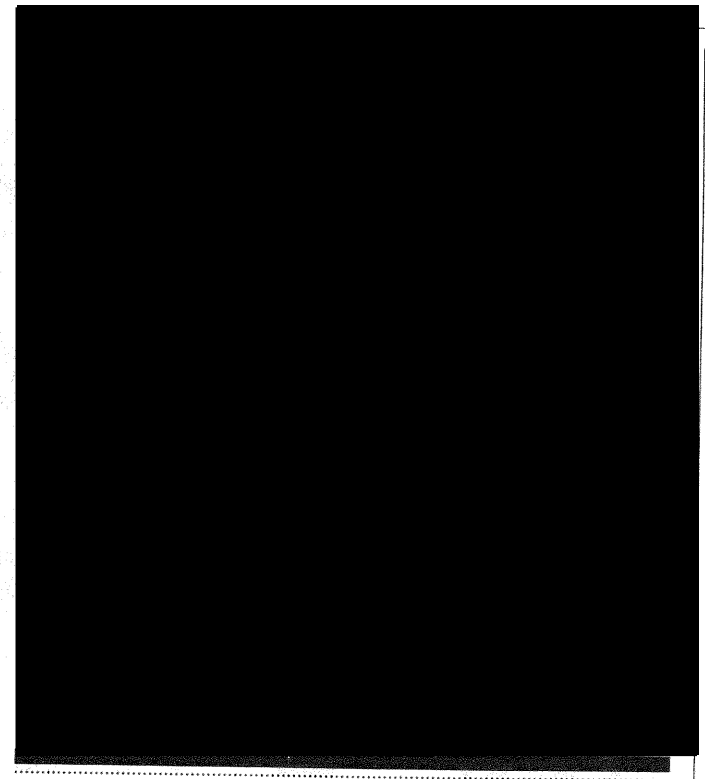

In Mexico, soccer as history.

PRI-GAME

By Enrique Krauze

I sing to the feet of those who,
weary of their labors in the mountains,
descended to the plains,
there to invent football.

—Antonio Deltoro, 1990

Actually, they didn't come from the mountains at all, but from England. As in Argentina and Brazil, soccer (or "football," as we call it in Spanish) arrived in the van of fin de siècle material progress. It found a home in the mines of Pachuca and in the textile factories of Orizaba, as well as in the elegant metropolitan clubs previously given over to cricket, tennis and polo. A certain Mr. Blackmore imported balls from England. The British ambassador laid down the rules, which all players, as loyal subjects of the crown, studiously observed. With World War I, the British left Mexico and ceded control of the sport to the Mexicans, who took to it quickly. Did it remind them, in their collective unconscious, of the ancient "ball game" played by the Aztecs and the Mayas, a sport that sometimes cost the lives of the players? Who knows? The point is that in the plains of Mexico City the ball began to roll, and with it commenced a minor epic that in many ways parallels the history of Mexico itself.

The growth of Mexican soccer was stunted by the Mexican revolution (1910-1920), which postponed economic progress and cost the country 1 million lives. No soccer fiesta could take place in the midst of that "fiesta of bullets," as the Mexican writer Martín Luis Guzmân called it. (In peaceful, prosperous Argentina, by contrast, every neighborhood of Buenos Aires had a soccer club, and tangos were composed in honor of the game.) When the civil strife finally settled, the stage was open for the Americans. From that time on, soccer was confined to the center of the country. In the northern, Pacific and Gulf Coast states the big sport then—as now—was baseball, spread by the Americans throughout the Caribbean and Central America.

In culture and in art, the Mexican Revolution revived an old conflict between Spaniards and Aztecs—Diego Rivera even painted a syphilitic Cortés into one of his murals. In somewhat less sensational fashion, the same thing happened to soccer. The sanguinary cry, "Death to the Spaniards!"—which opened the war of independence—was heard once again in the stadiums of the capital. On the one hand, there were the teams supported by Spanish businessmen in Mexico (the España and the Asturias). On the other, there were Mexican teams drawn from the most varied economic, social and ethnic categories: the military elite (the Mars); the workers of the electric company (the Necaxa); the team of the well-to-do, founded by French Marist fathers (the América); the shoemakers and masons (the Atlante), known as the "little darkies."

Though beloved at home, these teams were no match for their international neighbors: the tough Uruguayans of Basque origin; the versatile Argentinians of British, Spanish or Italian origin; the nimble Brazilians, for whom soccer and the samba were two variations on the same carnival theme. (The musician Vinicius de Moraes would accept only two excuses for refusing to dance the samba or play football—a headache or a footache.) Mexico lacked genuine professional clubs. Instead, it fielded teams of amateurs brought together only by a love for the game.

The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) led to a new peninsular emigration to Mexico. This time, however, the influx consisted not of soldiers, priests or adventurers, but of republican historians, poets, philosophers, musicians, businessmen—and soccer players. At one time, the entire Basque team took refuge in Mexico. Sadly, most of its players ended up joining either the España or the Asturias, which served only to reignite the rivalry between Mexicans and Spaniards. Angered by an injury inflicted by one of the Asturias players on the famous Necaxa forward, Horacio Casarín, the crowd burned down the Asturias stadium. That was in 1943. The final battle of our war of independence, one might say, was carried out on a soccer field. Shortly thereafter, Generalísimo Francisco Franco issued a decree forbidding Spanish teams to play in Mexico.

In sociological terms, soccer was very far from the popular festival it is today. Most Mexicans continued to be addicted to sports involving bloodshed and stoicism:

bullfighting, cock-fighting, boxing. (In the 1930s there was even a big battle between a lion and a bull; the lion won.) The more civilized middle classes preferred soccer, but the sport still lacked the support of young people. Until the 1950s, the universities in Monterrey and Mexico City were given over almost exclusively to American-style football. The two main institutions of higher learning, the University of Mexico and the Polytechnic, were still in thrall to a Mexican version of the Rose Bowl: the "Classic" between the Jaguars and the White Donkeys.

The Second World War benefited Mexico's economy. Many light industries sprang up to service the American market. The government put in place a successful policy of controlled imports and protected industry, which for three decades made possible 6 percent annual growth. In soccer, the model was similar. The sport boomed: it spread beyond the capital, and a professional league with a First Division was born. (It, too, was protectionist—every top team had to have seven Mexican-born players.) The names of the local clubs evoked the products or skills of each region: the strawberry pickers of Iraputo, the tanners of León. In the state of Morelos, once the stronghold of Emiliano Zapata, the teams and fans were as fearsome as the old guerrilla fighters. Guadalajara distinguished itself among provincial capitals by having the Chivas team, whose prestige rested on its refusal to hire a single foreigner. Significantly, the mostly Indian south (Oaxaca, Chiapas) did not produce a single club. It was and remains too poor and marginal to do so. These states aside, soccer—in contrast to politics—was the one thing in Mexico that united all conditions and classes.

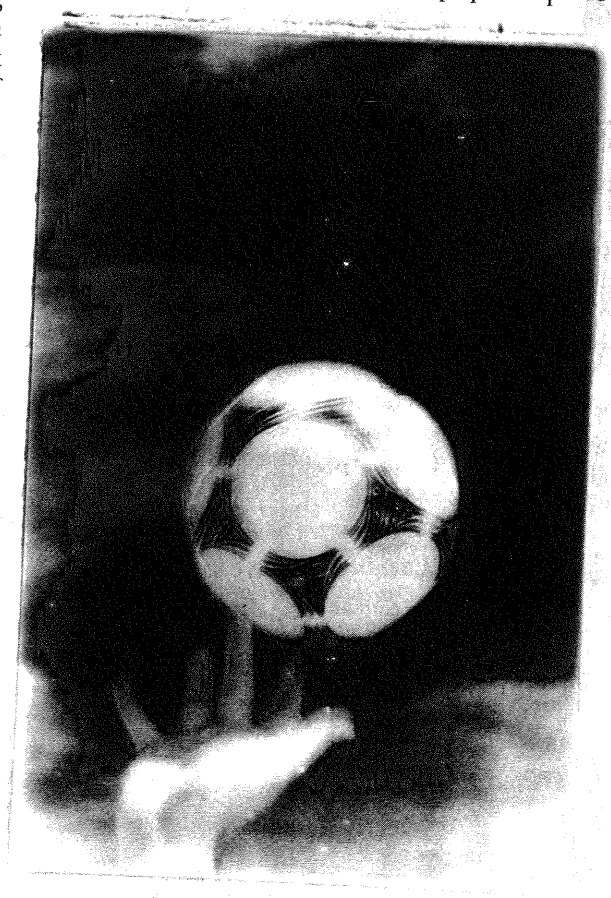

ILLUSTRATION BY JANE HOLLOWAY FOR THE NEW REPUBLIC

Instead of going for a stroll on Sunday, families began to go to the stadiums. Children accumulated (in their memories, at least) an archive of soccer trivia: dates, names, plays. Cheerful and uninhibited, the soccer of that era was mediocre, but made no pretense of being anything else: it was played for a local market. And even this began to change. By the late 1950s Mexican involvement in international tournaments raised the level of competition. The country went head-to-head with the world's great teams. The press and radio practiced a free-wheeling criticism, often with considerable literary distinction. Thanks to all these factors, Mexico proved itself at the 1962 World Cup in Chile: in the initial rounds, it beat the eventual runner-up, Czechoslovakia.

During the '60s Mexico's urban areas experienced a population explosion—mostly centered in Mexico City. Soccer, too, went back to the cities. The monumental Aztec stadium, built in 1964 (capacity: 110,000), was emblematic of this change—a ceremonial center for the exposition of the ritual sport. All the larger cities (Guadalajara, Monterrey and, of course, Mexico City) got teams in the First Division. Lacking any real possibility of competing, the smaller provincial teams disappeared.

The populist periods of Presidents Luis Echevarría (1970-1976) and José López Portillo (1976-82) brought to Mexico—and to soccer as well—many hitherto unknown evils, including statism, corporativism and inflation. In a paroxysm of "progressive" enthusiasm, the Atlante team was expropriated by the state in the guise of the Institute of Social Security. As a result, it dropped to the Second Division. In a similar outburst of syndicalist energies, a powerful labor leader in the oil industry (since jailed by President Carlos Salinas) maintained his own personal team: the Tampico-Madero. It, too, fell to the Second Division. Television joined in the practice of vice and fraud: sportscasters hyped every player as the next Pelé. They were no better than the announcers of American pro wrestling. Like their counterparts in the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), what they said didn't have a lot to do with reality.

Mexican soccer and the Mexican economy had much in common: both were centralized, heavily bureaucratized and breathtakingly inflated. Though the cheap dollars that flowed in during the oil euphoria of the mid-'70s brought some fine foreign players to Mexico, the dominant tendency was toward unproductive luxury imports (mostly South Americans who were beyond their prime). In 1982 both the economy and soccer crashed: the Mexican national team was defeated by a fifth-rate team from the Antilles. Some fans—Aztec hooligans, really—then committed the almost unheard-of atrocity of burning the Mexican flag.

What was needed was a thoroughgoing economic adjustment. Only then could Mexico begin again to grow at a modest rate. Fortunately, some teams started to follow the model of the real soccer powers: they became genuine sports clubs, nurturing promising play-

L. A. Story

On Saturday, after the Atletico Aztecas had fought to a 1-1 tie with Sporting Cristal, Aztecas coach Enrique Garcia brought out two large pots of pigs' feet that he had cooked and then soaked for three days in water, salt, vinegar and jalapeños. The Aztecas rounded out their weekly game gnawing on the snack, tossing back beers and talking about *futbol* under a giant sycamore in the corner of soccer field No. 1 at Whittier Narrows Regional Park in South El Monte. The Aztecas' match was one of more than 2,000 organized games played every weekend in parks and fields throughout Los Angeles County.

Thanks to its enormous immigrant population, Southern California has the most and best local soccer in the United States. The number of leagues in L.A. has doubled in the last ten years. *La Opinión*, L.A.'s leading Spanish-language daily, covers more than 1,000 matches a week. Four out of five local players are Latino.

Latino immigrants often join teams whose members are from their native pueblo, rancho, city or province. Most of the players on Ayutla, one of the leading teams in the Abraham Lincoln Soccer League, are from the town of the same name in the Mexican state of Jalisco. Alianza D. F. of the Mexico League is largely made up of *Chilangos*, natives of the Mexican capital. For Latino immigrants, soccer is a major link to the past, to each other and to their new home. This is especially true for L.A.'s 250,000 Salvadorans, many of whom had their lives interrupted by a lengthy, ferocious civil war.

"God Himself invented soccer," says Nicholas Orellana, owner of Niky's Sports store, the city's soccer cathedral, which is situated between L.A.'s Little Central America and skid row. "You put a ball in front of a child who has just taken his first steps, and what does he do? Whether he's Chinese, black, Iranian or Anglo—he's going to kick it."

Orellana, a middle-class Salvadoran refugee who fled his country in 1981 after a right-wing death squad attacked his home, is raving about a story in *La Prensa* from San Salvador, in which a local boy made good. He hands the article to his soccer cronies, who stop by throughout the day. The men, mostly Salvadorans, share in the glory. "He flies like an angel," says Mario Barrientos, a janitorial supervisor, pointing to the picture of Waldir Guerra, a midfielder for the team from the northern Salvadoran city of Santa Ana. "When Jorge 'the Magician' Gonzalez, the greatest player in our history, retires, Waldir will be the best player in El Salvador. And he grew up right here in Los Angeles."

There are around twenty Salvadoran amateur soccer leagues in L.A. County. Thousands more Salvadoran *futbolistas* play in the pan-Latino leagues, which are mostly Mexican. Guerra once played for the Niky's Sports team in the North Central American League. Orellana not only supplies his team members with handsome blue and white checked jerseys and cleats; he is their sympathetic godfather. He was instrumental in getting his favorite Salvadoran team to sign Guerra. Last year the Salvadoran National Selection Committee, aware of the soccer talent that had departed the country during the twelve-year civil war, asked Orellana to develop a training school in L.A. to send players back to El Salvador. In February Orellana and other ardent soccer fans formed the Angeleno Committee of Salvadoran Selections. In May three of the seven players they sent to San Salvador qualified for the country's national team.

"We're trying to recover something we lost," says Hector Moran, a 28-year-old graduate student in agricultural engineering who volunteers for the group. Moran, who came to the United States when he was 14, says the war destroyed his dream of playing pro soccer. He wants to ensure that younger players get his lost opportunity.

"The most important thing in soccer is to put yourself in the middle of it all, not to sit back and watch," Niky's Sports coach Luis Cruz yells at a dispirited forward during halftime of a match with a neighborhood rival. The players, whose ages range from 17 to 32, huddle against a chain-link fence, gulp water and listen to their coach. Cruz, a 41-year-old refrigeration truck mechanic, is "renovating" his young team of blue-collar workers and community college students. He's trying to squeeze in as much training time as possible before the season is put on hold for the World Cup.

That El Salvador is not fielding a team for this year's Cup—and has done so only twice since 1970—does little to dampen enthusiasm. This year Salvadorans all over the globe will be rooting for the U.S. team. Why? Because midfielder Hugo Perez, the second all-time goal-scorer on the U.S. club, was born in El Salvador and grew up a few blocks from Niky's Sports.

Earlier this month more than 91,000 spectators filled the Rose Bowl in Pasadena to watch the United States play Mexico in an exhibition match. The vast majority of the fans were Mexican-Americans who came out for the Mexican team. The stands were a sea of red, white and green, the tri-colors of the Mexican flag. The crowd roared its approval when the Mexican squad was announced but cheered only politely for the "home team." The Salvadorans felt a little differently. Orellana sold 1,000 tickets to the game, which the underdog Americans won. Not only has the "Colossus to the North" long been a hated—and sometimes envied—older brother to Salvadorans, but Mexico eliminated El Salvador last year in the qualifying rounds. "Did you see how the Mexicans were deliberately hitting Hugo Perez?" a Niky's Sports regular asked incredulously after the match.

"It's very important for us to be in the World Cup, even if it's only one player on another team," says Barrientos. He and his Salvadoran buddy, Oscar Herrera, a chef at the plush Mondrian Hotel in West Hollywood, were two of the very few fans at the game to buy American flags. Barrientos gave one to his teenage son to wave in honor of Hugo Perez. Herrera had more complicated reasoning. With a 7-year-old daughter born in L.A. to a Mexican mother, he just figured that red, white and blue was the only logical compromise.

DAVID E. HAYES-BAUTISTA
and GREGORY RODRIGUEZ

David E. Hayes-Bautista is director of the Alta California Policy Research Center. Gregory Rodríguez is a research associate at the center.

ers from childhood. By the mid-'80s Mexico began to field some exceptional players. The best of these, Hugo Sánchez, went to Spain, where he won five championships with Real Madrid and was named the most valuable player in Europe. Sánchez proved the advantages of open markets: Mexico showed that it could export excellent products, whether made by hand (glass, cement, automobile parts) or by foot (goals).

And Mexico finally developed a soccer style of its own. Pier Paolo Pasolini, a famous theoretician of soccer (almost as big a fan as Camus and Beckett), said that there are two types of soccer: prose and poetry. The European teams are prose—tough, premeditated, systematic, collective. The Latin American countries play poetry—ductile, spontaneous, individual, erotic. Mexico, a country with neither great soccer prose stylists nor great soccer poets, had to develop a technique of its own. And, with the help of César Luis Mennoti, an Argentinian who coached Mexico until 1992, it did. The team created a game built on a quick touch, continuous movement, individual brilliance, stoic resistance.

How will the Mexican style fare in the World Cup? Judging from the way things have been going politically (Chiapas, the assassination of Luis Donaldo Colosio, the uncertainty over the August 21 elections), probably not too well. What will happen if Mexico doesn't advance to the second round? Will there be a wave of suicides, as there was in Brazil when its team lost to Uruguay in 1950? Will national flags burn once again? Most likely the fans will blame the defeat on media hype, the corporativist and centralized control of the sport and, last but not least, Mexico's archaic political system. In Mexico, politics is our first national sport, soccer our second. And both are sorely in need of the same thing—democracy.

ENRIQUE KRAUZE is editor of *Vuelta*. This article was translated from the Spanish by Mark Falcoff.