

## Soccer star Ahmad Boura shares his love of the game

By Jake Berry | Posted: Saturday, September 15, 2007 12:00 am

The small wooden plaque hanging on the wall of Ahmad Boura's office at Franklin Pierce University in Rindge doesn't sparkle like a World Series ring.

But to Boura, a university fund-raiser and a former professional soccer player in Lebanon, it's worth just as much.

The plaque, which reads "Viceroy Cup 1996," commemorates the Nejme Soccer Club's championship win in the Viceroy Cup, a professional soccer tournament held in northern Lebanon.

In the tournament's championship game, Boura made headlines in his home country by scoring the game-winning goal off the bench to beat his team's longtime rival.

"I remember that day very well," Boura, 34, said with a wide grin. "It was like hitting a home run for the Red Sox to beat the Yankees.

"Spectators ... picked each one of us up ... and carried us back to the stadium" after the game, he said, his eyes glowing with pride. "That was the most satisfaction I ever had."

Playing before crowds of 70,000 in Lebanon, Boura, who played professionally for eight years in Beirut, rarely got to play the hero, he said. But he always received celebrity treatment - for better and worse.

"There are about 3 million people in Lebanon," he said. "Probably 3 million people know you (when you play soccer). ... You have the media who are criticizing you, literally, every single week. ... It can be hard, but I did like some of it."

Now living and working in Rindge, Boura is out of the soccer spotlight, he said. But through his job at Franklin Pierce, and through his work with the school's soccer teams, as well as his own soccer camps, he's building a following in the Monadnock Region, he said.

Boura, who came to New Hampshire in 1999 to play with the New Hampshire Phantoms of the United Soccer League, hosts a pair of soccer clinics, called the Boura Soccer Camps, on campus each summer. The camps, which each run one weekend long, draw about 150 participants between the two, he said.

"I receive calls and I get e-mails now all the time from folks" asking about the camps, Boura said. "They say 'we've heard about your services from others. We would love to participate.'"

"Some people like attention," he said. "Some people don't. ... I like to be known. I like to be around people. The reason is, I like to learn about people and see how they think. ... It helps me to be a better person."

### **Finding joy in soccer; helping his family**

Growing up in a poor neighborhood in Beirut, Boura had always dreamt of playing professional soccer. But nothing could have prepared him for the day he signed his first professional contract, he said.

"I was born in a culture where soccer ... was the only joy you can have," said Boura, who first signed with the Nejmech club in 1992 at the age of 17. "We didn't go to parks. We didn't go on vacations. The only thing we had was just playing soccer. ... To be able to turn my hobby into a profession, I was very fortunate."

But Boura's good fortune extended beyond himself, he said. The day that he signed - his contract was worth about \$120,000, Boura said - he took his family on a shopping spree.

His mother, Houda, had been forced to sell her jewelry to buy food for Boura and his three brothers. "So I bought her jewelry back for her," Boura said.

His father, Mouhamed Dib, who had worked as a carpenter, hadn't been able to access the medical care he needed. "So we took him to see the doctor," Boura said.

"It was great to be able to help my family," he said. "It's part of our culture, actually. When you earn something it's shared by the family."

It was Boura's family, in fact, that drew him to the U.S. years later.

After eight years with the team, team officials cut him after the 1998 season, he said. Instead of looking for a new team in Lebanon, he opted to pursue soccer in the United States.

Boura's agent arranged tryouts with six teams around the northeast, including teams in Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York and Rhode Island, Boura said. And while some offered richer contracts, only the New Hampshire Phantoms left him close to family.

"The reason I stayed in New Hampshire ... was to be close to my brothers in Massachusetts," he said. "One, I couldn't speak English. Second, I wasn't familiar with the culture. I wanted to be close (to my brother) in case I needed something."

### **Coming to Rindge, passing on his love of the game**

Boura hardly received a David Beckham welcome when he arrived to play soccer in 1999.

There were no lucrative endorsement deals or adoring fans. Instead, what he found was a part-time obligation to a minor league team.

"It was a very nice club," Boura said. "But it was different. It was a part-time job, not a full-time job. We practiced twice a week. I used to practice nine times a week. ... It was very different."

At the time, the coach of the Phantoms, Suleyman Doenmez, also served as an assistant coach for Franklin Pierce soccer teams, and he arranged for Boura to take part in several of the school's soccer camps.

Through the camps, Boura came to know Tod Silegy, the head coach at Franklin Pierce. Later that year, Silegy offered him a spot on the Franklin Pierce coaching staff.

Boura accepted and served as an assistant coach for both the men's and women's teams from 1999 through 2003.

"He was great with the kids," said Silegy, who left Franklin Pierce after Boura's first year, and now works as a physical-education teacher and soccer coach at South Meadow School in Peterborough.

"He had a great personality," Silegy said. "Not only was his knowledge of the game outstanding, but he was an outstanding player. So he could demonstrate and relay his ... knowledge to the kids on the playing field."

After a year of coaching, Boura took a graduate assistant position within the Franklin Pierce athletic department. The post, which he held until 2002, put great demands on his time, Boura said, and he had to give up playing with the Phantoms.

"It was hard," he said of his decision to stop playing. But through coaching, "I adjusted slowly and turned it so I really enjoy coaching. That way you can really see the kids develop."

Boura worked with the soccer teams until June 2003, when school officials offered him a job in the school's fundraising department. In July 2006, he was offered his current position as individual giving director.

"I'm very passionate about Franklin Pierce because they gave me a chance," said Boura, who earned his master's degree in business administration at the school in 2002. "Through my work, I meet a lot of people who are passionate about what I'm passionate about. ... I love my job."

But despite his long work hours, Boura has been able to maintain his other passion.

"I'm just trying to develop my (soccer) camps now," he said. "I would love to be on the field. But coaching is the closest thing to it. The fact that I can teach someone to make a pass, or shoot the ball properly, that means a lot to me. ... It's a way to pass on my love of the game."

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 Name: Ahmad Boura

☒ Age: 34.

☒ Born and raised: Beirut, Lebanon.

☒ Residence: Rindge.

☒ Family: Wife, Jennifer; two stepsons.

☒ Education: Bachelor's degree of commerce, accounting, Beirut Arab University, Beirut Lebanon, 1996; master's of business administration, Franklin Pierce College, now Franklin Pierce University, 2002.

☒ Employment: Director of individual giving, Franklin Pierce University; former professional soccer player, Nejme Soccer Club, Beirut, Lebanon; New Hampshire Phantoms, Manchester, N.H.

☒ Question:

David Beckham: hero or hustler?

Answer:

"I think he's very good for (professional) soccer in America. ... There are a lot of players here who don't make as much money as players in other parts of the world. ... This will hopefully help more people pay attention to soccer in the U.S., and then the players can get paid what they deserve."

☒ Question:

Why hasn't professional soccer caught on so much in the United States?

Answer:

"It's just starting. People have been playing in other parts of the world for a long time. ... And it's growing. When they brought the World Cup to the U.S. (in 1994) it opened a lot of windows for the league. ... I can already see a huge difference in ... terms of the number of children playing."

☒ Question:

What was the hardest part about transitioning to life in America?

Answer:

“Learning the language was hard. ... At some point I made some silly comments because I was translating literally from Arabic to English. People laughed at me ... in a good way. ... If someone was telling me ‘how come?’ I thought (about) it, and I’d say, ‘How come? I came by plane.’”]]>