

## WASHINGTON POST

Concussion symptoms linger for former soccer star Alecko Eskandarian as he returns to school at Virginia

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CHARLOTTESVILLE - On the last day of the Early African History course at the University of Virginia this summer, a student built up the courage to approach classmate Alecko Eskandarian and tell him that he had been her favorite player when she attended Cavaliers soccer matches.

"She was 8 years old when she watched me play," he said, smiling. "Man, I felt so old."

Eskandarian, 28, is a full-time student again, resuming course work almost eight years after departing Charlottesville to pursue a pro career that was derailed by a series of concussions.

Some on campus recognize him or his distinctive name through soccer - as Virginia's season scoring record holder and national player of the year, as the first overall draft pick by D.C. United and MVP of the 2004 MLS Cup. Others know him through pop culture - as celebrity Kim Kardashian's blind date on reality TV a few weeks ago.

But for Eskandarian, his return to school is also defined by a much more serious issue - the lingering effects of the concussions he suffered during his playing days.

On pace to earn a degree in anthropology in the spring, Eskandarian is taking five classes this semester, including an independent study exploring why soccer's popularity in the United States lags behind much of the world.

He is also an unpaid assistant coach for the reigning NCAA champion Cavaliers. His daily routine is the same as the players': class, practice, homework. Team captain Greg Monaco, a junior defender, is in Eskandarian's American culture class; on a recent bus trip to and from Duke, they discussed project ideas.

The return to an academic climate was a needed change for Eskandarian, who had spent 21/2 years with the two MLS clubs in Los Angeles and was living steps from the beach.

"It's a fantasy life, but the older that I have gotten, all of that stuff becomes minute," he said. "The most important thing to me was my health and my mental health. It was important to get away and refocus on things I can do, which is go to class and get back to my roots."

'My own doctor now'

Eskandarian reluctantly stepped away from soccer last winter after the second serious head injury of his well-traveled MLS career. In July 2009, shortly after joining the Los Angeles Galaxy, he was hit in the face by a ball kicked at close distance by an AC Milan player. "It felt like an uppercut," he said.

The force broke his nose, but more troubling, triggered concussion symptoms that had faded since his first comeback from a 10-month layoff in 2005-06. The headaches, migraines and neck pains were back. A new issue also surfaced: vertigo.

His nose healed; his head did not. Doctors wouldn't clear him to play.

With his career on hold again, he decided to fulfill a promise to his parents to earn an undergraduate degree. Though he left Virginia in early 2003 after three seasons, he had stuck with schooling. While with United in 2004, he commuted to Charlottesville twice a week for class. Two years later, he enrolled at American University, and while in California, he took classes at El Camino College.

Initially, he majored in economics but later took interest in anthropology.

"I am not trying to be an archaeologist or discover a new species, but I love learning about it," he said. "The study of culture, especially with all the places I have been through soccer and the different backgrounds of the teammates I have had, it all ties together."

Though his focus has shifted, the head injuries haunt him. As is common with athletes recovering from a concussion, physical exertion will often set off a headache. For Eskandarian, routine actions, such as shouting at practice or intense concentration on academics, will cause problems.

One day in class this summer, "I am writing and writing, processing information for 25-30 minutes straight," he said. "I just felt mentally it was too much, and I needed to cool off. I got up and walked around. If I am studying or reading too long, there are little reminders and I can see them coming."

Virginia Coach George Gelnovatch is well aware of his former player's problems. Eskandarian stayed with Gelnovatch and his family last January while taking a two-week course at U-Va., allowing them to reconnect and discuss the future.

"I don't put him in a situation where he exerts himself very much, and he's pretty good about it," said Gelnovatch, a former Virginia forward in his 15th season as head coach after serving as Bruce Arena's assistant for seven years.

Last week, "Alecko was running around for 15 minutes and came off the field going, 'I am feeling a little funky.' When the dials get turned up and the adrenaline is flowing, he still has little issues."

Since his first serious injury in 2005, the result of a collision with New England Revolution goalkeeper Matt Reis, Eskandarian has lost count of the specialists that have examined him.

"In many ways, I am my own doctor now," he said. He is not taking medication, other than standard pain relievers, because it "masks the issues. If I take medication and then the problem disappears, you think you feel good and go out and exert yourself and get a worse headache."

Although doctors have told him that he does not have brain damage, "I guess we will never know until I die and someone splits my brain open and looks around."

'Not just a soccer stud'

Eskandarian is in contact with other players sidelined by concussions, such as New England star Taylor Twellman and former teammates Josh Gros and Bryan Namoff. He also receives calls periodically from players whom he has never met seeking advice.

"They say, 'I heard you are the guy to talk to about concussions,' " he said.

The head issues have not deterred his hunger to nourish the mind.

"I went through my grace period of feeling sorry for myself," he said. "At some point, you have to keep moving and say to yourself, 'What can I do right now and how can I be productive?'"

Said teammate Monaco: "He is sharp in class, answering questions and striving to learn. He has a mind too. He's not just a soccer stud."

With the Cavaliers, Eskandarian shares wisdom acquired from his days on and off the field.

"He is still in the prime of his career in terms of age, but it's been cut short," Gelnovatch said "For some of our players who are considering leaving early and how to balance that decision with education, Alecko tells them: 'Look, this could happen. Leaving early is fine, but make sure you are doing the right things along the way.' "

Eskandarian's return coincided with the Cavaliers defending a national title, their first since 1994. At the home opener this month, Eskandarian was given the honor of raising the championship flag at Klockner Stadium.

Beyond soccer, he caused a buzz on campus two weeks ago by appearing on "Keeping Up With the Kardashians." With shared Armenian roots, Eskandarian and Kim Kardashian were set up for a date in Los Angeles this summer. Photos of them appeared in the entertainment magazine US Weekly and on gossipy Web sites.

"Everything I have accomplished in soccer is secondary to my one 10-minute cameo on the show," he said, laughing. "It's amazing what popular culture is like today. Kids I grew up with, who never contacted me no matter what I accomplished in soccer, now are like, 'Oh my gosh, I cannot believe this!' I am like, 'Really? What about MLS Cup and the national team?' None of that mattered to them."

As for the future, Eskandarian would like to remain in soccer. He plans to earn the highest coaching license this winter. Although he hasn't ruled out returning as a player, the setbacks have steered him in a new direction.

"I've beaten this condition once before, so there is always that one percent chance in me that says, 'Hey who knows?' " he said. "But I am realistic as well. Right now, the reality is that I am not going to be cleared to play any time soon, so I just need to refocus what I am going to do with my life and move on."