

HISTORIC BONDS SIX LATIN NATIONS ARE LINKED BY THEIR STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE AND A LOVE OF SOCCER

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

While most countries celebrate their own, individual Independence Day holidays, six Central American nations go together on September 15 for a common celebration.

The six, Mexico, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica—are distinct countries, each unique, yet bound by language and one passion—soccer.

“Baseball is the number one sport in Nicaragua, but here in south Florida, everybody gathers together to play soccer,” affirmed Juan Vasquez, a Nicaraguan who lives in West Palm Beach. “Futbol gives us our common identity with each other,” he said, referring to the bond that his fellow countrymen feel with others from Central America.

Vasquez said that he counts around 90 teams in the region, so many that they are running out of fields on which to play. “We are planning to use a new field in Stuart this year,” he said.

“Futbol is a great tradition,” agreed Nery Consuelo, a native of Honduras who operates the El Tio restaurants in Hialeah and Oakland Park. “We have a Honduran team and we play with teams from other Central American groups,” he said.

While soccer and the common language of Spanish unite Central Americans who have decided to live in South Florida, representatives of each nation proudly point to cultural distinctions which, they feel, demarcate them from their friendly soccer rivals.

Generosity and goodness are hallmarks of El Salvadorians according to San Salvador native William Freund whose family fled here 22 years ago in the midst of that country’s civil war. “There are one million of us in the United States and we are the best example of people who send a large amount of money back home,” he said.

“Salvadorians could keep the money here, but they send millions and millions back to their needy families,” said Freund who lives in Plantation.

In fact, Salvadorians living in the United States send between \$1.8 billion and \$2 billion back home each year, making remittances the most important source of income in the Salvadorian economy.

“We could get international organizations to help us, but it’s amazing how generous El Salvadorians are,” said Mariella Sardi, Assistant Director of the Coral Gables-based Salvadoran American Health Foundation. “Our foundation works to enhance the well-being of the underserved in El Salvador through housing, community development, nutrition, education and other projects,” said Sardi, formerly of Fort Lauderdale who now lives in Miami.

Freund said that his countrymen work to overcome obstacles, pointing to the reconciliation between guerrillas and other elements of society that led to a civil war. “Today the guerrillas are integrated politically and former fighters are serving in the army and police force.”

Nicaraguans have also come to south Florida because of a civil war, though their citizens have not overcome the political and ideological divisions as easily. “You grow up with politics,” said

Karina Victoria, a native of Managua who lives in West Palm Beach. “You get used to voicing your opinion and being involved in politics. Even here, Nicaraguans buy *La Prensa* (Nicaragua’s best known newspaper) and are involved in politics.”

Politics aside, Victoria said that food and family are the mainstays of Nicaraguan culture both back home and here. “We are family oriented, and food is the treasure that helps us stay together,” she explained. “We enjoy Arroz Aguado (a type of rice soup) and Gallo Pinto (a common rice and bean dish). We always have a huge pot of Gallo Pinto cooking with enough to feed everybody.”

If Gallo Pinto is a popular dish in Nicaragua, it’s one of the mainstays of the diet in neighboring Costa Rica. The problem for Costa Rican Felipe Madrigal of the Doral area of Miami is that he has to go to a Nicaraguan restaurant to find some.

“There have been four or five Costa Rican restaurants started here in the past few years, but they all have failed,” he said.

The reason is because there are fewer Costa Ricans in the United States and they are spread all over the country.

“Costa Ricans have never had a reason to leave their country in mass numbers,” he explained. “Nicaraguans fled for economic reasons and because of a war, El Salvadorians because of war and disasters and Panamanians because of corruption.”

Madrigal said that those Costa Ricans who do come here bring their values of education, democracy and sense of self-advancement and service. “Many of them are professionals or in service organizations,” he said.

Patriotic pride is a distinguishing mark for many Central Americans including Tony Mejia, a Honduran who lives in Davie. “Honduras is unique because Francisco Morazan, the George Washington of Central America, was born there,” Mejia affirmed. “He fought for independence from Spain and wanted all of Central America united like the United States. However, divisions arose and he was executed.”

Guatemala proclaimed independence from Spain for all of Central America on September 15, 1821. In spite of the subsequent divisions of the area into the different countries that today make up Central America, all of the countries from Costa Rica through Mexico celebrate the common holiday. Morazan was president of Central America from 1830 until 1838.

Residents of the two northern most countries of Central America come from somewhat different situations and bring varying customs with them. “Most of the Guatemalans here come from rural areas and work in agriculture, construction and maintenance,” reported Luis Coliveres, a Guatemalan who lives in Miami.

“The majority of Guatemalans are of Mayan descent, and therefore speak K’ekch’í as well as Spanish,” he explained. “Most of them live in Indian Town west of Palm Beach or in Homestead.”

“Many of the Guatemalans come here to work in agriculture end up staying to work in landscaping,” said Marlene Spitz, a Boca Raton resident who works at the Guatemalan-Mayan

Center in Fort Worth, an umbrella agency that provides social services to an estimated 50,000 Guatemalans in the area.

Because of their different background, Guatemalans have brought different customs with them than the other Central Americans. "They have different typical food plates," he said. "Most of the food is prepared manually and takes three to four hours." Guatemalans use the typical Mexican Tortilla as a basic food.

Many Mexicans in the United States, including South Florida, also come from agricultural backgrounds. "They pick oranges, harvest sugar cane, lettuce and tomatoes," said Angel Guerreo of West Palm Beach.

"The sad thing is that many of them have been in the United States so long that they don't know Mexico," Guerreo said. He is working with a non-profit group to help Mexicans orient themselves to life in Florida, obtain immigration and other legal papers and train them to read and write.

"Many Mexicans will take jobs here that nobody else will do," explained Hugo Hernandez, a native of Mexico City who lives in Fort Lauderdale.

But, their willingness to work is not always good for their families. "They come with a strong family ethic, but their lives are disrupted in the big cities," Hernandez said. "They take whatever jobs they can find, and many times that means that they need to work at night. That affects their kids and leaves the children's care in the hands of the mothers who have trouble getting them to obey."

Hernandez, who runs a courier service between several U.S. cities and Mexico, said that it is difficult to describe Mexicans. "Mexico is a larger country than the others in Central America like Nicaragua," he said. "Different areas have different foods and different music."

Holidays such as Independence Day are important in helping Mexicans, along with other Central Americans, to remember their heritage. "Many are ignorant and they live isolated from other people," Hernandez explained. "We want to make sure that they don't forget their roots."

Events:

Independence Celebration, 9 p.m., Saturday, September 14 at the Miami Plaza Hotel, 7707 NW 103rd Street, Miami. The Raza Band will be playing. For information and reservations, call 954-462-3555.

Cocktail Reception in honor of the 181st Anniversary of the Independence of Central America, sponsored by the Consuls General of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, 10 noon – 2:30 p.m., Sunday, September 15 at the Biltmore Hotel, 1200 Anastasia Avenue, Coral Gables. RSVP to 305-423-3946 required by September 10.

Central American and Mexican Independence Carnival, Sunday, September 15 at NW 22nd Ave & NW 7th Street in Miami. Food, music, dancing. 11 a.m. until evening.

Soccer Tournament, 9 a.m., Sunday, September 15 at Memorial Park, Lake Worth. Food and other activities also scheduled. For information, call 561-965-3044.

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