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Community Identity and Sports: A Social History of Soccer in Salinas, California

By Arturo Figueroa

Figueroa analyzes how Mexican immigrants have brought soccer as part of their cultural baggage to their communities and this sport is essential not only used as a recreational tool, but also as a way to reflect their own cultural identity.

Introduction

This paper demonstrates the relationship of the development of soccer in the city of Salinas and the role that Mexican immigrant farm workers have with the beginnings of soccer. It also demonstrates the relationship between Mexican immigrant farm workers in the Salinas Community and two forms of domination, white supremacy and capitalism. Many people mention soccer as a recent sport in the United States, however Mexican farm workers in Salinas have practiced the sport in an organized level for more than 30 years.

The massive arrival of millions of Mexican laborers with the Bracero Program was very significant and ties the growing popularity of soccer in Salinas. Today, thousands of immigrant farm workers from many parts of Mexico including indigenous people, arrive every year to work in the fields of the Salinas Valley. Many others reside in Salinas while others move to Yuma, Arizona to follow the lettuce crop. Gerald Shenk's class on domination and resistance at the California State University, Monterey Bay uses a term called "Practice and Negotiation."

Through the process of "practice and negotiation", this subaltern group of people is able to bring cultural and social practices from their home country to communities throughout California. This

particular phenomenon can be observed in Mexican American communities such as Salinas, Watsonville, and Gonzalez. The Mexican immigrant community of Salinas has brought soccer as part of their cultural baggage from their home country Mexico (Hardy, 676). This paper analyzes the development and beginnings of soccer in Salinas by analyzing three inauguration tournaments during the early 1970's and how this connects to two different forms of domination. The theoretical principles that apply to my research are practice and negotiation, Victor Turner's Symbolic Interaction, and Stephen Hardy's Urban Paradigm.

Symbolic Interactionism is one of the most important theories of the 20th Century. This theory argues that what differs humans from animals is the ability to give symbolic meaning to the material world. By this, humans are able to produce a history, a culture, a language and a civilized interrelationship with other humans. Humans are able to create habits and routines that are always open to change and as the time progresses, people can easily adjust to the circumstances. Based on the theory of Victor Turner, a Symbolic Interactionist, I will try to show how the people with the Mexican community in Salinas interact with each other. The Salinas Soccer League celebrates their inauguration tournament every year

during April and holds a special meaning not only because it serves the opening of the soccer league, however it also serves as an opening event to begin the working season. This becomes a time for them to socialize with people of their own ethnic background and is a unique opportunity to be with family during the year. "I saw people interacting, and, as day succeeded day, the consequences of their interactions. I then began to perceive a form in the process of social time" (Victor Turner, 1974). Symbolic interaction demonstrates that people in Salinas had a necessity of interacting with their family, friends and community and this is done through the practice of soccer.

Mexican immigrants that came to this country with the Bracero Program brought soccer, and "practice and negotiation" is the theoretical principle that applies to this phenomenon.

In 1943 the United States Congress created the Bracero Program in order to supply the United States agricultural fields with labor forces. Migration before the Bracero Program was important too, but this program marks a big line in the history of Mexican migration to the United States. According to Neil Foley, the beginning of the Mexican Revolution in 1910, not only marked a change in Mexican history, but it also marked the beginning of Mexican immigration to the United States, especially to the states of Texas and California. With the revolutionary movement in Mexico, thousands of Mexican laborers fled to the United States to work in agriculture as fruit pickers, cotton growers, and so on.

The Bracero Program delivered millions of Mexican farm workers to employers in the United States of America, the head of the capitalist

world. Capitalism is one of the strongest form of domination and the United States have used their capitalistic ideas to attract millions of immigrants from every part of the world. The "American Dream" is just the mask under which white supremacy and capitalism hides under. The Bracero Program recruited, distributed, and controlled millions of farm workers to agricultural fields for more than two decades. The United States planned to employ Braceros as temporary workers only during the World War II labor shortage, but thousands of immigrants decided to stay and bring their families to this country (Calavita). This is quite significant because recently formed communities throughout California were forced to form such communities according to what they left behind. Daily in Salinas, you can watch *paleteros* (ice cream vendors in little cars), corn vendors, and other type of ambulant merchants in the streets. During the afternoons in La Plazita in Watsonville, one may view Mexican people, young and old, socializing with others like one would in Mexico.

During the 1940s and 1960s the Bracero Program brought thousands of Mexican immigrants to the United States. These immigrants developed communities throughout California according to their culture and similar to what they left behind. For example, they built churches, restaurants, stores, recreational places, and most of the social and cultural institutions they had within their communities in Mexico. In other words, they have copied their cultural and social lifestyles and adapted these aspects to their new life in the United States. This theoretical framework is called practice and negotiation. Mexican Americans and

Mexican immigrants in Salinas created the Salinas Soccer League as a way to promote or negotiate their culture and identity. At the same time they borrowed many practices and ideas from the existing United States culture and have adapted them to their own culture. Mexican farm workers in Salinas have negotiated these ideas and cultivated them into soccer. The people that live in the Salinas Community have a strong necessity for recreation and escape their every day lifestyles and the following paragraph analyzes how sports have been historically used as the way to escape urban lifestyle.

Urban United States culture promoted recreational activities such sports, camping, fishing, and so on... as ways to escape the everyday life within the cities. Stephen Hardy, in his journal article "Sport in Urbanizing America: A Historical Review," talks about the Urban Paradigm which mentions that people in industrialized cities have a necessity to recreate and escape their every day lifestyle. "Historians agree that the engine for the evolution and rise of contemporary sport was an urbanizing, capitalist system that slowly transformed the landscapes of Europe and North America" (Hardy 676). In addition, Mexican immigrants in California developed soccer and other activities to acculturate and assimilate to a new culture. They created these activities to negotiate their identity and culture.

The following paragraphs analyze the raising popularity of soccer in Salinas during the 1970's.

The 1970's Inauguration Tournament

Primary sources are extremely important to formulate an analysis in a research

investigation. I have encountered moments with members of the soccer league who have indulged me with information on primary sources such as: newspaper articles, pictures, journals or catalogs. I was to look through two yearbook catalogs from the Salinas Soccer League from two different years 1996 and 1997. These yearbooks have given me a sense of what it would have been like to be part of the young teams of the Salinas Soccer League. I was also able to find three photographs of a soccer team from three different years 1971, 1972 and 1973. The photographs belonged to Rachel Torres, the person in charge of community affairs at Alisal High School.

The photographs were taken when Torres participated as a *madrina* of this soccer team. A *madrina* is usually a young girl who accompanies the soccer team during an inauguration tournament or during an opening of the season. Being a *madrina* is very important for a young girl because they interact with the teams; usually teams composed of males carrying a *madrina* at their side, who is holding a flower bucket or a gift for the team, which usually is a soccer ball. This tradition still persists today in the Salinas Soccer League and even younger teams have a *madrina* participating during their inauguration tournament. This tradition is very common in Mexico as well and many professional teams carry beautiful young women at the beginning of soccer games. During the early 1970s, Rachel Torres participated as a *madrina* with a soccer team. She participated three to four consecutive years as a *madrina* of this team.

The first picture I have analyzed was taken in 1971 and the team name, according to Torres, was Mexico. The photograph showed a little flag

confirming what Torres had informed me, with an inscription of “Mexico.” The team in the picture was uniformed with green shirts, which was embroidered with two stripes on the chest: a red and white stripe quite similar to the Mexican flag. The members of the team appeared to be in their twenties, with a few members younger and a few older. Their ethnicity appeared to be Mexican or Mexican-American.



The photograph, according to Torres, was taken at Washington Middle School, the location where most of the early tournaments took place. One other important aspect I observed in the photograph was that soccer appeared to be an activity that involved the family due to the two small children about three or four years old, who were in the photograph. The children were also uniformed with team jerseys and were dressed as players, relating their role to the team. Their role was to be some form of mascot to the teams and hold the team flags or names in front of them as they paraded during the tournament. Their role was quite similar to the *madrina* role and this is essentially important because the family and descendants of the soccer players may eventually be inspired to play the sport. Soccer in Salinas involved the whole family and one may find wives, daughters, and sons cheering their dads or brothers in the fields.

The second photograph I analyzed came from Rachel Torres as well, dating back to 1972. In the photograph, I noticed the team was featuring a different uniform, which was blue and red with white shorts. The photograph featured two *madrinas*, Torres and a second *madrina* who held a Mexican flag. The Mexican flag is a symbol of not only ethnic identity, but a symbol of national identity. During the opening ceremonies of a tournament, the U.S., Mexican, and Salvadorian national anthems are played. The participation of people from Central America in the league has increased during the last ten years.



The team photograph was composed by almost all of the same players from the year before. Current teams are, at times, composed of people that work together, students that go to same school, and or people from the same part of Mexico. This is an extremely important aspect to analyze because people form their communities of friends and coworkers who come from the same part of Mexico. This is an example of practice and negotiation because Mexican

immigrants in the Salinas Community are trying to actively incorporate a cultural aspect of their lives with the American society. They are using soccer, a sport from their home country, and have long been adapting this sport with American culture.

The third photograph featured a game of soccer being played in a person's backyard. The same team described above did not have a place to practice one day and they used a backyard as a soccer field. The photograph was taken in 1973. Two of the men, in the photograph, were wearing bandanas: one was wearing blue, while the other was wearing red.



This shows that during that specific time period, color affiliation was yet to be tied to gangs and during this time Mexican-Americans were not stereotypically related to the types of gangs nor their behavior as they are today.

Today most soccer teams are sponsored either by a local business or by a company, and usually an agribusiness company. Stephen Hardy, in his journal "Sport in Urbanizing America: A Historical Review" from the *Journal of Urban History*, talks about the participation of business in sporting activities, such as baseball. Baseball creates a worker mentality due to the requirement that individuals must

function as a team, with clear assignments and signals. "The ballplayer was not a pioneer or even an old-fashioned artisan: he was a specialist, with finely honed skills that succeeded only as part of an elaborated and complex system" (Hardy, 680). This system is clearly reinforced in the capitalist ideology and farm workers in the Salinas Valley have had to adapt to this system.

Most of the small campesinos in Mexico work for themselves and do not have assigned roles. Farm workers in California have had to get used to a different system in which roles are strictly assigned to them. For example, one would find a worker picking lettuce out of the fields, and another worker packing the lettuce to be shipped off to its destination. Salinas' agribusiness companies are contributing in an indirect way to the growing popularity of soccer in this community. They have created teams and have build recreational facilities and promote activities for their workers. American metropolitan areas like Chicago, New York, and San Francisco must have recreational areas like stadiums and parks for their citizens, so people have the choice to escape from their everyday working life. In Salinas, agribusinesses are active participants in recreational activities of their workers and their communities. Companies are active participants in soccer in Salinas, and most people who have played during the 1970s and currently, were sponsored by agribusiness companies like Barendo, Man's Packing, and Fresh Express to name a few.

In conclusion, Mexican farm workers have created cultural and social practices similar to what they left behind in their country and have adapted to their communities here in the United States.

Soccer is one of the cultural practices that were brought by Europeans in the early 1900s and now Mexican farm workers have brought soccer with them from Mexico. During the mid-1900s, these farm workers started to arrive to the United States in large numbers and soccer have served them as the way to assimilate to the new culture and life.

Other sports in US history have been use as tools to assimilate immigrants to the new culture, but Mexican immigrants have brought soccer and have infiltrated the sport to American culture. The process of practice and negotiation is the theoretical framework that explains this particular phenomenon. Through this process, Mexican immigrants are able to build their ethnicity and identity. The Salinas Soccer Community reflects the growing popularity of soccer in the United States. The activities that the Mexican soccer communities are doing today in Salinas are ways to separate themselves from the white communities in Salinas. Today, the Salinas Soccer League has more than one hundred teams and only a few people who play in the league are from other ethnic groups other than the Mexican-American ethnicity.

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