

Citizen of the World (Cup); Little-Known Law Enables French Player to Join U.S. Team

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Body

As a talented soccer **player**, David Regis will compete in the **World Cup** this summer in France, the country he has called home for the last 19 years. But he won't be playing for the **French** national **team**, which did not select him.

Instead, he will take the field as the newest member of the **U.S.** soccer squad -- thanks to an American wife, a **little-known** provision of immigration **law**, a determined **U.S.** Soccer Federation and, apparently, some soccer fans at the Immigration and Naturalization Service.

Under the obscure legal provision, Regis, a native of the **French** island of Martinique, went from being a **French citizen** to an American in about three months, bypassing a **U.S.** residency requirement and other hurdles of a process that normally takes years. Regis, 29, whose English is limited, was sworn in as a **U.S. citizen** during a private ceremony in Los Angeles last month, just in time to play in a **World Cup** tuneup against Kuwait in Portland, Ore.

The fleet-footed defender, who moved to France at age 10 to attend boarding school and play soccer, was named to fill the last spot on the **U.S. team's** 22-**player** roster on Tuesday. Thursday, he **joined** the **team** on its trip to France, where it will open first-round play June 15 against Germany.

The quick acquisition of **U.S.** citizenship suits Regis, who wins a chance to fulfill every soccer **player's** dream: competing in the sport's premier tournament. And it comes as a blessing to the **U.S.** soccer **team**, which gets a star with 10 years of professional experience.

But not everybody is happy. Critics of **U.S.** immigration policy see Regis's case as an example of a growing trend toward citizenships of convenience, which they say devalue the meaning of becoming an American. And it threatens to stir resentment among some of the 2 million people stuck in a huge backlog of citizenship applicants.

Because of record numbers of applications, the naturalization process now takes two to three years to complete, on top of the five years that one usually must spend in the **United States** as a legal permanent resident, or green-card holder, before becoming eligible to apply.

The citizenship fast-track for Regis, a former **French** First Division standout who now plays in the German First Division, began late last year when a sports agent based in Luxembourg alerted the **U.S. team's** coach, Steve Sampson, that Regis was married to Nikki Fogle of Savannah, Ga. The couple met in Strasbourg, France, when Fogle was a student there, and married in June 1995. They have a young daughter.

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Sampson saw Regis play on television for his German team, Karlsruhe, in December, then watched one of his matches in person a month later, said Jim Frosolid, a spokesman for the U.S. Soccer Federation.

A Los Angeles-based immigration lawyer, Barbara Federman, applied for a green card for Regis in February. It came through a month later -- in less time than applicants usually wait for their initial INS interview. The application for his U.S. citizenship took longer, Federman said, because the INS lost his fingerprints.

The application was based on a provision of immigration law designed primarily to expedite citizenship for foreign spouses of U.S. government employees or members of the armed forces to protect them overseas. Also covered are spouses of American employees stationed abroad for U.S. firms engaged in "the development of foreign trade and commerce of the United States."

Applicants for naturalization under the provision are allowed to bypass the requirement for five years of green-card status in the United States -- three years if married to an American -- but they must pledge to take up U.S. residence immediately after the spouse's foreign employment ends.

For Regis to qualify, the U.S. Soccer Federation helped set up a job for his wife in France with Gullivers Sports Travel, a travel agency based in Southern California that offers World Cup tours and is handling travel arrangements for the relatives and friends of U.S. players. Nikki Regis started the job last month and plans to work for the agency in France for at least a year to meet the law's requirements, Federman said.

However, neither Federman nor U.S. soccer officials could say when the couple plans to move to the United States, or whether Regis intends to play for a U.S. pro team.

If Regis does not take up U.S. residence, "there is not a whole lot we can do . . . but it probably weakens the chances of the next person who comes along," said Bill Strassberger, an INS spokesman. He said the player's citizenship application was processed and approved in accordance with the legal provision, called Section 319(b), which was invoked in only 25 of the 133,518 naturalization cases in Los Angeles last year.

"No rules were broken," Strassberger said. "No laws were bent to make this happen." But he acknowledged that there are some serious soccer fans in the Los Angeles district of the INS.

"I'm not going to say that didn't play into it," he said. "Everyone's rooting for the team against overwhelming odds."

"The way our laws are written, people can elect to become citizens for the most noble reasons or most cynical reasons," said Michael Maggio, a Washington immigration lawyer.

Maggio said that while many people waiting years to get U.S. citizenship were likely to see the case as an example of "someone rich and famous who jumps the queue," Congress created the "statutory springboard" for such queue-jumpers. The biggest users of the provision, he said, are federal employees.

While his path to naturalization might have been unusual, Regis is hardly unique as a foreign-born member of the U.S. squad, said Tom King, the team's general manager. Of the 22 players, seven were born outside the United States. Captain Thomas Dooley grew up in Germany but claimed U.S. citizenship as the son of an American serviceman.

To some skeptics, the job that provided the basis for expediting Regis's application was a stretch.

"You really have to wonder what kind of message we're sending to immigrants around the country" who have to wait for years to become citizens, said Mark Krikorian, director of the Washington-based Center for Immigration Studies. "In some sense it cheapens citizenship. . . . The U.S. government is telling the rest of the world that citizenship is in fact a matter of convenience."

That, anyway, is what a U.S. passport seemed to be for Ulf Samuelsson, an NHL defenseman who was booted off the Swedish ice hockey team at the Winter Olympics in Japan. The action was taken by the International Ice

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Hockey Federation because Swedish law requires those who naturalize in another country to give up their Swedish citizenship.

Samuelsson explained, to no avail, that he became a U.S. citizen to avoid the hassles that foreigners face in working in the United States and that he never intended to give up his Swedish citizenship.

Staff writer Devon Spurgeon contributed to this report.

Graphic

Photo, afp/Hector Mata, David Regis became a U.S. citizen in a matter of months.

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