

THE POSTGAME MEAL

In Nashville, two elite soccer players bonded at the table.

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HANY MUKHTAR STANDS IN FRONT OF AN OCEAN OF GOLD, AN ENORMOUS black cowboy hat on his head, the captain's armband around his bicep. All around Geodis Park, the stadium on the hill that locals call "The Castle," fans in gold jerseys with his name on the back sing for him. "M-V-P! M-V-P!" It's spring in Music City, and Hany has just scored the third hat trick of his Nashville Soccer Club (NSC) career. He doffs the hat, bows his head, and grins—a giddy, defenseless smile that's rare for him, one that betrays a hint of sheepishness. *All this for me?* He returns the crowd's applause. He's waited years for this feeling. He left his home in Berlin and traveled to Lisbon, Salzburg, Copenhagen, and now Nashville, all in search of a club and crowd that believe in him like this.

Hany loves his life, so much so that in March 2023, on his twenty-eighth birthday, he married his partner, Ashley Gowder, on this same field. They met here in Nashville, and at their townhouse near The Gulch, they drink tea, talk trash over Mario Kart, and play with their dogs. He is excellent at his job, the reigning most valuable player of Major League Soccer (MLS). At Geodis Park, when he gets on the ball, an entire city seems to hold its breath, waiting to see what he'll do next.

There's just one thing missing. A few days after his hat trick, Hany grabs his phone and places a call to Charleston, South Carolina. He's trying to reach one of his closest friends: a former teammate he calls his little brother, another Muslim man with African roots making his way in the South.

"I miss you so much, man," Hany says into the phone.

"Yeah, me too, bro," the voice replies. "I miss you so much."

At seventeen years old, Hany Mukhtar became the second-youngest debutant ever to play for Hertha Berlin, his hometown club. At nineteen, he scored the winning goal for Germany in the finals of the Under-19 Euros. In the aftermath, he earned a transfer to Benfica, Portugal's largest club and a regular qualifier for the Champions League.

In Lisbon, Hany sat on the bench. Texts from friends grew scarce, then nonexistent. He left Lisbon for a year on loan in Salzburg, then returned to Benfica, only to find they didn't want him anymore. His agent said he could take a step down to the Danish Superliga, to a club based in the working-class suburbs of Copenhagen. In Denmark, the manager trusted him, the fans grew to love him, and in 2018, Hany won the league's player of the year award. He loved the order and discipline the fans displayed when they filed through the streets on the way to the stadium, so much so that whenever he scored, he ran to

them and saluted. That celebration became his signature.

Then the manager was sacked, Hany's importance waned, and in 2020, he moved to Nashville in search of the belief he craved. It didn't come right away. Throughout his first year in Nashville, Hany struggled with injuries and expectations. He scored only four times.

In October 2020, NSC traded with the Seattle Sounders for Handwalla Bwana. Handwalla was twenty-one, four years younger than Hany. A beard couldn't quite hide his baby face. He smiled a lot, and he seemed to approach most things, even his job as a professional athlete, with a hard-won ease. It was as if he knew that life could be much worse, so there was nothing left to fear.

Hany didn't spend much time with his new teammate at first—it was the first year of the Covid pandemic, after all. Then, in spring 2021, the Islamic holy month of Ramadan coincided with the beginning of the MLS season. Both practicing Muslims, Hany and Handwalla observed the customary fast of food and drink from sunup to sundown. Some days, temperatures pushed eighty degrees, and Hany and Handwalla abstained from even water as they pushed through ninety-minute matches and multi-hour training sessions. The two grew closer by sharing Iftar, the traditional fast-breaking meal, at Hany's home.

Though the two share a religious faith, they grew up on different continents in far different circumstances, with distinct relationships to food. For Handwalla, food had always been largely functional. He spent the first eleven years of his life in Kakuma, a refugee camp in the northwest corner of Kenya. His father was Somali, and the family's Muslim faith is part of why Kakuma felt like the safest place in Kenya, a mostly Christian nation. Handwalla spent most of his childhood waiting. To pass the time, he played soccer in the lanes outside his family's hut, where he dribbled balls he built out of trash, plastic bags, or inflated condoms. He mostly remembers these years as monotonous and relatively stable, so long as the sun was up. Many nights he heard gunshots, and one day, while he prayed in a mosque, a bullet grazed one of his relatives sitting ten feet away.

Food morphed from necessity to joy on the Fridays when Handwalla's mother, Fatima, would make pilau or biryani from the family's UN rations. That meal, Handwalla says, would hit *different*. Even when his family immigrated to Seattle

by way of Atlanta, that rice remained special.

For Hany, though, food was a lifelong passion. His family's flat in south Berlin was filled with the smell of bread from local bakeries, along with homemade dumplings cooked by Ursula, Hany's Polish-German mother. Family meals were non-negotiable and could last for hours. Tea was always on, and you were expected to linger at the table. If Ursula didn't cook, they'd walk around the corner for sujuk, a Turkish breakfast sausage.

Hany cooks to demonstrate affection, as his now-wife, Ashley, learned the first time he cooked for her. She remembers watching as he julienned carrots, sliced chicken, washed sprouts, and rolled the ingredients into perfect spring rolls.

During Ramadan, Hany prepared similarly intricate Iftar feasts of soup, salads, chicken, and pasta for Handwalla. Handwalla's favorite was Hany's signature salad: lettuce, tomato, onion, green onion, pickles, avocado, cheese, and chicken, tossed in peanut-coconut dressing. Sometimes, after dinner, they'd retire to the living room couch to play FIFA on Hany's Xbox, still two kids in their twenties. Other nights, they'd sit at the kitchen table for hours, talking about soccer, their faith, and who they hoped to become.

After Ramadan, Hany and Handwalla built an easy routine. In the summer, they began to eat dinner together two or three times each week. They mostly ate at the townhouse, but sometimes they'd drive to Edessa, a Turkish spot in the Nolensville Pike strip mall that locals call Little Kurdistan.

Handwalla remembers evenings at Hany's, stretched out on the couch, stuffed with chicken and pasta, when Hany walked over and prodded him with a pack of Skittles or a tray of cookies.

"I got these amazing cookies," Hany might say. "You gotta try them." Handwalla would refuse, but Hany kept poking him. Finally, Handwalla would relent. Hany, far from appeased, would pressure him into eating more until the end of the night.

"Bro. I've got to drive home."

"No problem. You can sleep here!"

Too full of meat, veggies, and sweets to argue, Handwalla would drag himself upstairs and passed out in Hany's spare bedroom.

Hany loves food, so he probably indulges more than the average professional athlete. He cooks at home with groceries from Publix and



eats out with Ashley, favoring sushi at O-Ku, steak at Kayne Prime, and takeaway poke bowls. NSC prefers that its players stay below 10 percent body fat. At team weigh-ins, Handwalla delighted in pointing to Hany's stomach.

"You're gonna fail this," Handwalla said.

"No, no, no. This is muscle!"

Hany and Handwalla became so close that their teammates started calling them "Hany-and-Handy." When Hany messed up in training, Handwalla loved to point out his mistakes, as little brothers do. "Did you forget to eat breakfast today, Hany?" he'd say when Hany sailed a free kick over the bar. "You're so bad, bro."

Hany would laugh it off, and sometimes, he'd return fire. "You're so handsome," he once told Handwalla. "But man, your teeth are ugly."

After a home win on a Saturday night, Hany and Handwalla sometimes treated themselves to a meal from one of their staples: a gyro and kebab cart on Lower Broadway. On one of the

South's most infamous party streets, two elite athletes—both teetotalers—waded into a sea of Miller High Life and bachelorettes in search of a stand that unabashedly traffics in drunk food. The chicken kebabs and the fries, Handwalla swears, are some of the best in the city.

In 2021, free from injury, Hany began to find his rhythm. In 2022, he won MVP of the entire league. He remained a force in the 2023 season, when NSC made it to the finals of the Leagues Cup before losing to Lionel Messi and Inter Miami. At an NSC game earlier this year, in the fifty-ninth minute, Hany received the ball near the endline, at such an acute angle to the goal that a shot seemed impossible. But Hany shot anyway, kicked it with such insolence and venom that the ball whizzed past the keeper's head and bulged the roof of the net before he could lift his arms. Behind the goal, a little girl looked at her dad,



her mouth shaped like a perfect o, and yanked her hand to her forehead. A salute, just like Hany. He's ascended to icon status here in Nashville.

Meanwhile, Handwalla struggled to conform his game to the team's style of play. No one on the team, not even Hany, was as good as him in one-on-one situations. He spent so much time with a garbage ball in Kakuma that it felt like his companion. Dribbling became an extension of the joy in his personality, and no one in the squad dribbled better than him. But NSC is a defensive team that relies on Hany to make the most of counterattacks.

In September 2022, NSC played a friendly at Geodis Park against Club América, the most famous team in Mexico. Since it wasn't a league or cup match, the manager gave Hany the night off. Handwalla entered the game at halftime, but less than half an hour later, he crumpled to the turf. He limped off the field, down the tunnel, and into the training room, where doctors evaluated him. They told him he'd strained his adductor.

Handwalla returned to his locker, where he sat by himself. The match went to penalties, and The Castle shook around him, noise stacking on top of itself. Left alone with his thoughts, he started to spiral. He didn't know yet, but could sense, that he'd played his last game in Nashville. *This place has been terrible for me*, he realized. He should've stayed in Seattle. His mother still lived there, and it was the closest place he'd ever had to a home.

When the game ended, the rest of the team trickled into the locker room. A few people checked on Handwalla, asking if he was okay before retreating to their own lockers. Handwalla had mostly kept it together, but he could feel panic start to yank at his composure. He needed crutches to walk, so he couldn't even drive home. It was Hany, who hadn't played, who sat down and put an arm around his friend.

"Come stay at my house," he said.

Ashley drove Handwalla's car to the townhouse, and Hany took Handwalla in his gold Range Rover. When they arrived, they ordered pizza, Hany's postgame meal of choice. They sat in the kitchen for hours, and Hany talked about the beginning of his career, how he'd struggled for playing time, how alone he'd felt away from his family when he lived in Lisbon and Salzburg, and how it had

finally gone right here in Nashville. He could honestly say he knew what Handwalla felt. They talked about life, God, and why bad things happened. Then Handwalla wanted to go to sleep, so Hany cleaned the guest bedroom and helped him climb the stairs.

Around New Year's 2023, Handwalla and NSC decided to move forward without each other, and he signed for Charleston Battery, a club in the tier below MLS. After he and Hany shared one last meal at Edessa, Handwalla packed up his things and moved to Charleston. The club offered him the choice of two jersey numbers: 7 or 10. In Nashville, he'd worn 7, a traditional number for a dribbler like him. But for some reason, 7 no longer held any special appeal.

"Let me get 10," he told the team. Ten is Hany's number.

In the late summer of 2023, sitting on his couch in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, Handwalla says he feels content. He's recovering from a torn ligament in his knee, but he's hopeful that he'll be back in MLS by next spring. He plans to visit Hany in Nashville this fall. Right now, aside from rehab and physical therapy, he takes sunset walks, goes to the beach, and eats a lot of Chick-fil-A.

At twenty-four years old, Handwalla sees his stint with NSC as two wasted years in a profession in which time is precious—elite male soccer players are likely to peak before the age of thirty. Yet he doesn't regret his time in Nashville. "I made friends who I can call twenty years later, you know? And Hany is someone who will always be a brother to me," Handwalla says.

Home and belonging are fleeting for professional footballers, who move from country to country and across continents and oceans to cling to a dream they had when they were kids. They breathe ambition like oxygen, but the pursuit of that dream is often lonely—a beautiful city where you don't speak the language, IKEA furniture in a sterile apartment, twenty minutes alone at your locker wondering if your career is over. Small joys and rituals, like a shared meal, can make you feel a little less rootless, like you actually belong somewhere. 🍷

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