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# Russian Goes From Jail to Pro Soccer in Chile

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Molokoyedov training in Santiago. While serving time for drug trafficking, he plays for a professional team. **Alvaro Duran**

QUILICURA, Chile — Fog blankets the grassy soccer field surrounded by chickens and grazing cows as the players of Santiago Morning sprint through a practice game. It's just another training session in Chile's second-tier soccer league, but at least one man plays like a child running free in a pasture.

For Maxim Molokoyedov, it's a taste of temporary freedom after his almost three years in prison — and a renewed shot at a professional career that seemed to have been cut short.

Every evening, the Russian footballer sleeps behind bars. But every morning, Molokoyedov walks out of his prison cell, ready to hit the field wearing the jersey of his professional soccer team.

The newest star of Santiago Morning is getting a second shot at life through soccer after he was arrested while carrying 6 kilograms of cocaine, which he planned to smuggle to Europe

inside children's books.

"I'm so happy, but I know I need to work hard. It's been three years since I played at this level," Molokoyedov, 24, said in a thick accent, sometimes dropping in Spanish slang that he learned from other inmates. "I have a six-month contract. I'm looking forward, but I'm living a day at a time."

Back home in Russia, Molokoyedov had dropped out of school in his native St. Petersburg but was recruited by second-division soccer team FK Pskov 747 because of his power and agility with a ball.

Traveling from Ecuador on his way to Madrid and then Moscow in 2010, he was arrested during a stop at the airport in the Chilean capital of Santiago. He was sentenced to three years and one day.

Molokoyedov said he was stupid, regrets it, and prefers not to talk about it, calling the experience "a bad memory."

The first days at Santiago's penitentiary were rough. Molokoyedov slept in a crammed cell with four other prisoners, didn't speak a word of Spanish and missed his family. He put his faith in a wooden rendering of St. Nicholas, known as the Wonderworker in the Russian Orthodox Church.

The miracle came at the rocky prison yard's pickup games. Inmates began offering him deodorant and a bar of soap to be treated to a few minutes of his dribbling skills and brutal right-footed shot.

Word got around about "El Ruso." It reached Chilean national coach Claudio Borghi, who said Molokoyedov was good enough to go pro. It also reached Franklin Lobos, a former Chilean professional player who volunteers at prisons and who vouched for the Russian.

With almost a year still to go on his sentence, Molokoyedov does not yet qualify for Sunday passes or the daily passes many inmates get after they complete most of their term. But starting in late July, the warden began letting him leave the prison grounds to play soccer as long as he was accompanied by a guard.

"It's an exceptional situation that has to do with Maxim's sporting abilities," said Max Laulie, a spokesman for Chile's prison police.

Such an arrangement would be difficult to imagine in countries with zero tolerance for drugs such as Singapore, Malaysia or Iran, where traffickers often get the death penalty or at least a lengthy prison term.

"We're not trying to defend this practice but the objective behind it, which is rehabilitating people, in this case someone who has a shot at becoming a professional soccer player," Laulie said. "The prison system defends this opportunity to reintegrate him into society. We just hope he does well."

In his debut game, Molokoyedov scored two goals against top division team C.D. Palestino.

"He's proving that you can make mistakes, but if life gives you another chance, you have to take it. And if it is through soccer, which is what he loves, then even better yet," said Santiago Morning Coach Hernan Ibarra.

The coach praised Molokoyedov's control of the ball, his ability to show up unexpectedly behind players and, most of all, his speed. He compares Molokoyedov to Luis Figo, the Portuguese right-wing midfielder who was FIFA's player of the year in 2001 and who played for Spanish rivals FC Barcelona and Real Madrid.

"Perhaps I'm exaggerating a bit. Don't forget that this kid has only been with us for a couple weeks," Ibarra said. "But I see some positive physical and technical conditions. ... He's an important player for any team in Chile, and I have no doubt that he has everything he needs to become a professional player."

During a recent practice session, a cross shot curled from the back and Molokoyedov stopped the ball at midfield using the inside of his right foot. Looking up to make a pass, he danced with the ball almost on tiptoes, recalling a member of the Bolshoi Ballet, before soccer reality set in and Molokoyedov was taken down with a rough sliding tackle.

Nearing noon in the field at Quilicura, which means colorful rock in the language of the Mapuche Indians, it was time to return to the other rock, the gray one where he sleeps. Molokoyedov stepped into a car flanked by the prison's coach and a burly guard and looked out the window, again at the chickens and the cows.

Molokoyedov could have returned to Russia this month. An amnesty law recently took effect to free up overcrowded prisons by sending prisoners to their home countries on the condition they don't return to Chile for at least a decade.

Molokoyedov chose to stay and play soccer for the Santiago Morning, which earlier this month announced that his official transfer from FK Pskov 747 had cleared, allowing him to play in tournaments in Chile. The club has declined to say how much he is paid.

"My life is here, and I want to do things well," he said.

Thirty minutes later, Molokoyedov was back at the concrete fortress walls. A woman waiting in the line outside the prison recognized him, asked someone to take a picture of them with her cell phone, then kissed him on the check.

Molokoyedov flushed and paced to the iron prison gate, where he raised his arms to be checked for weapons, passing an X-ray scanner decorated with a big silver soccer trophy on top.

Cleared, Molokoyedov was back behind bars. But he knew he would be able to live out his soccer dreams far from the prison walls again tomorrow, out there in the grassy field.

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