

2011-12 Fred Stabley Sr. Writing Contest

Submitted by: University of Montana (Joel Carlson)

Originally appeared: GoGriz.com (Oct. 6, 2011)

Link: <http://www.gogriz.com/sports/w-soccer/spec-rel/100611aab.html>

Category: Coach profile

The Passion of Vijay Dias

It's like Oprah winning the lottery. Or Tom Brady getting the phone number of another supermodel. Or Lionel Messi discovering he has world-class talent in chess.

Add this to the "Life Isn't Fair" folder.

He won a high school soccer national championship at Louisville's Ballard High in 1999, he won an NCAA championship at Indiana as a senior in 2003, he was part of the Hoosiers' seventh national championship in 2004 as a student assistant coach, and he was working for the Indianapolis Colts in February 2007 when they won Super Bowl XLI.



And added to these spoils, Vijay Dias also got that hair? How is that fair? I didn't think you could double dip into life's bag of goodies like that. You get the titles, Jim at Jiffy Lube gets the hair. That's how it's supposed to work. It's that balance that keeps society from unraveling at the seams and spiraling out of control and into anarchy.

It's perfect. Not perfect like he spends an hour in front of the mirror, primping and preening to get it just right, but perfect like he wakes up, runs his fingers through his thick, dark mane and he's out the door, ready to conquer the world.

It's 2011, so I feel safe admitting to a full-blown man crush. I'd even elevate it to a full-on bromance, but it probably only goes one way. And it's mostly about the hair anyway.

Vijay Dias, who is working as a volunteer coach with the Griz soccer team, makes an odd pairing with coach Mark Plakorus.

Plakorus is short and thick. If his life was being broadcast on television, the announcers would use the term "fireplug" to describe him, because even with decades of broadcast history behind us, that's the best moniker we've come up with.

Dias is tall and was originally cut from the genetic bolt of cloth marked "athletic specimen." Just walking the sideline, with his eye on practice, he glides with the graceful movements of a dancer. Like you could just say the word and he could immediately perform a perfect backflip and nail the landing without straining anything.

Plakorus drives his truck to practice at South Campus Stadium. Dias rides a beat-up bike and makes it look like he should be pedaling down the runway at a New York City fashion show. When you can pull that off with a Griz soccer T-shirt and ratty practice shorts, you know you've got it going.

Both would take on a brick wall to win. Plakorus would run through it. Dias would slip over the wall like a hurdle, hardly breaking stride or a sweat. They'd both overcome the wall, then high-five on the other side. That's why they make an effective coaching tandem.

And of course Plakorus is bald and Dias has the hair of a Greek god. (We don't know this for certain, with only marble busts to guide us, but you think Zeus, the god of sky and thunder, rocked a mullet or went for a high and tight? No way.)

Plus Dias has the light facial hair to complete the male model look, which he was briefly while making a run at a spot on the New York MetroStars (that's professional soccer!) a few years back. Think: the Marlboro Man meets Wall Street meets Fifth Avenue. That's Dias.

Sigh. And the rest of us believe we've won the day when we make it home from work and all three traffic lights were green.

For some reason Dias is in Missoula, kicking balls around South Campus Stadium with Erin Craig and Lauren Costa and the rest of the Grizzlies instead of showing up in ads in GQ, kicking it alongside Taylor Fuchs.

It's because deep down he's a soccer player, and he is still chasing his dream.

The road to the realized dreams of youth – especially when sports are involved – is littered with stories of disappointment. This is not one of them.

Dias was an all-state soccer player at Helena Capital as a freshman and sophomore. The Bruins won a state championship in 1997, Dias's sophomore season, with a 2-0 victory over Whitefish.

With bedtime thoughts of playing top-level soccer at the collegiate level nightly dancing in his head – UCLA! Indiana! – and two years of prep and club soccer remaining as a means to get there, Dias looked east.

His brother-in-law, Paul Petrino, was coaching wide receivers at the University of Louisville at the time, and Louisville also happened to be home of one of the nation's top prep schools for soccer – Ballard High! – and one of the top club programs – Javanon!

"I was developing, and I realized that if I wanted to play at a high level in college I needed to go somewhere where I could get some exposure," Dias recollects more than a decade later.

"Both my parents supported me, so (in the spring of my sophomore year) I went out and did a little investigating. I trained with Javanon, and I learned the (coach at Ballard) had played at Indiana and won a national title.

"It never hurts to have a coach who has direct ties to the program you want to go to."

Dias did everything he could on the soccer field to capture the attention of legendary Indiana coach Jerry Yeagley, who led the Hoosiers to national titles in 1982, '83, '88 and '98 and again in the fall of '99 when Dias was a senior and bleeding not just red, but IU crimson.

In the fall of 1999, the Ballard Bruins went 27-0 and won the NSCAA (mythical) national title. Dias captained the team and earned all-America honors.

That winter Javanon traveled to the Tampa Bay Sun Bowl, one of the most important recruiting tournaments on the calendar, and returned home with the title.

Dias did all he could outside of driving the 100 miles from Louisville to Bloomington, showing up at the Yeagleys' home and announcing, "I want you. You need me. Let's make this happen."

Dias was at practice the day the call came, when Coach Yeagley phoned the Petrino household.

"I was just floored," Dias said. "He was a legend, and he possibly wanted me to come play for his program."

An official visit was made. A scholarship and a spot on the team were offered. A dream was realized.

Even though Indiana was coming off back-to-back national championships, Dias started half the games his freshman year. The Hoosiers went 16-7 in 2000 and advanced to the national semifinals.

IU went 18-4-1 in 2001 and lost in the national championship game to North Carolina. In 2002 Indiana went 15-4-2 and lost in the regional semifinals to Connecticut.

Dias played wide midfielder for 70 percent of his career in IU's 3-5-2 system, "and we didn't zone anywhere on the field. The two outside midfielders were responsible for covering end line to end line."

He says this with a surprising degree of cockiness (a chink in the armor!), but then he laughs, runs his fingers through his hair, and all is forgiven.

His senior season was a fairytale (his word). Dias and Coach Yeagley would go out together, though one to a little more fanfare than the other.

There was, however, the small matter of making Yeagley the all-time winningest coach in NCAA men's soccer history.

Stephen Negoesco, who coached at San Francisco from 1962 to 2000, retired with a 39-year record of 540-172-66 (and five national championships between 1966 and 1980).

"Everybody knew (Coach Yeagley) needed to get to a certain number of wins to become the all-time winningest coach, but he said it was going to be his last year regardless," Dias says.

"So we had that pressure on us. Everybody wanted to do it for him. He started the program as a club team, then got it varsity status and now it's a program with seven national championships."

The 2003 team promptly opened the season with three losses in its first six matches. Not exactly the swan song Dias and his teammates had hoped to enact for their outgoing coach. The Hoosiers were 2-3-4 through nine matches.

"We got to a point in the season when we realized we needed 17 wins to put him out on top, so we knew what we had to do," Dias says.

Indiana would not lose another match that season (and finish 17-3-5). The Hoosiers won their final nine regular-season matches, giving up just four goals in those games, won the Big Ten tournament, then won five matches in the NCAA tournament.

Indiana defeated St. John's in the title match, 2-1. Dias was the only true senior on the team.

Because he had played as a true freshman in 2000, then straight through to 2003, Dias took his redshirt year in 2004, temporarily putting off a professional career so he could get his degree.

"I was able to train with the team every day and coach the redshirts. Coaching the freshmen that came in and being a sparring partner for the first team, that was a pretty valuable experience for me at the time," he says.

And because the hair, a high school national championship and winning another national championship in your final collegiate match sometimes just aren't enough, Indiana went 19-4-1 and won its second straight national championship in penalty kicks over UC Santa Barbara.

The MetroStars called with an invitation. Columbus, too, was interested. Dias did not last long at either place, and after a short go with a couple USL teams, he called it quits and went to work for NFL International in London.

That led to his time with the Colts – and their Super Bowl win – but something wasn't right. Here were all these athletes realizing their dreams, and here sat Dias in the background, wondering if maybe he'd given up too quickly on his own.

"I was struggling," he admits. "I was 25, 26, and I was seeing these professional athletes living their dreams. My dream had always been to play professionally, and I didn't feel like I quite did that."

He moved to his dad's native India to play with Salgaocar SC, but a back injury derailed his plans.

Dias was working back in Louisville when he got a call from an old teammate who had just been signed by the Blues, a USL team in Los Angeles.

"He said, 'Dude, you need to get yourself in shape and come out here and play.'"

He did, and now he is in his offseason. That's why he's in Missoula, spending time with his mom and grandma, and now the Grizzlies, who are coached by a guy who was a state ODP coach when Dias was 14.

"Mark had the group one year younger, but it was a pretty tight-knit group."

While he ponders his future as a soccer player – a return to Southern California in the spring is an option, because the dream is still alive and the fire still burns – he is happily staying involved in the game as a volunteer coach.

"I have a passion for soccer, and Mark was nice enough to let me come out here and be a volunteer.

"I have a lot of respect for Mark, with the discipline and the way he works with the girls and communicates with them. It's pretty spot on.

"Things are changing here, and I wanted to be a part of it."

Montana opened its Big Sky Conference schedule with a 1-0 victory over Eastern Washington last Friday afternoon at South Campus Stadium. Dias was on the bench.

The Grizzlies return to the pitch this weekend for matches against Sacramento State and Portland State, key games for a team seeking its first Big Sky championship since 2000.

Perhaps Dias could arrange a visit from his lady friend Nike, the Greek goddess better known as the Winged Goddess of Victory.