

COLLIDING CULTURES: INFUSION OF U.S.-NURTURED TALENT DELICATE MIX FOR MEXICAN TEAM

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Shouting to his team from the sideline, the coach of Mexico's women's national soccer team, Leo Cuellar, switched seamlessly from Spanish to English and back again, depending upon which player he was addressing.

Walking along the bench receiving high-fives from her teammates after being subbed out of a recent scrimmage against Stanford, forward Monica Gerardo said "thanks" about as often as "gracias."

Even if Spanish is the first language of only half of its 20 players, Mexico next month will become the first women's team from a Spanish-speaking country to play for the world championship of a sport in which Español is the most common tongue.

"We know we're making history as pioneers of women's soccer," said Cuellar, once a Mexican national team star.

For a team that has six players with California birth certificates, more than from any Mexican state, the language barrier is only the most obvious of a host of problems it must solve in the World Cup, which begins June 19.

It is a team united by the legalism of citizenship yet divided by background and culture. Native-born teenagers who played *fútbol* in the streets and who are leaving home for the first time play with U.S.-born players whose soccer-oriented lives have taken them to tournaments around the world.

Two strong personalities, Cuellar and 32-year-old captain Andrea Rodebaugh, hold it together. Both were born in Mexico. But Cuellar, a former World Cup star, lives in Los Angeles, where he coaches the men's and women's teams at Cal State-Los Angeles. And Rodebaugh, who grew up in Los Gatos and played at Cal, has returned to Mexico City where she coaches one of her country's first women's college teams.

Mexican fans and media only recently began to warm to the team, Cuellar said, largely because the country's soccer ego was offended by the importation of players from a

country whose roots in the game are as shallow as the border-hugging All-American Canal.

Within the team, the issue was even more pointed: Why should Mexico-born players be displaced for "foreigners" openly using citizenship loopholes for a chance to play in the World Cup that they could not get in the United States?

"I felt it should be just Mexicans on the Mexican national team," said 19-year-old midfielder Fatima Leyva. "I still think that way."

A study in contrasts

Leyva's father, a school administrator in the town of Ixtapaluca, taught her the game when she was a child, and she was one of the few Mexican girls who continued playing into their teen years. She was discovered two years ago by a national program to identify potential female soccer players for the Olympics.

Before joining the national team, she had never traveled farther from home than the two-hour drive to Mexico City. Last week's exhibition matches against Canada in Vancouver, British Columbia, gave her the chance to play in snow for the first time.

Laurie Hill, 29, a blond-haired, blue-eyed midfielder born in West Los Angeles to a Mexican mother, was an All-American at UC-Santa Barbara and lives in Berkeley. Walking through airports with her teammates in their traveling uniforms, she is asked, "Are you Mexican?" She has learned enough Spanish to answer.

"I think the other players on the team recognize we (Mexican-Americans) bring experience and talent to the team," she said. "We're used to training daily. In that respect, we bring intensity the other players need."

Rodebaugh, who was a Cal teammate of U.S. national team players Joy Fawcett and Brandi Chastain, said, "There are two schools of thought among the Mexicans on the team. One is that the Americans are going to take a spot from a Mexican player, and the second is that the most important thing is qualifying for the World Cup, otherwise we'll be ignored by the public."

Rodebaugh played on the 1991 and '95 Mexican teams, which were hastily thrown together a few weeks before World Cup qualifying and embarrassingly unsuccessful in their quests, losing by scores such as 12-0 to the United States and 9-0 to Canada. But

the *Federacion Mexicana de Futbol Asociacion* took a much more serious approach to this year's World Cup, the first to be held in the United States.

In the two previous Cups, the United States easily qualified as North America's lone representative in a 12-team tournament, winning the first championship in China and losing only one match in a third-place finish four years ago in Sweden.

FIFA, soccer's international governing body, expanded the women's field to 16 teams this year, allocating a third berth to the Western Hemisphere. That berth would go to the winner of a playoff between the second-place teams in North American and South American qualifying. Because the United States, as host team, didn't have to qualify, that meant North America's berth was up for grabs -- mostly likely between Canada and Mexico -- with a fallback opportunity to make the field through the playoff.

At the suggestion of Karlo Pedrin, a Tijuana restaurateur whose daughter played on a U.S. club team, the Mexican federation decided in 1997 to scour the ranks of U.S. women soccer players who could claim dual citizenship and play for Mexico. The idea was that reinforcements from the strong U.S. collegiate system would instantly make a credible competitor of Mexico, where sports -- especially soccer -- traditionally have been for men only.

"Obviously, we can put together a squad of Mexican-born players, but it's not going to be at the same level," Cuellar said. "There's no (Mexican) program we can depend on for players."

For many Mexican-Americans, such as Gerardo of Simi Valley, Notre Dame's all-time leading scorer and a former member of the United States under-20 national team pool, choosing the Mexican national team meant the end of any chance to play for the United States. FIFA rules forbid players to switch teams once they have appeared in a match.

But women's talent in the United States is so deep there are an estimated 100 players good enough to start on most other national teams, and FIFA limits World Cup rosters to 20.

"The World Cup is every woman soccer player's dream," said defender Lisa Nañez of Los Gatos, who finished her collegiate career at Santa Clara last fall with a trip to the NCAA semifinals. "I had no shot at the U.S. team."

Getting attention

After three months' play in a San Diego club league a year ago, Mexico finished its qualifying group with a 2-0-1 record last summer. It lost to Canada 1-0 in a match for the North American berth played in suburban Toronto. That sent the Mexicans into a home-and-home series against Argentina, runner-up to Brazil for the South American berth.

Mexico swept Argentina 3-1 and 3-2 in December to make the World Cup field. That paved the way to acceptance by Mexican fans, Rodebaugh said, "because our men never beat Argentina."

Since qualifying, the team has scrimmaged U.S. college teams such as Stanford and Santa Clara on the road as well as Mexican boys teams behind closed doors at the national training center near Mexico City. It played the U.S. under-20 team Saturday in Chiapas, the first public game in Mexico since the team beat Argentina in Toluca.

In Mexico, the players are restricted to the eat-sleep-practice confines of the fenced-in training center for four weeks at a time – a source of considerable grumbling among the U.S.-born players who like to take breaks at home, Hill said.

Still, the Mexican public is slowly becoming aware that its women's team is going to play for the world soccer championship. Fans even know their team has been placed in "group of death" against strong European teams and assigned venues away from Los Angeles or San Jose, where it would get considerable support.

"A lot of little girls are coming out with their parents to watch us through the fence," said Gina Ocegüera, who played at St. Francis High School and Cal Poly-San Luis Obispo. "Our coach tells us they come out because they're curious to see who we are."

Looking ahead

Despite the difficulties he has had to overcome since becoming Mexico's coach last November, Cuellar believes both factions on his team can make their own contributions.

"The training discipline it takes for the Mexican girls is made a lot easier by having Mexican-Americans who are used to doing that kind of work all the time," he said. "But the Americans can learn from the Mexican girls the emotions, the Latin things that make soccer a beautiful game. There's give and take from both the groups."

Mexico opens the tournament against Brazil in East Rutherford, N.J. With Germany and Italy in its group and Brazil considered the World Cup dark horse, Mexico's chances of advancing to the quarterfinals are slim. If it does advance, it would win a berth in next year's Sydney Olympics, which will have eight women's teams.

The future of women's soccer in Mexico might hang on this World Cup.

"When this all ends," Rodebaugh said, "the (Mexican soccer) federation, because it's run by the same people who have always run soccer in our country, are going to try to forget all about this team. Those of us who live in Mexico are going to have to continue the women's game and not worry about what our federation is going to do."

Cuellar hopes his team will generate support for women's sports.

"This could be the biggest step in the independence of Mexican women," he said. "It's a reflection of what's happening in the rest of the world. It's happening later in Mexico, but it's happening."

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