

Football gives East High kicker Martin Flores the opportunity to reunite with his father

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SALT LAKE CITY — Growing up little over a thousand miles south of here in Sonora, Mexico, **Martin Flores** would occasionally watch American football on TV with his father, also named **Martin Flores**.

The younger Martin enjoyed the physical nature of it even though he didn't totally understand the rules, but he preferred soccer over football and developed a strong leg throughout his formative years.

A move to Utah when he was 15, however, would allow football to become a main focus in Flores' life, as well as provide a special reunion with his father.

The move

In 2015, the senior **Martin Flores** and his wife Bertha had decided to get divorced. A member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since the younger Martin was a baby, Bertha had some friends who lived in Utah, so she decided to pack up and move to the Beehive State. Joining her were Martin Jr., her only daughter, two grandchildren and some other friends. Martin Sr. and an older son stayed in Mexico.

Bertha and her family initially settled in with their friends who lived here, arriving on Dec. 22, 2015.

Occurring in the middle of his sophomore year, the move was hard for Martin since he didn't speak any English. He quickly joined the soccer program at East High School, however, which, along with his classes, helped him learn quickly. He played JV and varsity his sophomore and junior years.

Football?

One day last spring as the Leopard soccer team was about to conduct its usual practice on the football field, some of the players saw a pigskin and started trying to kick field goals. Given Flores' strong leg, East coach Rudy Schenk suggested he give it a shot.

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With the ball on the 40-yard line (a 50-yard field goal), Flores got a running start and nailed it.

"It would have been good from probably 55-plus yards," Schenk said. "He just smashed it right down the middle."

Schenk told head coach Brandon Match about Flores' kick, and although the conversation didn't progress much at that point, Match reached out to Schenk in June as his team was starting workouts to ask about Flores.

Schenk then called Flores about joining Match's team, and he was all for it. In truth, Flores had been in attendance at the 2016 4A championship game at Rice-Eccles Stadium and thought joining the football team would be fun, but he didn't think it could ever happen.

"Having the call from my coach was like a dream come true," he said.

The beginning

After getting permission from his mom to play, Flores made his presence known on his first day of camp by connecting on a 52-yard field goal, but still had to learn proper technique, from how to get momentum quicker to where to strike the ball with his foot and proper follow through.

Through East's first two games of the season, Flores was 8 for 8 on extra points and also made a 34-yard field goal versus Bingham.

Then came the reunion.

Saguaro

One of the trademarks of the Leopard football program is that it plays a national schedule. This year, that included a Week 3 matchup on the road against Saguaro High School, one of the top teams in Arizona.

When Flores saw the schedule, he became excited. He hadn't seen his father in nearly two years since leaving Mexico (although they communicated regularly) and realized it might be possible for his dad to make the seven-hour drive from Sonora to Scottsdale.

The pair made a plan to reunite, and did so on Friday, Sept. 1, hours before the Leopards were set to play.

"I just went out of the hotel looking at him. I just ran like a little kid. I just ran. I hugged him," the younger Martin said, letting out a sigh. "It was a good experience."

Over the next few hours, the two Martins both caught up on life and reminisced about the past.

"He was so proud to introduce his dad to me," Matich said of his kicker. "It was a really cool homecoming for the two of them to be able to reconnect. It was kind of a sweet, emotional scene to see that."

That night, Martin Sr. was in the stands to see his son handle kickoffs and make three extra points in East's 35-14 win. After the game, Martin Jr. was offered his first football scholarship by coaches at nearby Mesa Community College.

Today, Martin Sr.'s Facebook profile picture is of him with his son, who is donning an East T-shirt. His cover photo is of himself donning an East hat.

"Football provided a young man with an opportunity to reunite with his father," Matich observed. "That's pretty cool."

Follow through

Given the Leopards' prolific offense, Flores hasn't had much opportunity to kick field goals and only has two to his name, but he's made 53 extra points, good enough for eighth in the state. A generally quiet kid, he also has one tackle to his credit, a vicious hit he laid on a Westlake kick returner in Week 4.

"I just saw the guy running and without hesitating, I just went and tackled him," Flores said. "Most of the team will always remember that tackle because they said that a kicker doesn't tackle that way."

Now, as East prepares for the championship game Friday against the Miners, Flores reflected on all that has happened to him since moving from Mexico, including making new friends, learning a new language and picking up a new sport.

"I wouldn't change it for nothing."