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Updated: June 17, 2011, 12:44 PM ET

# La Raza's edge

**The best fans in America don't root for an American team**

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*By Luke Cyphers  
ESPN The Magazine*

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Donald Miralle/Getty

*Images* Whenever Mexico plays in the United States, its fans come out in droves.

*This story appears in the June 27, 2011 issue of ESPN The Magazine.*

They're doing the wave in Seattle, and whether you think the classic exercise in fanimation originated here, as every Washington native does, or in Mexico, as most of the rest of the world believes, this one really is a Mexican Wave. Fifty thousand supporters of Mexico's national soccer team -- in sombreros, Aztec headdresses, wrestling masks and insect costumes -- have brought their unique shade of green to the Emerald City. The Pacific Northwest isn't typically a Mexican tour stop, so for many who have gathered at Qwest Field for the team's Gold Cup warmup with Ecuador, it's the first chance to see their beloved "El Tricolor" in person. The team struggles to an uninspired 1-1 draw, but the El Tri crowd is in form. Then again, it always is.

Joyous, spontaneous, disorganized yet perfectly in unison -- the Mexican Wave is the perfect metaphor for the millions of north-of-the-border followers of El Tri. "Soccer is our main sport, and the Mexican team is our team," says Oscar Quiroz of Vancouver, Wash., as he marches outside the stadium before the match alongside a mélange of fans similarly draped in Mexican flags. "We support it 100 percent."

Likewise, we will take this opportunity to champion Mexico's displaced faithful as the best fans in America. If the scenes in Seattle are any indication, there's no such thing as a casual Mexico fan. All across the country, El Tri devotees like Quiroz flock to U.S. football stadiums at least five times a year to support an annual tour of friendlies managed by Soccer United Marketing (SUM), the marketing arm of Major League Soccer. These exhibitions generate the sports-festival atmosphere of a Final Four, the prideful party vibe of a big-city ethnic parade and the celeb idolatry of a Justin Bieber concert. Where else in the world could you find a national team's fans selling out stadiums in the country of its No. 1 rival?

Yet no matter how many hotel rooms it fills or cities it marches through, the massive Mexican-American fan base is almost always invisible to the U.S. public. Other than stadium owners, that is. Whom did Jerry Jones book to headline the inaugural sporting event at Cowboys Stadium? Mexico, which set a soccer attendance record in Texas in its 2009 Gold Cup quarterfinal against Haiti. And guess who kicked off the first full event at New Meadowlands Stadium the following year? Mexico again, in a friendly against Ecuador that was attended by 77,705 fans.

If you book El Tricolor, they will come.

Still, Mexico's diehards are more than the sum of their loyalty and spectacularly telegenic displays of support. Like any fan group worth its face paint, it's stubborn (and arrogant) enough to earn rivals' scorn. To fans of any neighboring Spanish-speaking team, an enemy of Mexico is a friend.

Take Manny Rivas, an immigrant to the U.S. who cheers on his native El Salvador -- and anybody who is competing against Mexico. It is a tradition that's fairly common among Central Americans. "Nobody likes Mexico," Rivas says bluntly. He fondly recalls a scene from a U.S.-El Salvador match near Salt Lake City in 2009. "There was a guy wearing a green shirt, and the American and Salvadoran fans got together and yelled at him." It is a particular brand of fan base, like that of, say, the Yankees or Manchester United, that inspires collective enmity.

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But even with the hate focused on them, El Tri's fans are so overlooked by the "Yanqui" media that they may as well be underdogs. Make that underground, much like their team. While Spanish-language airwaves are awash in El Tri stories the week of a match, the American media rarely notice the events. And that is shortsighted, because Mexico's fans dominate the small screen the way they do the ticket booth. During the 2010 World Cup, the U.S. audience for Mexico matches on Univision averaged 6,072,000 viewers; the network's Mexico-France group game drew comparable ratings to ESPN's broadcast of Landon Donovan's game-winner against Algeria. On average, El Tri friendlies draw bigger ratings than any American network's regular-season NBA or MLB broadcasts.

Mostly, El Tri fans just ignore the fact they're ignored and have a great time. But as soccer grows in this country, the Mexican fan is becoming harder to miss. This summer, the green horde is making its presence keenly felt, filling seats around the country and delivering ratings for the Gold Cup, CONCACAF's biennial regional championship. If an expected Gold Cup final between the U.S. and El Tri materializes, the Rose Bowl will sell out and the combined Spanish and English TV ratings will set a record for the event. If that happens, it will largely be because of American fans of Mexico -- people like the Quiroz brothers.

Oscar Quiroz and his brother Cesar love soccer, but like most Mexico fans, their love of El Tri goes beyond the game. At 9:30 a.m. on a Saturday, four hours before kickoff, the siblings are already entrenched in the buzzing Qwest Field parking lot. They soak up the energy of the pregame Futbol Fiesta, a corporate carnival overflowing with music, food and swag bags from blue-chip team sponsors like the Home Depot and Coca-Cola. The Quiroz brothers have been in the parking lot since 3 a.m. "That's nothing," Oscar says. In California, he says, people camp out for days before the game. The brothers' travelogue would make an old Deadhead proud, but it's not unusual among El Tri fans. "We go all over," Cesar says.

Oscar and Cesar have followed the team to stops in San Diego, Denver, Houston, San Francisco and Phoenix. Less adventurous fans might have a better chance heading south of the border. Jose Cisneros, a Mexico City resident who catches two El Tri games a year up north, says tickets are harder to come by in the States than in his homeland. That's because Americans like Quiroz & Co. are online the moment tickets go on sale. "When they announce it, we're ready, and it's just 'click,' " Cesar says. Those clicks cause headaches for the U.S. Soccer Federation, which has held its home World Cup qualifying matches against Mexico in the 20,555-seat Crew Stadium in the middle-American city of Columbus, Ohio, the past two cycles to avoid being swamped by El Tri fans. For the friendly against Ecuador, Cesar estimates he and his group of four are spending about \$1,500. "It's

worth it," he says.

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*Ronaldo Schemidt/AFP/Getty*

*Images*It's sheer bedlam whenever Mexico puts one in the net.

An El Tri outing is more than a game; it is a full-day experience. The fan fiestas outside U.S. stadiums -- part tailgate party, part family picnic, part fashion show -- are almost as big an event as the match itself. College coeds wearing T-shirts that read "Kiss Me, I'm Mexican," accompanied by their moms, rub elbows with masses of young men sporting jerseys of star players, past and present. But the real scene-stealers are guys like José Campos and his pal Javier Cernas. Campos, a grocery distributor from Portland, struts around wearing a Mexican flag as a cape and a wrestling mask he bought for \$10 at a flea market; Cernas, from Salem, Ore., is resplendent in the costume of El Chapulín Colorado -- a Mexican TV superhero dressed as a red grasshopper -- little vinyl antennae and all. Cernas and Campos are big fans of the MLS Portland Timbers, but the El Tri games offer something more. "You see all the smiling faces, no worries, everybody talking, having a good time," Campos says.

"It's very much a festival," says Brandon Valeriano, a political science professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago who is studying fan loyalties of immigrant groups in the U.S. But he thinks the games provide a real political function, too: a safe haven in a time when some Mexican-Americans feel besieged by calls to clamp down on immigration. Just showing up at the games "is partly a form of protest," Valeriano says. "It's a simple way to show respect for where you come from."

Many at the Qwest fiesta echo that sentiment, noting that at games they don't have to feel self-conscious if they speak Spanish. More than that, they can display uninhibited pride in being both Mexican and soccer fans -- two groups that are often relegated to the periphery in the States.

Both of those minorities are growing, though, and big business has taken notice. In the '90s, Mexico friendlies here were one-off affairs organized, sometimes poorly, by local promoters. One 1993 match in San Diego created such traffic jams that fans simply parked on the freeway rather than miss the kickoff. Since 2003, El Tri Inc. has been centralized by SUM, the aforementioned MLS-affiliated company that stages the annual Mexican national team visits to the U.S. It also procures contracts with high-profile sponsors, giving the tour a NASCAR feel. A portion of all this revenue underwrites MLS, which, of course, routinely supplies players to Mexico's chief rival, the U.S. national team.

That doesn't seem to bother the fans lined up outside Qwest to take pictures with Senorita Makita, the tool company's Latina spokesmodel. El Jimador, the best-selling tequila in Mexico, has also jumped on the brand wagon to sponsor the U.S. tour. "Being part of soccer, and being associated with all the jubilation of the games, makes a lot of sense for us," says company spokesman David Page.

Parties are nice, but what makes Mexican fans such a force, from an economic standpoint anyway, are their sheer numbers. Fernando Lozano, a Mexican-born economist at Pomona College in California and an El Tri fan himself, notes that while Mexican supporters in the U.S. are unquestionably passionate, person for person they're probably no crazier than a typical Red Sox or SEC football diehard; there are just more of them. In Denver, where El Tri drew 45,401 fans to a midweek friendly against New Zealand earlier this month, Lozano points out that there are 158,820 area residents who were born in Mexico. Only one U.S. state -- Colorado itself -- has supplied more Colorado residents. Likewise, the 11.5 million Mexican-born residents of the U.S. would make for the seventh-most populous state in the union. "That's a huge market," Lozano says, one with an income of \$200 billion. And that's counting only first-generation Mexican-Americans. No wonder there's such a demand for tickets and a swelling list of corporate sponsors.

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**THE MEXICAN PLAYERS** notice the attention. "It's amazing that so many fans will show up to see us, even on the day of the final of the Champions League," says keeper Guillermo Ochoa after the Ecuador match at Qwest. "It's like playing at home." In fact, Mexican fans take the term "following" literally. ESPN Deportes reporter John Sutcliffe recalls being awakened by a knock on his door at the team hotel in February by a family seeking a picture with a Mexican player.

Still, for most of America, Mexican fans, when they're noticed at all, are often called out for less-than-sporting behavior at matches against the home team. Outnumbered Yanks partisans have been subjected to beer showers during fierce rivalry games. Conservative LA talk-radio host John Ziegler has even deemed the high Mexican-American TV ratings for El Tri a sign of "disloyalty" to the U.S. For some reason, the legions of Polish-American fans in Chicago at a U.S.-Poland friendly last fall didn't inspire the same outrage.

In truth, a large number of Mexico fans born in the U.S. already embrace the Yanks as their second team. Some even say they'd be proud if their child chose to play for the U.S. instead of Mexico. It's all part of the typical march of acculturation, Lozano says. When his own 5-year-old son was urged by his mother to cheer for a Chicharito goal against Argentina at the World Cup last year, the boy replied, "Shouldn't we celebrate when America scores?"

At least until the Gold Cup final, some north-of-the-border El Tri supporters gladly call a Mexico-U.S. truce. "I support both teams," says Cesar Quiroz. "When they battle we don't always know what to do. I mean, I can't go against my parents. So I just say, whoever wins, have a good game. We're from the U.S. and Mexico, and we have both kinds of blood in our hearts."

Inevitably, succeeding generations of El Tricolor supporters will form the next wave of red-white-and-blue soccer fans. Here's hoping it's even half as much fun as the Mexican one.

*Luke Cyphers is a senior writer for ESPN The Magazine.*

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