Association will pay the salaries of their national team players playing in the league.

Since Brazil lacks a college soccer program, I ask Sissi if it would help women’s soccer in Brazil if the Brazilian Football Confederation were to participate.

“I hope we can be open to do that,” she

says. “Like I said, the way we see women’s soccer here [in the United States] is very different than the way we see it in Brazil. I hope that can happen. I think the Mexican players are going to benefit by doing this. Same thing with Canada. I wish those kids [Brazilian players] can have a chance to play; I know they are desperate to have a chance to play soccer elsewhere, I know that. Because I have had a chance to talk to them.”

“We can give a chance to those kids to still play and I think that the national thinking can benefit, too. It’s something that I hope they can look for, but can our Confederation be open? I don’t know.”

Sissi played in the WUSA and for FC Gold Pride in the Women’s Professional Soccer league. Both leagues folded.

“I’m excited for this new league,” she says. “You know, I want to see how it’s going to work and I hope we can survive because it’s tough. Every year we finally get excited, watch games and after, the league folds. I hope this league can stick around so at least the kids will have something, not only go to college and play but still do what they love to do. But I’m excited.”

## Hindsight

Sissi interacts with players of all ages so I ask her what advice she would give to her 16-year-old self if she met her on the street.

“My advice is you have to keep working hard, you have to believe in yourself. That’s very important. Dreams come true and you have to make sure you work hard and have that desire and set your own goals because that’s very important,” she says. “Don’t let anyone say that you cannot do it. I believe that everything is possible. It’s belief in yourself number one and make sure that every time you leave the field say, ‘I left everything.’”

“After having the chance to play for the national team, play in World Cups, that is when I look back and see everything — all the sacrifices I made to achieve my goal, oh my gosh. It’s like — words cannot describe. It was a lot of effort, it was timing, it was a lot of sacrifice that I had to make, but you know in

the end, when I look back on my career and all the things that I achieved as a person, as a player, as a friend, as a daughter, I don’t have any regrets. If I had to do everything again, I’d probably say yes. I would. My advice is to

## Sisleide do Amor Lima

**Place of birth:** Esplanada, Brazil  
**First cap:** age 16

Participant in two Summer Olympic Games (1996, 2000) and three Women’s World Cups (1991, 1995, 1999).

### Individual Honors

1999: FIFA Golden Boot Award (with China’s Sun Wen)  
1999: FIFA Silver Ball Award  
2001-2003: All-WUSA First Team  
2002: WUSA Humanitarian of the Year Award  
2005: WPSL League MVP

make sure that you don’t let people say that you cannot do it and always follow your dreams.”

## Soccer = Everything

The sun has completely set behind the hills. Lights come on as a boys’ team takes the field. As she changes out of her cleats - into futsal shoes - we chat about goals. She encourages her kids and players to achieve something every day, whether it’s learning something new in school or on the soccer field.

Conversation with Sissi is easy. She’s a natural facilitator, not surprising for a playmaker who led the WUSA in 2001 with 10 assists.

Kids, younger siblings of the boys now on the field, run around, kicking soccer balls. A couple of errant passes head our way, and without breaking sentence stride, Sissi one touches the balls back to their owners. Her eyes are always on the ball, wherever it might be.

Earlier, I asked Sissi to tell me what soccer meant to her in one word.

“That’s tough,” she said. “I would say everything. I would say life. Yes, I would say that. Soccer gave me a lot. I made a lot of friends. I had a chance to go to places and soccer made me a strong person, made me know my limits, challenge myself, learn a different language, so it’s everything.” ■