

## **Brokering Playing Fields:**

### **Latinos And La Liga De Fútbol In Raleigh, NC**

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#### **Introduction**

The 2000 US Census confirmed that North Carolina has been the recipient of a rapid increase in Latino residents since 1990. The explosion in Latino migrants (primarily from Mexico, El Salvador and Honduras) has been so sudden and rapid that many communities have not been able to respond fast enough to handle the needs and special problems presented by this new, young, ethnic population. Local institutions such as police departments, courts, schools, and medical clinics have had to hire bilingual police, find translators for courts, and to train English as a Second Language (ESL)-certified teachers. Much already has been written about these issues and problems in other areas of the United States. However, one issue that has been rarely mentioned and researched is how Latinos and US Americans accommodate regarding access to sports activities and facilities.

One of the most popular Latin American sporting activities is soccer (*fútbol*), and access to playing fields has become, at least in North Carolina and in the capital city of Raleigh, in particular, one of the most contested arenas in the accommodations taking place between the US American and newly arrived Latino populations. This article briefly discusses who the stakeholders are, what is at stake and my attempts to both broker and advocate for Latino access to soccer playing field facilities. It is also a story and subtext of the process of accommodation

and adaptation to each other's culture through the medium of the love of the game in both communities. I write this brief history in an attempt to give insight to other anthropologists who want to work as a broker, negotiating services and facilities from the US American community for the Latino community.

### **Enthusiasm For Soccer In Both Communities**

In late 2001, in Washington, D.C., the US national team played the Honduran national team in a World Cup qualifying match. RFK stadium officials were not fully prepared for the arrival of thousands and thousands of Hondurans, Mexicans and other Central Americans from up and down the Eastern seaboard who streamed into DC to watch the game and root for the Hondurans as they defeated the US side. The Saturday evening game meant that many Central Americans gave up a half day or more of earnings, drove hundreds and hundreds of miles, slept in cars overnight and returned home again all within the space of about 36 hours. One of the Honduran groups attending the match was a soccer team from Raleigh called Deportivo Progreseño. They wanted to party a lot after the late-night victory, but had to forgo much of the revelry due to the fact they had an 8AM game back in Raleigh, a six-hour ride home. For them soccer is not merely a game, but it is also a commitment. However, Raleighites are no less serious about soccer.

Raleigh's Capital Area Soccer League (CASL) is a private, not-for-profit local soccer organization that includes more than 8000 children and adults who play on approximately fifty, well-maintained, private-access fields of varying sizes. CASL is, arguably, the premier youth soccer organization in the state and is host to a national soccer tournament every November

called the Raleigh Shootout. The Shootout is also a venue for college coaches to observe and select skilled potential players for scholarships. Soccer is the fastest growing high school sport in the state. Nearly every weekend of the year has some kind of soccer activity. Just like Latinos, CASL organization and CASL players, parents and coaches take their soccer commitment very seriously. But what happens when both groups want the same fields at the same time?

### **Playing Fields: A Scarce Resource**

More than twenty years ago before the Soccer-mom development, the City of Raleigh ceded the exclusive right to operate soccer leagues and fields to CASL, then primarily a parent-run organization. Shortly thereafter the organization grew quickly as the sport's popularity skyrocketed. The parent-managed, CASL Board had to hire an executive director to run the day-to-day operations. With an administrator and staff on board, rapid expansion followed, especially after the opening of a 25-field soccer-only site. The land was donated by Capitol Broadcasting Company (CBC), owner of WRAL-TV (then the local ABC affiliate; now it is the CBS affiliate) and WRDU radio, but developed by CASL. CASL named the site, the WRAL Soccer Center, and it is those fields that are most coveted by Latinos in the area. Latinos are not the only competitors. Non-Latino teams and soccer organizations complain publicly about the domination and CASL's rigid control over field access.

Latinos cannot afford to join CASL adult teams, because the fees are too high and Sunday is the only day they have free to play. They work every weekday and at least a half day Saturday, and often work two jobs and part of Sunday. They have tried to use high school fields, but these are even more strictly controlled and they run the risk of arrest by local police if they play on

them illegally. Only teams with liability insurance policies are permitted to use the fields on non-school days. Since the City of Raleigh does not maintain soccer playing fields there is no public resource for soccer fields. The only place where organized Latino leagues have been able to play is on a piece of privately-owned land with three tiny, rocky, dirt fields. Yet, despite the fact that the grass on these fields is long gone, and totally inadequate for adult soccer, a league of over 40 teams has been playing here for the past several years. The league survived only because it is as much a social occasion as it is a soccer venue. About fifteen Mexican and Central American vendors surround the fields offering players and spectators delicious reminders of snack foods from their home countries.

### **From Soccer Referee To Culture Broker**

I have been a soccer referee for almost fifteen years, and was an adult player and soccer Dad before that. One day about three years ago I had the opportunity to officiate Latino league games on those really bad fields mentioned above. I find refereeing Latinos a good challenge. After one of the days I worked, the president of the league asked me if I could help him gain access to the WRAL fields next season. They would be willing to pay a rental fee for fields as long as it was affordable. I agreed to check it out for him. Thus began a long odyssey to broker a deal between the Latino soccer community and the CASL soccer community to gain access to playing fields. I did not know how much volunteer work I was getting myself into!

### **The Deal: Round One**

When I met with the CASL Executive Director, I suggested that Latinos could play on Sunday morning at from 8 to 12:30 – CASL’s games on Sunday begin at 1PM and continue until dark. This was agreeable to him, but when he told me the rental fee I realized it would be too much for them to pay. CASL officials later offered to lower the fee some, if some of the players would agree to provide free, in-kind, landscaping and field maintenance services. But the fee was still too high and I could not support the in-kind service requirement. Face-to face meetings between me, the Latino league president and a CASL administrator were pleasant and cordial, but I knew no further compromise could be had and we withdrew from negotiations.

I felt frustrated because even though CASL spokespersons said the goal was laudable, no one had enough leverage to change the status quo, that is, to modify the way CASL did business with low-income groups like ours. Too, I lacked leverage, since I was just one of many solicitors knocking on CASL’s doors. Even though CASL – overwhelmingly, white, educated, middle-to-upper-middle class – recognized that including Latinos within their framework would be a big publicity boost, the CASL organization was too rigid (at least at that point) to be able to modify policy and lower fees to a level that would be affordable for Latinos. Though not racist, CASL administrators, like many local public and private institutions having their first sustained encounter with Latinos, had difficulty in really understanding the special cultural and economic issues facing Latino league soccer players.

### **The Deal: Round Two And Lesson No. 1 – Use The Power Of The Media**

I was about to forget about the whole process when fortunes suddenly changed for the better. A newspaper reporter from the local newspaper, the News and Observer, called me about a

story she was working on about the Latino league and interviewed me about what the next season would be like. I told her there would be no next season since we had failed to get agreement with CASL to rent fields. A few days later the newspaper story appeared headlining the failure to get the league up and running on CASL fields. Within 36 hours, I received a call from a woman representing WRAL-TV who told me that the President of Capitol Broadcasting Company wanted to provide moral and financial help. Suddenly, I had leverage, and the Latino soccer players had a guardian angel!

### **Lesson Number Two: Political Influence And Leverage Make A Difference**

The emergence of an influential community leader was a critical breakthrough, because it led to a second, successful round of negotiations with CASL, a round in which I was able to argue and speak more effectively for the Latino soccer players, and because the CBC president was able to speak directly and influentially with the ultimate decision makers – the CASL Board members. Both the President and his representative had personal contacts with the CASL Board of Directors. They convinced the CASL Board that it was in everyone's best interests to facilitate Latino access to fields. In turn, the CASL Board directed the administrators to work closely with us to work out the details in a way that would benefit both communities. CASL would benefit not only from good press, but it would also give them direct access to a largely untapped Latino market, including youth players. With the emergence of the CBC as a supporter of the Latino community but with strong ties to CASL, the CBC representative became the mediator and I became the advocate-broker for the Latino soccer community.

Unfortunately, in the middle of the negotiations I suddenly became a spokesman without

an actual group to speak for. Without warning the Latino soccer league president returned to Mexico permanently. The absence of the league's leader was, obviously, a big problem. I asked a Salvadoran man I knew who worked in a local grocery store if he knew someone who might be interested in working with me to get the local players organized into a league (one separate from the church league). He found Fernando, 28, a Salvadoran migrant, construction worker and businessman who had been involved in organizing a league in another town. His poor English skills but good organizational skills, combined with my good bilingual and bicultural brokering skills, made us a good team.

### **The Final Negotiations For The First Year's Season**

We were to begin play mid-March, but by January things with CASL had gotten stalled again, mainly over the length of the season. CASL wanted us to have the same schedule as theirs, two nine-week seasons, one in the Spring and one in Fall. I insisted that it had to run the same length as Latinos had been used to playing, every Sunday from March to September with playoff and championship games in October, about 25 consecutive weeks. Our "guardian angel", the CBC representative, and I were in agreement with this provision. She had a lot of experience in promoting sporting events and pressed the CASL attorney to make this be the season in the written agreement that was being drawn up.

Control over league affairs was another issue we wrestled over. Some CASL Board members wanted La Liga to be part of the CASL administrative structure, but I felt very strongly that governance must remain in Latino hands. Our organization needed to develop the knowledge associated with developing a new league within a US American context. There was a price to pay

for independence. And part of the price concerned liability insurance, a CASL requirement if we were to operate independently, but play on CASL fields. This was solved by becoming a member of the local chapter of the US Amateur Soccer Association. Membership gave us several advantages. First, we would get liability coverage. Second, there would be some, though minimal, secondary accident insurance. Third, we would be obliged to hire United States Soccer Federation (USSF) certified referees in a three-referee system. Other leagues with a non-USSF-certified, one-referee system had had problems with referee assault and serious foul play. The certified-referee requirement obliged us to use three referees (and in fact, during our first year there were no cases of any violence at all neither toward officials, nor players, nor fans). And, fourth, membership in this national organization would confer a formal, USSF-recognized status to our organization. The drawback to these significant advantages was that players would have to pay more for participating in the league through the registration fee. The fee is only \$17 per player, but this additional cost multiplied times 20 teams made it a significant cost. In the end, the thought of playing on green, spacious fields with good referees and ample parking overcame some of the hesitation to sign up.

Negotiations were difficult throughout and they almost broke down at several points due to the continuing misunderstandings arising out cross-cultural differences. I believe my anthropological skills and knowledge of Latin American society and culture greatly helped to ease both sides past the most difficult issues. In the end, both groups were learning how to adjust to the needs and cultural reality of the other's special issues and bottom line.

### **Anthropologist As President**



Finally, the contract with CASL was signed and we were ready to begin formal operations. A few, organizational hurdles remained to be solved. What would be the structure of the new league, which we decided to call, for simplicity in cross-cultural communication, *La Liga de Raleigh*? And, who would lead the organization? I had originally thought that with the signing of the contract my job would be about over. Wrong! My organizational role in the league along with my senior status (age 55 ), my skills in communicating with CASL and my neutrality (I was the only league leader without a team), led the team captains to unanimously volunteer me as President. I thought to refuse, but saw that my broker and advocate roles could actually enhance the chances of success for the league in its first year of operations. I realized that failure was still a real possibility and many hurdles would have to be overcome as we worked through our inevitable mistakes during the first season.

Indeed, I played two other informal roles within the organization. First, I was chief cheerleader and arbitrator for disagreements over game results and team standings. In this role, I could also appeal to captains to control their players and respect each other's right to disagree without pulling out of the league. I was most concerned to maintain a calm, united, harmonizing front when it came to CASL and referees. In addition, my brokering cross-cultural skills served us well during the heated discussions over fair play behind the scenes. Second, since I was the only person who had the time, the contacts, the English language and cultural knowledge skills to navigate safely outside La Liga, I was an effective spokesperson in the organization when we needed special assistance from CASL administrators, referee assignors and potential sponsors. Simultaneously, I was receiving excellent support and encouragement from the CBC representative (our guardian angel) who often contributed ideas about fund-raising and public relations. Within the league itself, Fernando set up the meeting agendas and developed the

functional organization to deal with rules to guide league play. I would meet with Fernando several times a week to discuss league rules and listen to what he thought would work best with the team captains. When we had captain meetings, I merely ran them according to the agenda we had discussed. As the year wore on, we developed a constitution and bylaws, which were adopted by the league membership. These were sent onto the NCASA along with our formal application to set up a separate league and by the middle of the season we had officially become La Liga de Raleigh.

Another activity that was important for our success and will be expanded in the second year was sub-contracting with Latino vendors to sell favorite Central American food snacks during and after games. This effort, too, was complicated, but we managed it. The headaches in completing the deal were well worth it, as the availability of Latino foods adds a relaxed, festive, and family atmosphere to these early Sunday morning games.

### **The Second Season And Beyond**

The first season has come and gone. We have learned a lot. There were many organizational glitches, but no major problems. A solid organization is in place; we have achieved local recognition as a viable, responsible institution; and, we have established a good working relationship with CASL, with referees and among captains and players. The second season has seen a phenomenal growth in teams wanting to play in our league. We are doubling in size, from twenty to over forty-five teams.

This in itself presents new challenges. I continue to be the President, but in name only. Furthermore, our guardian angel, through her contacts and knowledge of local politics has helped

us organize to get a \$10,000 grant from the Raleigh City Council. We are more effective in using print media (especially the local Spanish-language newspaper) and radio (the local Spanish-language AM radio station). In addition to getting larger numbers of teams we have been able to get more local, businesses to sponsor league activities, including buying uniforms for teams, trophies for the championships and operational expenses in return for advertising opportunities during games). We are thinking about a partnership with CASL to try to buy and develop our own fields. We want to start a Spanish-language, referee certification class for league members and fans who want to become officials, and we hope to begin work on getting Latino youth involved in league play.

I have enjoyed my broker-advocate role in getting La Liga de Raleigh off the ground. I have used every bit of cross-cultural communication skill and patience I have ever learned. My anthropological skills were tested nearly every day and I was a real participant observer throughout the process. It feels good to know that the untold hours of work are paying off as two soccer-loving communities are starting to come together and share their passion for the sport.