

Women's Soccer in Mexico: A Unique Spin on the Rivalry with the USA

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The development of the rivalry between American and Mexican soccer has been significantly different on the women's side than from the men's game due to the following: the dominance of the women's program in the USA, the vastly different attitudes toward girls, and women playing the game in the two countries, the heavy utilization of Americans of Mexican descent for Mexico's national teams and the difference in priorities that the two federations place on women's soccer/*futbol*, which is reflected in the tenure of men's team coaches versus those on the women's side, particularly in Mexico.

In addition, youth soccer for girls in Mexico is far less structured by different age groups than in the USA, where club soccer and elite level programs can cost significant amounts, leaning heavily toward middle- and upper-class families. In Mexico, it is not uncommon to see young talented players in leagues with women more than twice their ages and for both men and women, players tend to come from lower-income settings, attracted by the fame and attention (much more so on the men's side) that comes at the professional level (Grainey [2012](#)).

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Unlike the USMNT, which struggled for decades to be competitive with Mexico, it's only been within the past two decades that their games can be legitimately considered a toss-up; in sharp contrast, the American women's national team has long been recognized as trailblazers in the growth of the women's game globally. This dominance began with Title IX in the early 1970s, the federal law dictating equal spending on women's sports at colleges and universities, which allowed the mass expansion of the collegiate sport. The vast expansion of women's Division I college teams—up from 22 in 1981–1982 to 334 in 2016, benefited national team programs in the USA, Canada as well as Mexico and even nations overseas, becoming a highly organized and well-funded incubator for top-level women's soccer, dovetailing with the growth of the sport at the youth level during the same time period (Grainey 2012). College soccer drove American success on the field at the highest levels, at the first Women's World Cup in 1991 followed by the first Olympic Gold Medal in 1996, to hundreds of thousands of fans flocking to stadiums and record television ratings for the US hosted Women's World Cup win in 1999. Though the USA has had a professional soccer league for women for ten out of 16 seasons since 2001, it has taken a number of years, as well as three different league organizational structures, to finally reach the point where the league's survival is not questioned annually. The Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) lasted from 2001 to 2003 and spent over \$100 million without establishing a reliable revenue base. Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) ran from 2009 to 2011 with a lower operations budget but still ran into cost overruns and self-destructed over internal legal issues. The US Soccer run National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) began in 2013 and has leveraged funding for their own national team players, as well as from the Canadian and Mexican federations, to help keep franchise player costs low. NWSL will enter its fifth season in 2017 with a low salary cap, increased media attention and impressive (average 13,000 a game) attendances in Portland, Oregon. By contrast to the women's struggle, MLS on the men's side launched in 1996 with ten teams in the USA. Despite folding a few franchises in the early years and centralized ownership, the league has become the seventh highest drawing operation in the world with over 21,500 fans a game in 2016, a number of soccer-specific stadiums, three very successful teams in Canada, and 20 teams in total, with more expansion sides scheduled to come over the next few years (Kennedy 2016).

In Mexico however, the women's game has struggled to succeed; the Americans have won two World Cup titles and made the final of another in the five World Cups since Mexico's debut in 1999; Mexico failed to qualify for two of those World Cups and has yet to win a match in three events. In March of 2016, FIFA's ranking of women's national teams had the Americans number one; Mexico was ranked 26th, behind Austria and Iceland, who had never qualified for a World Cup or Olympics.

The women's game in Mexico was embryonic throughout the 1980s and 1990s, in part due to the machismo attitude toward appropriate activities for women, which excluded an active, "manly" game such as *fútbol*, which is still an issue to this day. Women who played the most popular *male* sport in the country were seen as outcasts or different—frankly, as lesbians—a stereotype commonly applied to women athletes in many other regions, including in Africa, Asia, Europe, and Latin America. In the USA, however, soccer is seen as an acceptable sport for girls to play and subsequently saw substantial growth; the number of elite female players rose from 700 in 1972 to approximately 300,000 in 2011 (Grainey 2012). Some parents encouraged their daughters to play with the hope that they would win a college scholarship. According to Aaron Heifetz, the long-time publicist for the US Women's National Team (USWNT), "A teenage women's soccer player is a cool thing to be. Soccer players are the most popular girls, the prettiest girls, the most social, the most athletic" (Crothers 2006). In sum, the development of the female game in the USA was significant, in large part because it was seen as a healthy sport that was championed by parents as their daughters' entered grade school, but quickly became a structured sport for middle class and largely Caucasian families. Minorities and other disadvantaged youth were left playing in informal leagues that were outside of the more expensive structured youth club and travel system that could eventually lead to national youth team opportunities.

Another unique aspect apparent between genders is the prevalence of Americans of Mexican descent playing with the Mexican national team. On the men's side, seeing American-born and/or-raised players with Mexico is a relatively recent phenomena—within the past 10–15 years (even at the club level)—whereas for women, the Mexican national team would most likely not have qualified for any of their three Women's World Cup tournaments without the more experienced Americans playing alongside them. Mexico's female national teams at most age levels routinely stock half of their rosters with Americans.

The Mexican Football Federation or Femexfut is hugely successful and plows millions of dollars into its men's national team by playing multiple friendly internationals in the USA every season (see Chap. 11 for more on this practice). Femexfut has been able to fully support their male youth soccer infrastructure, resulting in World Cup Finals victories at the U-17 level (2005 and 2011), as well as a Gold Medal at the 2012 Olympics, which is primarily for U-23 players (Woitalla 2016). The women have largely been an afterthought in the federation's thinking; funding is inconsistent and limited, with the exception of preparing for major international tournaments. In the USA, the federation has invested millions into women's soccer, including full and youth national teams, as well as funding league operations for the professional NWSL and national age-group leagues for youth. Success is so important on the men's side that mediocre results from coaches in Mexico result in quick termination after a run of poor results, with 16 men's national team head coaches (some with short stays) in the past 18 years. In contrast, the women have had only one head coach during this time frame. In the USA, typically a successful women's coach stays for two World Cup cycles (6–8 years) though some have had shorter stints.

The remainder of this chapter explores these issues in more detail and examines trends in the future for the women's game south of the border and their relationship with American soccer.

BUILDING A WORLD CUP TEAM WITH AMERICANS AS A STRONG BASE

Leo Cuellar, a long-time Mexican national team star in the 1970s, captained the team in the 1978 World Cup, played over 100 international games and was a trailblazer of his own throughout his career. He played in Spain and in the North American Soccer League at a time when most Mexicans did not play abroad, as the Mexican League was and still is one of the best paid, well-organized and popular destinations in the Americas. Cuellar's 6 years stint with San Diego Sockers and San Jose Earthquakes led to him staying in the USA after he retired. Cuellar became a college soccer coach on the men's and women's side at California State University, Los Angeles. With his well-recognized name at home and experience coaching women, he was the ideal selection in 1998 when Femexfut needed a head coach ahead of the 1999 FIFA

Women's World Cup qualifying campaign. With the USA qualifying automatically as hosts, Mexico had a realistic opportunity to qualify from CONCACAF. The top team in the final regional tournament earned a berth to the World Cup while the second placed team played the runner-up of the South American federation's CONMEBOL tournament in an inter-regional contest for the region's final spot. *El Tri Femenil* had participated in regional Women's World Cup qualifying for the 1991 and 1995 events, but performed poorly (including losing to the Americans by 12-0 and 9-0 scorelines respectively). Cuellar led his new team to second place behind Canada in the CONCACAF tournament and then faced Argentina for the final spot play-off. A 3-1 win at home followed by a 3-2 victory in Buenos Aires gave Cuellar's team a coveted ticket to the 16 team finals.

Since Cuellar had so few players at home to draw from, he jump-started the developmental process by scouring the USA for top quality college players of Mexican descent, utilizing their superior training and the supportive atmosphere toward the sport by parents and others. As long as the players had a Mexican-born parent or grandparent, even players born in the USA qualified according to *FIFA* rules, though Femexfut had to petition the Mexican government to allow dual citizens to play for their national teams, receiving approval shortly before the World Cup. Cuellar's Mexican National Team did the bulk of their training in Southern California, his and several of his new players' home. This unique approach was accepted within Mexico for a few reasons: it was deemed as the only way to quickly put together a team that could make the World Cup Finals and women's soccer had virtually little presence or media coverage at home and thus faced very little criticism. Cuellar had ten Americans on his final World Cup roster including forward Monica Gerardo, second on Notre Dame's all-time leading scorer list, Cal Poly San Luis Obispo's Gina Ocegüera (defender), San Diego State's Linneer Quinones (goalkeeper), and Kendyl Parker-Michner (midfielder) from the University of Tennessee. Cuellar's justification was, "American women are very athletic, very competitive...because of the culture; they have the right to imitate what men do. In Mexico, it's almost against our culture to give women that flexibility. The United States has that gift that in the society that we live, the women have [access] to anything" (French 1999). Cuellar also explained that "Machismo in Mexico is nearly impossible to remove. It's part of the culture. There will always

be detractors for women participating in the sport” (“Mexican Women’s Soccer Team” 2008).

Some of Cuellar’s Anglo’s couldn’t even speak Spanish and the compensation was quite low for these college-educated Americans. U.C.-Santa Barbara’s Laurie Hill said, “I’m working on my Spanish, because in my house we always spoke English and I hope this will be a positive experience. But at times it’s difficult because we don’t get much support. We got only \$50 for 2 months, but I hope things will improve” (“Las Tricolores” 1998). Twelve years later, players saw little change in their compensation levels. Monica Gonzalez was born in Texas, went to Notre Dame and played for Mexico before becoming a successful television soccer commentator. In order to train to make the squad for the 2011 World Cup, Gonzales said, “I had to sell my car so I could have enough money to train for six months” (Romero 2013). Unfortunately, Gonzalez was a late cut from that World Cup team.

Mexico’s first World Cup in 1999 was an eye-opening disappointment as Mexico was outscored 15-1 in their three matches, losing 7-1 to Brazil, 6-0 to Germany, and 2-0 to Italy. As Mexico finished their debut tournament, Cuellar was realistic, stressing the positives of what had been accomplished in such a short time, “I’m sure there will be some negative people who look only at the scores. I am very proud of this group. What we have right now is all we can offer” (“They Said” 1999).

After that 1999 World Cup experience, Cuellar continued to focus on the USA for recruiting by lining-up practice matches with college teams, though he did scout for talent among the limited numbers who learned the game in Mexico. The Mexican-raised players were more sophisticated and creative, benefiting from seeing top quality men’s soccer at home and overseas on television. Cuellar had to meld two distinct styles from both sides of the border. California-born and raised Marlene Sandoval noticed that “The girls from Mexico develop their touch and notion of the game much better than the girls from the US. In Mexico, it’s more of a certain style of possession of the ball and having that technical ability” (“Mexican Women’s Soccer Team” 2008). The Americans, in turn, brought a comfort level with the more physical type of play that is widespread in the USA and Canada but the native Mexicans brought a higher level of skill that reflected their national style of creative play.

After finishing third in CONCACAF’s qualifying tournament for the 2003 Women’s World Cup, Mexico had to play a team from another confederation to try to win a spot, this time Japan. Mexico hosted the

first leg at the gigantic Azteca Stadium in Mexico City on a Sunday morning in July, allowing people in for free. A shocking 75,000 showed up to root the squad on to a 2-2 tie, but a 2-0 defeat away left Mexico out of the 2003 World Cup, again hosted in the USA.

The team came back from that disappointment and completely shocked regional soccer followers less than a year later by qualifying for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games at the expense of Canada (2-1), who themselves had stunningly overachieved by finishing fourth in the 2003 World Cup. Cuellar out-maneuvered the overconfident Canadians, who had won all of their previous ten matches with Mexico, and *El Tri Femenil* dominated the semifinal throughout (French 2004). In an interview with the author after the upset, Cuellar said that he prepared his team for the match by ramping up their physical play in practice. Canada expected Mexico to play their usual technical passing game but was surprised when they matched Canada's signature, aggressive, battling style, and directly attacked the goal (Cuellar, personal communication 2005). The wily coach felt that match could have a long-term impact on the sport in his country, particularly since it was telecast live nationwide, "What we earned today was another four years of support [from Femexfut]. We live in a culture where you have to win to get support... The players deserved this win. They do not get any pennies for this. It has no value financially for them, but emotionally these are tattoos that stay on your heart forever" (Ziegler 2004). Mexico nearly won the regional crown when Maribel Dominguez (see below) scored twice within the first 15 minutes against the USA, but the Americans rallied to win the title 3-2 and would also capture the Olympic Games Gold medal later that summer in Greece.

Mexico's trip to the Athens Olympics in the summer of 2004 was viewed as solid progress. They finished second in a three-team first round group via a narrow 2-0 defeat to Germany and a 1-1 deadlock with China, advancing to the quarterfinals over the 1999 World Cup runners-up on goal difference. Mexico was ousted by powerful Brazil 5-0, who would finish with the Silver Medal.

GREATEST MEXICAN PLAYER EVER

Despite Cuellar's constant reliance on Mexican Americans at the youth and full-team levels for typically half of his players, he uncovered a gem that was born in Mexico and developed her game playing mostly with the boys. Maribel Dominguez was universally acclaimed as Mexico's

best women's player ever. Dominguez scored her team's only goal in the 1999 World Cup and stands as an important example of the type of world-class talent Mexico can grow at home. Dominguez is the all-time leading international goal scorer for Mexico with 82 goals in 117 games, double that of the leading male scorer (Jared Borgetti with 46), and is known by a one-name *nom de plume*—*Marigol*. She grew up in Chalco, a community just east of Mexico City, and preferred playing soccer with her three brothers to playing with her five sisters and their dolls. Her alcoholic father who worked in a tequila warehouse did not approve of her avocation, "My father was very old-fashioned, and he didn't like soccer. He didn't even like that my brothers played soccer. When he went to work, I would sneak out of the house to go and practice in the street. When he came home from work, I was already inside the house" (Bachelor 2003). Her father passed away when she was 14.

Marigol also had to fool the boys on her street. With short-hair and a flat-chest they called her *Mario*, "I tricked them for years....They only found out I wasn't a boy when they saw my picture in the paper because I'd got into the subnational women's team. They went to my house and asked my mother if I was really a girl. They were pretty shocked" (Tuckman 2005). Teammate Monica Gonzalez further explained the difficulties that girls and women face in Mexico: "They are worried about the lesbian label. People tell girl players that they are boys and it can become a self-fulfilling prophesy....It's just not accepted; the girls are doing something prohibited" (Carlisle 2015). She added in a later interview, "You have to change the culture—what it means to be athletic" (Gonzalez 2016, personal communication).

Dominguez had no choice but to play with boys as she didn't find a girls' team to play on until she was in her teens. She explained, "I did have some trouble early on wanting to play with boys. I was looked upon as a tomboy. Truthfully, people didn't like it" (French 2003). In 1997 when she was 18, she joined a women's team called *Inter*. She was forced to have a fully nude inspection of her body by a female Mexican league official to validate her gender, because, "she had short hair and played like a man." Dominguez recalled, "I was sitting in the dressing-room one day when a female instructor walked in and told me to take off my trousers to prove that I was a woman. I told her, 'All right, but only if you do the same.' After that, they stopped bothering me" (Hennies 2004).

As she got older Dominguez joined women's teams in different parts of Mexico City, although none were very good. Then, at 20, she was called up to the national squad and her dream of making a living from football began. She joined the Kansas City Mystics of the United Soccer League's W-League (a summer league comprised of college players and professionals who had reregistered as amateurs with US Soccer and received only expense money) as a complete unknown and led the league in scoring with 17 goals and 12 assists, earning the Most Valuable Player award to boot. That success led to a spot with the Atlanta Beat of the professional WUSA in 2003. In her first full month, she was selected as the WUSA's Player of the Month after notching five goals and two assists in three games ("Dominguez, the Toast of Mexico" 2004).

With the WUSA's demise after the 2003 season, Maribel played primarily for clubs in Spain. In late 2006, she made international headlines when she signed for a team in Mexico—in the men's second division. Celaya, located in the state of Guanajuato, needed a goal scorer as well as some publicity. The only holdup in Dominguez' deal was that *FIFA* had to formally approve the signing. Dominguez was hopeful for *FIFA*'s blessing. "The thing is, that in Mexico we don't have even a decent amateur league for women, so you have to look for other options...I knew that the decision could go either way, but we were expecting a yes" (Tuckman 2005). She was aware of the physical challenge of playing in a competitive men's league but approached it realistically, "The hard thing is going to be equaling the physical force of the men, but the technique, the desire, the willpower, those are things I already have" (Woman signs 2004; "Dominguez, the Toast of Mexico" 2004). *FIFA* squashed her plans and the dreams of other women with the same goal when they issued an official statement, "There must be a clear separation between men's and women's football...no exceptions" (Tuckman 2005). A disappointed Dominguez said, "I just wanted to be given the chance to try. If I failed I would have been the first to say I can't do it, the first to admit it doesn't work. But at least I would have tried" (Tuckman 2005). Dominguez for her part has a long-term plan to open a football school for girls in Mexico after her career is over. Maribel Dominguez remains an important role model in a region where females are not encouraged to play a physical sport that is seen as exclusively a male domain.

MEXICO IMPRESSES AT THE 2011 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING TOURNAMENT AND THE FINALS; THEN FADES IN 2014–2015

Mexico missed out on the 2007 World Cup and 2008 Olympics (both held in China) during CONCACAF regional qualifying, but their World Cup return in Germany for 2011 was a benchmark period for the side. Maribel Dominguez scored a goal in the third minute to lead Mexico to a shock 2-1 defeat of the USA in the 2011 CONCACAF World Cup Qualifiers in Cancun, forcing the bewildered USA into two additional games (narrowly overcoming Italy through the inter-regional play-off). The loss was the American's first in 26 matches with Mexico and their first ever in 20 World Cup qualification matches dating back to 1991. Mexico narrowly fell in the CONCACAF title game to Canada (1-0). In Germany, *El Tri Femenil* received praise for their attractive and positive passing game, which helped them to their first ever World Cup points in a 1-1 draw with England and a 2-2 tie with New Zealand. Unfortunately, a 4-1 group match loss against eventual champion Japan put them out of the tournament.

Cuellar's starting goalkeeper in Germany was Cecilia Santiago, a 16-year old raised in Las Reyes la Paz (greater Mexico City), who became the youngest backstop ever to play in a World Cup, and was selected for four U-20 Women's World Cups (2008, 2010, 2012, and 2014). She explained, "I was 13 when I went to my first World Cup in Chile. I've always played with older girls, so it wasn't something that fazed me, although being away with the team for so long was not easy. I spent the time talking to my parents" ("Santiago, Mexico's Teenage Veteran" 2014). On her starting role in Germany with the full side, she said, "Playing in a World Cup with the full national team at the age of only 16 was a really big thing. The year before my coach told me to prepare myself for playing there, and it was an amazing feeling when I actually did. I got a lot of support from my teammates...Obviously I had a lot of responsibility on my shoulders, but I've never thought about my age. For me what counts is if I'm good enough, and if I am, then I give it all I've got." Santiago has enjoyed a meteoric rise to prominence and helped the U-20s make the quarterfinals in Germany in 2010 and Japan in 2012—a first for any Mexican women's youth national team (the U-17 women made the last eight in Costa Rica in 2014 and in Jordan in 2016). At the 2014 U-20 World Cup in Canada, Santiago's fourth and final in that age tournament, Mexico had two ties and one loss and was

eliminated in the first round, with 11 of their 21 squad members from the USA—one of whom was born in Mexico. Santiago seems to be set in her position for years and has played professionally in the USA, Cyprus, and Iceland.

Mexico qualified for the next Women's World Cup in Canada (2015), but it was not an artistic masterpiece, in qualifying, or at the finals. They started regional group play with a 1-0 loss to Costa Rica, an up-and-coming force on the CONCACAF scene. *El Tri Femenil* recovered to win its next two games over Martinique (10-0) and Jamaica (3-1) to advance to the semifinals. Finishing their group in second put them against the Americans, who won handily (3-0). *El Tri Femenil* had to play Trinidad and Tobago in the all-important third place match, with the winner going directly to the World Cup, while the fourth-place team had to play-off with CONMEBOL's third place team (Ecuador). Mexico scored a late tying goal for a 2-2 scoreline at the end of regulation against Trinidad before Charlyn Corral—another Mexico City area prodigy—scored twice in overtime, allowing Mexico to narrowly squeak into the final tournament.

Cuellar attempted to lower expectations ahead of the World Cup, this time with eight Americans on the side and 12 from Mexico (Kennedy 2015). Cuellar said, "This is a change of generation. The team, basically, is quite young. We expect that we are going to have some areas that we are going to suffer, but at the same time we are building for a solid future. Maybe our future is not immediately this next World Cup, but the following, if we continue with the progress. It is our goal to step up strong and make an impact" (Kassouf 2014). Cuellar, in his 17th year as national team coach, basically repeated a line that the media hear from coaches of women's teams who underachieve but insist that—given sufficient time—they will be competitive in two or three World Cup cycles (8–12 years), which in turn doesn't hurt their job security prospects. There is an expectation in soccer that a men's national team coach lasts at most through two World Cup cycles, typically 6–8 years. In women's soccer, that is not the norm. In developing markets for women's soccer, coaches can manage tenures of 10 years or more, in part because they slip under the radar when federations do not prioritize their women's team. Cuellar's lament was questionable in this case since he could draw on an increasing vein of talent in Mexico and experienced players in the USA, some of whom were good enough to play at the youth level for the Americans. There also was the underlying feeling that if Cuellar was

coaching a men's team in Mexico, he would have been fired a long time ago. The lower visibility and priority of the women's program to the federation and fans within Mexico has allowed Cuellar to last for years, which is not possible on the men's side with the intense scrutiny on national team results which can be particularly strident in Mexico.

Cuellar probably did not lower expectations enough for the 2015 World Cup as Mexico lost an early lead in their opening match to Colombia; the 1-1 result energized the South Americans as they advanced to the knockout stage for the first time. Mexico, looking disjointed and dispirited, plummeted out of the tournament, losing to eventual third-place side England (2-1), and then falling apart against France (5-0) in a must-win match. Despite a better Pan Am Games in Ontario later in the summer (defeating the host Canadians 2-0 in the third place match after a 4-2 loss to Brazil in the semifinals), *El Tri Femenil* went into the eight-team CONCACAF Rio de Janeiro Olympic Games qualification tournament in Texas in early 2016 facing some substantial player discord.

After the 2015 World Cup, Charyln Corral publicly called for Cuellar's departure, "I believe that Cuellar has done a lot for the program, but we need new ideas. I do not do it for me, it is for Mexico and the growth of women's football. We need more competition, more players to advance" ("Mexico Coach" 2015). Corral added on *Twitter*, "Everything changes except the Mexico WNT" and asked for, "more transparency and less lies." Long-time Mexico goalkeeper Pamela Tajonar, who did not make the 2015 World Cup roster after going to Greece in 2004 and Germany in 2011, had similar thoughts, "The biggest concern is the noticeable stagnation that we're going through as a NT (national team), while we watch women's football evolve world-wide" (Kassouf 2016a). Another Mexican American youth team player said: "We should be getting the best coaches because we want to improve the program. It is very political and there are girls there that shouldn't be there".¹

Corral was diplomatic in her comments, but she was not selected for the Olympic qualifiers, even though she had scored 12 goals for Levante in Spain's top women's league; a few others who liked her *Facebook* post were suspiciously not selected for the tournament, which looked like punishment rather than tactical moves by a desperate Cuellar*.

The criticism led to further scrutiny of Cuellar and his autocratic culture. Besides allegations that players are dropped after disputes with him,

charges included that he selected players that he likes, avoided talented, strong-willed individuals, and didn't provide useful feedback in training, all of which added unnecessary intrigue to what should be a straightforward quest to find and roster the best players available*. With a rumored salary approaching \$400,000, there have also been accusations that Cuellar takes a percentage for tryouts of players in Mexico. In the USA, there have been a plethora of "Mexican National Team" tryouts for a day or two—concentrated in California—where a player has to pay up to \$500 but there are no Mexican team officials present.* As Monica Gonzalez says, "You shouldn't be having more tryouts for a national team in another country than in your own" (Romero 2013).

In the Olympic Qualifying tournament, Mexico did not make it out of their group with losses to Costa Rica 2-1 and the USA 1-0 (Grainey 2016). A few months later Cuellar finally did resign but his son Chris took the U-17s to the World Cup Finals in Jordan for September/October 2016, losing to Venezuela 2-1 in the quarterfinals. Femexfut delayed the appointment of a permanent head coach and technical director, who sets the overall philosophy for the entire women's program (Kassouf 2016b). Femexfut obviously felt that, with the next World Cup qualifying tournament at least 2 years in the future, there wasn't any urgency to find a replacement. But Canada's experience would suggest that Mexico stands to lose valuable time. John Herdman was hired by Canada as head coach after the team finished last among the 24 teams at the Germany 2011 World Cup, looking as bad if not worse than Mexico did in 2015. Less than a year later, Herdman had changed the culture so much that his team excited the entire country at the London Olympics by narrowly losing to the USA 4-3 in a classic semifinal, before regrouping and capturing a Bronze Medal with an overtime win over heavily favored France.

MEXICO'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE PROFESSIONAL NATIONAL WOMEN'S SOCCER LEAGUE

An excellent opportunity for player development was underutilized by Mexico from 2013 to 2015 as a partner in the NWSL, the third attempt at a women's professional league in the USA. The American federation, along with Canada Soccer and Femexfut, agreed to pay the league salaries of their national team players, who would be allocated by the NWSL to one of their eight franchises for the 2013 season, with the idea that the concept would be renewed every year. This approach also benefited

club owners, who would not have to pay premium salaries for these top players since the federations absorbed the costs. Clubs then only had to pay for their other players and operational expenses. In theory, this was a chance for Mexican players—both those raised in Mexico and the USA—to receive top class coaching and playing time against the best in the world. The implementation did not pan out well, however. Sixteen Mexican national team members were originally allocated but four players opted out for various reasons, including California-raised and former Stanford star Alina Garciamendez who played in Germany with top side Frankfurt—an appealing move as European leagues were more stable than the seemingly endless carousel ride of professional leagues at home.

In that first season, Mexican national team players averaged about 500 min and 10 games each out of the 1980 min and 22 games possible in the regular season. None reached 1000 min of playing time and three played less than 100 min or a little over one game (Cooper 2016). In Boston, goalkeeper Cecelia Santiago only played in three games as her coach Lisa Cole did not view the then 19-year old as a starter (Lauletta 2015). One of the success stories was Veronica Perez from California, who spent the 2013 season allocated to the Western New York Flash, where she played in every game but averaged half a game per appearance. She explained the situation for Mexican players after the season: “We’re trying to figure out what’s going to happen next year because I think some teams didn’t know about the players they were allocated. They were picking players in the draft and doing research on college players they knew from the USA to try to form their teams and then maybe they got a surprise with which Mexican players they got. Maybe they didn’t really need them or have them in mind when they were trying to form their teams, so I think that was a disadvantage for some of the Mexicans. Maybe a team needed a forward but they got a defender. I think that was a little hard for some of the Mexicans because they didn’t feel as valued or as needed when they got into a certain team” (Murray 2013).

From some coaches’ and reporters’ perspective, the Mexicans largely came in unfit; players who are not at their top physical condition do not contribute enough and tend to ride the bench, so fitness is intrinsically related to playing time. Perez explained, “Being a Mexican allocated player, it worked out well for us because we got six months of really good training... to be able to develop and get better in these types of games, we need more playing time, but we need to earn that. So I think us Mexicans need to prepare better before we go into a season so we can

earn our spots” (Murray 2013). Perez played 2 years in NWSL and after the 2015 World Cup went to Australia to join Canberra United before signing for Swedish club KIF Orebro for the 2016 season.

Cuellar’s resolve for NWSL seemed to wane after the first season. In 2014, only eight players were allocated by Mexico. Dinora Garza had only played a couple of games in 2013 and did not return while Santiago was injured all season. Of the six remaining players, rookie Arianna Romero, a native of Arizona who played at the University of Nebraska, did well with expansion side Houston Dash. The flip side of the equation showed when reigning champions Portland Thorns brought in Texas-raised Jackie Acevedo as a possible replacement for injured US star Alex Morgan. Acevedo played only 15 minutes all season.

The following year (2015) Mexico only allocated four players to NWSL: Monica Ocampo (Sky Blue FC), Veronica Perez (Washington), Arianna Romero (Washington), and Bianca Sierra (Boston) but stipulated that they could not play until after the Pan American Games in late July, as Mexico used the residency approach to prepare for the tournaments, in which national team players train in one location for months, for concentrated preparation ahead of a major tournament. This training strategy was developed by the Americans in the late 1990s to compensate for the lack of quality leagues available. It was even unclear in August as to whether those four players would return to their teams, which would have to adjust rosters for them with only a few regular season games left. As a result, veteran WPS writer Dan Lauletta reported: “Not a single player who played for the Mexico women’s national team in 2015 played a single minute in the NWSL in 2015” (Lauletta 2015). Cuellar explained that he had no communication with the team coaches even after the Pan Am Games but didn’t blame them; rather he felt that his players needed to step up their play to make the club rosters, “The clubs are not at fault. I think we need to challenge our players to be on the level [of the NWSL].” Cuellar went on to say that, “constantly we have to start from zero again” as a national team because of irregular training and not enough players earning significant playing time with clubs (Kassouf 2016c). The irregular training periods that Cuellar refers to are typically breaks for international games and affect Canadian, US, and other international players the same as it does the Mexicans. Lauletta wrote after the 2015 World Cup that he viewed Veronica Perez, Teresa Noyola, and Monica Ocampo as NWSL’s most effective Mexican players but concluded, “Certainly they were all exposed to rigorous training

and competitive matches. At the same time it is unlikely anyone thought as they watched the tournament [Women's World Cup], 'Hey, player X is really so much better from playing in NWSL.'" At that point in time, Lauletta (2015) felt that "Mexico is not exactly stocked with coveted players" for NWSL teams.

For 2016 Mexico entirely stopped their funding of national team players' salaries in NWSL. For those who do not have dual/USA citizenship, making an NWSL roster now requires teams to use an international slot (of which there are five per team) and pay their salaries, so playing in Europe—particularly in Spain where some have thrived—may offer more opportunities. The US born or dual citizenship Mexican national team players who are good enough to make NWSL rosters—like Houston's Bianca Henninger, who was the US U-20 World Cup team's starting goalkeeper in 2010—benefit from not needing an international player slot to play in NWSL.

MEXICAN NATIONAL TEAM—ANGLOS VERSUS MEXICANS

The integration of the Mexican American and native Mexicans has a number of layers and is more than just a common passport. The Americans were raised with a general respect and widespread acceptance for females playing the sport, particularly at the youth level, as opposed to a culture in which the players have to justify why they play and fight negative stereotypes. One player who grew up in Mexico said: "We are not supported because of the male-dominated culture in Mexico and not appreciated as much as we should be."* The Americans also typically come from a higher economic level than their sisters in Mexico; median household income in the USA was \$53,657 compared to \$10,116 in Mexico in 2014. The fact that the Mexican Americans are either college graduates or still in college, many on full-ride scholarships, counter the Mexican-based players, the majority of whom are struggling to survive as professional players. Cuellar has said repeatedly that the national team program has allowed some of his Mexican-based players to escape from a life of abject poverty (Cuellar, personal communication 2005, 2008, 2012).

Moreover, the two groups were raised differently, in cultural environments that are vastly different, with one west coast-based American-born player calling the divide "a true segregation at first."* Another obstacle has been language; some of the Americans are not fluent in Spanish.

Some rifts have emerged over the national anthem when the native Mexicans were insulted that Americans did not sing the national anthem because they did not know the words. Over the past couple of years, Mexican youth national teams have even helped new players to learn the anthem.* A fluency in Spanish among some Americans helps smooth their acceptance. And, of late, more of the Mexican-raised players are familiar with English.*

Another difference is the Americans have to justify why they chose to play for Mexico since they qualify for two countries, with an underlying feeling that they are taking advantage of a situation that many do not have. The country of their ancestors is seen as a “second team,” implying that their first choice would be to play for the USA but they could not make the cut. It is common in both the men’s and women’s game for some players to choose to play for the national team of their parents and grandparents: the Republic of Ireland men’s side overachieved in the 1990s and early 2000s by utilizing their diaspora, mostly from the British Isles. Current US head coach Jill Ellis once told Teresa Noyola—who was born in Mexico City but reared in California and played for the USA at the 2010 U-20 World Cup—“If I were you, I’d consider playing for Mexico.” Noyola was shocked by the advice and explained that “At that time, I was fully committed to the U.S.” (McIntyre 2015). She ended up playing for Mexico and performing well at both the club and national team level. Indeed, a reporter once told me that Mexico’s best youth team development strategy is to troll American national and regional youth teams for players of Mexican heritage* (see Chap. 1).

When the Mexican American players talked about what playing for Mexico means to them, they all thoroughly considered the choice and the implications. To some, they feel that they are bringing something to their “homeland,” or giving back, including their experiences in a country where female athletes are appreciated.* Monica Gonzalez felt like a traitor at first to the USA but over time has worked to reduce the gap between the two distinct cultures through her *Gonzo Soccer*, a nonprofit soccer and leadership academy for girls ages 8–16, which she started in the Chicago area where she was playing after college and trying to make ends meet. Her academy has since expanded to Mexico and Colombia and includes over 900 girls. Gonzalez explains: “They already have soccer in their blood. They’re passionate about it. If they come from a lower socio-economic status, that means they’re at higher risk for getting pregnant, violence, diabetes, obesity, all that stuff. It’s my community, they’re

my people but they're a group of people that deserves the same opportunities that everybody else has, and they have just as much talent and potential" (Romero 2013). Her objective involves "potentially turning a light on" for the girl, her family, and her community, to make positive choices and change perceptions (Carlisle 2015).

Another Mexican American midfielder said that joining Mexico was a chance at revenge, to show the American coaches that they were wrong to pass her over: "First I went into it as revenge to show the Americans that they got it wrong. I [then quickly] fell in love with the culture and embraced it. Mexican players are passionate and underdogs and they are not supported; the culture is male dominant, old-fashioned and people don't appreciate women as they should. I am happy the way things worked out. It's where my parents and ancestors are from."* Since a number of the Anglos spent time with American youth national teams, some do see their tenure with Mexico as a chance to prove that they are good players and many felt that, as Hispanics, they weren't evaluated with the same acceptance levels as other American youth.

Veronica Perez played with national teams from both countries in 2009. After her first start with the USA under-23 national team, the Americans' interest in her cooled considerably. Mexican officials came to her to see if she wanted to play on their World Cup team and Perez remembered: "I was like, 'Of course. Why would I give up that opportunity?'" She still remembers the emotions when she faced the Americans; she had to bite the insides of her cheeks to keep from singing "The Star-Spangled Banner." Twenty-seven minutes later, she scored the deciding goal in the landmark 2-1 Mexico win to clinch a 2011 World Cup spot and send the Americans into the intercontinental play-offs (Baxter 2016). One California-reared player said that she "gets emotional when she hears both anthems," when Mexico plays the country of her birth.*

Playing for Mexico isn't about turning their backs on one country; it is about embracing an opportunity from another. Bianca Sierra, a Californian who played in the US ODP program before joining Mexico's U-20 team in 2009 explained: "To play for a country where my family is from is such an honor. Seeing the way my grandparents' faces light up every time they ask me about how camp went or how the team is doing is really special. When I was given the opportunity at such a young age, I jumped right on it. I didn't think twice" (Baxter 2016). An American-born youth international player who went to college in the southwest

said that playing for Mexico symbolizes that, “My parents came from Mexico and worked their butts off here for me.”*

MEXICO'S WOMEN'S SOCCER FUTURE

First of all, and most pressing, Mexico needs to sort out Leo Cuellar's replacement, who hopefully will have free reign to institute structures and a philosophy. Part of that plan will entail how reliant they will be on Mexican Americans. One of those who gained from playing for the country of her parents, Monica Gonzalez interestingly said, “I'm not against having American-born players come to Mexico because that's how I came I think we've had 14 years to try and build infrastructure here (in Mexico) and to try and develop players here ... there's so many things we can do to grow the participation in Mexico on the women's side that we're not doing. I think that there should be a majority of girls from Mexico on the Mexican national team, it shouldn't be 50-50” (Romero 2013).

There have been a number of candidates presented in the media to replace Cuellar, including former Mexican national teamers: Monica Gonzalez, Fatima Leyva, Iris Mora, Fabiola Vargas, and Andrea Rodebaugh as well as former Swedish club coach and US national team assistant Tony Gustavsson and current Costa Rican head coach Amelia Valverde. American coach Randy Waldrum, who failed to take Trinidad and Tobago to the 2015 Women's World Cup and the 2016 Olympics, has been mentioned as a candidate as well. He recently was fired as the head coach of the Houston Dash in NWSL after having failed to make the play-offs in his three seasons, even though he had the 2015 FIFA Women's World Player of the Year Carli Lloyd on his roster (Marshall 2016). Femexfut politically probably cannot hire an American coach anyway, as that would add to the controversy regarding US versus Mexican-born players. This same concern could be detrimental to Monica Gonzalez' candidacy too, along with her lack of senior club and national team coaching experience. Importing a coach from Brazil—widely respected in the women's game—would help bring more international ideas to the team, but short of a candidate from Brazil, Valverde, and Gustavsson present the most promise to bring a cultural change to a damaged program. Mexico has a chance to break new ground with this hire, but they need to support that decision with funding and resources. Additionally, the tenure of women's coaches in the federation should

mirror the men (1–2 World Cup cycles) so that new ideas and perspectives are brought in on a more frequent basis.

FIFA estimates that around 2 million women practice soccer in Mexico and yet only 11,000 are affiliated with Femexfut (Arroyo 2015). For the game to continue to grow in Mexico, the federation must concentrate on building better leagues at the youth and senior level, while still looking for seasoned Mexican Americans that can contribute immediately. There needs to be an expansion and infusion of capital into the Mexican Women's League to turn it into a truly national league where home-based players can improve. Perhaps Femexfut can take a similar approach to what US Soccer did with NWSL, paying for their national team players and helping to attract some of the well-heeled Mexican clubs, such as Chivas-Guadalajara, Club America of Mexico, and Tijuana de Xolos, to start teams. A women's national U-23 league due to start in late 2017 offers a promising start, with 16 men's professional teams sponsoring teams. Femexfut could work with federations such as Costa Rica, Guatemala or the Caribbean Football Union to import players and help to develop the sport throughout the region. Monica Gonzalez, who feels that Mexico should grow the sport at home and uncover more players like Maribel Dominguez and Cecelia Santiago, captures the current state of affairs well when she quips, "I think it's easier to walk over to your neighbor's ranch and pick his corn than have to grow your own" (Marshall 2016). Women playing in Mexico need more support from the federation, parents, and fans to change the status quo of the past few decades in order to develop a thriving women's soccer ecosystem. This would allow for matchups on the women's side with the Americans to be more competitive and rival what we have seen in the men's game over the past two decades.

NOTE

1. The author held interviews with five Mexican national teams' players, two US-based coaches and one Mexican-based journalist from January to September, 2016. Their identities are not revealed to protect their playing careers/coaching/media relationships with Mexican Federation officials. Direct quotes and other content drawn from these interviews are included without citations but noted with an asterisk.

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