



A Home ON THE Field

*How One Championship Team Inspires Hope
for the Revival of Small Town America*



Paul Cuadros

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on the
FIELD

*How One Championship Team
Inspires Hope for the
Revival of Small Town America*

PAUL CUADROS



HarperCollins e-books

*For my father, Alberto, who taught me how to play the game,
and for my brother, Alberto, who taught me to win at life.*

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INTRODUCTION

For the past fifteen years, the country has been experiencing a silent migration of Mexicans and other Latin Americans who have been crossing the border and migrating to the interior portion of the United States. Only now, however, has the country become aware of this migration and its impact on our society. This migration has since caused a tumultuous debate about immigration and what the country will do with the more than 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the country. But the origins of this issue can be found in the very free-trade policies of the United States that have compelled poor peasant farmers in Mexico and Central America to migrate north in an attempt to feed their families.

In the 1990s, the U.S. passed the North American Free Trade Agreement with the idea that free trade between the U.S., Canada, and Mexico would help the economies of all participating countries. The agreement ended up being a disaster for the Mexican farmer. It allowed heavily subsidized U.S. corn and other agribusiness products to be dumped into Mexico. Millions of Mexican farmers could no longer compete against these artificially lower prices and many were forced to leave their farms for the central cities like Mexico City. Not being able to find work in urban com-

munities, they migrated north into the U.S. where they found jobs in the meatpacking and poultry-processing industries.

The food processing industry was undergoing a transformation in how it raised, slaughtered, and processed food to the American consumer. Processing companies were integrating vertically, encompassing all aspects of the business including supplying animals to farmers or growers, providing the feed and medicine needed to keep the animals alive and healthy, and slaughtering and processing the animals to prepare them directly for sale to supermarkets and restaurants. Gone forever were the days of the local butcher that prepared your meat for consumption. Companies needed a compliant and pliable labor force that could endure the grueling conditions of plants and that wouldn't complain of conditions, wages, or want to unionize. They found their labor force in the Latin American worker and began recruiting Latino workers along the border and in Mexico. Some companies even provided transportation and promised housing if they came to the Midwest or Southeast to work in their plants. In addition, they offered incentives to workers to bring their family members from their local villages to also work. Because turnover in the meatpacking and poultry-processing industry can be high, there was always a need for new workers once the old workers either moved on to other jobs or were too injured to continue working on the killing floor.

The food processing industry served as a gateway industry for many Latino workers as they began migrating into such states as North Carolina. But after enduring the work at a chicken plant many workers sought out new jobs and many found them in such other industries as landscaping, textiles, furniture manufacturing, and construction. The construction industry was experiencing a boom in the South building new housing developments, roads, and office buildings. States like North Carolina were beginning to develop and attract new businesses and people to the area.

In 1996, Latino workers began to bring their families. The migration of Latinos was no longer a temporary phenomenon. Schools began to see an increase in their Latino student population that

continues to grow to this day. Longtime residents began to realize that this migration was going to be permanent—Latinos were going to be settling in their communities.

Small rural communities like Siler City, North Carolina were at a crossroads when the Latino migration began. In the early 1990s, the town was suffering through several major plant closings in the textile and furniture manufacturing industries, losing a thousand jobs in a town of only five thousand people. Without sustainable jobs, many young people began to leave Siler City. The town was growing older and its vitality was flowing into other larger cities. In 1990, the median age for Siler City was 37 years, according to the U.S. Census. The town was aging out.

The migration of Latino workers and their families has been like a shot in the arm to Siler City. It has restored and spurred growth and development in a town that was dying. By 2000, the influx of Latinos had dramatically lowered the median age to 31 years. The increase in population and buying power has also translated into new business growth and opportunity.

But adjusting to the migration has not been easy for Latinos and for longtime residents. Culture clashes were frequent and continue to cause friction. One of the areas where the two groups confronted each other was in how they played.

Like many rural communities, baseball and football were the top sports. Schools and parks are designed around these two American bastions of play. A small town's identity can be bound up in how well its high school football team does on Friday nights. Saturday afternoons were reserved for Little League and softball games at the park.

Latinos wanted to play soccer. They passionately love the sport. But there were no places to play soccer in Siler City. Makeshift fields were created to accommodate the Latino workers who wanted to let off some steam after a hard shift at the chicken plant. The children of these workers were growing up playing in their backyards, in the streets, and at the parks. It was inevitable that in addition to the other culture clashes between Latinos and longtime

residents there would come a time when these struggles would be taken to the high school football field itself.

This story is told over three seasons of soccer at Jordan-Matthews High School and encompasses many of the issues faced by Siler City. The stories contained within the three seasons did happen and the events have been like a whirlwind. I set out to report on the Latino Diaspora to the Southeast and not to write a book about soccer or coach a team. But along the way, I met a great group of kids with a dream that soon became my dream. The book features some of the most courageous young people I know. Many of these kids have faced terrible hardship and now face an unknown future because of their immigration status. The names of the players and others have been changed or nicknames have been used to protect their identities. I hope one day this story can be told with their true names and they can at last emerge from the shadows to claim their true identities and accomplishments.

Congress is currently debating immigration issues and what to do with the some 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the country. Siler City has a lot to teach America about how to handle this situation. I hope one day in the not-too-distant future when the historians begin to write about the Great Latino Migration to America they will consider this story of how a town and a team came together and found a way to share.

***First
Season***

The boys were on time for a change. There was no such thing as “Latino time” during the state high school play-offs, that customary half-hour tardiness in which they showed up one by one, drifting onto the field still in their street clothes. They arrived tonight dressed to play in their white home jerseys, royal-blue shorts, and white socks pulled up over their knees to keep their legs warm from the cold November night. They went right away to the bag of soccer balls on the sideline, took one, and ran out onto the field like colts bolting over an open plain, kicking and jumping in the crisp autumn air. They immediately started taking shots on goal, warming up our goalkeeper, “Fish,” for the game.

I went out to meet them—handing out pinnies, warm-up vests in bright yellow—to divide them into two teams so they could go through our normal warm-up drill before a game. “¡Eh! ¡El juego de posesión! ¡Ahorita!” I yelled at them, blowing my whistle. “Hey! The possession game! Now!” The boys quickly split off into two teams and started playing keep-away with the ball, possessing it with the pass, two-touch only, moving it from one side of the field to the other on the ground, passing it around from one player to another as fast as they could.

Across the field, the Hendersonville Bearcats were performing

their own warm-up drills. They had traveled more than five hours on their school bus from the Appalachian Mountains to Siler City, North Carolina, a small poultry-processing town in the middle of the state. They were vastly different from my team. Their soldier-like warm-ups included jogging together in a straight line across the field, kicking their legs up high, and touching their toes with the tips of their fingers to stretch their leg muscles. My stomach tightened when I saw their size and height. They were the opposite of the Jets. These were tall, big, beefy white mountain boys who played a physical game known for its long-ball style; they kicked the ball up the field and sprinted after it, outmuscling the opposition and shooting on goal.

“*Mira, Cuadros, son grandes,*” said Perico, one of our forwards who barely stood more than five feet tall and whose name means little bird. “Look, Cuadros, they’re huge.”

I looked at him as I put my hand on his shoulder and laughed. “It doesn’t matter, they’re always bigger than you, right?” Perico’s face lit up and he smiled, nodding. I wasn’t even much taller than he was. We were Latinos and we had learned to play a different style of game against bigger teams—excellent ball control, tricky moves, and possessing the ball on the ground. We focused on being quicker, making short passes, moving the ball around, and attacking at high speed. It had won us the conference championship for the first time and we were about to put our style to the test against a team that had crushed us during our first season.

Two years ago, we had traveled the five hours to Hendersonville in the second round of the play-offs only to be bruised and beaten by the Bearcats. We were an excellent team, loaded with talent in every position, but the Bearcats played aggressively, physically, knocking our guys down and battering them. We were too one-dimensional that first year. The soccer program at Jordan-Matthews was new and I had not had the time to train them out of their bad habits, refine their game, and help them learn how to play more as a team. We could not possess the ball then. After we lost to Hendersonville 1–0, it had taken me two years to break bad habits, bad

thinking, and put in place a new system, a new style, one that did not rely on one player who could be shut down, but on an entire team of players who could step up and win games.

I wanted them to win this game very much: not only to move the team to the quarterfinals of the play-offs and put us one step closer to the finals, but also as a way of putting that horrible night behind us. As a coach, you have to keep a lot of your feelings inside and only carefully, strategically, let them out. But deep inside, against a team that beat us badly, and where the atmosphere was so poisonous against our boys, I felt it personally. Soccer is not like other sports. It is passionate. It is volatile. It is emotional.

Unlike so many sports in the United States, the clock doesn't stop in soccer. There are no time-outs, no commercial breaks, and no strategic stoppages where the coach can affect the game. Soccer is a players' game. The players play on despite fouls, penalty kicks, missed shots, vicious slide tackles, elbows to the face, unseen hand balls, fights, arguments with refs, and screaming fans and coaches. The players have to figure out for themselves how to come through all those emotions to win.

The best teams can do it with grace and skill and they are a sight to behold. The worst teams do it through thuggery. Latinos are passionate, and that's why we love soccer so much. The game is always played in our throats whether you are a player, coach, or fan. Americans cannot understand how two countries could go to war after a soccer match, as happened in 1969 between Honduras and El Salvador. Latinos ask: How can you not?

The game was about to begin, and I gathered the team together for one last talk. I wanted them to feel the weight of the moment, to know that we were capable of rising to the occasion.

"Well, boys, here we are again." I needed to inspire them, fire them up, get them ready to go out to the field pumped up and ready to start the game. The best pep talks made the moment personal in some way. You have to connect with the players, reach into their hearts, their guts, their pride, and switch something on in them so they can believe in themselves. I spent hours thinking how to do it

before a game, but when it came down to it, I had to feel it in me first before I could get them to feel it, too. If I didn't believe it, feel it, they weren't going to.

"Some of you remember this team from the play-offs two years ago." Several of the boys nodded. There was Fish, our goalkeeper, who got his nickname shortly after he emigrated to the United States from Mexico; his middle school teacher asked him what his favorite food was and unfortunately the only word he knew in English was *fish*.

Next to him was Indio, our main central midfielder, an extremely talented player and excellent student who had crossed the U.S. and Mexican border by himself when he was only eleven years old. To his left stood Bomba, a tall quiet kid from El Salvador. And in the middle was "Lechero", our lanky, sinewy sweeper, whom everyone called "the Milkman" because he had walked into school wearing an old T-shirt with a popular Mexican milk label on the front. They had all been there three years ago against Hendersonville and they had all suffered through the indignities of that night from the slashing slide tackles of the players and the shouts from their fans. I looked into their young brown faces and saw an intensity that belied their years. They knew what this game meant. I didn't need to tell them that. Tonight was about payback, putting a foe behind you and moving on to bigger things.

"A lot of you remember this team and what they did to us—what they said about us. I want you to remember all those feelings now. I want you to remember them now because things have changed. *You* have changed." I paused and looked each one in the eyes. I held them there for a moment. "This is not the same team they beat three years ago. This team is stronger. This is not the team that lost by one goal. This team can score *lots* of goals." The boys smiled and nodded. "This team is a different team. This team is a bigger team. This team has grown. This team is a championship team. This team is made of fire and iron!" And with that I held up the steel chain I had in my hand and shook it. I had started bringing a chain to the games for the boys to see and hold as a symbol of our unity. The

boys hollered and jumped up and down, grabbing a piece of the chain from my hands. We had come together in a circle, everyone held together by the chain. They rocked back and forth gripping the chain, testing its strength, testing themselves.

Eduardo, or “Edi,” our left midfielder, started the chant. “Who are we?” The *chavos* responded together, “Los Jets!” Again, “Who are we?” “Los Jets!” “Who are we?” “Los Jets!” And then, in unison they cried in English, “One, two, three—let’s go, Jets!” and took the field under the big lights.

So much had changed from that first season when I had started the team with little more than equipment that I had borrowed, begged, or stolen. For the past fifteen years, Latino families from Mexico and Central America had been migrating to little towns like Siler City in search of jobs and a better, quieter life than that of the big cities. They had been met with fear, distrust, and dread. There was nothing worse than being a stranger in a small Southern town where everyone, black or white, knew your history and your family’s history. What made things even harder was that the newcomers didn’t speak English. As I watched these young Latino men take the field that nobody in town wanted them to play on, I couldn’t help but think how close we had come to never reaching this point.

