

FORT WAYNE, Ind. - Every student-athlete has their own path to reach the collegiate level. Their stories matter.

This is no different for Purdue Fort Wayne freshman Damon Almazan, who has a unique path and set of experiences that brought him to play collegiate soccer.

At three years old, he started training with his father. Two years later, he joined his first team. After two years there, he started following in his father's footsteps. Almazan started playing for Juventus, a club that his dad played for when he was young.

"My dad had the right path with his soccer career, but he made some bad choices along the way," Almazan said. "He didn't have the knowledge that I had from my dad. His path for me was to get me to learn the game and love it like he did, and then show me the path to take but let me take my own way from there."

"I feel like we're connected in a different way," Almazan said. "Like he's living his dream through me and I'm living my dream with his support."

When the time for high school soccer came around, Almazan made the decision to not play for Joliet West, his high school. He chose to follow a path in the club scene and look for more unique experiences for a bit longer.

While soccer is his primary sport now, he also loves playing futsal, and he started playing high level futsal early on. He even got the opportunity to travel to Brazil with his futsal team at age 14. The goal of this trip was not to improve on their futsal skills specifically, but to excel at soccer. He and his teammates trained with the Fluminense FC Youth Academy, a training subsidiary of the Serie A team.

"I grew up traveling without my family so it wasn't bad," Almazan said. "It was difficult because I didn't speak Portuguese, but overall it was a good experience because it gave me the confidence to be on my own now in college. At first I felt like an outsider because I was an American playing with a bunch of Brazilians. They looked at me funny until they saw me play."

Two years after his trip to Brazil, a scout from Tigres UANL came to watch him play in Illinois. The Tigres are a professional team in the Liga MX, and the 16-year-old Almazan excelled during the game that their scout came to see. The next day, Almazan was on a plane with the scout, a family friend, to head to Mexico to train with the Tigres UANL Youth Academy.

"I was with a bunch of players that came from nothing, kinda like me," Almazan said. "That felt a little bit more at home, especially because they spoke Spanish instead of Portuguese."

"It was a cool experience because they train so differently. Not just their playing style, but

how their trainings are run. I've never been more tired in my life."

It was a grueling training system that Almazan could have immediately reaped the benefits of, as he was offered a spot to play left midfielder for Tigres. Despite a professional offer, Almazan decided to play collegiate soccer first.

In the United States, Almazan won the state title with the Chicago Magic then received a call from the Wisconsin Red Star. They wanted him to come help them win the Wisconsin state title. He obliged, and did exactly what he promised. He led the squad to the title, giving him his second straight state title, in two different states no less.

Before committing to play at Purdue Fort Wayne, Almazan competed at the Prep4Pro trials in Virginia in 2019. This was an opportunity for him to compete against players coming out of college and professional ranks to see where he stacked up. He was the youngest player at the trials at 17 years old. After one week of training with Prep4Pro, Almazan competed with the team against Lionsbridge FC and the Richmond Kickers. They beat Lionsbridge FC 2-0 with Almazan on the left wing. He came off the bench against Richmond in front of a crowded arena after 65 minutes of play, scoring a deep volley from midfield. He was the only player to score for Prep4Pro against Richmond, which got him some attention from other pro teams.

FC Bruno's Magpies, a Second Division team in Gibraltar, offered Almazan the chance to play professionally and study in Europe. Since he has the goal of continuing his education and playing at the Division I level, Almazan declined the offer to play pro before attending school.

When it came to soccer, Almazan went through the majority of his career not playing for Joliet West, the high school he attended. He chose to play for clubs and get international experience. That changed in his senior year, when his friend asked him to try out for the team. He obliged, but did not guarantee that he would even play for the Tigers. He made the team and stuck with the team and led them to heights they had not ever reached.

When the season came, he shined on the soccer pitch even more. Donning the same number on his jersey as his father at the same high school, Almazan led the team in goals and assists. He led the team to its first PepsiCo championship and regional championship, while breaking team records for goals and wins in a season.

"I felt like I was the missing puzzle piece with that team," Almazan said. "When I'm on the field, I control the pace when I'm in there."

During his one season of high school soccer, he also had the opportunity to play futsal with the United States Men's National Team, but the tryouts were on the same day as the sectional tournament game to which he led Joliet West. The coach of the National Team told him he had to choose, so Almazan picked to finish his season with Joliet West. He

later received a call that allowed him to find a spot on a team that was playing against the National Team. Almazan got on the roster of experienced players that had been playing together for years, and he managed to score three goals against the National Team.

"That was a good experience for me," Almazan said. "Obviously I made some impact because the coach immediately followed me on all my social media."

During his senior year of high school, Almazan decided to attend Purdue Fort Wayne to play his collegiate soccer career. This was an experience that his father never realized, despite a full scholarship offer to play at Indiana. Almazan made his decision quickly, as he made his commitment to Purdue Fort Wayne less than a month after visiting campus.

While Almazan chose to attend school and play collegiate soccer, he also has a responsibility back home.

His father owns the Ladies Steel City FC, a member of the national second tier pro-am league, the United Women's Soccer League. The team is based in Joliet, Illinois and Almazan has also has a role to play with the team. As part-owner, Almazan attends practices to help the team prepare for games in the United Women's Soccer Midwest Conference and serves as a member of the team's Board of Directors. Almazan works closely with the players in agility drills and other daily practice activities. Ladies Steel FC is an expansion team that was set to make its debut in 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic.

In his freshman season with the Mastodons, Almazan will fight for playing time with 16 other newcomers to the program. Under first-year head coach Stephen Gorton, he and the Mastodons will be playing in their first season in the Horizon League.

"I am a person who likes to be in the learning process and experiencing new things," Almazan said. "I don't expect it to be easy to adapt to college and the playing style in college. My expectations for myself are to learn, improve and to better every single day."