

Heart of a Tiger: A Tiger's journey home

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By Tisa Mason

HAYS, Kan. - Some people know exactly what they want in life. Elias Ovelar Semeniuk did too, until he realized his dream needed to change.

Elias grew up in Paraguay, where his family runs one of the largest rice farms in the country. They grow rice on 10,000 hectares (24,710 acres). They also grow soybeans and raise cattle. But when Elias was young, his heart belonged to soccer.

At just 19 years old, Elias got the chance many young players only dream about. He played professional soccer in Brazil for a whole year. It felt like his lifelong dream was finally coming true.

But that year taught him something surprising. The life of a professional soccer player wasn't exactly what he hoped it would be.

"I was thinking about my family and my future wife and future sons, and I wanted to be a good person," Elias said. "Did I really want to play soccer my whole life, or did I want to study and be part of my family business? Maybe that would give me a better life in general."

So, Elias made a big decision. He would follow a different path, one that combined soccer with a college education. That path led him halfway around the world to Fort Hays State University.

"In my heart, I was feeling like Fort Hays State was the place for me because of its good soccer program and because it's Kansas, a good place to study agriculture," Elias said.

Elias arrived at FHSU with strong grades from his home school, but he wasn't confident in his English. Still, he was determined to make the most of his time in Kansas.

"My goal was to study, mature, learn, and enjoy my time at Fort Hays State because it was a unique time," he said. "My first semester was good. I enjoyed it. The people I met on the soccer team were amazing."

Elias also found a second home at the Catholic Campus Center, where his faith grew stronger.

"I made memories there and matured and grew up there in my faith," he said. "I was able to open my heart to learn from different people and carried that with me to Paraguay with my family and friends. When I came back here, they saw the changes — my aura was different because I was happy."

His professors made a lasting impact on him, too, as many were international faculty members who understood his journey.

"The resources that they gave me, the opportunities and the tools that they gave me, the way I learned to research, how to write, how to express myself, and the motivation I had after being there. That is all amazing," Elias said. "I will always be grateful for the academic side. It really prepared me to decide what to do with my life."

One person who especially shaped his college experience was his mentor, Dr. Yi-Chen Lee, assistant professor of agronomy. Elias was his very first undergraduate research student and a founding member of his research program.

"My favorite memories of Elias involve learning about his family farm in Paraguay, collecting insects at the FHSU university farm for a class final project, and watching him compete in the NCAA Division II soccer postseason," Dr. Lee said. "I am certain that he will be a great leader in the agricultural industry!"

During his second year, a new soccer coach, Alex Nichols, arrived at FHSU. He became a role model who truly made a difference in Elias's life.

"I think he was the coach I needed in my soccer career," Elias said. "He had a personality that I respect a lot because he was the type of person who really knew how to lead and how important it is to be passionate and love what you are doing. I learned that if you love something and you have a plan and put your heart into it, you will make it."

That heart and hard work paid off. In his final season, Elias was named the 2025 United Soccer Coaches NCAA Division II National Player of the Year, along with many other honors, including the 2025 United Coaches NCAA Division II national player of the year, first team forward selection at forward, and being named to the GAC academic honor roll two times. But awards weren't what mattered most to him.

"I'm not an ego-centric kind of guy, but I received a lot of trophies and awards," he said. "These represent years and years of hard work. I really worked for all of those, not the trophies, but to enjoy and be part of those experiences."

Iryna McDonald, associate professor of agronomy, who knows Elias well from his time at FHSU, said he stood out for more than just his soccer talent.

"Elias is a shining example of what it means to be a student at Fort Hays State University, a rare combination of excellence, humility, and generosity," she said.

After graduating in May 2026, Elias returned to Paraguay to work at his family's rice business. He is now the Agro-industrial Operations Coordinator for the entire operation, from growing the crops to milling, packaging, and selling the rice.

"Our industry connects us," Elias said. "I feel that I'm doing good for society - to be good, to be healthy, to have other people see me as a good example. A good child of God."

While at FHSU, Elias also met his girlfriend, Yone, who is from Acapulco. Last December, he visited her family and learned to enjoy the sea and beach activities she loves.

Looking back, Elias is deeply thankful for his time as a Tiger. His FHSU educational experience prepared and connected Elias to the agricultural industry and to the world. He hopes that one day, members of FHSU's agriculture department might visit him in Paraguay, building new partnerships and internship opportunities between the university and his home country.