

HE CAME, HE SAW, HE SCORED

YURA MOVSISYAN'S SENSATIONAL PATH TO SOCCER STARDOM INCLUDES A MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER CHAMPIONSHIP, A MOVE OVERSEAS TO PLAY IN THE DANISH SUPERLIGA AND HIGH-PROFILED TRANSFERS WITHIN THE RUSSIAN PREMIER LEAGUE. THE STRIKER'S NIFTY FEET HAVE ALSO MADE THE ARMENIAN NATIONAL TEAM A GROUP TO BE RECKONED WITH. MOVSISYAN HAS HIS SIGHTS SET ON A FIELD OF GREENER PASTURES, CONQUERING ONE FRONTLINE CHALLENGE AT A TIME.

Text **Manouk Akopyan** | Photo **Arnos Martirosyan**



Yura Movsisyan is all too familiar with the dramatics. For every stop he's had in his soccer career, his brilliant performances and pristine reputation have left a lasting impression. Earlier this year, Movsisyan found himself in a position to please; he was facing the pressures of living up to his \$9.7 million transfer to FC Spartak Moscow of the Russian Premier League. When the 25-year-old laced his cleats for his first game in red and white against Terek Grozny on March 10, he proved he was worth every ruble the only way he could – by scoring. He scored once. He scored twice. He then scored a third time for good measure, accounting for all three goals in a 3-1 victory. It was his first professional hat trick. Movsisyan kept the game ball as a memento and phoned his family in California to share the elation from the locker room. It was the greatest game he ever played, right? "I wouldn't say so. Scoring-wise, yes, but not when talking about my overall quality of play. If I can't touch the sky, I will never say I did. I'm my worst critic on the field. That's the way I've been my whole life, and that's the way I'll always be." Movsisyan then called the coach who was instrumental to his craft and eventual advancement in the sport. The surprise recipient of the call was one Cherif Zein in Los Angeles. Zein mentored Movsisyan for two years at Pasadena High School and one year at Pasadena City College. "How many kids would do something like that? I don't know any!" says Zein, who last coached Movsisyan over seven years ago. "He always calls me; he always visits me; he always contributes to our Pasadena club team and gives his time to the kids. And he doesn't have to do any of it. It was very nice. It meant a lot to me." Before developing into a game-changing forward and fan favorite, Movsisyan faced the growing pains of maturing as a player and person. He was born in Baku in 1987 at the height of a developing war between Armenia and Azerbaijan and moved to Pasadena, California when his family was granted political asylum status in 2000. It's a dark period of his life, vaulted in a memory bank he'd rather not open. "I can never hide that I was born in Azerbaijan," he says. "I really didn't know what was going on at the time because we were constantly on the move; we lived in Russia too. I am a very proud Armenian, and my parents raised my brothers and myself as Armenians. Life began for us when we moved to America – that's how I look at it." Although Movsisyan had dreams of playing professional soccer as a child, he never played

at an organizational level until he was a 14-year-old in Los Angeles. He and his brother Movses, two years his senior, played on club teams and later, together at Pasadena High School where Yura scored 32 goals in 13 games. Zein first got a look at Movsisyan when he played for the local club team Lazio but didn't think much of him at the time. "I was flabbergasted on how fast Yura developed," Zein tells *Yerevan* magazine. "Movses was actually better than him but Yura focused on becoming great. He was persistent in his work ethic and willingness to improve." With both brothers chasing the same dream, a time came when one of the two had to begin providing financially for the family. So Movses quit soccer to work, allowing Yura the opportunity to further pursue the sport. Movsisyan played one year at Pasadena City College, tallying 18 goals en route to being named the college's 2005-2006 Men's Athlete of the Year. But he wasn't even invited to the MLS draft combine.

So Zein called Ralph Perez, a former assistant coach for the Los Angeles Galaxy, who called Nelson Rodríguez, Executive Vice President of Competition at MLS, and vouched for the unknown Armenian. Rodríguez told Perez to find suitors interested in drafting Movsisyan. So he went to Bob Gansler, who coached the 1990 United States World Cup team with Perez as his assistant. Perez's respected judgment and Movsisyan's stellar play at the Nike Friendlies caught the eye of the Kansas City Wizards coach, and Gansler drafted Movsisyan with the fourth overall pick in 2006, making him the highest player ever taken from a community college. "You look for players who are offensive threats because they are few and far between," Perez tells *Yerevan* magazine. "I liked his heart and determination. Soccer was in his blood 24 hours, the passion – watching, studying, playing – you can't instill that in everybody. A lot of kids aspire and dream, but he lived and breathed soccer. He was motivated to help his family. That's really commendable. He got the opportunity and made the most of it, and I'm proud of him."

At 19, Movsisyan's life instantaneously changed when he moved from familial comforts to the unfamiliar grounds of the Midwest. To boot, he seldom played once Gansler resigned midway into his rookie season. "Soccer made me grow up fast. When you live alone at such a young age, it's different. It's the real world, and you have a lot more responsibilities. You have to find a way to do all the right things." ▶



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IN HIS FIRST GAME, MOVSISYAN PROVED TO SPARTAK HE WAS WORTH EVERY RUBLE THE ONLY WAY HE COULD — BY SCORING. HE SCORED ONCE. HE SCORED TWICE. HE THEN SCORED A THIRD TIME FOR GOOD MEASURE. IT WAS HIS FIRST PROFESSIONAL HAT TRICK.

The amiable Movsisyan chalks it up as a humbling experience, admitting that it helped him mature mentally and emotionally. With Movsisyan playing mostly a featured role as a spectator, the Wizards traded him to Real Salt Lake (RSL). The deal was a blessing in disguise. It moved Movsisyan into the starting lineup and allowed him to finally showcase his potential. In almost no time, the intense attacker kicked off a series of cardiac-testing play. He catapulted himself to prominence in 2008 when he scored the equalizing goal in the 90th minute of the regular season finale. The draw would clinch a playoff berth for RSL, its first ever. In the postseason opener against Chivas USA seven days later, it was déjà vu all over again when this time Movsisyan netted the game winner yet again in the 90th minute.

In three seasons, he became a fan favorite and one of the faces of the organization. American soccer fans will remember Movsisyan most for leading RSL to an MLS Cup in 2009 against David Beckham and the heavily favored Los Angeles Galaxy. It would be the last game he'd play in America.

Movsisyan moved to Europe in 2010 when the Danish club Randers purchased his contract. A successful stint in Denmark scoring 12 goals in 30 games earned him a \$3.2 million move to Krasnodar, where he enjoyed 23 goals over two seasons before landing on the radar of Spartak Moscow. The last four years of the feared forward's life have been on the upswing. Everywhere he's played, he's scored, and that's helped tremendously with his confidence, he says. But the main antidote to Europe's physical and tactical play has been his ability to stay calm and patient under pressure. "Life certainly hasn't been boring the last few years, I'll tell you that much," Movsisyan laughs. "Having two kids and living out of the country is the hardest part. This is just another challenge I'll overcome. Seeing my family happy about my success motivates me even more."

He and his wife of six years, Marianna, have two children, Arman four, and Aida one, and live almost 10 months of the year together. "Anytime he has family around him, he plays twice as good. My father (Sergey) visits him in Moscow once a month to mentally prepare him to exceed expectations," Movses says. Movsisyan achieved another proud moment in 2010 when he joined the Armenian national team. "It's an unbelievable and almost indescribable feeling to represent my country, wearing the red, blue and orange," Yura says. "Playing for a club team is work, and you can enjoy it while getting paid. Playing for your country, you don't play for money. You play for pride and for your people." In 2012, Movsisyan and Henrikh Mkhitaryan led Armenia to within one victory of a birth

in the UEFA championships. They catapulted the country to a FIFA ranking of No. 41 in the world — its highest ever. Armenia finished the qualification round with a respectable 5-2-3 record, with Movsisyan contributing four goals and five assists.

Almost overnight, the perception and expectations of cynic compatriots changed, and fans forgot the days when they'd watch games not in hopes of a victory but just to know by how much Armenia would lose. "Armenia is definitely going to accomplish feats that have never been done before," Movsisyan says when talking about Armenia's prospects of its first-ever major international tournament. "That is still in our future, and I hope it happens during my era. Although we are a young team, I am confident we can get it done with the group of guys we have now. We just need time."

In the meantime, Movsisyan is focused on his responsibilities for Spartak Moscow, where he hopes to lead the club back to its championship ways. They've won 21 top-flight national titles and 13 domestic cups, but nothing since their 2003 Russian Cup. Owner Leonid Fedun's \$9.7 million transfer made Movsisyan the second-largest transfer involving a current or former MLS player, trailing Jozy Altidore's \$10 million move to Villarreal.

Movsisyan immediately repaid that sum in the eight games he played for the Red and White before the season culminated with a record of 4-1-3, finishing the 2012-13 RPL campaign as the scoring leader and Bombardir Award winner with 13 goals, helping Spartak qualify for Europa League.

"I always want to accomplish feats that people will remember — everybody dreams of making history. But at the end of the day, I don't care about the on-the-field stuff. Life is not about being a good football player. It's about being an even better person. I just hope the journey continues to be fantastic."

Zein agrees, saying that Movsisyan is a role model for a human success story and a hero for the Armenians.

"It's amazing where he came from and how he kept his roots. He has so much heart and determination. His life story should be turned into a movie, so that it could teach kids what they can do with their lives."

"I look at my career, and it's always moving forward," adds Movsisyan. "And it's the same with life — always progressing. The meaning of life is to progress as you get older."

In seven years, Movsisyan has gone from being a virtual unknown to one of Europe's most prolific goal scorers. The script to his Hollywood ending remains unwritten. ■