

SOCCER'S OFFICIAL TOP KICK

By **Julie Hanna**
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One thing is for certain: Irena Kleinaitis never thought it would come to this. When she suggested to her husband 19 years ago that he might want to play a little less soccer, she thought she was doing herself and their newborn daughter a favor.

As it turned out, she was. But when Alfred Kleinaitis stopped playing the game he loved and started officiating it instead, no one in the family could have imagined where the road would take them.

There were the weekends and weeks away from home as one of the world's premier soccer referees, the missed anniversaries and birthdays and a dad's realization that he couldn't discipline his children with a whistle and a rule book, on the one hand.

On the other, there were the exciting games and accolades and the sense of accomplishment that comes from giving 110 percent and knowing you've come as close to perfect as is possible in the endeavor you love.

"Arguably the most qualified person on the planet," said Steve Davidson, who has officiated Big Ten games with Kleinaitis and who is director of operations for Chicago's professional league soccer team, the Power.

"The premier official in the area and probably the country. He's very professional but also very personable," said St. Charles High School girls' coach Tim Dailey, coach of two state championship teams.

"Only Alfred can go do certain things and get away with it," said Vincent Mauro, director of officials for the U.S. Soccer Federation, headquartered in Chicago. "You know, like, sometimes people respect your personality. He can talk to (the players). Another referee couldn't talk to them; they wouldn't listen to him."

To Kleinaitis, they listen. His resume includes officiating five Division I NCAA championship games, professional league games and a number of international matches.

His career came to a head in 1991. Then, at 50, Kleinaitis was in his final year as a U.S. referee for FIFA, the international governing body of soccer and possibly the most powerful single sports regulating body in the world, which then retired its referees at that age. It had been quite a run for Kleinaitis, who considered himself lucky to have achieved the FIFA ranking six years before—only seven U.S. refs of a pool of 65,000 hold the distinction in a given year and only 150 referees total in the world.

There he was in a Dublin stadium filled to capacity with 58,000 fans waiting for Ireland to play the Soviet Union. Kleinaitis was the first U.S. official ever asked to referee an A match (of World Cup class, the highest)

in Europe.

"The stadium was full with the Irish flags and everyone dressed in green, and the (Soviet) flag on the other side, with the FIFA flag next to it," said Kleinaitis. "Then, for the first time in history they had an American flag, and that is usually dedicated in honor of the assigned referee, and that was me.

"I noticed the American flag as I came in for the match, and the groundskeeper said to me, 'Young man, we have various flags from different countries, but you are the first American to ever fly. It seemed like all the eyes went past the American flag and that was very special for me.'" That same year, the Burr Ridge resident received a special invitation to officiate one of the Lithuanian national championship games as that country was establishing its independence from the Soviet bloc. Kleinaitis returned to the nation of his birth for the first time since his family had fled their native land in 1944.

As the only Lithuanian-American FIFA official, Kleinaitis found himself somewhat of a celebrity as he visited the place where he was born. He found "there was nothing there, just land, land, land. I was surprised at how beautiful it was-so much forest and so many old churches."

In a sense, Kleinaitis had come full circle. He'd begun his lifetime affair with soccer in Europe, as a tot in post-War West Germany.

His family had lived in a number of refugee camps after fleeing communism in Lithuania, and the soccer ball was two things: a way to unite children of different cultures, and cheap.

The latter remains Kleinaitis' chief selling point of the game to still-reluctant Americans.

"Think about it, it's so natural," he said. "A kid sees a pebble and they kick it. It's only natural to progress to a ball. There's no other equipment and it's cheap to play."

The only people playing in Chicago when the Kleinaitis family arrived in the Marquette Park neighborhood in 1957 were other ethnics: the Lithuanian-Americans, Poles, Germans, Italians, Czechoslovaks, Yugoslavs and Mexicans.

Kelly High School had no team, but Kleinaitis was good enough to make the Lithuanian community's best team. He played midfield and remembers himself as an attacker.

As a referee now, he would describe the young Kleinaitis this way: "Able to read the game well, but lazy. I didn't know what defense meant. I would be yelling at myself for not working at a higher rate, but soccer to me then was just having a good time."

It stayed that way for him through the University of Illinois, where Kleinaitis earned bachelor's and master's degrees in physical education.

Kleinaitis has been a physical education teacher for the past 26 years at Sward School in Oak Lawn

Elementary District 123, grades 1-6. So it doesn't seem surprising his gifts for instruction and discipline have transferred to the soccer field as an officiator and to the classroom as an instructor.

Though retired by FIFA in 1991, Kleinaitis is busier than ever officiating and serving as the national director of instruction for United States Soccer Federation. He is gone just about every other weekend to teaching clinics and lectures, responsible for the development of 65,000 registered U.S. soccer referees.

And when the world spotlight is turned on the U.S. next year as the World Cup comes here for the first time, Kleinaitis will take a bit of indirect responsibility for the U.S. referee or referees chosen to officiate the world's most-watched sporting event and most prestigious soccer tournament.

Consider that a billion people saw the last World Cup on television, in 1990, and that crucial plays often rest on a ref's call.

"No question," said Kleinaitis, that he'll take a little pride in seeing U.S. officials call World Cup games. "But it's much harder to sit on the sideline than on the field. You're always more nervous to see someone perform who more or less indirectly was taught by you."

And Kleinaitis will be there, for the opening ceremonies and matches to be played in Soldier Field, as well as those scheduled around the country for the 24-nation, three-week tournament.

"Neither one of us ever imagined it would come to anything like this," Irena Kleinaitis said in retrospect.

Irena was tired of her husband being gone for Tuesday and Thursday night practices and Sunday games, followed by all day socializing with the guys, back in 1974, especially with a new baby in the house.

One Sunday he skipped the game. "It was beautiful outside," said Kleinaitis. "We packed up and went out, and it was one of the nicest days we ever had."

Irena knew he loved soccer too much to give it up, though. So she suggested he try refereeing a few games instead. At 34, his playing days were numbered anyway.

"I remember I was sewing at the sewing machine," Irena said, "and he came in and plopped \$15 down and said, 'Here, do whatever you want with this, I enjoyed myself.' "

The money made from refereeing was never significant, but Irena quickly realized her husband was onto something else. Kleinaitis, it turned out, was a natural referee. He quickly rose within the ranks and in 1978 became an official for the North American Soccer League, the only truly big-time professional league the U.S. has had. Then the traveling began in earnest.

"From the female's perspective, it was a difficult thing to have him leave," she said, "but I never made a major issue with it. There was something happening to him."

It was the realization that he had found the perfect outlet for his love of soccer. Kleinaitis wasn't ever going to play in a world-class game or a collegiate championship, but here was a way to participate in the highest level of competition and to raise the game's level to as close to perfection as possible.

The referee in many ways has a thankless job. He endures the wrath of the players, coaches and fans and never receives recognition. Yet the best must have a passion for order, an understanding of tolerance and a vision of the game's artistic merits within the boundaries of its rules.

"When refereeing became important, I realized I had to dedicate myself," said Kleinaitis. "I felt I needed to have a perfect game. You strive for that and work to prepare yourself mentally before you go on the field."

There is too much beauty in the game and talent among its players for an official to give anything less than the best effort possible, Kleinaitis says. Of the players he has seen, Kleinaitis puts former Chicago Sting player Pato Margetic among the top talents.

"He was one of the most gifted and exciting ballplayers," said Kleinaitis. "Very unpredictable and he would do something unexpectedly that would completely confuse the opponent."

Said the 32-year-old Margetic, now the Chicago Power's player-coach: "Blond, skinny? Yes, I know him. You know a lot of times people don't give enough credit to the referee, including myself. But those who dedicate themselves to the game are the survivors. A referee has to be in charge of the game, and I think he is very well-known for that. A lot of times he'll tell you to shut up, too, but you know he's in charge."

Kleinaitis prides himself on having the players' respect. It is to his chagrin that young American referees have been leaving their officiating endeavors after short periods of time. So as part of Kleinaitis' tour of duty as director of U.S. instruction, he set out last year to find out what was happening. He asked to officiate a number of youth and high school matches and found a disturbing trend.

"My biggest disappointment presently was observing the behavior of parents at games," Kleinaitis said. "You hear them yelling, and obviously they have a very low knowledge of the game. Even the kids turn to me and say, 'Don't pay attention.' It doesn't penetrate me, but we found this is the reason a lot of referees are quitting the business."

Kleinaitis swears he'll never be a pushy parent in the stands if his youngest, Natalia, takes up soccer, as she's threatening to do. The 13-year-old's older sisters, Andrea, 20, and Kristina, 17, managed to get most of the way through adolescence without a serious athletic commitment.

Their father's passion never rubbed off and neither did disciplinary methods culled from the athletic code of rules.

"The players on the field listen, and if that doesn't work I talk to them very gently, and if that doesn't work I yell, and if that doesn't work I show them the yellow card (a warning), then maybe the red card (ejection

from the game)," said Kleinaitis. "At home the red card doesn't mean anything. I have been told on numerous occasions you're not on the soccer field, and we're in charge here."

Irena, a computer systems manager for Sears in Hoffman Estates, admits the family has had its struggles getting Dad to realize home life is not dictated by black and white rules of the field. "But he certainly has a deep love for us and it shows in many different ways," she said.

She now travels with him regularly. "It took me a few years to understand his involvement. I wasn't quite aware of his abilities and determination and commitment and just how he thrives on it," Irena said. "It keeps him going."

Says the Power's Davidson: "I never met a man with more compassion for the game."

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