

Bears alum kickin' in Cottbus

A rookie with U of A soccer last year, Eddy Sidra is now starting games, making friends, and dancing up a storm with a German club's youth squad

ROBIN COLLUM
Sports Editor

Trying out for a new team is a nerve-wracking experience: hoping you don't make any small errors, anxious about the other guys after your position, keeping your fingers crossed that you're have just what the coaches are looking for. And if you're alone in a foreign land, unable to understand what those coaches are even saying, it's even more stressful.

Former U of A soccer player Eddy Sidra found this all out this summer when he tried out for FC Energie Cottbus's under-19 squad in Germany.

"Even going in for a new team in Canada, everyone looks at you because you're trying to take their spot, but going over there was even worse," he says. "You walk on the field for the first training session, jet-lagged and everything, nervous out of your mind, and you see a whole bunch of guys whispering to themselves in a language you don't understand, and you can just tell they don't like you."

Whatever it was Energie's coaches wanted to see, they found it in Sidra, and he now lives and plays in Cottbus, a small town near the eastern border of Germany.

The right back and midfielder, who was a rookie on last year's national championship-winning Alberta team, joined Energie's roster this summer after a string of go-sees and tryouts both in Canada and in Germany.

"It kinda just happened all at once," he explains. Sidra and a few of his teammates visited a Vancouver scout last winter, who was impressed enough with Sidra's play to recommend him to Energie Cottbus for a tryout in July.

"I just jumped at the chance," Sidra says. "You don't get a lot of chances like that, and this is something I've dreamed of since I was a little kid."

Dream or no, his first weeks in Germany were hard. Sidra had to deal with hostility from his future teammates and a daunting language barrier.

"After they saw that I fit well with them, they started to take a liking to me, but it took a couple of weeks," he says. "They didn't really like me that well at first."

Now Sidra's close with his teammates, and he says he no longer feels unwelcome. The language issue, however, has been a slower wall to fall. None of his coaches speak English, and most of his teammates have only a rough knowledge of the language.

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EDDY SIDRA
FORMER BEARS MIDFIELDER

"The coaches don't speak a word of English, so I had to learn really quickly. Most of the time, I just have to watch the drill and just not go first, but now I can just pick out the key words and make it through on my own," he says. "Now I know a little bit of German, so I can have conversations in broken German and broken English."

Sidra says being from Canada has given him an advantage.

"I think they like me even more just because I'm Canadian, because I'm so different," he says. "They get me to translate songs they can't understand, really random stuff. They're really cool guys."

Music has actually proved an important bonding tool for Sidra and his teammates.

"That's how they talk to me a lot of the time. They'll get phrases from hit songs, and they'll translate it at home and then come talk to me. They started calling me DJ Eddy because I'll play them all the new music," he explains. "One time, I turned it off when the coach came in, and this was right after Rihanna's song 'Please Don't Stop The Music' came out, and one of the guys said, 'Eddy, Eddy, please don't stop the

music!' So I had to say 'Sorry, sorry, I'll put it back on.' That was a guy who barely spoke a word of English.

"And at one of our training camps, they were listening to my iPod and found my Punjabi music—I have a lot of Punjabi friends, and they had taught me how to dance a few summers ago, and the music's pretty good—so I showed them how to dance, and it's tradition now," he continues. "Everytime we win, they get in a big circle and shout 'Oi, oi, oi,' and I'll be in the middle dancing. That's when I knew they liked me."

Not everyone has been as accepting of Sidra's differences in Germany, unfortunately, and Sidra recounts some chilling incidents of racism: Sidra, who was born in Sudan, is of Arabic descent and therefore a visible target for those Germans who feel threatened by minorities.

"Mostly everyone's nice, except for the neo-Nazis. They're the ones who give you grief. In three months there, I've only had about five real encounters with them," Sidra says calmly. "The first time was most rattling because I've never encountered anything like that. I was at the market, outside, and there were two guys driving around in their SUV, two skinheads, and they were shouting at me. I didn't understand what they're saying, but they're screaming at me, and then they [mimed a gunshot]. And if you're on the street jaywalking, they speed up their car."

"Besides that everyone else is nice." Those negative moments are only a small part of Sidra's experience, however, and he's already looking forward to more years playing in Germany. According to him, though, it's not just his game that's grown in the past few months. The most valuable part of his experience, he says, is fending for himself on another continent and facing the challenges alone.

"My favourite thing is just to have everything on my own, being on my own, and knowing I'm doing it all on my own—learning the language, pursuing my dream."



SUPPLIED

BLAME IT ON THE TEUTONS Eddy Sidra (right) is already getting hints from his German coaches that they'd like him on the Under-23 team next season.



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