

An exploration of determination: Spanish class connects soccer, culture

A growing interest in soccer has evolved into a change of perspective for students and faculty across campus

Lillian Haynes, Life & Arts Writer

For most students and faculty at Texas A&M, learning and speaking Spanish goes beyond attaining mastery of a language. It encompasses a diverse culture and community, much of which ties back to a love of soccer.

Eduardo Espina, Ph.D., a long-respected faculty member, poet and writer who teaches in the fields of Hispanic Studies and Spanish at A&M, founded SPAN 423: Soccer in the Hispanic World to allow students to discuss how the innate strategy and rhythm found in the sport translate into everyday life.

"I first began the class in 2011, when people began taking more of an interest in the sport," Espina said. "At first, I was unsure if students would even register since it was the first ever class in the United States to offer a class on fútbol and literature. It had never been done before."



Jorge Giordano speaking. Photo courtesy of Uruguayan Football Association, also known as Asociación Uruguayan de Fútbol (AUF)

Beyond a revolutionary curriculum, the class has also prompted questions on how language and culture connect, as students are given an opportunity to form interpersonal connections through a well-rounded curriculum.

"When so many students signed up, I knew I had the chance to cultivate something unique," Espina said. "I wanted to create an environment where students not only learned about soccer but also engaged in critical thinking skills. During the class, we learn how soccer has shaped the lives of generations and become a cultural and artistic phenomenon in modern society."

Political science senior Julie Soliman began learning Spanish when she was age 13 and continued to improve by taking challenging college courses. However, before Espina's class, she had never had the opportunity to explore the intersection between language and culture.

"When I first registered for the class Soccer in the Hispanic World, I knew it would be a challenge, but I

also knew I wanted to take on something new and exciting," Soliman said. "Professor Espina teaches with all his heart and soul, and you can tell he has a passion for what he is saying."

His course offers in-depth instruction focused on improving critical thinking skills and hands-on cultural activities. One of the events highlighted by students was a panel discussion with Jorge Giordano, published author and sporting director of Uruguay's national team, who spoke of the cultural practices and identity related to soccer.

Spanish junior Juan Daza said the event provided a way for him to understand the mindset of soccer players, as well as connect with his



Juan Daza playing soccer. Photo courtesy of Erika Perez Roa

Spanish journalist Juan Daza said the event provided a way for him to understand the mindset of soccer players, as well as connect with his home country of Venezuela.

"I've had a ball at my feet since I was young," Daza said. "Any chance I get, I go play with my friends. Even though baseball is the national sport in Venezuela, my family has always loved watching La Liga together. It's basically tradition."

Daza went on to say that taking his knowledge of soccer out of the textbook and into a real-life event allowed him to better understand the meaning behind it.

"The Uruguayan mindset is fascinating to learn about," Daza said. "They're big-hearted and always focused on winning. They guide their decisions through emotion, and as someone interested in teaching Spanish literature, I find that very poetic."



Jorge Giordano. Photo courtesy of Uruguayan Football Association, or Asociación Uruguayan de Fútbol (AUF)

Business and sports management senior Jacob Shelton said the class allowed him to understand how soccer is a driving force to bring communities together. He mentioned how little equipment it takes to play soccer — only a ball and an open field — and how this has enabled a whole culture to be formed around a sport that anyone can play, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

"In Latin America especially, it seems like such a community builder," Shelton said. "You grab a soccer ball, and you can have a team put together right there, ready

to play. I played
baseball for over a

decade, and even though I love throwing leather around, it has nothing on the team mentality found within soccer teams.”

Shelton referenced Giordano himself, who highlighted how the passion found in Latin America towards soccer is so strong that it goes beyond anything else. Calling it la ultima pasión, or the ultimate passion in Spanish, Shelton said, when something becomes so integrated in your identity, people never work a day in their life.

Graduate student Manuel Somoza, who is currently working on his Ph.D. in philosophy of soccer, said he is appreciative that the events, classes and participation related to soccer have been so well received.

“I hope such a large popularity means that this could become a new space for the celebration and recognition of soccer,” Somoza said. “Even though we have opportunities at A&M to play the sport, we need more places to connect soccer to our lives.”

Shelton also said he is hopeful more students will be exposed to the sport and its ability to bridge the connection between language and culture, like he was for the first time through Espina’s class.

“Fútbol in the United States and Latin America is like a hidden gem,” Shelton said. “It’s not as appreciated as it should be.”



Jorge Giordano and Eduardo Espina (center) with fellow Aggies. Photo courtesy of Manuel Somoza