

## Too many players vie for too few soccer fields

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SUMMARY: "Rogue" teams | Cities struggle to accommodate the growing Latino population's passion for the game

Sometimes Ramon Cortez arrives to referee a Sunday soccer game and finds bare patches of grass. Holes. Mud overturned by the clawing of cleats on wet grass.

And occasionally, Cortez finds players not authorized to use the field still kicking a ball around on the Northwest Gresham field he reserves for the Gresham Hispanic Soccer League he founded. But, to avoid tension, he doesn't confront them. Instead, the bad fields or unauthorized players may lead him to cancel a game, leaving hundreds of players and spectators stranded.

His is a typical experience in the Portland metro area --and in other states --as jurisdictions, along with thousands of players, teams and club managers, face a growing shortage of soccer fields. The deficit forces too many adult teams to compete for too few fields. That leads to some frustrated, die-hard players using fields without permits, and that can lead to conflict and overuse.

"The shortage each year is accumulating, and we're starting to play on substandard fields that may lead to injuries and on fields that are not the right size," says Anne Braghero, operations manager for the Oregon Adult Soccer Association. "The quality of the field changes the quality of the game."

The shortage, park managers and soccer officials agree, has become acute largely because of the growing Latino population --a culture passionate about the game. From 2000 to 2005, their numbers surged nearly one-third, and they now make up 10 percent of the state's population.

Many Latino soccer groups are sanctioned to play. Some are not. Park managers say many --but not all --of the "rogue" or "renegade" teams occupying fields without authorization are Latinos.

Kevin Vicente Sosa, 17, of the Portland-based Juventus club, admits his team occasionally practices without permits.

"We try to find any kind of field, even if it's messy and has a hole in it," he says. The drive to play is so strong, he says, that Latino clubs like his will resort to kicking the ball around on the sidelines of a scheduled baseball game.

Latino teams say they want to play by the rules, as long as they get the opportunity to sign up and pay for a field. But, they say, preference for established, non-Latino leagues, coupled with a lack of knowledge of the permit system and problems communicating in English, may lead to unpermitted play.

Some cities and districts are trying various approaches to solve the problem. Gresham recently adjusted its field-use fees. And Hillsboro, which reduced conflicts by using bilingual league coordinators, has become a source of inspiration for communities looking to get a handle on the commotion.

### Cultural factors

In Latino countries, soccer is organic and essential, players and team managers say. People kick a ball in the streets and at family gatherings, with fewer rules.

"For us, it's a culture," says Ulbe Palomo, who runs the Liga Latina league. "Something we grew up with."

And immigrants often bring that passion --and unfettered attitude --with them. At Gresham's John Deere field earlier this month, hundreds of spectators congregated for league quarterfinals. They yelled, "Tirale! Tirale!" --"Shoot it! Shoot it!" --and other encouragements from the sidelines. They ate tacos and flirted, as norteno music flowed from a loudspeaker.

This spontaneous, unstructured spirit is one of the primary reasons that some transplanted clubs are perceived as rogues, area team managers say. Lack of affordability is another --newly established Latino leagues may not be able to afford rates typically charged by U.S. cities and school districts for field use.

So loosely organized teams spend hours on Sundays --the day most Latinos have off work --traipsing from park to park, cell phones in hand, hoping to find a stretch of grass not occupied by youth teams and other sports, which receive higher priority.

Most Latino club leaders, who compete with Latino and non-Latino leagues alike for field space, say their players are only looking for an affordable place to play and for a fair shot at being assigned a field.

"We just want to play somewhere and follow the rules of the city," says Alicia Lopez, who with her husband, Victor Cornejo, runs the Latino league Oregol, which has permits to use fields in Gresham and Portland. "But we need a place to play."

Lopez says Latino players sometimes hit the field without a permit because the wait is too long, the English-language sign-up system is too complicated, and potential competitors won't help newcomers learn the ropes.

"Nobody knows where the (permit) office is," Lopez says. "People who know don't tell you, because they don't want you to create your own league."

Lopez also detects a bias in the sign-up process toward traditional U.S. sports like softball and baseball, as well as toward the well-established Oregon Adult Soccer Association leagues, which many Latinos can't afford to join.

"My perspective is that they're giving more fields to the Americans," she says, who, in her view, reserve fields then often let them sit empty for weeks.

The shortage has also forced Latino leagues to cap the number of teams and players. Palomo had to downsize Liga Latina from 30 to 14 teams because he couldn't secure enough fields, he says.

"Before we finish our season, (players) are already calling about next season," Cortez agrees. "I have to turn so many people away." His Gresham league has 14 adult teams and five teams on a waiting list.

With a shortage of leagues to join, Cortez says, some Latino teams end up "going rogue" for lack of a better option. They join a broader list of occasional offenders, parks officials say, including cricket clubs, bottle-rocket enthusiasts and flying disc teams.

#### Looking for win-win

Everyone says the real solution is buying or building more fields. But that's expensive. Not even Los Angeles has figured how to afford all the fields its Latino population wants, says Jack Baptista, soccer coordinator for the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks.

But short of new fields, some Oregon communities are responding with education and higher field-use fees.

Gresham recently changed its fee structure from a flat rate for the season to an hourly rental, which will increase during the next three years. The city hopes to combat the wear-and-tear of constant use and provide users with a pocket-book incentive to sign up only for hours they actually plan to use. That, says city parks analyst Justin Cutler, should create more efficient use of limited field space.

The plan is also expected to eventually generate enough revenue to hire a seasonal bilingual field monitor --someone who will make sure everyone playing has a permit and educate those who don't.

Hillsboro, which saw a lot of unpermitted teams walking onto fields five years ago, has successfully addressed its problem through outreach and cooperation, officials say. And Tualatin Hills Park & Recreation District has followed suit with special meetings and Spanish educational signs and fliers.

Team managers such as Adolfo Tellez, founder of the Hillsboro Futbol Soccer League, are teaching more Latino players to abide by the regulations. Tellez, an unofficial liaison between Hillsboro Parks and Recreation and the Latino community, seeks out teams and explains city regulations to them in Spanish. He helps get permits for fields. People know and respect him.

"I tell them that as Latinos, we need to be good; we need to respect the rules of the fields," Tellez said, "because what one team does reflects on all of us."

The effort has paid off.

"They get what they need --the fields --and we get what we need --more control and revenue. And really, both sides become more connected with the community," says Gary Wilson, Parks and Recreation program supervisor. "To me, clearly, if there are key people in the (Latino soccer) community, it just makes good sense to partner with them and bring them into the system."

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