

World Champion?

My fathers died when I was four years old. There were seven of us, and our economic situation got worse than terrible after that. We lived in the small town of San Rafael Heredia in Costa Rica. We all had to pitch in to make ends meet, but there weren't too many jobs for kids other than picking coffee during harvest, which only lasted about eight weeks.

When I was around 13, Mom packed us up and moved us to the capital of Costa Rica, San Jose. There, all but my youngest sister were able to find work. She got to stay home to help Mom.

My nine-year old brother and I sold newspapers on almost every street corner of San Jose. We had to buy our own papers. We would get up pretty early so we could be at the printing office by 5:00 a.m. It was several miles away, and we usually had to wait an hour or so before they were ready. These morning papers had to be sold before 1:00 p.m. so we could reinvest that money for our afternoon papers. From six in the morning until six at night we would shout to customers for attention until all the papers were gone. Then, we went to school at night.

About a half a block from the printing office there was an arcade with no name. We called it Parque Central fusbolin. Patrons at the arcade consisted mainly of men and boys, who either shined shoes or sold papers. Some were quite young. On weekends there were some high school students, too.

The arcade had four foosball tables and two pinball machines. I had played foosball a half dozen or so times back in my hometown and I loved it. As often as I could I would play. If the arcade were open early enough, while I was waiting for my morning papers, I would have played. But, it wasn't, so all I could do then was to visualize about playing and winning. While waiting for my afternoon papers, though, the arcade was open. That was my leisure time. It was fun and challenging. I relished the chance to play, practice and compete. And, when a part-time job opened at the arcade, I jumped at it. It didn't take long before I played so much foosball at that arcade, and the four others in the area, that I became as good as any player in San Jose – except one, Pirulo.

There were good players everywhere I went to play: La Y Griega, Guadalupe, Moravia and Cinco Esquinas. Competition was tough, but nothing like our own arcade, Parque Central fusbolin! Those downtown shoeshine men and paperboys were the best, and Pirulo was King.

Pirulo was a shoeshine boy. He was short like me, with a good sense of humor. He was a very good kid about a year younger than me. He was the best foosball player in that arcade from the very first day I watched him until the last time I saw him play three year later. Nobody could ever eat him in a game of loser pays (pierde paga). Maybe he lost a game here or there when players split the cost, but never on a loser pays. I know I never beat him that way.

He could do it all. I tried everything I could to beat him, from slowing it down, to speeding it up. Nothing worked. Even when we split the cost of the game he would toy with me and try odd shots and bank shots. He called them lucky shots (guava). Even though we never knew each other's real names, we became best of friends. Pirulo called everybody 'palmador'. It was his own street way of saying "In a game against me you lose!" I saw him almost every day. We played against each other or as partners. We also spent lots of time together outside the arcade. Once we even went fishing with a couple of other friends on the Maia Aguilar River. We caught lots of cat fish (barbudos) and had a wonderful time.

When I was 16 I moved back to my hometown San Rafael to work in a grocery store that also had a cantina and pool hall. I stayed there about five years. My mother moved to Seattle, Washington with my three sisters and an adopted brother. In July of 1964 I followed. Soon after, I was playing foosball all over the northwest. There were plenty of foosball tournaments, especially in Seattle and Portland, Oregon. I was having lots of fun. To top it off, in 1972 and 1973 I won the world foosball championship.

Many times over the last 35 years I bragged to my friends about Pirulo and how good he was at foosball. I often wondered whatever became of him and what he might be doing today. Every year for the past 23 years I have visited Costa Rica during the Christmas season with my wife and son. Though I often looked forward to finding Pirulo while on those trips, I didn't know how to, since I never knew his real name.

But, while visiting last Christmas it dawned on me-what if Pirulo the shoeshine boy grew into Pirulo the shoeshine man? I thought, why not just go look for him where he used to work, at the square downtown, in front of the San Jose Cathedral, not too far from the arcade? Excited by the prospect, on January 3rd, 2008 I went looking for my friend, Pirulo, the foosball King!

Once parked, I hustled to the square, which turned into a run when I saw a long-bearded, white-haired shoeshine man in the distance. It wasn't Pirulo. Neither was the other, younger, darker white-haired shoeshine man I saw next. It was a bit discouraged, but kept looking. After all, it had been almost 50 years.

Observing me on my mission, a few feet from me a helpful shoeshine man asked me "Are you looking for somebody, amigo?"

"A friend" I answered.

"Who?" He asked.

"Pirulo," I said.

"Over there in the black shirt," he told me, pointing to about 30 yards away from where we were standing.

"Gracias!" I exclaimed.

Pirulo was sitting under a palm tree on a big pillow in front of a cement bench, his shoeshine box between the pillow and bench. His name, missing the 'o' was carved on his box. I tapped him on the shoulder and said "Pirulo, you many not remember me. We used to be friends, but we have not seen each other for a long time."

He looked up at me, and I looked down at him sitting on the big pillow. On his face I could see him struggling, trying to remember who this dude could be. Not convinced either, I wondered if this was my old friend.

"Remember the arcade?" I asked him.

"Yes," he nodded.

"We used to play a lot of foosball together," I said.

He smiled. I asked him about several of the things we did together, but I could tell that he still couldn't place me.

“Do you still play foosball much anymore? You were the best,” I said.

“I have not played in a long time, but I think that none of those young players can beat me yet,” he laughed.

“Not in a ‘pierde paga’ game,” I thought.

We talked some more, but he still could not remember me until I brought up our fishing trip on the river. When he cracked a tiny smile, I knew I had found him. After that, we talked for almost an hour more, mostly about him.

“What have you done? Are you married? Got any kids?” I asked.

“No kids, no wife. I lived with a lady for a long time, but she passed away about a year ago,” he said.

“What are you doing now? Do you live alone?” I asked.

“No, I live with my sister. We help each other with the rent. It’s hard to come up with the money every month,” he said.

“Pirulo, how old are you?” I asked.

“I am 63 years old,” he said.

“You look good,” I said.

“Well, I never smoked, and I have never done drugs. Some shoeshine men here in the square got into drugs, especially crack, and don’t eat. Soon, they look like they are drying out. I feel sorry for them,” he said.

“Pirulo, I bought you a gift,” I said.

He smiled.

I gave him some cash.

“Wow, USA dollars. You must be doing well!” he said.

He put the money in his pocket, rubbed his two-day-old beard, and said, “I am going home in a couple of hours. I’m going to clean up, because we are eating well tonight. God bless you.”

“What is your real name?” I asked.

He laughed. “My full name is Jose Franklin Hernandez Arguedas,” he said.

“How long have you been doing this work?” I asked.

“47 years,” he said.

I figured longer.

“How many days a week do you work?” I asked.

“I work every day, from 7:30 a.m. to about 3:30 p.m.,” he said.

“How much money do you make a day?” I asked.

“I make about \$8.00 a day, sometimes \$10.00. But, on a good day, \$12.00. It is hard, but I enjoy coming here,” he said.

“Are you looking for another lady to live with?” I asked.

“No. It hurts too much to lose a loved one. I would be afraid of just thinking that it could happen again,” he said.

“Pirulo, I am leaving now, but God willing I will be back next year, and then we’ll talk some more,” I said. He shook my hand hard for a long time. I leaned down and put my left hand on his shoulder. He did the same to me. And, with a tear of joy in his eye he thanked me and wished me well.

“God will protect you. I know he will,” he said.

I also wished him well, thankful, at long last to be reunited with my friend, Pirulo. I look forward to visiting with him next year.

I drove away – happy – very happy – that I got to see my friend again. At first, I thought his financial situation my not be so good. But, sitting in a park, on a pillow, under a shade of a palm tree in a tropical country every day from 47+ years? Maybe that’s not so bad. Certainly not stressful. God blessed his soul!

Time really does fly. In retrospect, finding, playing, meeting Pirulo, relentlessly practicing and mastering foosball changed my life. It was how I got introduced to and involved in the coin-op industry. It allowed me to travel to many countries, meet lots of good people and make many friends. I owe much of my success to foosball. It was my passion to beat Pirulo. But, I never did. And, I never let that stop me from challenging him, again and again. Where would I have ended up without foosball and my friend Pirulo?

Caught up in the momentum during the early 1970s, I thought nothing could compare to winning the foosball world championship, two years in a row. But, as I drove past the square that day, friendship renewed, hoping to wave goodbye to Pirulo, who was busy tending to client’s shoes, I was reminded, and knew-that the best foosball player didn’t win those championship tournaments.