

The Inca Champions League

By Andrew W. Jones

1.

As the ball rolled on the pitch, it brought with it the momentum of feverish dust particles that were swarming together, desperate to be part of the action. Itø hit little pebbles, bigger rocks and swoon into undulating indentations in the dirt before caroming off wavering pairs of feet. Where would the bounding orb with a pocket-size flap whipping its way loose be headed next?

Fans started trickling into the stadiumø and stadium would definitely be a flattering termø and looked for various patches of dirt or grass on the sliding slope that led its way down to the valley of a field. There were two different approaches to finding seats, though. The white foreigners approached with apprehension, looking for a place to adequately stretch out their legs and sit comfortably. Eyes darted this way and that, perhaps wondering if it was even a good idea to sit at all. At the same time, the darker-skinned locals congregated close together, chattering expectantly. They were ready for some *futbol*.

From my vantage point, I looked off in the distance and sensed there was a goalø but this was only a sense, not a concrete observation. There appeared to be a silhouette of metal rods huddled together that looked like, in the absence of replacement parts, theyø been constructed and re-constructed numerous times. It seemed naïve to have confidence the metal rods could withstand the force of any shot that headed its way with pace. But more concerning than the goal itself was where the ballø and perhaps the accompanying playersø would be headed if they crossed the invisible plane that signified the end of the field. The drop at the edge of the pitch was made all the more dramatic and uncertain by the all-consuming vista behind it.

Engulfed in snow with a few jagged rocks attempting to power their way toward the sky, the mountain loomed above at an unfathomable height of over 20,000 feet. The breeze that swirled dust on the pitch in front of us originated as gale force gusts that careened their way around ledges of the peak. It was both picturesque and intimidating, a shot worth taking on any camera, and a reminder that this land we were traversing in shorts and t-shirts wasnø simply a paradise.

Caught up in the cornucopia of visual stimuli surrounding me, I barely noticed when the ball was brought to the center of the pitch and tapped forward to start the game. There were no handshakes, no wishes of good luck. There was no check with the goalkeepers to assess their readiness. There was no whistle blown to officially signify the start of the game.

The ball simply rolled forward and was swept up in the midst of feet moving quickly, and the hurried babble of mouths moving even more rapidlyø spit firing words in an unintelligible language. In this most foreign of worlds, I felt like an observer. I felt like I was here solely to document what was taking place on this plateau pitch nearly 10,000 feet above sea level somewhere in the heart of the Andes. I knew no picture could entirely do justice to the setting, and I wondered if Iø have the words to capture this precise moment, this precise image.

But I was lost in that pensive mood only briefly. I didnø have much time to ponder the beauty, confusion, danger or majesty of the moment. The ball was now hurdling its way toward me with confident, scissoring legs trailing just a hair behind it. I wasnø an observer of this incredible scene; I was thrust right in the middle of it. Jolted back to reality, I bent my knees into a stance, met eyes with the attacking dribbler and lunged to my left as I saw him make his deft move with the ball. As the half-inflated ball inadvertently ticked off a small rock in its path, I saw it barely climb over my outstretched

foot. And with it, the attacking dribbler brought his dust with him as he bolted past me. I turned quickly to chase, leaving the massive mountain and all my reflective thoughts behind me.

Blindly chasing a dark-skinned descendant of the Incas half my age, I surged forward in my attempt to catch him. It was at this moment I had the inkling of a thought: I was doing more than just chasing a soccer ball from behind; I was chasing down the best soccer game of my life.

2.

Cesar's hands shot out left, right, up and down, and his eyes darted about fiercely as he began his lecture. His warm smile and unparalleled enthusiasm made him seem far grander in stature than his 5'6", 130-pound Peruvian frame would've naturally afforded him. When he'd introduced himself as *See-zer*, just like the first job I ever had answering Friday night pizza orders on the phone for Little Caesar's, my first inclination was to stop him and say, "Shouldn't you pronounce in the Latin way, *Say-zar*?" But there was no stopping *See-zer* once he got on a roll which he did with each animated breath he'd exhale.

"Today, you start on journey," he said with slightly halting English, as his eyes made the panorama to connect with each hiker. "And this no ordinary journey. This journey is greatest journey you ever take. This journey is sacred. This journey is holy."

His voice wasn't loud, but carried weight, and it was met by rapt attention from the group of 14 gringos—a term Latin Americans use for pretty much anyone with white skin not from Latin America. As I looked around at our group of unsuspecting hikers with tiny spots of not-completely-rubbed-in sunscreen on our faces and necks, I figured that we'd bond over the fact that none of us knew exactly what we were getting into. We were carrying backpacks we'd instantly realized were too heavy, wearing shoes that probably weren't appropriate for four days of hiking, and wondering why we thought it'd be easy to instantly acclimate our lungs and the rest of our bodies to elevations above 10,000 feet.

"This journey, my friends," and he smiled as he paused, "is difficult. Do not think this journey will be easy."

With sun pouring down on ball caps, bandanas, Panama hats and any other relatively insufficient head covering we could muster, we'd come to that conclusion well before Cesar enlightened us. Reading about the Inca Trail from afar there was always a sense of comfort, a distance from how challenging it would actually be. And when you could see the iconic photos of a pyramid peak hovering over the lush green Lost City of the Incas on various websites, this served to assuage fears about the challenge of the hike. Swept up in the splendor of the images my girlfriend Erin and I swam in from the comforts of our apartment, it just looked like something we had to see, just felt like something we had to do.

And that's probably why hiking the Inca Trail has become a pilgrimage for so many. As a link to a bygone past we tend to feel so far removed from, the Inca Trail offers a human connection to a world that seems like it should only exist in historical texts. It's presumed that it was around the 15th century that the Incas constructed the 45-kilometer dirt and stone road through the Andes to their crown jewel, the Inca site of *Machu Picchu*, a name which translates from native language Quechua to Old Peak. Among the many uncertainties of the site, no one knows how long it took them to build *Machu Picchu* or what exact purpose it served to the ancient Inca civilizations. Many have surmised that *Machu Picchu* was a religious site due to its sacred geography. The site is nestled between several verdant mountain peaks the Incas viewed as holy. Others have put forth a wide range of theories from the site's use as a mountain fortress to a royal palace to agricultural testing station to a prison—all evidence of the sophistication of a society that existed some 600 years before us. Within five minutes of meeting Cesar, though, and hearing

him utter the words *ōsacredō* and *ōholyō* in every other sentence, it was clear he~~ad~~ made his decision: *Machu Picchu* was a holy land for the Incas. Traversing the Inca Trail was a sacred pilgrimage.

But no matter what exact purpose *Machu Picchu* served, it was easy to agree on one thing: getting there could be a nightmare. While modern societies excel in establishing roads as the most convenient form of traveling, there~~s~~ nothing convenient about the Inca Trail. Starting in the southeast of Peru outside of the Inca capital of Cusco~~ō~~ a city still well-populated, boasting an elevation of over 11,000 feet~~ō~~ the trail has wild elevation swings. Even though the beginning and ending of the trail are at similar elevations~~ō~~ around 8,000 feet~~ō~~ the route in between is no leisurely stroll through pleasant fields and forests. It~~s~~ almost all up and down~~ō~~ and plenty of it is steep up and down. The trail was also intentionally built as narrowly as possible to make it difficult to detect~~ō~~ all in the hopes of warding off outsiders. The Incas were only interested in true believers and they most likely planned out the route to span the most dramatic climbs to ensure that only those supremely motivated to get to *Machu Picchu* would actually get there. And since the Spanish decimated nearly every other part of the Inca Empire but never laid a hand on *Machu Picchu*~~ō~~ it can be assumed they never found it~~ō~~ it~~s~~ clear the Incas knew how to make things problematic for those who weren~~t~~ welcome, and most likely, even those who were welcome.

The highest point of the trail tops out at a whopping 13,780 feet at *Warmiwanusca*, or Dead Woman~~s~~ Pass. Thankfully, Cesar told us that the mountain peak got its name because it takes the shape of a woman lying down, not because women had a propensity for dying there. But based on the way that the altitude was causing tourists to gasp for air and take breaks to stretch out cramping muscles, it didn~~t~~ seem out of the realm of possibility that a woman~~ō~~ or man~~ō~~ could keel over and find a final resting place anywhere on the trail. This sentiment didn~~t~~ take long to set in, and that made it all the more difficult not to look at Cesar with envy. He~~ad~~ approach each new climb on the march with glee wearing a pair of sandals, using his walking stick expertly with what had to be a too-small backpack slung over his shoulders. Without a doubt, though, he was used to the way gringos reacted to this hike.

ōIt is same every hike,ö he told me with a full-toothed grin. öNo matter what we say, no matter how much we say, ÷Walking four days with heavy bag is no fun,øno one ever believes. They tell me, ÷Cesar, it~~s~~ just walking! How bad can walking be?ö

With this, he~~ad~~ throw his head back and laugh~~ō~~ not disrespectfully, but knowingly. I assumed the ritual of looking at green gringos and chuckling was another sacred part of the journey for him.

I didn~~t~~ doubt the truth of his statement, though; there was nothing light about this journey. In the flat parts of the hike, the Incas didn~~t~~ have much work to do; they merely cleared off a course through the grass. But it was a rare that we~~d~~ find ourselves walking on flat ground. And once we started ascending and descending, I marveled at Cesar~~s~~ springy legs and how he nimbly handled each new step. He~~ad~~ confidently mount stone stairs as if he was an architect of the trail itself, and then he~~ad~~ practically gallop down the stone stairs as they inevitably sloped back down. The steps themselves always offered narrow landing pads, and the longer we hiked, the easier you could fathom making a wrong step on the uneven stones and turning an ankle~~ō~~ or, even worse, having that wrong step send you tumbling down the mountainside.

As enthusiastic as Cesar was about everything related to this hike, with each new ascent, he~~ad~~ warn us to take it slowly~~ō~~ öThis altitude is no joke!ö and with each new descent, he~~ad~~ caution us to know where our feet were going~~ō~~ öYou go fast down this hill if you roll!ö and not spend too much time drifting off amidst the beautiful, rugged scenery. We had to remember, he~~ad~~ say, that the Incas made this trip with a purpose. This trail had meaning beyond anything any of us~~ō~~ himself included~~ō~~ could

comprehend. We should treat the trail with the utmost respect and sanctity, and not take a moment for granted.

Halfway through our first day of hiking, we gazed down at a terraced city, half in ruin, but still intact enough to see the genius of the architectural plan. Cesar grasped the opportunity to amplify the moment with us, and we huddled close around him.

“Do you know how the Incas were so good at constructing these cities? These ancient cities? Do you? Do you? Do you?”

With each new “Do you?” he looked each of us in the eye, ensuring we’d all bought into the pilgrimage.

“Well, I will tell you,” he said, straightening up solemnly.

With the accompanying pause, the air around us grew still as we inched closer to Cesar’s voice.

“When they were children,” Cesar spoke slowly for effect, “they played *í* with Legos!”

With this, he let loose a primal laugh, showing that no matter how many times he’d used that line and we guessed it was plenty he still enjoyed every moment of watching the gringo anticipation. We laughed along with him, but still wondered if Cesar or anyone knew with certainty how the Incas had constructed such an improbable society up here in the wilds of the Andes.

3.

From our gringo perspective, hiking for four days in the Andes fulfilled our summer desire for adventure, and we were all eager to view mountain peaks and Inca ruins. But when Cesar kept pushing for a soccer match after our first day of hiking, we were confused on several levels. Aside from the fact that our day would end around 10,000 feet in some place we had trouble pronouncing *Wayllabamba* we didn’t quite understand why we’d be motivated to finish our 12-kilometer hike through the mountains with a soccer game against ourselves.

“No, no, no,” Cesar corrected. “We will not play against each other. We play against locals. *Locals?*”

We’d been hiking for hours and hadn’t seen a soul. The term *local* had to be relative, or perhaps something was lost in translation between the English and Spanish version of local. Not having seen anyone for the greater part of the day, a Peruvian version of *Deliverance* crept into my mind.

“You say you play soccer,” Cesar half-declared and half-challenged me at the end of our day’s hike. “You say you play soccer. Now is time for soccer!”

I looked to my left, where a fellow hiker from our group was posed to take off his hiking boots and give up on physical activity for the day. I knew he had no other pair of shoes than those completely soccer-unfriendly boots, but he hesitated taking them off when he heard Cesar. I looked at Cesar, dancing with excitement in his sandals, and then I looked down at my own feet. I was wearing old, beat-up running shoes and of the three of us, my excuse of having improper footwear for the game would be the flimsiest.

Acquiescing to our fate, Cesar marched six of us from our pleasant mountain plateau down toward the *village*, as he called it. But as we walked on a trail with ferns hanging overhead and tiny animals scurrying out of our path below, there was nothing in our midst that looked like a village.

“This game, this game,” Cesar sputtered away excitedly, “it will be big, big game for village. They take this game very seriously. It is big pride for them.”

I was part of a group of six gringos from our hike who would now amass the soccer team ready to compete with *big pride* on the line. We all had varying outward reactions to Cesar’s fervor, and there was

no way any of us could predict what sort of soccer fate would lay ahead of us. Based on his continued pep talk, though, this seemed far more significant than a lighthearted end-of-the-day pickup game of soccer.

“To play against this village,” Cesar directed us pointedly, “you must play for money. This is serious business. They do not play for fun; they play for money.”

As Cesar spoke, we found ourselves hovering over a dusty, ancient pitch shaped almost like a bowl. And as we trekked downward, our opponents came into view. My first impression, once I could see them more clearly, was that these serious-looking dark-skinned Inca kids were probably about 16 years old.

“Big pride, big pride,” Cesar kept chirping at us. “Big pride for village, big pride for you. I hope you win” but these boys are village’s best. It will not be easy.”

One of the beauties of the game of soccer is that size doesn’t matter nearly as much in this sport as in nearly all others. Being bigger in soccer doesn’t necessarily mean being better. And at the moment of greeting our opponents with various phrases in English, Spanish, grunts and charades— all of which weren’t understood by the boys who only spoke Quechua— we couldn’t have felt supreme confidence based on how much bigger we were than them. But I knew that the members of my gringo team knew better. By a stroke of luck, we’d thought, our team of six all had experience playing soccer at a relatively high level. Two hikers from our group who were in their late 20s had played Division III soccer in college. One of them, a Welshman who moved to America for college, was the MVP of his college team. Two other 20-something Americans had played all throughout high school, and the one Scottish hiker from the group was a former soccer player, currently a burly rugby player in university. He eagerly volunteered to play goalkeeper, and I already sensed that he didn’t play to block shots sent his way, but attack them. At 31, I was the oldest player on the team, but I’d played competitive soccer that culminated as a high school varsity player, and I had an advantage that would help more than any other: I’d spent the last year living in Quito, Ecuador at 9,500 feet; the altitude here at *Wayllabamba* wasn’t affecting me nearly as much as everyone else.

So when the ball was kicked off and the Inca player beat me with his first move, I tore after him with confidence that my lungs would hold out. And I could tell from the onset that the Inca boys counted on the exact opposite to happen: unaccustomed to the altitude, the gringos would have no stamina. As a result, they began their possession game immediately— short, relatively crisp passes followed by direct cuts back to the ball, straight runs down the makeshift sideline or angled runs to the goal. Everything they did was with a purpose and knowledge accrued from playing together for years, I assumed. I couldn’t fathom who else they had to play with up here. They weren’t awed by the massive precipice looming in the background, or affected by the half-inflated ball that would indiscriminately hop around on the pockmarked field. They were swift-footed, in sync and confident. This was their home, and they were in their element.

In contrast to the Incas, everything we did was accompanied by gasps for breath and confusion over how to make our legs soccer-functional after a day of burning our leg muscles hiking up mountain trails. We clunked around in hiking boots, clumsily chopping at the ball. We weren’t passing or dribbling the ball; we were desperately launching it in any direction we deemed remotely safe. Maybe this was yet another ritual of the Inca Trail that Cesar treasured— watching the panicked gringos take one on the chin in *futbol* from his people?

It didn’t take long for them to score. A beautiful combination occurred when a player 20 yards from the goal sent a ball out to the wing to have it quickly one-touched back toward the goal onto the

right foot of an oncoming attacker. He nimbly faked a shot as our all-too-eager rugby goaltender dove too early, and then the Inca boy softly delivered the ball through the wobbly metal goalposts.

The Inca boys gathered together in a celebration, and cheers could be heard from the small congregation of villagers who'd congregated near this end of the field. Something told me they knew to sit there, anticipating the goals that would be scored by their boys down at this end. As the Inca boys sauntered their way back to midfield, we could see the playful smiles on their faces; they weren't quite done with their celebration yet. And as we took this hike to learn and appreciate other cultures, we should've welcomed the warmth and enthusiasm of our hosts. But the first goal had been scored too quickly and we were rattled. We didn't want to be embarrassed. And as this thought crossed my mind, more gringo hikers who'd finished hiking for the day started to matriculate on the ridge to the left of the pitch. I glanced over to the Inca followers, who had started a communal dance.

“Remember the village rules: first team to two goals wins!” the Welshman barked out. “One more and we're done. Come on! One more and that's it!”

This jolted our ragged team back to reality. As much as our legs might've burned, and as much as we might've felt we were at a serious disadvantage against this polished team, if they scored again soon, we'd walk off the field having played for less than ten minutes. That just didn't seem right; it just didn't seem like the *gringo* way.

And with that, we tried to maintain possession of the ball as best we could. Sometimes this came through sharp passes and pseudo-slick dribbling, but more often, it was through safe passes followed by using the only advantage we had: our size. Each time we'd receive a pass, if the next option wasn't clearly present, we'd use our bodies to shield off the smaller, Inca boys. As they hacked away for the ball, sometimes clipping the ball, more often clipping our ankles, we started to notice that they weren't used to being shielded away from the ball by bigger, stronger players. Theirs was a game of speed and precision, smart combination play and dexterous touches with both right and left feet. Our only response to this appeared to be brute force, but this force was affording us the opportunity to control the ball.

We held our own for the first five minutes after the goal, and the Inca team seemed surprised this game wasn't over yet. One of our attempts to create offense led to a long ball being played to the corner near the goal we were attacking. Two Inca boys had gone to trap one of our players as he jabbed away at the ball trying to bull his way out of the scrum. As I instinctively made my run toward the corner to offer my teammate a passing option, I was called off by the Welshman who was tearing up the field, howling out for the ball. With half-skill and half-luck, the ball ricocheted off the two defenders in the corner and headed to the left hiking boot of the Welshman. I made a circle retreat back toward the goal, anticipating a shot on goal. This was clearly our best chance of the game, and the Welshman was clearly our best player.

But just as he wound up to unleash a shot with his left foot, I saw an Inca opponent dart out of nowhere and begin his slide on the rough dirt in between the Welshman and the goal. Focused on the forthcoming shot and oblivious to the slide, the Welshman still let rip with his weighted hiking boot. The semi-inflated ball seemed to pop when it hit the sliding Inca defender in the stomach, and the Welshman's jaw dropped.

But his reaction didn't compare with the surprise I felt when that same shot that had just been deflected by the Inca boy ricocheted sideways right in front of me, eight yards from goal. One more bounce and I'd trap the ball with my right foot. I was all alone with nothing but a goalkeeper in front of me, and the vast, precipitous ruins of an Inca empire just a little ways beyond that.

4.

The modern version of the Inca Trail pilgrimage to *Machu Picchu* is not something that's done alone on a path to solitary enlightenment. There is plenty of romance to be had gazing up at jagged snow-topped Andean peaks and gazing down at intricate Inca ruins—but none of this majesty is viewed in a solitary sense. Hikers can't just wander off onto the Inca Trail with some granola bars and a few bottles of water. The Peruvian government mandates that all trail-hikers be registered with a licensed guide, and they limit the number of people on the trail per day to 500.

Of the 500, though, usually only 200 of these are tourist hikers. The Inca Trail has turned into quite a business. The industry consists of guides and porters who make their living leading and narrating the trip—guides—or schlepping tents, supplies and food on their backs—porters. As much as I was captivated by Cesar's presence as an Inca-loving, Lego-building, pilgrimage-seeking guide, I soon discovered there was little that could compare with the porters who were part of our hike.

On our guided hike, there were 15 porters, and this number seemed to gel with other groups we saw as well; there would be at least one porter for every hiker. While we lumbered up and down the trails with backpacks filled with all the warm clothes we could imagine—it's temperate during the daytime under the sun on the trail, but the minute the sun goes down at elevations of 10,000 feet, all thoughts of a balmy South American adventure quickly vanish—the porters' realm was much more challenging. Gringos were only in charge of carrying clothing for four days of hiking along with a sleeping bag and ground pad tied to the outside of the backpack. Inevitably, this would lead to backpacks being stuffed with everything a first-world hiker could get his hands on: dry-fit, neoprene, moisture-wicking, Gore-Tex, SmartWool gear that would have him prepared for anything.

The porters did the hike in flip-flops.

And those flip-flops provided their base as they lugged everything needed for the hike outside of the things the gringos had purchased at REI. Their backs housed tents for the entire group, food and drink for upwards of 30 people hiking for four days, a mobile kitchen, a table and chairs for mealtimes, plates, bowls, silverware and cups. Long abused as cheap labor, the Peruvian government finally stepped in and mandated that a porter could be forced to carry no more than 40 pounds of gear on any particular day of hiking. So that meant one porter carried a scale, too.

Before we'd even started hiking, Cesar offered up the option to all of us that if we didn't want to carry our 15-pound backpacks, we could pay a nominal fee and have a porter add to his load for the 45-kilometer trek. My initial reaction was indignity—*how could you come on the hike and not even carry your own backpack?*—but this sentiment wasn't necessarily universal. Three hikers immediately volunteered to hike unencumbered, and as the hike continued on into days two, three and four, others took advantage of the offer, too.

With loads at least twice the size of ours and footwear that would never be classified as hiking-appropriate, the porters didn't arrive at camp after us, and they didn't arrive at camp along with us either. For each stop—lunch in the afternoon and dinner at night—they'd arrive at least an hour before us in order to set up all the necessities for meals and sleeping. While there are many things hikers partake in on the Inca Trail that qualify as roughing it, because of the porters' extreme efforts, this hike at times morphed into luxury camping.

Each day, as we trudged up stony Inca stairs, winding slowly and precariously around ledges with sheer drops that got our pulses racing, the porters weren't hiking the trail. They were running the trail. With a precisely-weighed forty pounds on each of their backs, their flip-flops and super-charged legs propelled them up, down and around the trail at what appeared to be warp speeds, as our altitude-afflicted

quadriceps and calves felt the incessant burn. The diminutive porters would be hunched over with giant green canvas bags that swallowed them up, zooming along the trail, never missing a step, and from our astounded vantage point, it appeared they weren't sweating or breathing hard either. The same way the Inca boys were running circles around us in soccer, the porters seemed to be breezing their way through the trail.

“Every year,” Cesar told us, “we have Inca Trail marathon. The trail is almost exact 42.2 kilometers a perfect marathon.”

With his use of the word *perfect*, several of us who had previously run marathons had to chuckle. While the distance might've been *perfect*, the terrain was anything but. Running a flat and secure-footed 26.2 miles was arduous enough. To us, the thought of running the Inca Trail reeked of sprained ankles and torn ACLs and those would only occur if we had enough wind in our lungs to actually be able to run up hills at 11,000 feet. Soccer at this height was one thing but an entire marathon?

“Who runs this marathon, Cesar?” we had to ask incredulously.

“The porters, of course,” Cesar replied, wondering why we'd even need to ask this question.

“Do they actually wear running shoes?” I asked, assuming there had to be a better form of footwear if you were competing in a race all the way to *Machu Picchu*.

“No, no,” Cesar answered quickly. “They would never want shoes like gringo shoes. Those are only shoes they know, only shoes they want.”

“What's the winning time for the marathon?” someone piped in.

“Usually,” Cesar thought for a moment, “three hours, twenty minutes.”

The qualifying standard for the Boston Marathon is three hours and five minutes, and many people strive for a good portion of their lives to run a marathon in that time on flat ground in good conditions. The Inca Trail porters don't officially train and don't even wear shoes and they run a mountainous marathon in just 15 minutes more. What was taking us four days to hike, they could knock out in a run before lunch.

But there would be no way for me to show my amazement for any of the porters' feats at least not in a way they'd understand. While Cesar procured his job as a guide by being tri-lingual Spanish, English, and Quechua the porters exclusively spoke Quechua. They didn't even speak Spanish, and in a forward-moving country, only speaking Quechua meant their job prospects were limited. I was too embarrassed of my own good fortune to ask how much they were earning for their four days of laboring through the Andes with all of our food and gear, knowing that the total would likely be very low. At the end of the hike, when a collection pot was passed around for a tip for the porters, whatever money I had in my wallet seemed completely insufficient.

5.

When I cast the ball from the topside of my right foot, I felt like everything went silent. I listened for the muffled sound of the ball being blocked by a sliding defender, or the clanging of the fragile metal goalposts. But these did not occur. I didn't hear anything from the now-burgeoning crowd either, as most of them had gathered at the opposite end of the pitch, away from the mountainous backdrop I'd just sent my shot into. From all of our vantage points, I think it took a moment to understand what happened.

But the first noise I heard was a very distinctive American, “YEAH!”

Then I knew what had happened.

The score was tied 1-1.

Our gallop back to midfield was high-five and smile-filled, similar to the jubilant jog we'd witnessed from the Inca boys, but while their goal celebration had been riddled with confidence and swagger, the predominant sentiment in our celebration was, "Can you believe it? We just scored!"

If there had been instant replay, some of us wondered if perhaps a second look at the shot might've rendered a different outcome. We were clearly outmatched in this game, and it seemed improbable that we'd scored to tie the match and send this into a golden goal situation. Darkness was settling in, we could feel the temperatures dropping, and it seemed we'd entered a far different world than what we'd experienced all day long hiking in the sun. Who knew what was for certain anymore?

Maybe my shot hadn't inched its way past the extended right arm of the goalkeeper? And even if it did, maybe it veered to the outside of the goalpost, not sneaked just inside to the right? Maybe, as dusk fell on the Andes, none of us could really see what was happening anyway?

But in this Inca world, there was no instant replay. And there was no discussion or protest of the goal. The Inca boys didn't speak our language, and we didn't speak theirs. But body language told the whole story. One of the Inca boys trudged down the hill below their goal—it looked to me like he'd fallen off the face of the mountain—and dejectedly chucked the ball back up to the pitch. With their pride—*big pride*, perhaps—wounded, they shrugged their way back to midfield to restart the game from midfield.

And in the moment, the third kickoff of the game, I wasn't thinking about anything other than winning. This had turned from a showcase for the Inca boys to humble the unprepared and unsuspecting gringos in a soccer match to a fiercely fought, competitive game. Looking into the eyes of men who just a few minutes ago appeared to be weary, tired hikers, I now saw looks of hunger, fiery appetites ready for this conquest.

But the Inca boys weren't going to roll over. Their dejection over giving up a goal soon turned to resolute defiance; they weren't giving up another one. Any time the ball was at our feet, they came at us harder, chopping away effectively at the ball. They especially went after the Welshman, who they'd quickly identified as our main threat. If we tried to use our size to our advantage, they amped up their quickness and squirted around to find better angles for deflections. Our passing was improving, but so was their defense. We couldn't mount much of an offensive attack.

Surprisingly, though, neither could they. To us, what felt like a ridiculous chance to win this game had steeled our resolve to get back and hawk the Incas on defense. I took up my position in midfield and vowed to run and chase until I dropped—which I was aware could happen at any moment when I stepped into an unseen hole on the dirt pitch.

Each new time an attack was mounted, our Scottish keeper would brazenly call out defensive instructions as if these were things we'd practiced all year long: "Force him to the bloody sideline! There's a man loose in the middle! Step up on the bloody ball! Don't let him shoot!"

Responding as if we actually had practiced these tactics all year long, the five other gringos hustled into positions and prepared to throw our bodies in the path of the ball if necessary. The game continued mostly with them attacking and us defending for over 30 minutes. In the few moments of respite we had when the ball bounded off the pitch, I saw the size of the crowd increase. It now appeared the entire Inca village—maybe 50 people—had settled in to their corner, and more and more gringos were hovering across from them over the pitch, having just finished their hike. Both sides watched and cheered as each team desperately tried to launch the attack that would end the game. The Incas sang and chanted; the gringos clapped and encouraged.

In response to one of the Inca attacks, I deflected a long-range shot and took off, dribbling furiously toward the other goal off in the twilight. Up ahead of me about 20 feet in the distance were the

two Inca defenders who quickly gazed down at my feet. They knew I was the only gringo who wasn't wearing unwieldy hiking boots. I had a full head of steam, my mind chock full of images of a game-winning goal, and adrenaline pulsing through my body so that I didn't even notice my legs were tired or that my lungs were burning. I feinted left, jabbed right, stepped over the ball, and prepared to make whatever move I could.

But really, what I was doing was waiting for the rest of my team. This was a one-on-two break at the moment, and didn't represent the best odds for success. Even with all my blustering adrenaline and confidence, I understood that. I heard a bunch of noise, however, behind me, and anticipated that reinforcements were coming. My teammates would come charging behind me to help us score the winning goal.

The noises behind me, though, as I took a split-second to listen, weren't familiar sounds. I didn't hear, "Coming on your left!" or "Open on the right!", but instead a whole host of unintelligible yelling—defensive yelling from Inca boys instructing their defenders on how to handle me. I took a quick look behind me and saw two Inca boys charging hard to catch up with me. Behind them were my teammates; two were jogging forward and two others were grabbing at their shorts, desperately trying to catch their breath. As much as we'd all geared ourselves up to attack for that one more goal we needed, this was still 10,000 feet above sea level—and this was still a game being played after we hiked all day.

In this moment, I slowed and tried to calculate my next move. My eyes met with the two Inca boys tasked with stopping my advance, and I couldn't help but look up and smile at them. Even though their nerves had been alerted, not wanting to be responsible for the goal that would decide this match, I saw smiles on their faces, too. In this instant, I became caught up in the sublime nature of this moment. Sweating profusely with burning lungs begging for more oxygen, I let my legs carry me, confident that I'd find a way to score the unlikeliest of all goals. Grinning as I made my move, the Inca defenders and I entered into a form of synchronized dance—I dodged right, they dodged left; I juked left, they juked right. As we danced this *futbol* dance ever so gracefully in the dust, even in that moment, I was awed, wondering how in the world I'd even gotten to this place.

6.

Hiram Bingham grew up in a world so poor and foreign to most Americans that he might as well have grown up in Peru. A son to missionaries in Hawaii, Bingham was an unlikely candidate to become who many have said was the inspiration for the modern day Indiana Jones character. Bingham received his big break as a young man when he went to the mainland to study at Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. His academic excellence led him to attend Yale University, and this would later lead him to become a lecturer at Yale in the first decade of the 20th century.

But Bingham wasn't your typical lecturer. He loved history, but didn't want that to be confined to a classroom or lecture hall. He felt most at home when he was "understanding history through his feet," as the historian Christopher Heaney puts it. In the early 20th century, though, history, as far as serious American scholars weren't concerned about South America. It was just a land the Spanish had pillaged for centuries, and there wasn't much sense meddling in the history of that place. History, at this point in time, did not incorporate in-depth studies of indigenous peoples.

Bingham, though, saw it differently. While South America had been combed over plenty by Europeans looking for material gains, it was relatively untouched in terms of historical study. This fact, along with Bingham's growing restlessness of just being a lecturer and not an explorer, led him to

undertake several journeys to South America. His first took him in the revolutionary footsteps of Simon Bolivar, from Caracas in the northeast through the mountains south and west down to Bogota. His second South American jaunt had him starting much farther south in Buenos Aires, making his way through the Andes all the way to the Bolivian mining town of Potosi. With each new journey, Bingham was gaining an understanding and appreciation for South America, and his appetite for adventure continued to be whetted.

It was his third trip, though, in 1911 that launched him into a new orbit of fame. Thinking, once again, that he was following a famous and well-traveled route of the past, Bingham set out to find the lost Inca stronghold of Vilcabamba in the heart of Peru. Either by mistake or providential design, Bingham headed the wrong direction. As he trekked through the Andes, he kept asking people where the ruins were, and kept getting answers that struck a similar, if unfamiliar, chord: *Machu Picchu is near*.

It's here where many of the Indiana Jones comparisons start to fall flat. Bingham was not faced with competition between other explorers hell-bent on beating him to archaeological glory. In fact, Bingham wasn't even an archaeologist, but a historian who'd found his knack following historical trails. The irony, though, is that the trail he most famously discovered was one he stumbled along unintentionally, and one that he had next to no knowledge of ahead of time. In terms of conflict any true adventure-seeker would face, he had to contend with poisonous vipers along what he'd later learn was the Inca Trail—Indiana Jones would've expressed the appropriate level of anxiety here—but he wasn't up against any colossal opposing force that makes for a good movie script. In fact, he was led right to *Machu Picchu* by farmers living in the area, farmers who'd taken up residence in remote Andean land where they were hoping to get away from the government. Bingham was surprised to find people living in this remote area, but quickly buoyed by the fact that everyone in the relatively unpopulated area knew about the Inca ruins. Most of them were using the agricultural terraces to grow crops. As they marched him toward what is now considered a mecca of historical exploration, they weren't sure why this particular gringo was so interested in *Machu Picchu*.

Once Bingham arrived at *Machu Picchu*, he knew he'd found something, as he wrote in *Harper's Monthly*, "suddenly we found ourselves in the midst of a jungle-covered maze of small and large walls, followed with, 'Surprise followed surprise until there came the realization that we were in the midst of as wonderful ruins as any ever found in Peru.'" The *New York Times* went even further to describe Bingham's find as the "greatest archaeological discovery of the age."

There are many historians, though, that dispute the nature of Bingham as a discoverer. Clearly, all the farmers in the area knew about the site, and they'd actually ushered in white men before Bingham. The previous white men, though, didn't have the historical and archaeological knowledge that Bingham had. They didn't understand that what they were looking at a veritable gold mine.

And with that, *Machu Picchu* became a place full of artifacts that Yale and the United States were desperate to have. Peru was wondering how it could best hold onto its past, while Bingham was bringing more and more expeditions to *Machu Picchu* to excavate and explore the ruins. The problem with Bingham's expeditions, though, was that the gringos were having trouble knowing where to dig to find the most valuable artifacts. Once again, the local farmers came to the rescue—and were able to identify the integral parts of *Machu Picchu* so the digging would occur in areas that most likely to provide the keys to an ancient civilization. They did so with trepidation—fear that they were digging in a sacred land of the dead—but the gringos were eventually too persuasive to resist.

During these excavations in 1913, *National Geographic* devoted an entire edition—complete with Bingham's photographs—to *Machu Picchu*, and then the American archaeological world—as well as a

good majority of Americans fascinated by adventure were hooked. Bingham now felt conflicted, as he didn't want to betray the trust of so many of the Peruvian locals he'd struck up relationships with, but at the same time, he felt an obligation to Yale. They'd funded all of his trips to *Machu Picchu*, and he wanted to deliver to them the return they were looking for: hoards of Inca artifacts. As a result, Bingham leaned Yale's way and tried to swing as many deals with the Peruvian government as possible to allow him unlimited ability to transport artifacts back to the States. Watching train loads of ancient goods being hauled out of their homeland, the same farmers who'd eagerly led Bingham to *Machu Picchu* now protested what they saw was a looting of their native land. The astounding deal Bingham, the U.S. government and Yale eventually struck with the government of Peru allowed for Bingham to take any and all artifacts out of *Machu Picchu* back to America but these artifacts would have to be returned to Peru whenever this request was made. And this deal was what had Cesar, our guide, rankled.

"Hiram Bingham was great man, great explorer," Cesar declared, getting warmed up. "But he promised these Inca treasures would return to Peru. He promised this in 1913! 1913! Do you know how long ago this is? Do you? Do you? Do you?"

Before, I'd been eager to meet Cesar's eyes when he questioned each one of us as part of his lecture. Now, I felt the shameful burn as a native Peruvian I'd grown to adore asked a bunch of blushing gringos why the best place to study the relics of the Lost City of the Incas that we'd traveled thousands of miles to get to was actually in a museum in New Haven, Connecticut. In 2008, after numerous unsuccessful attempts by the Peruvian government to get Yale to return the artifacts, they formally sued the university to recoup their lost native treasure. While Cesar, ever knowledgeable of his gringo audience, was the consummate diplomat on many subjects, he left little doubt about whose side he took in this dispute.

"This is our land, holy land. *Machu Picchu* it isn't just a place. No, no, to us *Peruanos*, it, it, it is our life. It is our spiritual heritage. It is who we are, where we come from. It is part of our heart."

I couldn't tell if Cesar paused for effect or because he actually needed to collect himself.

"How can someone else keep these things that belong to us?"

Cesar's rhetorical questions left us all silenced, but it slowly started me thinking on the bigger picture of the Inca Trail. He was battling for the return of Inca artifacts to their proper home, but I wondered how much either *Machu Picchu* or the Inca Trail actually belonged to Peruvians at this point anyway. Our hike, which had been jaw-dropping and enlightening in so many ways, had only been a Peruvian experience because Cesar was leading us, and the Quechua porters were carrying our tents and food. Our group of 14 was entirely gringo—12 Americans and a young Scottish couple. There were no *Peruanos* with us making the pilgrimage to *Machu Picchu*. And as we encountered other hiking groups, the ethnic makeup was strikingly similar. The Inca Trail—the heart and soul of Peru, according to Cesar—was full of Peruvian workers catering to gringo tourists. Our only contact with the people most associated with the Inca Trail was in a soccer match. While Cesar became emotional talking about the artifacts that had been lost by a process Hiram Bingham perhaps unintentionally set in motion almost 100 years ago, I wondered if the Peruvian government was fighting this smaller patriotic battle while already having conceded the larger war.

7.

As confident as I was that my final move would result in an opportunity to win this battle with a goal, I was swimming upstream, one attacker on two defenders plus a goalkeeper. My optimism could be

lauded, but in the end, I was plenty misguided. My last tired gringo feint was awkward and slow, and one of the defenders stepped in to poke the ball away before I could even uncork a shot.

So back the other way we went. The game was settling into a rhythm: the Inca boys would command possession of the ball and work fluidly and strategically toward a good scoring opportunity. They possessed a confidence and style that we didn't have. They shared the ball with quick passes and made precise cuts left and right as if they knew exactly what they were doing at all times. Their movement on the pitch and attention to detail spoke to the greater confidence and precision that their ancestors must have utilized half a millennium ago when they built the Inca Trail.

At the other end, we were doing our best to snuff out each attack, and then push forward the other way in desperation, only to have this attack thwarted even quicker. I'd then hustle back into our defensive half, playing the role of chaser once again. My legs felt like Jell-O and some wooziness was starting to set in. But as I hounded the ball, sometimes creating deflections, sometimes missing and starting the chase all over again, I started to feel a sensation as if I was floating through this game.

This wasn't a sensation like I was just going through the motions, but a sense that here I was, at the end of an exhilarating and exhausting day of hiking through the mountains, in a place that it seemed no one could completely comprehend, chasing this round ball with too little air in it as if my life depended on it. Nothing mattered more than this game, and even more than potentially scoring a goal to win the game, I just didn't want the Inca boys to score and end the game as a result. With legs and lungs that should've capitulated a long time ago, I pursued the ball and the Inca boys with passion and determination. I'd never particularly enjoyed the defensive aspect of playing soccer, but here on this Andean plateau, I was willing to shuffle my feet into position to stop dribblers and slide in the face of shots all night long. I'd felt the transcendent nature of a runner's high before, but never a soccer high. And on this night, I knew I was experiencing something entirely different—a *futbol* high.

As the sun dipped even further below the jagged peaks, it became more difficult to make out players in the distance. Voices became louder in hopes that vocal communication would make up for the half-blindness of all the players. Each time a player hit the dirt, I felt certain that a new cut had opened up on a shin or knee, but I could rarely see the end result. The slide tackle would create a billowing cloud of dust in the rustling darkness.

“Mark the man on the left! Drop, drop, drop! Drop back and bloody defend! Force to the outside, watch the bloody crosses” and don't let them shoot! the Scot in goal would call out with even more urgency, now sensing our legs were giving in. We were now closing in on an hour of playing time.

During the day while hiking, I'd found it difficult to understand the gregarious Scot's accent, and in the quiet setting of the trail, I'd found myself nodding along and agreeing to statements he'd made even though I couldn't completely understand him. But here in the twilight of the Inca Trail with my head throbbing, each of his words penetrated right through to my brain. I was not going to let my man beat me.

And not only did I hold true to that declaration, the Inca boy dancing with the ball in front of me made a much bigger mistake than I ever could've imagined. Stepping over the ball scissor-style to his right, he intended to then make his move left to charge by me. But whether it was the potholed surface that betrayed him or perhaps his own tired legs—was this possible?—he moved to his left without touching the ball to take it with him. Seizing on this chance, I stepped in and jabbed at the ball, propelling it forward toward the giant snow-capped peak that housed our goal below it.

I'd knocked the ball away before, and led gringo breaks the other way before as well—but right away, I could tell this was different. As I carried the ball forward, there was much more yelling than any

of our previous attacks. The yelling began with garbled Quechua frustration over losing the ball, then the exigency of getting back to defend but more prominent was the English I was hearing.

“Let’s go, let’s go!” I heard on my left side from one of the gringos.

“This is it, this is it!” I recognized the voice of the Welshman close to me, and started to take this even more seriously.

Finally, it was the Scot in goal nearly half the field behind us that convinced me that this was the time to push; this was our chance.

“Bloody go for it! Push up! Bloody go! Go score!” he bellowed, and again, I made out every syllable.

I touched a pass over to my right to the Welshman who received the pass and started charging toward the middle with it. With his central motion, I crossed behind him, forcing the two Inca defenders who were backpedaling hurriedly to make a decision. Whether it was their intention or not, with the Welshman’s move to the middle, they both went with him, leaving both the left and right wings wide open. I was charging down the right with nothing but open space ahead of me, and the same could be said for my teammate on the left. This was a three-on-two rush in the semi-darkness with Inca glory on the line.

Immediately sensing he’d drawn two defenders, the Welshman called out to his teammate on the left a clever subterfuge that would’ve worked if the Inca boys understood what he was saying in English but then delivered the ball at an perfect pace ahead of me to the right. With this, noise seemed to be coming from all directions: animated urgings in English and desperate pleas in Quechua. The ball was slowly bounding toward my favored right foot, and both defenders, caught off guard by the return pass, were now a step slow in recovering to defend me. When I touched the ball with my right foot, I was about 20 yards from the rickety goal. And with one more touch, I had a decision to make.

The angle for the shot now afforded to me wasn’t entirely ideal, but it would still be the kind of shot where the Inca keeper would have trouble saving to either his right or left. With one Inca defender charging back at me and the other seeming lost, it was clear neither one of them was in an enviable position. The Welshman and my other teammate both called out to me to let me know they were open should I decide to cross the ball back into the middle, perhaps creating an even better scoring chance.

I’d been floating in this game for so long, enjoying the freeing sensation of running, exhausting myself and playing as hard as I could, that in that quick instant, I realized why it had all been so freeing: there had been nothing to think about. Here on the dusty Inca pitch, I’d left all decision-making behind me and just played a game I loved in its simplest form. While I might’ve been physically encumbered in many different ways, I didn’t notice it because I was mentally unburdened.

But now I had to make a decision: shoot or pass? With a glimpse into the shadows, I saw the keeper sliding himself into position. I took one last listen for the approaching footsteps of the harried Inca defender, and then I made my decision.

I decided to shoot.

But then at the last moment, something clicked and told me to pass. In a quick-moving game like soccer where decisions can’t be plotted or completely thought-through, my split-second of indecision was crucial. My right foot came swinging down to the ball and the inside of my foot chipped at the middle of the ball, sending it across the goal mouth. What I’d initially hoped was a perfectly-placed shot and then changed mid-course to an ideal cross to the Welshman had turned into neither. I’d sent the ball into the middle of the imaginary goal box, into a virtual no man’s land. No attacker or defender would get to this ball; it would only bounce harmlessly to the keeper who’d stepped out to scoop up my errant shot-pass.

I was dismayed by my own indecisiveness. If I had missed the shot or made a bad pass, I could live with either of those. But I hadn't done either one. By being caught in between, I had essentially done nothing and squandered our best chance to win the game. I was certain my teammates knew it, and even more certain the Incas did.

Charging out of the goal with the ball, the Inca keeper decided to dribble it himself. With three gringos now horribly out of position at the wrong end of the pitch, we were nowhere near the strong defensive shell we had been holding firmly for at least the past half hour. The Inca keeper zipped the ball ahead to a winger who expertly trapped the ball and kept dribbling forward.

Desperate to get back into the play to atone for my mistake, I started sprinting back toward midfield, still trailing the action. One of our defenders veered out onto the wing to attempt to stop or slow down the process of the ball surging forward up the sideline. But his gambit didn't work. He had hoped the Inca boy would make the easy back pass to this trailing midfielder instead of attacking him head on. But the head-on attack is exactly what the Inca boy chose. With a swift right-footed boot, the Inca boy sent the ball rolling up the sideline and left our hiking-booted defender in the dust. Cutting the ball back to the middle, he carried the ball forward. We were now left with one defender squaring up two attackers.

Almost the entirety of this game had been chronicled by our Scottish keeper yelling out instructions— *bloody* this! and *bloody* that!— but I didn't hear a word from him as the Inca boy approached. There weren't many instructions to give for a two-on-one break. More than defensive strategy, we were going to need a whole lot of luck.

The Inca boy was now faced with the same decision I had just had, and as I chased from behind, he stepped over the ball and made a beautiful fake with his right foot, forcing our defender to jab left toward the other attacker. He was certain a pass was going to be made, but this was never in the cards. Now with a free moment to take on the Scottish keeper, the Inca boy had what he wanted. And just like he had made this move a thousand times over in the waning daylight, with a half-inflated ball bouncing unevenly in the dust, he feigned taking a shot while our keeper left his feet and slid out at him. Seeing him out of position, he rocketed a shot toward the near post.

Slowing down to a jog 30 yards from goal, I realized how hard I was breathing. I had watched the whole scene unfold in front of me, knowing it had occurred because of my mistake at the other end, and also now not being sure what happened. I was peering into the dust at a scene strewn with chaos: our keeper was in the dirt and the Inca boy who had taken the shot had just joined him there as well. But though my eyes might have failed me, and just like my goal I wondered what instant replay would say, there wasn't much doubt about what had happened.

The shot had gone through the goalposts.

The game was over.

With the ball rolling quickly up the hill past the goal, the Inca cheering section gobbled it up and held the ball above their heads symbolically. They started to sing a song. I saw our keeper smack the dirt in front of him, frustrated he hadn't made the save. I looked to the spot where the shot was taken and saw the Inca boys swarming the goal-scorer, eager to celebrate. I sensed they felt equal parts triumph and relief at scoring the goal to end the game.

After spending the better part of the last hour so sure of myself, so eminently free to fly around the pitch with beautiful abandon, I now had no idea where to go. A feeling of guilt swept over me as I thought about my unintended role in setting up the game-winning Inca goal. In a game that by all traditional standards meant absolutely nothing, I couldn't believe how horrible I felt that we had lost, and

how responsible I felt. I saw the Welshman, the MVP of his college soccer team, trotting my way, a few steps behind me on his unfruitful quest to get back to defend.

“I’m sorry about” I started to utter in a contrite fashion.

“That was the best game of soccer I’ve ever played in my life,” he cut me off with conviction and clarity.

I wasn’t sure how to respond, weighing my own feeling of guilt, while assessing what he’d just said. But before I could even acknowledge his comment, another one of my teammates joined us.

“That game was absolutely amazing. I’d never play in a better soccer game.”

The Inca boys celebrate near the goal and the villagers loped down to join them. But the three of us looked out over the Andes in awe and my guilt was quickly absolved. Without a doubt, they’d said what I knew deep down, and what I realized I’d been processing the entire time we’d been playing.

While I’d played soccer my whole life with the purpose of winning games, the actual outcome had little to do with how much the game itself mattered. As much as I’d become immersed in the spirit of competition in this game, the notion of winning or losing had little to do with what we were actually experiencing on this Andean plateau. While on the trail of an ancient world we could barely fathom, we’d just played this incredible game that perhaps was just as hard to fathom. We played in darkness with no thoughts of why there weren’t lights, watched the ball bounce every which way with no deliberation over why it didn’t roll as expected, and felt the collective heaviness in our lungs and legs without considering that maybe our bodies weren’t ready for this elevation.

And more than anything, we’d played against an opponent who had most likely never been coached at least not in the traditional sense and spoke a language we’d never come close to understanding. But this Inca team was perhaps the most skilled, fluid and team-oriented bunch any of us had ever faced at various levels of soccer in our home countries. As gringos we’d come into this world eager to explore the Inca land, and as a result, make memories that would last us a lifetime. And like so many of our ancestors before and after us, it was probably only natural that by being in this place by hiking their trail and playing their game of *futbol* we felt that this place had somehow become ours.

But it wasn’t ours.

This mountainous Andean terrain belonging to the Incas had been run through by the plundering Spanish nearly 500 years ago, the fame-seeking Hiram Bingham a century ago, and today the Inca Trail is overrun by adventure-seeking gringos, all looking for that slice of the Inca soul they can claim to be theirs. But on this afternoon, this *futbol* pitch didn’t belong to us, just in the same way that victory didn’t belong to us. While we’d played our hearts and lungs out, we didn’t deserve to win. We’d lost to a better team, and in a land that has been repeatedly taken over by others, there was no need for us to take over this soccer game.

We shook hands with the Inca boys and paid them their victory money, a prize of six Peruvian Soles about two U.S. dollars each, which we’d intended to give them no matter the outcome. Each boy smiled and nodded gratefully as he received his money, and while their faces lit up with the *big pride* of winning and earning what, to them, would be a sizeable treasure, I wondered about their future. All smiles after earning their prize money from the gringos in a glorious game of *futbol*, these boys could only speak one language, Quechua. Looking ahead to their future in a country where the Quechua language was dying out in favor of Spanish with English as a second language for those of privilege I wondered if these boys would soon become Inca Trail porters, lugging unimaginable weights up and down the Inca Trail, gratefully accepting tips from gringos at the end of grueling four-day hikes.

“This was great game, great game,” Cesar congratulated us as we headed off the dusty, now almost completely dark, pitch. “Those boys are so good, so very good” but you gringos play great, too!”

Cesar was grinning ear to ear and we thanked him for setting up such a memorable experience for us. I could sense that he needed to hear we were happy with the experience even though we’d lost. While undoubtedly his heart had been silently cheering for the native Inca boys, his savvy professional sense knew that he was in charge of keeping us content for the next three days.

As he made his way over to the Inca boys and villagers to congratulate them on their win, I wondered what he said to them. And even more importantly, I wondered if they knew him as *See-zer*, the gringo-fied version of his name, or *Say-zar*, which would be true to his heritage.

On this night, though, our conversation strayed from the grander significance of this place as we walked back to our campsite, chattering away about each intricate detail of the game we’d just experienced. We did the best we could to produce our own living version of instant replay both on that night and for the remainder of the hike. Most immediately, though, knowing that a warm shower to clean off what had now become very cold sweat would only become an option after three more days of hiking, we hustled into our tents to find sweatpants, sweatshirts and stocking caps to protect us from the cold. Dinner was about to be served to us by smiling porters still wearing flip flops as the temperatures dropped precipitously.

That night before I went to bed, I lay out on the ground in front of our tent and looked up at the stars. Actually, though, in this elevated Inca Andean world, the glittering stars in the clear night weren’t above me. Curving with the shape of the earth, the stars occupied my vision to the right and left— not limited to straight overhead like I was used to. This was yet another unique and astounding moment I wanted to keep forever, and to memorialize with a photo. But as I tried to fidget with my camera to adjust the lens to get a clear picture of the bright majesty swirling around me, none of the shots came close to coming out clearly.

Like so many elements of this ancient world, this land steeped in history, and even my vision during the soccer game, very little was clear. But maybe, I thought, as I climbed into a down sleeping bag, bundling up for a frigid night in the Andes, a lack of clarity is just what every explorer should be looking for.

