

It wasn't the prettiest goal I scored. But it might have been the most important

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Sports highlights are so much fun to watch – all those hand-of-God goals, the bend-it-like-Beckhams, the spin-o-ramas, the Hail Mary passes. It's poetry in motion, partners executing choreographed moves with strength and grace. When I juggle a soccer ball, I sometimes come close to a Zen-like state, feeling, just for a fraction of a second, that total self-awareness in space, effortless balance, kinetic poise.

But sometimes, all that really matters is to put the ball in the net.

I once found a photo of my grandfather, Giuseppe Nardella, as a young man on a horse. Or more precisely, a photo of him hovering over a horse, defying gravity in a parallel dismount worthy of an Olympic gymnast. At 21, he was in complete control of his body, strong and agile, with enough gumption to spare to look right into the camera with the cocky assurance of youth.

As far as I could remember back to my childhood, my grandfather had always been ill. He was in and out of hospitals regularly (angina attacks, mostly). He had a slow, deliberate walk, a dry sense of humour and a vintage 1962 Chrysler in mint condition.

In his impoverished youth during the First World War, he was taken out of school at an early age to work in the fields, like most boys in the Italian village of San Marco in Lamis. For days on end, the boys would sleep in empty watering troughs, staying warm under makeshift burlap covers, surviving on bread and water and occasionally sneaking away to eat a raw egg or onion without getting caught. Truth be told, his later military service was probably the first time he experienced the comforts of being properly housed, fed and clothed.

Giuseppe moved to Canada in 1927, the second of four brothers to make the trip to

Montreal. His father, Michele, had come earlier on a reconnaissance trip and deemed the new country full of opportunity. Over a period of years, as quickly as Michele could raise the money, he brought his four sons here, one at a time. Once they were all settled, he returned to Italy.

Giuseppe never again saw his parents, his four sisters, or Italy. He seemed at peace with that. The old country had represented nothing but poverty and hardship. Canada was the promised land where he and his brothers could work hard, earn a wage and build a better life. Giuseppe built his own home, brick by brick, every night after putting in long hours at the quarry.

His move to Canada hadn't been easy; there were quotas on Italian immigrants and he had to first spend time in another Commonwealth country, Australia. His ocean voyage from Melbourne to Vancouver nearly killed him. Years later, in his fractured French, he would tell us about the unsanitary conditions on the ship, the seasickness and the men who jumped overboard when they could no longer endure. When he couldn't find the right words, his voice would trail off, and the silence spoke volumes.

He had four grandchildren – all girls – and we were precious to him. When I was 4, my wrist was crushed when I accidentally stuck my hand out from the back seat just as my mom was closing the car door. There was blood, and some shrieking, as my aunt drove us to the nearest hospital. Giuseppe was worried sick when he heard the news and paced all night, according to my grandmother. Apparently, he didn't sleep a wink, even after I was home safe and sound, bandaged up but relatively unscathed.

We saw my grandparents every Sunday for dinner, always at their home. But one hot summer night, when I was 11, they came to our house. I can't remember why they drove to Boucherville on a weeknight – that 1962 Chrysler didn't venture to the suburbs all that often – but I remember feeling a bit of extra pressure knowing that Giuseppe would be coming to the park with my dad to watch my soccer game.

I don't know what my grandfather thought at the time; perhaps the crusty old Italian man in him was perplexed that preteen girls were keen to play this macho sport. But I like to think he was proud that I was playing soccer rather than North American sports such as hockey or baseball.

Perhaps, while watching me and my teammates on the field, he drifted back to his youth, nostalgic for the time when he could run and jump with carefree ease. And although it was definitely not as graceful as his equestrian prowess, I'm glad he saw that it was me who buried a rebound in a frantic goalmouth scramble, clinching the 1-0 victory in the dying moments.

When we got home after the game, my grandmother nodded approvingly when told of the victory and my role in it: "*Il va bien dormir ce soir*" ("he'll sleep well tonight"), she said quietly.

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