

Tracing Lost Time

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In San Diego of the mid eighties, Juli Vee was a player in the caliber of Cruyff, and a direct gateway to the heart of Boaz Goldberg's father. In Tel Aviv of 2011, in the midst of an ongoing family rift, the hero stepped out of the past and enabled the son to take a step he ceased to believe he's ever going to take

Soccer was what connected me and my dad. He claims the first word that came out of my mouth was "ball" and that at the age of three I used to bounce a nylon beach ball from one leg to another. He was a doctor of political science that idolized Elvis and the United States and worshiped the Israeli right-wing Likud movement. He turned me into a fan of Beitar Tel Aviv, a soccer club whose golden days were back in the forties, and until today is the butt of a joke that claims that you can fit all its fans into a public phone booth and still have enough room to bounce a ball.

Since the communication between us materialized through soccer, by the time I turned thirteen something started to go wrong. This is exactly why I want to write about a soccer star me and my dad were exposed to when I was twelve - in the mid eighties - when I lived for a whole year in San Diego with a sparkling spontaneous dad, a button collecting mom, a fifteen year old red haired sister that came straight out of "Pretty in pink" (both the film and the song), and a sweet, disarming three year old sister.

Through a player that was in the caliber of Cruyff but that no one in Israel has heard of because he was playing a different kind of soccer, I'll try not just to compare between America of those days and of today, but to also show how a twelve year old's childhood fascination with a star can inspire immense consequences regarding that very same star and your own father twenty five years later. The motivation behind this story is to show how it's possible to take a step you ceased to believe you're ever going to take.

V for voodoo

It's considered common knowledge that modern soccer was invented in England in the middle of the 19th century, but actually, soccer was invented twice. The second

time was in the United States, in December of 1978, in an age when America was busy coming up with ingenious video games such as “Frogger” or “Paperboy”. On a wider time scale, this was a few moments after the landing on the moon and a few seconds before China bypassed the United States in the global rat race, to look back on an American nation with millions of homeless and a monster national deficit.

Forget about Futsal or Five-a-side football. My dad and I named this new sport “indoor”, and regular soccer was suddenly “outdoor” to us. American indoor, which was never really mapped out, had the aroma of a haiku poem in a language that isn’t Japanese; what happens when you take one thing - soccer - and synthesize it successfully with something else (Meaning, apply the rules of The National Hockey League). After the collapse of the NASL in 1984, the MISL consisted of fourteen teams from all over the United States, boasting stars from Europe, Latin America, and even Israel (Benny Tabak and the late goalie Manny Schwartz).

The indoor was an American pop product that wasn’t shipped off to a factory in China, and that, combined with its high aesthetics, made it look great on television. It looked like a game of Lego or an old video game, flirted with the dynamics of table tennis and never sprang to life outside of the United States. Some of the MISL games were broadcasted from coast to coast on ESPN, and this in a time when the USA national soccer team wasn’t holding any games. The hunger for professional soccer was channeled entirely into indoor: Spectators on league games averaged on 10,000, and teams like The Tacoma Stars, or The Cleveland Force filled auditoriums of 20,000 seats and were more popular than NBA teams playing in their area.

The jewel in the crown of the league, the team that won the championship for the fourth time in a row in 1985, was The San Diego Sockers. The Sockers had some mean players from Yugoslavia, Poland, El-Salvador, Uruguay, Ireland, Germany, Nigeria and more. There were some excellent players from Iran, Iraq, Haiti, England, Italy and Greece. Man, The Sockers even had some hand-picked Yankees. But when the 1985-1986 season was nearing, The Sockers’ management convened a dramatic press conference and announced it was rehiring jersey number 22, a mere year after he was sold to The Las Vegas Americans and didn’t take part in the fourth championship: Juli Vee.

One of the slogans most associated with Hungary born number 22 - Juli Veee, as he came to be known in America, was “Veee for victory”, for his trademark wave of the hands after scoring a goal, depicting the letter V. I say: “Veee for voodoo”. When the ball reached his feet, it seemed as if it was sewn from the very skin of the goalies and defenders trembling in front of him. His touch was supernatural. He always knew when to shoot the goal and when to pass to another player.

He had a full, fair and smooth head of hair, high cheekbones and wise eyes. He was tall and stylish - a devastatingly handsome man - but also a painter, a bohemian, a collector of books that described himself as an atheist. Veee was an artist playing soccer and not a soccer player kicking artistically. Like a DJ mixing different kinds of music, he could keep an eye on the ball and on the players in the field simultaneously. His delivery was every bit as good as Jordan’s fade-away jump shots - poetry to sports lovers - but he excelled in a sport nobody outside the United States knew. At age thirty five and a half, after in many ways he was the first soccer star made in the United States, the playmaker entered a comeback phase in which he had to reinvent himself within a new sport he himself was one of the first to ever play. That’s exactly what I was looking for. Especially considering where I came from.

Greetings from Charles Manson

I came from Hadar Yosef, a neighborhood in north Tel Aviv with a legendary Falafel kiosk. Around 1981, at age seven, I would go down to the street with a ball, run around in the neighborhood from one game to the next and return home only in the evening. I was a serious player - my inspiration stemmed from Beitar Tel Aviv’s playmaker (and sometimes captain of the Israeli national team) - a classic number 10 named Nissim Cohen. Nissim was king, but Beitar was a loser. Toward the summer of 1985, on a wooden bench crying out for a fresh coat of paint, I told my classmates I’d be flying off to San Diego for a sabbatical my father received from the university. We’ve just sold our apartment in Hadar Yosef and bought a new one in Ramat Aviv, so one year held two new beginnings for me: one in Ramat Aviv and one in San Diego.

The school year in San Diego is divided differently from what I was used to in Israel. As early as July I found myself seating in sixth grade in “Chula Vista Elementary School”. It was a strange experience. Every morning we stood and recited the pledge of allegiance to the American flag, much like school children in the Soviet Union at that time. I was a little bit before puberty, so I didn’t know the Smiths’ most beautiful song, “Suffer Little Children”. Years later, I found out that San Diego of the mid-80`s was the perfect place for 60`s Garage-Punk-revival lovers like me (with local bands like The Morlocks). but back then, at the age of 12, I was moved by Prince’s “Purple Rain” and wrote my master thesis on hamburger restaurants, Mexican food and fried chicken (On a side note, it’s sad to learn that the Bob’s Big Boy restaurant chain went belly up a decade ago).

Having no one to play soccer with, I focused on bouncing the ball. I think we were the only normative family in the United States where both mom and dad didn’t have a driver’s license. Every place I was in – on the bus with the strange and deranged; in the most beautiful beaches in the world; eating in “Jack In The Box”; riding my BMX bike down streets that seemed to come straight out of the set of “Back to the Future” - I was searching for a star to look up to, an anchor to build my new San Diego identity around. I wanted to gain strength from a hero that got to all kinds of places and always knew how to win.

Juli Vee was born in communist Hungary as Gyula Visnyei on February 22nd, 1950. As a young boy he excelled in table tennis and at age eleven he started to play soccer. When he turned fifteen, officials in the Hungarian government asked him to focus on a single sport. Visnyei said: “Table tennis has an audience of six people”. He chose soccer. In 1969 he came out with Hungary’s U-21 national team for a series of games in Western Europe. During the trip Visnyei defected from the Hungarian team - absconded, took off, disappeared - tore the iron curtain and arrived at the land of the free. One of the first day jobs he found in L.A. was at the “Spahn Movie Ranch” - the same ranch where, two months earlier, Charles Manson and his “family” were arrested for the nightmarish murder of Sharon Tate.

In 1971 he signed with a team in the French major league. Visnyei thought his contract was for a single year, as was agreed, but he soon found out it was a multiple-

year contract. Feeling betrayed and cheated, he broke the contract, and in exchange the international football association (FIFA) dismissed him for five years. The man found himself back in the United States with a wife and a baby, and started gluing linoleum flooring for a living. In 1973 he signed with the NFL's Los Angeles Rams. The gifted soccer player was meant to be the team's kicker, but never got a chance to show his skills.

Only in 1975, after six years of not playing, a friend brought him to a practice session of the Los Angeles Aztecs, a team from the NASL, that wasn't bound by the laws of FIFA.

An American star

In those days the New York Cosmos management signed Pele on a \$7 million dollar contract, and there was a great buzz regarding the booming league. After the Aztecs' coach saw Visnyei bouncing a ball, he was handed a \$3,500 Dollar contract for a five months season. Upon signing, the team's management, in a stroke of creativity, came up with the American adaptation to his Hungarian name: Juli Vee.

At the end of the season Vee left the Aztecs and joined The San Jose Earthquakes, from which he catapulted to Europe and played in the Belgian major league for two seasons. In 1978, with a wife and two daughters, he landed in a team that was founded that same year as part of the NASL: The San Diego Sockers. Vee became the team's MVP and its biggest scorer until 1984. The Sockers started playing indoor at the end of 1980, after lending Vee for one indoor season (1979-1980) to the New York Arrows - the MISL champions until the Sockers got into the business. Between 1976 and 1982, Vee played in the USA national soccer team and starred in the all-star games of the outdoor and indoor leagues. The day I first saw him was one of these California days of early November, when a warm breeze whispers of a storm on the horizon: It was the first game the Sockers were hosting in the 1985/86 season, against Jerry Buss's Los Angeles Lazers.

Pre-bought tickets in tow, we arrived by bus at The San Diego Sports Arena and entered a sold-out auditorium: 12,888 taken seats. The audience sat all the way up to the court - a green turf floor the color of grass, the exact measurements of an ice hockey rink, demarcated by high plexiglass walls. I have to admit we came with a

haughty attitude, overlooking “those Yankees”, coming to the game to eat hot dogs. But suddenly, all the lights went out and invisible loudspeakers started playing heroic music. A huge disco ball started turning, sending specs of light into the air, and a smoke machine fogged the arena. The announcer started the show to the sound of Queen’s “We Will Rock You”.

A giant statue made of letters that spelled out “SOCKERS” started flashing in yellow and white in the southern goal area. The players came out of the “O” one by one, lit by a spot of light, and aligned in the middle of the court. And then, the announcer started stretching out syllables dramatically. Something was happening.

The announcer introduced Juli Veee, bellowing out:

“Double- deuce, triple- E, the one- and- only Juli Veee”. Veee shot out of the “O”, running with his head held high, his arms stretched out to both sides and his chin raised pompously, matador style. The crowd went wild. I sat there and couldn’t believe it.

The game kicked off. Every team was made up of a goalie and five field players. The game lasted a total of 60 minutes, divided into four quarters. I was exposed to a different kind of soccer that was tailored for a nation that would not have its gratifications delayed: No possibility of a tie, because the game went into overtime until someone scored a goal; There were almost no outs because American indoor allows the use of walls; The game played on at lightning speed and there was constant tension and contact, because players rotated on the fly. The Sockers’ coach, an English “Mr. Soccer” by the name Ron Newman, shuffled all the cards at his command by making fast rotations as the game evolved. Newman was a genius coach.

Back to Beitar Tel Aviv

When Juli Veee was on the field you could sense his presence immediately. Even during warm up he was worth focusing on: before a game he would retreat to a far corner of the field and perform intricate tricks combining ball and wall, as if in ritual. Veee was the reason my biggest dream was to become an indoor player, and I knew no one in Israel would understand what I was talking about. As the season progressed I wanted to know more and more about him. Where he lives, what he does after

games, what he dreams of at night, what he likes to eat, what kind of car he drives and what his wife looks like.

Toward the 1985/86 playoff games, that were played in “best-of-seven” format, the Sockers launched a campaign under the slogan “One For The Thumb” (named after the championship ring), in which the coach and the players recorded a catchy rap tune, the clip of which is now available on YouTube. In the playoffs themselves, the Sockers fell behind 1:3 against the Minnesota Strikers, and were plagued by a series of injuries. No team in the history of the MISL revived from a state such as this, but the Sockers won three consecutive games and became league champions for the fifth time in a row. It was perfect. At the final buzzer purple rain was pouring down on me. And then we returned to Israel.

I signed up for Beitar Tel Aviv’s youth team, but to my astonishment, my passion for the adult team grew cold. I started entering the world of music, and failed to find a connection between the bands I idolized and Israeli soccer. I left Beitar’s youth team and my father began going to the adult team’s games alone. I maintained the connection with the Sockers, making my dad stand every week from October to May in front of foreign news stands, scouring the fine print on USA Today’s sports section. This is how I knew Juli Vee was still playing. I was in junior high school those days and my best mornings were those in which my dad would wake me up to the sound of “One For The Thumb” playing in full volume on a seven inch record. These days, I can enter The San Diego Union- Tribune’s internet archive and learn that not all was peaches and cream for the indoor star after that “One For The Thumb” season. But one day in 1988, my father came home and announced that the Sockers are MISL champions again and that Juli Vee cooked goals and scored by the bulk. At the end of that season, at the age of thirty eight and a half, Vee retired from professional soccer. He ended his career with the Sockers with 254 goals, 214 assists and a variety of titles. In December of 1988 he still had a chance to lead The United States national team to third place in the five-a-side football world championship held in Holland.

San Francisco days

Three years later, when I was seventeen, we returned to the United States - this time for four months in San Francisco. Frisco’s a long way off from San Diego - mentally,

aesthetically, and definitely politically - but the moment me and my dad had a chance to see the Sockers again and get our relationship back on track, we were inseparable. The first time we rode for nine hours on the night bus. The second time we took a plane. All in all, we made the trip to The Sports Arena four or five times. We found out that the league had shrunk down to eight teams, that the number of spectators has lowered considerably as well (According to statistics, an average game had an audience of about 7,200), that there were more American players and that the aesthetics of the game were compromised. Suddenly, the players were not shooting out of a flashy statue, and the league management widened the goal posts to achieve even more scores per game. Times have changed. In a land where bigger is always better, America was at the age of supersize, and the national ego went to war in Iraq for the first time. Around that time, the successful MLS outdoor league started to emerge around the corner.

A few days before we returned to Israel, in the summer of 1991, we learned from a San Diego soccer magazine that Juli Veev and a few more Sockers Veterans were holding weekly games for their own enjoyment in a San Diego sports center, located in a place that can safely be called "wild America". Excited, we rented a room at a motel nearby that was run by a Mexican-American whose breath smelled of Taco Bell's Crunchy Meat Taco with jalapeno peppers - I recognized the aroma immediately. We couldn't care less that we were the only costumers, that the walls were dirty, the carpets stained, and the curtains sullen and droopy. The mere thought that in a few short hours we'll be witnessing Juli Veev model 1991 on the field was enough to turn the crumbling room into a thing of beauty. When the time came, we sat in a two row gallery and to be honest - our hearts went out to the men on the court, which had clearly seen better days. Unfortunately, Veev wasn't playing that night. We came back to Israel with six VHS tapes of games from the eighties we ordered from the Sockers' press officer.

Ironically, in the last days of the MISL, airing rights for the games were selling at especially low prices, which is why a year later the Israeli sports channel aired the Sockers' playoff series. It was a strange blend - a Sockers' game with a Hebrew speaking commentator. I don't remember seating in the living room and watching the games, but my dad taped it all on video. It was the last season of the first ever indoor

league. In the summer of 1992, when all the focus was on the 1994 World Cup event held in the United States, the MISL drowned in debt and broke up.

The way we were

Two months ago I sat in a pub with friends and each of us talked about his first kiss. When I got home, I searched Facebook for my first kiss in San Diego. And then I did something I hadn't done in a decade: I googled the Sockers. It turns out that two years ago the Sockers came back to life and that they've won two championships since. The league is named PASL now, and although tickets don't cost any more than fifteen dollars, an average game has an audience of about 2,500. The Sockers don't host in that same beautiful auditorium built in 1966, but in a new, soulless compound. But guess who's commentating the games on television.

Thanks to YouTube I saw him for the first time in his more mature version. What a joy it was. I was thrilled to learn that in 1997 he became the first athlete in San Diego County to enter The San Diego Hall of Fame. Juli Vee makes a living primarily by coaching youth teams, but I found his e-mail address in an internet site of an art gallery that sells his paintings - psychedelic images in the colors of the Californian desert that blend Native American aesthetics and Americana. I immediately emailed him, and attached a photo from 1986: a picture my father took of me and Vee in one of the public relations events the club threw. I signed with the sentence: "Love you 22 times".

Juli Vee answered me.

I sent him another e-mail, we set up an interview, and he began sending me some black and white photos. It turns out that his best friend is Stathis Orphanos, a well-known Greek-American photographer and the owner of Sylvester & Orphanos press. Stathis used to take Vee on trips around the United States, in which he photographed figures like novelist Philip Roth and his wife, actress Claire Bloom, in their home environment. This completely justifies the way I perceived Vee as a kid. I always sensed he was a unique soccer player. However, the photograph of Vee with Roth and Bloom has an air of American free spirit about it that I fear has gone out of this world. I think even McDonalds had more character in the eighties.

From past interviews I conducted with rock stars in my job as a music journalist, I learnt of the gap between the emotional intensities a childhood hero awakes in you, and that phone call between two strangers, years later. That same gap existed with Veee, but I discovered an honest guy that can break the ice in a few short seconds. “When are you coming to visit me in San Marcos?” he asks. Juli Veee has a steady voice, an Eastern-European accent, and an impressive vocabulary seasoned with Californian slang. “Make an effort to come, we’ll play tennis soccer”, he says. Then - in a replica reminiscent of Eastwood in “Dirty Harry” - Veee shoots: “You go ahead”. The interview begins.

I open with a series of questions about his fate as an indoor star - did he mind that American indoor was operating in a vacuum compared to the rest of the world? Veee answers that he has already given up on soccer, but America gave him a chance to create a persona and make good money off of it. He says the American dream is dying while we’re talking because “no American would pay a teenager 30 dollars an hour, while in India workers get paid 10 cents an hour”. “What kind of soccer did you enjoy more, outdoor or indoor?” I ask. “I enjoyed both”, he says, “but indoor was made for me. The moment I stepped on the field I knew exactly what to do and what role to play”.

I tell Veee there’s a lot of evidence to the claim that the world is becoming an uglier place. You can see it everywhere - in fashion, architecture, design. But rather than delve into a discussion about personal taste, I prefer to talk about money. This would be the key to understanding the changing times. “In the Sockers I made 125,000 dollars a year when the average contract was 35,000 dollars per season”, Veee tells me. “On my only season in Las Vegas, I made 180,000 dollars. Nowadays, an indoor team is made up of no more than thirteen players, the season is short and the owner spends 2,500 dollars per game on the players. That means they receive between 50 to 300 dollars a game. The economic situation in the United States affects everything”, he states. Veee’s right. The current league, at least as seen through YouTube, bears as much grandeur as an ice cream cone in McDonald’s.

A dramatic event in my life compels me to ask him if he ever experimented in drugs. “During my career I never smoked or drank, not even coffee”, he tells me. “After

retirement I dabbled in mushrooms, marijuana and peyote. Marijuana makes you incompetent. Mushrooms were more my thing”. What made the 1985-86 season the most exciting, even according to the Sockers’ history books? “We were all blue-collar men”, he explains. “We came from a working class background, we were accessible. Some American celebrities wouldn’t even hand an autograph to a kid”. Does Veev visit Hungary since he split? “I visited Budapest in 1989. Until then I would send money to my parents and they’d come visit me. By the way, I had a good life in Hungary - The state took care of me. But America was calling”.

The last question I ask him is how fatherhood fit into his life as a star. “I wasn’t such a great dad”, he laughs. “I spent a lot of time in practice and on the road. I always brought money home and the kids were nearby, but I wasn’t meant to be a family man. A few years after my second wife and I divorced I remarried her. Years later we divorced again and a lot of money was lost. I did the best I could. I think I’m a much better father today”.

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An ongoing misunderstanding led me and my father to a total rift that started four years ago, at the same time I let a certain woman into my life. She used to be my older sister’s best friend and one night, in the summer of 1989 in Ramat Aviv, I had a thing with her. I stored her in my memory as a mythological character, because we promised each other that “one day, it’s going to happen”. And so, in 2007, she and I suddenly met and realized we’re in love. The past caught up with the present: we declared our true love to one another, started talking about going to San Francisco for a year - and I gave up a relationship that was very dear to me. A month went by, all signs seemed to lead to a wedding, and I happily accepted the offer to have a child and start a family. Three and a half months later, while we were already living together for five weeks and she was two months into her pregnancy, the cloud of euphoria and purple haze we were living in burst without warning. She grew cold. It was gut-wrenching: she just flipped and turned. The plane crashed. And I, who thought I knew everything about eternal values, received a cold lesson about the difference between eternal values and a passing fancy.

Shaken and broken, I came out of the rubble, clinging to life and sanity. But the rift with my father deepened further, so much so that three years ago, when I decided to become a father despite that nightmarish experience, my father didn't even send an e-mail to congratulate me on the birth of my sweet, disarming daughter. I spent my time getting to know my daughter and conducting peace talks with the anger, pain and contempt surging inside me. I went to therapy for two years and delved into experimental music. I tried everything. I made some strange decisions and counted four years of estrangement from my dad. And then Veeve came along.

The thought of a complete rift with the man that was the exact same age as I am today when he brought me to San Diego and experienced the Juli Veeve story with me seemed ridiculous. I suddenly understood the reason for the rift and what a mistake it was. I felt a sense of urgency to make amends with my father, but for two weeks I couldn't bring myself to pick up the phone - I was afraid to make the call. One morning I just dialed my dad's number, feeling there's no more anger, judgment or denial, just acceptance. In a voice changed with the years, my father answered, and I told him things I never said before. Right after I told him how much I loved him, I filled him in on the news from Juli Veeve.

After the talk with my dad I went out and bought a soccer ball. The past caught up with the present, but this time in a different way. Now I'm bouncing the ball again, practicing for a tennis soccer tournament with Juli Veeve and getting ready to breathe in the air of southern California, the home of another hero of mine - author Dean Koontz. Lately I've been asking my daughter to say 'Juli Veeve'. The feeling I get from hearing her say those words is indescribable.