It was almost impossible to miss Dominique Badji on the soccer field last season. At six feet, the freshman forward was one of the tallest players on the BU men’s soccer team. But it was more than Badji’s long limbs that set him apart from his teammates. While most varsity soccer players have spent years in structured youth and school programs, Badji grew up in three African countries where developmental soccer was unheard of.

Born in Dakar, Senegal, Badji (CGS’13) and his family lived in a world of poverty and political instability. His father was a translator who worked with the village’s Peace Corps volunteers. One of the volunteers, Clotilde Coly, helped Badji, his father, and his younger brother, Charles, relocate to Tanzania, where she became Badji’s legal guardian. The family later followed her to Zimbabwe when she accepted a position at the U.S. Embassy there.

The one constant of his childhood, Badji says, was soccer. “I loved how fast-paced the game was,” he says. “Whenever I lived in Africa, I just played with friends. There wasn’t much grass, so we played on sand. If we wanted something firmer, we played on a road.”

When Badji was 16, Coly returned to the United States to take a job with the State Department, in Washington, D.C. Badji went with her, leaving his father and brother in Zimbabwe. He enrolled in Episcopal High School, a boarding school in Alexandria, Va., where he got a crash course on the differences between pickup street soccer and regulation high school soccer.

“They were very organized, and emphasized following the rules,” he says. “There were rules I’d never even heard of.”

Badji’s prowess on the field caught the notice of college soccer scouts and coaches, including BU head coach Neil Roberts. A deal was clinched after Badji met his Terrier teammates during a visit to campus last spring.

“Culturally, he’s really what BU is,” says Roberts. “He’s a diverse young man. He’s intelligent and a good soccer player.”

Badji proved himself just weeks into his rookie season. By October, he ranked second on the team in points (8), shots (28), and goals (3) and was the team’s leading freshman in all offensive categories. By the end of the season, in November, Badji led the team with 5 goals and 13 points and had been named America East Rookie of the Year.

Badji intends to transfer to the School of Management and eventually pursue a career in management—or professional soccer.

KAT HASENAUER CORNETTA

WEB EXTRA
Watch a video of Dominique Badji (CGS’13) talking about growing up in three African countries and playing soccer at bu.edu/bostonia.

Dominique Badji’s dominance caught the eye of BU head coach Neil Roberts.

Badji, a forward, looks for soft spots in the University of New Hampshire’s defense.