

Chara! Chara! Chara!

Timbers' midfielder, Diego Chara on growing up in a soccer family in Colombia and his new family in Portland

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CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Diego Chara grew up in Cali, Colombia, where from the time he could walk he was kicking a soccer ball. He had good company nearby. His father Jesús played soccer, and he knocked the ball around with his two brothers — Luis Felipe and Jimmy — both of whom are also professional soccer players today.

Chara joined the Portland Timbers in 2011. He is an indefatigable force in the Timbers midfield, zipping up and down the pitch and executing the nitty-gritty duties that win games but do not necessarily end up on stat sheets. He has logged more minutes than any other Timbers player in the Major League Soccer era. The 5-8, 150-pound midfielder also leads the team in fouls committed, with more than double the number of teammate Will Johnson who is second on the list. He is a classic box-to-box midfielder who will make a game-saving tackle in front of his own goal only to turn around and set up the attack on the other end of the pitch moments later. Chara is held in high regard by his teammates. In 2012, he was voted "Players' Player of the Year" by his teammates. As we conducted the interview at the Timbers training facility, goalkeeper Donovan Ricketts drove by in his car, rolled down the window and chanted "Chara! Chara! Chara!" as he pumped his fist. A fan favorite, Chara has established himself as a vital element of the Timbers' success on the field.

Off the pitch, Chara has been active in the local community, participating in numerous Stand Together projects such as assisting with painting at Harrison Park SUN School and volunteering at the Tigard Library. He has also teamed up with the Portland-based international relief agency Mercy Corps. Chara lives in Tigard with his wife Sindy Lenis and his two daughters Mariajose (age 4) and Allison (age 2).

Jules Boykoff: What was it like growing up playing soccer in Colombia? How is it different than the youth soccer system you've seen here in the United States?

Diego Chara: I think that the biggest difference between youth soccer in Colombia and youth soccer in the United States is that here the system is connected with schooling. In Colombia the soccer training schools for youth players are something extra, totally separate from your studies. So, there are many players that end up without the possibility of a career or even finishing high school. And for me, growing up in Colombia playing soccer was a complete joy, given that my brothers also play professional soccer.

J.B.: Luis Felipe and Jimmy, right?

D.C.: Yeah, Luis Felipe plays in Venezuela and Jimmy plays professionally

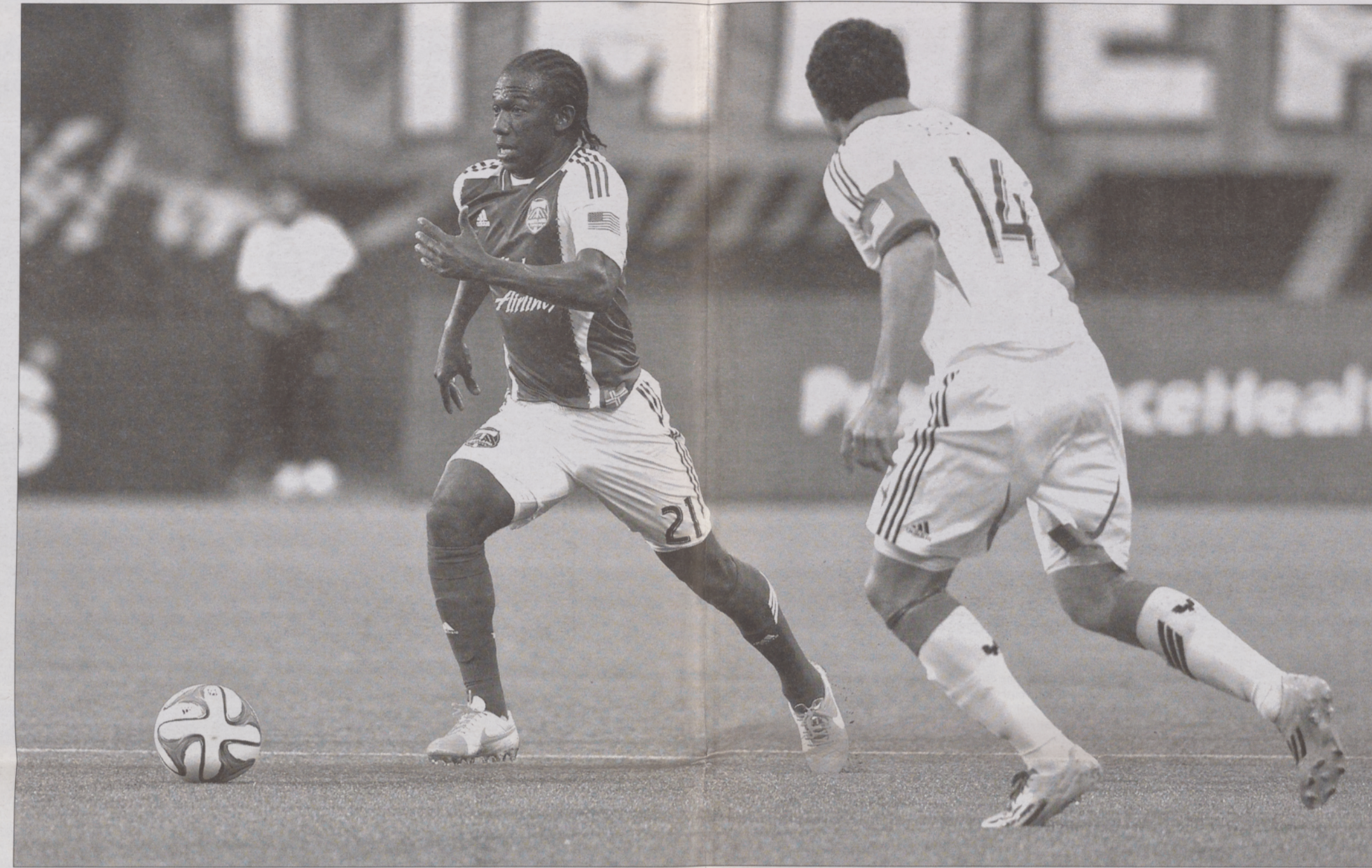


PHOTO BY CRAIG MITCHELLDYER/PORLAND TIMBERS

in Colombia. I think we are a blessed family to have been able to have all three brothers play professional soccer.

J.B.: As someone who has earned two caps by playing with the Colombian national team, can you comment on the terrific run the Colombian team — "Los Cafeteros" — had in the 2014 World Cup?

D.C.: I think that it was from the hard work that they did in the qualifiers in the lead-up to the World Cup. They brought on an experienced coaching staff, one that had been in World Cups before. Also, the players of this generation have very good characteristics and abilities. What the national team achieved in this World Cup was something that made history.

J.B.: Who have been some of your favorite players in the 2014 World Cup?

D.C.: In this World Cup I think that for me what James did was very special, James Rodríguez from the Colombian national team (winner of the Golden Boot award at the 2014 World Cup). He really took full advantage of the opportunity to play in his first World Cup. I think that Neymar also did his best, but also the so-called best players like Messi are always going to be the models to follow in soccer.

J.B.: What about players like Paul Pogba who, like you, work work work...

D.C.: Yeah that's right. They are players who don't get the recognition because they are players who do the "dirty work" on the field, as they say. I think that they don't

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D.C.: I think it's really important to learn. I've been learning English. There are different accents, too. We have teammates from Africa. Teammates from Europe. Teammates from other places. But I think that we all get along well. We have the possibility of learning new languages and that has been very important.

J.B.: And your daughters are learning English too, right?

D.C.: Yes, they already do quite well in English. They are really young and I think that it's much easier for them, and they don't have any problems communicating at daycare.

J.B.: Who among your teammates do you admire most? Why?

D.C.: Let's see ... I think that each of my teammates has different traits and qualities. I admire the characteristics of Darlington Nagbe. He is a young player. He came out of the university to play in the pros, and he has been here since the team began in 2011. He is a player with a lot of soccer talent, and I'm very happy to have met him. I know that he has lots to give for himself and for soccer.

J.B.: Who among your Timbers teammates is the best dancer? Best dresser? Most fun?

D.C.: Well...I don't really know for sure, but I think that Rodney Wallace is the best dancer. I believe he's the best dancer on the team at this time.

J.B.: And who's the best dresser, Rodney Wallace?

D.C.: Yeah, for me, he is someone who really likes fashion and I think he is someone who is always trying to show his own style.

J.B.: And the teammate who is the most fun?

D.C.: For me, I'd say Maxi, Maximiliano Urruti. He is a person who is always happy. He's always entertaining everyone, and I think he is a person who fills the team with happiness.

J.B.: What do you think of the Timbers Army? How aware are you of the Timbers Army when you are playing?

D.C.: Always. We are always thinking about what they do for us — their encouragement, their singing and when they chant — that we are there to win and they support us. Because of all the energy they bring to the stadium, we always try to do our best to win the game to thank them.

J.B.: It's special.

D.C.: Yes, it's incredible. When I arrived from Colombia three years ago it was something that really excited me, because to see the stadium full, everyone singing and having a good time, I think is something really unique.

J.B.: You have scored four goals with the Portland Timbers. What do you do with the wooden slabs that Timber Joey gives you for scoring?

D.C.: I have stored them in the locker room. I want to try to make some kind of monument to keep in a personal museum, something special that would say the day the goal was made and team that it was made against. I hope to be able to finish this monument and keep it for my whole life. I think the (log-cutting) tradition is something really special.

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stand out as much, but they are also very good players.

J.B.: What is your assessment of the protests in Brazil against FIFA privilege and the enormous public funds spent on the World Cup?

D.C.: Yes, as far as the social problems that Brazil has, I think it was an excessive expense. So much was spent on building and fixing up new stadiums — stadiums that were fine but that they wanted to improve for the World Cup. That is a big problem because the Brazilian community is experiencing difficulties with poverty and health. I think that it was an excessive expense and that they need to try to improve the conditions in Brazil.

J.B.: Speaking of improving conditions, please describe the relationship you have established with Mercy Corps to help people in your native country of Colombia. What do you do and why?

D.C.: I think that my work with Mercy Corps above all is to represent and try to help with what I have learned here in the U.S., a culture completely different from Colombian culture. Putting into practice what I have learned through professional soccer here in the U.S. — like the way to show respect for other people — in order to try to better the lives of the kids in Colombia. That's the most important part: to try to make sure those kids have more opportunities, to try to form a connection between Mercy Corps and the Timbers, and that is what I am working on.

J.B.: When you were 8 years old,

Colombian defender Andrés Escobar was assassinated only a few weeks after committing a goal against his own team in a 1994 World Cup match against the United States. For you, what's the significance of this event?

D.C.: It was something that was very sad, something that really impacted the whole country in that moment. Last week was the 20th anniversary of this having occurred. I think his death was really unfortunate. In that time Colombia was passing through a very violent period and his killing affected everyone. It was a very sad event.

J.B.: Shifting gears, what are your impressions of Portland? What do you like to do when you're not playing soccer?

D.C.: More than anything I spend time with my family, with my daughters and my wife. Right now her mom and my mom are visiting. So we are really enjoying these beautiful days together. The weather is really similar to my city of Cali, Colombia. And, we try to enjoy the moment, go to the beach, just walk around and explore, and get to know places in Portland. All that's important, too.

J.B.: In a locker room full of different nationalities and languages what do you do to relate to each other and get along?

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