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15 MINUTES

BY PATRICK HYUN WILSON

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## Flora in bloom

**Stephen Flora** didn't wake up one day and find out he was signed by a professional soccer team out of nowhere. The 23-year-old Fair Oaks native's journey—from playing at El Camino Fundamental High School to being signed December by Major Arena Soccer League team Ontario Fury—was chock full of setbacks. He didn't receive any scholarship offers, was cut from his college team, was cut from a semi-pro team and nearly gave up his childhood dream. But he didn't. Now he's been signed by Ontario Fury and is ready to make it to his next goal. SN&R chatted with the midfielder about the journey that led him here.

### What was the hardest moment of your career?

After my first year of college I basically got cut from the team at Chico ... at the end of the spring season, the coach just tells me, "You know Stephen, I like you, you know, you're a hard worker and everything, and everyone knows you're technically skilled. But we have guys that are older than you, bigger than you, faster than you and there's just no getting around that. We don't see you actually playing on the team." ... I didn't even tell my parents. I didn't have the heart to tell them, that I didn't make it, because I was just so upset about it.

### How did you find Ontario Fury?

One of my friends was playing in an indoor game at the arena that I worked at, and he's just like, "Oh, you want to hop on?" And I was like, okay ... I scored a bunch of goals, I was playing really, really good, and I guess the ref of that game was one of the older coaches for Ontario Fury. So after the game he came up to me, and he's like, "Hey dude, have you ever heard of the Ontario Fury?" ... I ended up going to a tryout and—this is back in July—and I played really, really good, probably one of the best tryouts I've ever had.

### What were you doing when you found out you were being signed?

I just was going [to their practice] every day just thinking, you know, I gotta just make the most



Stephen Flora at a recent Ontario Fury game.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEPHEN FLORA

of this, and hopefully one day I'll get a contract out of this. But I was just playing completely for free. ... It was the end of practice, and the coach is bringing everyone in for a huddle and they're just saying, "Good practice, make sure you're in the locker rooms tomorrow, blah, blah, blah—oh, by the way, we just wanted to say this in front of everybody, Stephen, we think you've been doing a hell of a job this year and we want to offer you a contract." And I had no idea they were going to say that, so as soon as they did I'm just like—I literally didn't hear a single word after that.

### What are you most excited for?

I would say the relationship with the fans. I walked around the side [of the arena] after the game and I literally was signing over 100 autographs, and the little kids came up to me and looked up to me like they wanted to be like me one day, that was just like ... man, that was the best feeling ever... I just wanted to like, one day, be that guy that I always looked up to. Ten, 15 years ago, I was that little kid walking around and trying to get a picture with those guys, and now that I'm actually the guy that's on the other side of the picture. It's like the coolest feeling ever. □

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