

Gonzalo Marronkle

"I'm actually very shy," Gonzalo Marronkle says. When watching the big Argentinian centre-forward maraud around the Hang Day stadium in Hanoi you would be forgiven for thinking otherwise. He is Hanoi T&T's talisman, and has been scoring goals for fun in Vietnamese football's premier division — the V-League 1 — since 2009.

Hanoi T&T celebrate its 10th birthday this year. Small change for the grand old clubs of European and South American football, perhaps, but in that short time they have made a habit of winning, with three league titles and four runners-up medals to their name.

The most recent of their titles came in a nail-biting final day showdown against Thanh Hoa FC in August. Four teams went into the day with a chance of lifting the trophy. It was the kind of drama Sky Sports television would dream of writing. Marronkle scored both goals in their title-winning game to clinch the trophy, and in his six years in Vietnam he has become a deity-like figure to the Hanoi supporters.

For Marronkle, the tightness of the campaign brought a bond within the squad that saw them over the line.

"It was a very hard league this year," he says. "We had a poor start that made it very difficult to be champions. But as the games kept passing, and as this team has very good players, we then saw that it was not impossible."

Low-key

With the season now over I speak to Marronkle from his home town of Cordoba, Argentina. It's clear he does not conform to the playboy reputation of footballers. He tells me the title celebrations were low-key. Dinner with his wife and a quiet toast with the rest of the team. Football is a more relaxed affair in Vietnam, with many of the excesses and temptations that are on offer to those in Europe not available here.

Cordoba is the second largest city in Argentina and is surrounded by the rolling hills of the Sierras Chicas. Ossie Ardiles is perhaps its most famous son to kick a ball. Ardiles found fame in England, and I am fascinated by Marronkle's less trodden path from South America, to Vietnam via Portugal.

He confesses that he didn't know much about the country before he signed. When he got the call that Hanoi T&T were interested in signing him, panic set in. "I thought I was coming to war!"

He admits that this initial reaction was unfair as he did "not know how beautiful this country was." A perk of the job for Marronkle is travelling around Vietnam, especially when the team gets to enjoy the beaches of Danang.

Determined

Football was always his dream and it is this single-mindedness and determination to make it that led him to Vietnam. "I always

There are many foreign footballers playing in the V-League. Some have an impact, some don't.

Thomas Barrett speaks to Vietnam's very own version of Sergio Aguero, Argentinian striker **Gonzalo Marronkle**.
Translation by **Guim Valls Teruel**



wanted to be a player," says Gonzalo. "I started when I was four years old in Bell Ville. When I was 15 I tried my luck in Buenos Aires at Club Lanus in the First Division."

But like many players from South America, the lure of European football drew him across the Atlantic and FC Porto in Portugal came calling. A fruitful spell for Portuguese lower division outfit Portinomense was his final port of call in Europe before heading to the unknowns of Vietnam. Marronkle admits that the financial incentive in Vietnam was attractive to him.

"I thought Hanoi was an interesting economic offer. In Portugal if it is not a big team there are many difficulties in economic terms."

Luckily for Gonzalo, the supporters embraced him from the start and his swashbuckling style of play has endeared him to the locals as well as to his teammates. As the star foreign striker, he doesn't see himself as above his Vietnamese allies on the pitch.

"What I feel is that people respect me and like the way I play. I have always tried to give my best, and without my teammates nothing will be achieved."

Beautiful Game

"I do not speak Vietnamese, I can only understand a little. And we communicate through a translator and the language of football — that is the most beautiful."

The fortified barriers that exist between fan and player in Europe are weaker here. To Marronkle it's a liberating aspect of life as a player in Vietnam. The fans have helped make Hanoi home to Gonzalo and his wife.

"They are very different here," says Gonzalo. "They want to please you all the time. They invite you to drink coffee or maybe a beer. I think it's the weirdest thing. It is an easy country to adapt to and it grows very fast. My wife and I, we feel very good and comfortable here. But traffic is a real challenge."

At 32, he's ready to give the twilight years of his career to Hanoi T&T. The wanderer has finally become settled and Gonzalo Marronkle is hungry for more success in Hanoi.

"My goal here is to win more titles and train harder to be able to give my best and help the club." 



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