

Rodriguez makes mark with El Salvador U-17s

By Will Hammock

will.hammock@gwinnettdailypost.com

A last-minute travel change launched Ava Rodriguez's international soccer career.

The Buford sophomore had a trip planned for a 2024 showcase in California when her father Ed mentioned upcoming tryouts for El Salvador's youth national team — something that interested both of them previously, but the sessions never were close to home.

"(My dad) said, 'Hey, they're having tryouts in Houston a couple of days before we leave (for California), do you want to go?' I said, 'Sure, let's do it,'" Rodriguez said.

The family added a stop in Houston, where things didn't initially go well because the first day of tryouts was canceled. That forced another flight change to a red-eye to California, allowing her brief time to show her skills in front of the Salvadoran coaching staff.

"The field was very rough looking. It was very out of my comfort zone, like what am I getting myself into?" said Rodriguez, eligible for the team because her father was born in El Salvador. "But once we started, we were doing rondo for about an hour, just passing the ball around and then we started the training. It was pretty intense to begin with, all the drills we were doing. We started scrimmaging and I was doing pretty good. Me and one other girl, (the



Special Photo

Buford sophomore Ava Rodriguez poses for a photo after winning a bronze medal with the El Salvador U-17 National Team at the UNCAF FIFA Forward tournament.

coach) got our information and he was like, 'Okay, we'll give you a call in a couple of months. Be ready.'"

Rodriguez got a text in August with an invitation to training camp for the U-17 El Salvadoran Women's National Team, and she spent a chunk of her fall not only as a member of the squad, but also as a contributor during the La Azulita's run to a bronze medal in the UNCAF FIFA Forward Tournament in Nicaragua.

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Special Photo

Buford sophomore Ava Rodriguez during a training session with the U-17 El Salvador National Team.

RODRIGUEZ

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"The overall experience, I would say 10 out of 10," the midfielder/forward said. "I want to go back. Every time someone asks me about it, I start smiling. It was an amazing experience. I couldn't ask for better. Part of it is because of the girls. The girls are super, super nice. I made some good friends."

In addition to the soccer, the journey offered a chance to connect with her heritage. Her immediate family is more immersed in American culture — her father moved to the U.S. as a 7-year-old and grew up in New York, where her mother Kristin is from — but her extended family is more connected to El Salvador.

"It was my dad's first time back (to El Salvador since he was a child)," Rodriguez said of her October trip. "I would just look over at him and he was just smiling. I think he was happy to be back. ... I've been wanting to go really bad, but it wasn't safe because of MS-13, one of the biggest gangs. It was really bad. But it's really safe now. You look at every street and there's a military or police there with a shotgun or rifle right there. You feel really secure. ... We went around El Salvador (as a family) and it's very pretty. It's very green."

While her time in Central America was partly fun, it also included serious work with her new teammates, who were mostly from all over the U.S. (16 of 20 on the final roster were Americans) and playing together for the first time.

"A lot of people spoke English, probably half and half, half Spanish and half English," said Rodriguez, a 4.0 GPA student at Buford. "The coach would speak in Spanish and get a translator, and a girl would have to translate. Sometimes he would speak English. I would say there were three separate groups — a few that only spoke English like me, a few that only spoke Spanish and then some who spoke both, and those were called the translators."

"So there weren't many language barriers, only sometimes. I know a couple of Spanish words. I can understand enough to get by, but I wouldn't say I'm fluent. But being there, I did pick up a little bit."

And she had no problem finding her favorite item on the menu.

"The food was really good," she said. "The pupusas. Whoever has not had a pupusa, they need to try it."

While the occasional pupusa (a griddle cake or flatbread stuffed with meats, cheeses and more) was nice, her days with the national team were full of healthy food and heavy training. A typical day included breakfast, a two-hour training session, followed by lunch and rest until 3:30 p.m., another training session, dinner and a final training session called gym (workouts inside or conditioning on the field).

"It was an adjustment the first couple of days," Rodriguez said. "I went from one training a day that's an hour and 15 minutes (with TopHat Soccer Club) to going two hours three times a day. It was a lot. But honestly, the coaching was really good. He told you how it was directly. He didn't cushion anything. If you didn't do what he wanted, he would tell you and tell you how to fix it."

The on-field results went well — for the most part. Rodriguez started and scored a goal in her first exhibition, though two days later she suffered an injury that put her status for the UNCAF FIFA Forward tourney in jeopardy. Despite the setback, she was named to the final 20-player roster.

"My coach was like, 'We're still going to take you and you can probably play in the last game,'" Rodriguez said. "I was like, 'That's okay. I still want to go.' I ended up healing really fast and I was able to play the first game against Panama. We didn't do too well, but the second game against Belize I got my first (international) goal. Playing for a country is such a different experience from club. I was really excited."

By the end of the UNCAF event, Rodriguez played in four games with three starts and scored two goals for the bronze medalists.

"Ava is a young, determined athlete

that strives to be better every training session." Buford girls coach Megan Hill said. "This opportunity for her is exciting and challenging, not only on the field but in the classroom keeping up her grades. Her self-determination and perfectionism attitude helped her grind out her academics while overseas playing soccer. She is not afraid to step outside of her comfort zone embracing challenges and learning from others around her. This was a great experience and opportunity for her to play for El Salvador and represent well."

Another journey with El Salvador's U-17 national team comes in late January as the team opens qualifying for the FIFA U-17 Women's World Cup, scheduled for October and November in Morocco. El Salvador is in Group D for qualifying with Guatemala, Curacao and Anguilla, and its goal is advancement to the final round of qualifying, where teams like the U.S. Mexico, Canada and Haiti await.

"I'm just looking forward to going back (in January)," Rodriguez said. "I miss everyone. But obviously our goal is to win our bracket, so that's what we're going to try to do. I feel like we can."

After that international trip, Rodriguez plans to get on the field more for her high school team this season. As a freshman, she missed most of the season with strained groin and a mid-foot sprain injuries, only seeing action in four matches — though the state finals was one. Buford lost a heartbreaker in the final match, leaving the Wolves hungry for a state championship run this season.

"High school is a fun thing, but obviously we're trying to win state," she said.

The college recruiting process also is on deck, along with — hopefully — more opportunities to represent El Salvador.

"I see myself continuing to play (for El Salvador)," Rodriguez said. "After this year, it goes up to U-20. It will definitely be harder to make that team because right now it's under-17. Then I'm going to be the youngest for U-20."