

## THE JOURNEY AWAITS

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West Aurora soccer player Jomar Mendoza will travel to Sweden to play in The Gothia Cup next week.

"A great kid," said Joe Sustersic, his high school coach. "He's tutored some of my other kids who were having academic troubles. He's one of the first there and one of the first to help clean up after practice.

"A consummate team player, he's one of the hardest working kids I know. He knows one speed and that's all-out effort."

Mendoza also plays for the Kickers club team.

His passion for the sport has led to what could be the trip of a lifetime, to Sweden, to play next week in The Gothia Cup.

The event is dubbed The World Youth Cup and draws more than 1,500 teams from around the world annually to the city of Gothenberg. There are 14 different age group divisions for boys (age 11 to 18) and girls (12-19) teams.

Mendoza's journey begins Thursday.

"I fly out to North Carolina, first, for a three-day camp, and then we head to Sweden," said Mendoza, noting that Monday night's opening ceremonies can be viewed online ([www.gothiacup.com](http://www.gothiacup.com)) here in the U.S. beginning at 1 p.m.

He doesn't know any of the other players yet, but will be placed on a team representing the U.S. in the pay-as-you-go event.

"I've got a (soccer recruiting) profile online for college coaches," said Mendoza, explaining how he drew the attention of team organizers. He supplied letters of recommendation from Sustersic and his club coaches and went through an interview process before being invited.

Mendoza then had to raise \$3,600 for the trip and thanked Aurora aldermen Scheketa Hart-Burns and Richard Irvin for their help in spearheading that effort.

He's hoping the experience will be a springboard to a good final season with the Blackhawks.

"I know I had a bad season," he said of a junior campaign in which he scored only two goals in 25 games playing forward. One of them came in the second overtime as the Blackhawks beat Wheaton Warrenville South for the first time in many years.

Mendoza thinks a summer injury contributed to his sub-par production.

"In a tournament in Indiana, I took a knee to the face," he said. "They called it a tripod break. All three bones in the cheek that support the eye socket were broken. I had to have surgery and had two titanium plates put in. I was out eight weeks, so I missed the whole summer training I would have had."

After the fall season, he noted he scored 12 goals in 13 games during the indoor season.

Sustersic, though, still wants to move him to outside midfield this coming season.

"He says I like to dance a lot with the ball," said Mendoza, who has told the coach he'll do whatever is best for the team.

"I know he likes to score goals and has that offensive mentality," Sustersic said. "But he can be a threat using his passing ability as a midfielder. He's a great passer. He'd be taking one for the team but also playing to his strengths."

Mendoza has his eye on the engineering schools at Illinois and Michigan State and also visited Indiana-Purdue at Indianapolis.

Sustersic doesn't think he's a Big Ten caliber soccer player but with a breakout senior season, believes Mendoza will have plenty of college soccer destinations ranging from Division III up to lower Division I programs as options.

The journey awaits.