

# Goals Beyond the Field: Pamela Bernal's Soccer Story

After playing soccer for over 10 years, the Mexican American center-back is ready to take the next step in her career.

By Jennifer Garcia Flores



*After 11 years, the City College Beavers won the CUNYAC Championship.  
Credit: Sebastian Bush, City College Athletics.*

On a sunny morning in early November, Pamela Bernal watched from the bench as the City College of New York (CCNY) women's soccer team, also known as the Beavers, aimed to make history and seek redemption.

After 56 intense minutes of play, [Bernal](#), a Mexican-American junior, kept her eyes fixed on the clock. Two minutes before she was subbed out, CCNY scored its third goal, taking a 3-1 lead over their rivals, John Jay. In the 78th minute, another goal by the Beavers brought the score to 4-1. At the end of 90 minutes, the whistle blew. The game was over, and the final score was 4-2. Bernal ran across the field with her teammates, feeling a mixture of happiness, excitement, and affirmation. After an 11-year championship drought, the City College Beavers were the CUNYAC women's soccer champions.

The previous season, the Beavers had fallen to John Jay 0-1, missing out on the championship.

"I think it was one of the most special moments of my soccer career at City," Bernal recalled. "We proved that we're strong enough to rise after a fall."

For Bernal and her teammates, this wasn't just another championship—it validated all their years of training and dedication. Bernal is one of the 526,084 student-athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) who participated in the 2023-2024 season, of which only 7% are Hispanic or Latino. In the U.S., there are over 18 million students enrolled in universities, nearly [4 million](#) of whom are Hispanic, making up 21% of the student population.

“I think it’s improved a bit over the years, but there’s still a lot of work to be done,” Bernal said about the low representation of Latino athletes.

## **Humble Beginnings**

To understand Bernal’s relationship with soccer, one must go back to the beginning—not to the fields of her hometown in Corona, Queens, New York City, where her father and uncles first taught her to kick a ball, but to Mexico. For the Bernal family, soccer has always been a family affair. Her parents, Leticia González-Albarrán and Maximino Bernal-Mejía, both 46, have played soccer for most of their lives.

Originally from the state of Toluca, their love for soccer was something they knew they wanted to share with their children when the couple moved to the United States in 2002.

“I used to tell them they had to do some kind of sport, any sport,” explained Bernal-Mejía, a construction worker. For him, sports are more than a health habit—they’re a key to success. Sports, he said, help develop leadership and professional skills while also opening doors to an affordable, high-quality education.

The statistics back him up. In a [2023 survey](#) on the relationship between sports and professional success among female athletes, 85% of respondents said their sport helped them succeed in their careers. The numbers were even higher among women in leadership roles (91%) and those earning \$100,000 or more annually (93%).



*The Bernal family at Samantha's graduation. Pamela Bernal is on the left dressed in white. Courtesy of Leticia Gonzalez-Albarran.*

## A Familial Love

Bernal, 20, is the eldest of three siblings. She plays alongside her sister [Samantha](#), 18, a freshman at City College and a forward for the Beavers. Their brother Max, 16, is a soccer star in his own right, having played for elite clubs like the Juventus Academy.

Like many other first-generation students, Bernal's life has been full of firsts. She was the first in her family to attend college, the first to navigate the labyrinth of applying for financial aid, and, most importantly, the first among her siblings to play a collegiate sport.



Although all three siblings play soccer, their opportunities have differed. Bernal explained that when she started, her parents were still new to the country, overcoming barriers like learning the language, adjusting to a new culture, and securing financial stability. As the eldest, she learned to play in free or low-cost clubs. By the time her younger brother, Max, began playing seriously, the family was more established, both financially and in navigating New York City's elite soccer clubs.

"We're known as 'the Bernals' or 'the sisters,' especially because we're always helping each other, trying to make each other better," said Samantha. "Being first-generation takes a lot of courage to play D3 (NCAA Division 3) or just to play sports in general, especially while learning how to apply to college," she added, referring to the division focused most on academic success.

Max echoed this sentiment. He considers Bernal an inspiration and a role model for paving the way for him and Samantha. Without his older sister's example, he said, he wouldn't have been able to travel to Europe or play for some of the most prestigious teams in the country.

"Compared to me, I've had so many opportunities through soccer. Soccer has given me opportunities. I've been able to travel," he reflected. "(Pamela) deserves everything because she's given it her all. Being a starting player even in D3—not everyone gets that chance, and it's pretty incredible."

"The level I'm at now is also because she's always been by my side."



*Bernal's dream is to be an immigration lawyer.. Credit Pamela Bernal.*

## A Bright Future Ahead

At one point, Bernal's dream was to play for the Mexican women's national team. She researched and evaluated the process but ultimately decided against it, as it would have required more than a year without studying.

"The effort my parents have put in over the years, being far from family and working so hard to support us and provide us with an education, I value that and make sure my siblings appreciate it too," she said. Like many on her team, she knows she has the skills and talent to play at the next level.

Bernal aspires to become an immigration lawyer and recently completed a semester in Washington, D.C., as part of an exchange program offered by City College.

When choosing a college, Bernal had no choice but to focus on cost. In the U.S., [32% of Latino students](#) must bear the cost of their education. Although she was admitted to public and private universities in California and Florida, she chose City College because she was able to secure financial aid and scholarships that covered her entire tuition.

"Sometimes I think about it, but at the same time, I think about where I am now, and I wouldn't change it for anything."

In everything she does, her family is there to support her. "If you like it, you hold on to it, and I saw that in Pamela. Pamela started not knowing much—at first, she was even afraid of the ball," her mother, González-Albarrán, said.

"In our culture, soccer used to be seen as a sport for men, not women. But today, we realize that any sport is for both men and women."