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'We hate losing to each other': Indiana men's soccer sophomore duo thrives off competition



[IDS file photo and Jenny Butler](#)

Then-freshman forward Samuel Sarver celebrates the win against Northwestern in the semifinals of the Big Ten Men's Soccer Tournament on Nov. 10, 2021, at Bill Armstrong Stadium. Among Big Ten freshmen, Sarver had the most goals in the 2021 season.

By [Matt Press](#)

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Sophomore forward Sam Sarver vividly recalls the heartbreak he felt last year on a cold November night.

Indiana men's soccer suffered a crushing overtime defeat to No. 2 University of Washington in the NCAA Sweet 16. The team was left motionless as the Husky faithful rushed the pitch in jubilation.

Sarver, a freshman at the time, remembers his shock after Washington's golden goal but said that moment now serves as motivation.

"When the ball hits the back of the net and your season's done, you just sit there and you can't say anything," Sarver said. "One thing my coach told me when we walked off the field was 'Remember this feeling.' I don't want that feeling to happen again."

Sarver is an Ohio native who spent his youth playing in Cleveland. At 14 years old, he, along with five teammates, was recruited to play for Columbus Crew Academy.

The organization maintains a strong pipeline to Indiana, having selected current Hoosier head coach Todd Yeagley in Major League Soccer's inaugural draft, and multiple current and former Indiana assistants have spent time with the Crew.

"There's just a really good connection, and that's why IU felt like home," Sarver said. "To be the best player you want to be, you have to surround yourself with the best players, and that's what brought me here too."

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In 2021, Sarver led Big Ten freshmen in scoring and tallied seven goals and 18 points — both second on the team — en route to All-Big Ten Freshman honors. Yeagley said he knew Sarver's personality would mesh with his Hoosier teammates.

"(Sarver) is constantly bantering a bit with the guys. He's a funny kid, and he wants to be in the middle of all things, but sometimes a little bit too much," Yeagley said with a smile. "He's learning just as he's maturing as a kid, how to pick and choose moments of jumping into a conversation."

Sophomore forward Tommy Mihalic's journey to collegiate soccer parallels Sarver's.

Mihalic is another player in a long list of Midwest youth soccer stars turned Hoosiers. He hails from Skokie, Illinois, and learned the fundamentals of the game from his father and coach, Mario.

Unlike Sarver, whose family had little experience with soccer, Mihalic said he was born into the sport. Though he is of Croatian descent where soccer reigns supreme, Mihalic is prideful of the region he grew up playing in.

"You hear that a lot, especially around high school and that higher level," Mihalic said, regarding the negative reputation of soccer in the Midwest. "I mean you see here at Indiana, a lot of our guys are from the Midwest, and we've brought in some good players, so I think that's a little misconception."

For academy play, Mihalic started with the Chicago Magic, who were bought out by FC United. After leading FC United in goals in 2018, Mihalic joined the U19's of German club FC Augsburg.

He never quite found his footing in Germany, but Mihalic made a handful of appearances with the Croatian youth national teams. However, just a few hours south of his hometown is where he would shine.

Mihalic's decision to attend IU was simple.

"I think it's a pretty easy option coming to a school like this with so much history soccer wise," Mihalic said. "It's a family-oriented program, and like Sammy said, it feels like home."

Mihalic went on to earn an All-Big Ten Freshman Team nod last season. Ranking third on the team in goals and points, his numbers indicate a promising trajectory. Still, Mihalic wants to take things a day at a time before facing what awaits him in the future.

"Obviously you want to be remembered for something when you come here, but it's not something you can just plan and say that's it," Mihalic said. "Each game you have to do what it takes and all that will come after."

Sarver and Mihalic's bond is unsurprising. Both are confident, outgoing personalities who carry aspirations of making it to professional leagues.

With these ambitions comes relentless work ethics. Both said they are competitive in virtually every aspect of their relationship. In fact, Sarver fondly remembers a few instances last season that epitomized their fiery nature.

"One fitness test, my legs were just dead, and I couldn't do it any longer," Sarver said, "But I told myself I'm just going to beat Tommy by one level, and I beat him. In the next fitness test over the summer, I was just about to finish, and (Mihalic) sprinted at the end just to get in front of me."

For years, every position on the team has had competition, but the attacking room specifically has had exceptional depth in recent seasons.

In 2021, forward Victor Bezerra, now with Major League Soccer's Chicago Fire, led the team in goals after three historic seasons. With other skilled attackers like redshirt senior Ryan Wittenbrink and senior Herbert Endeley, Yeagley said the team's drive to push each other is contagious.

With Sarver and Mihalic, Yeagley said their successful individual performances are a byproduct of competition.

"It's not about a contest of goals and assists. They just want to continue to elevate and help the team," Yeagley said. "They're driven, and goals and assists will come with that. Just being a good college player is not their end goal. They want to win and have a chance at the next level."

This season, Mihalic and Sarver's approach has stayed the same. For Mihalic, he said this season is about "showing what you can do," and Sarver assumed a "ruthless mentality."

"We hate losing to each other," Sarver said. "That's our main thing."

In a program with so much historical success on an individual and team level, forging a legacy requires daily competition. For the sophomore standouts, their healthy rivalry may help them reach that point.

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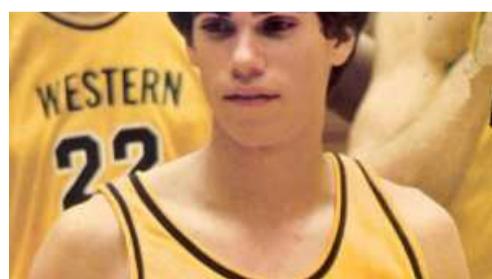
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