Routledge Handbook of Football Studies

John Hughson, Kevin Moore, Ramón Spaaij, Joseph Maguire

Football in North America

Publication details

Charles Parrish, John Nauright
Published online on: 05 Sep 2016

How to cite :- Charles Parrish, John Nauright. 05 Sep 2016, Football in North America from: Routledge Handbook of Football Studies Routledge
Accessed on: 27 Jul 2023
With the possible exception of China, North America is the fastest growing region in world football (which the locals in the USA and Canada call soccer). Major League Soccer (MLS), with teams in the USA and Canada, is now recognized as a quality league though not yet at the consistent performance levels of the “Big 5” in Europe. Governance of soccer/football in the region is in the hands of the Confederation of North, Central American, and Caribbean Association Football, better known by the acronym CONCACAF, one of six regional confederations under the FIFA organizational umbrella. It was established in 1961 as a result of the merger of the Football Confederation of Central America and the Caribbean and the North American Football Confederation. Today, CONCACAF provides governance and oversight for football in 41 countries (3 from North America – Canada, Mexico, and the USA, 7 from Central America and 31 from the Caribbean) and carries out its responsibilities from offices in cities throughout the region, including New York, Miami, the Cayman Islands, and Guatemala City. As the authority for football in the region, the organization is charged with an array of administrative and developmental duties, including organizing and coordinating competitions for the region’s men’s and women’s national teams across four age divisions (Senior teams, U20s, U17s, and U15s) as well as an annual tournament for men’s club teams similar to the Champions League in Europe. The Confederation also stages men’s futsal and beach soccer tournaments, which serve as the de facto qualifying tournaments for the FIFA World Cup in both sports, and provides technical and administrative training courses to benefit its member national football associations.

In terms of organizational structure, CONCACAF’s leadership includes a general secretary, an eight-member executive committee, a congress, comprising representatives of each member national association, and several task specific standing committees (CONCACAF’s executive committee consists of a president, three vice presidents representing each of the subregions, three members representing each of the subregions, and one female member). The Congress has a one-member–one-vote election policy similar to that of the general FIFA Congress. Consequently, the Caribbean Football Union and its 31 representatives possess an overwhelming majority in congress and can, theoretically, easily outvote the Central American and North American federations on matters of interest to the entire region. As an example, St. Lucia has equal voting power with the USA or Mexico. Not surprisingly, this has led to fractures within
the organization as well as the emergence of influence from entities outside CONCACAF, including corporations.

Given CONCACAF employs both vertical and horizontal differentiation of tasks and power is geographically dispersed, the regional governing body (as well as most international sport governing bodies) may be considered a highly complex bureaucratic organization (Slack and Parent, 2005). As noted by Fleming and Zyglidopoulos (2009: 81), high levels of organizational complexity may lead to a positive impact on ‘ethical distance,’ which ‘reduces the personal responsibility that individuals feel and enables them to perform acts that they would otherwise have considered as corrupt or criminal.’ As a result of ethics and corruption probes into FIFA, several high-ranking CONCACAF executives have been implicated in a wide range of breeches dating back to 2011, including charges of bribery, money laundering, and other improprieties.

Former CONCACAF President, Jack Warner, of Trinidad and Tobago, and his general secretary Chuck Blazer were at the center of controversy. In 2015, Warner’s replacement and former Vice-President Jack Webb of the Cayman Islands was charged in the Institute of Justice Department v. FIFA case and extradited from Switzerland to stand trial for money laundering and racketeering (Parrish and Nauright, 2015). As a result of corruption at the top of CONCACAF administration, new more transparent governance structures have been established (CONCACAF, 2015).

Football’s evolution in North America

United States

A version of soccer has existed in the US and Canada for over four centuries; hence, it could be argued the sport is the oldest modern sport in America. The game is linked to the nation’s colonial past, as the British introduced their leisure practices to their American colonies. After the American Revolution and into the nineteenth century a variant of association football, later termed soccer by students in England, became popular in the northeastern US. By the middle of the nineteenth century the influence of muscular Christianity within the English public schools gave rise to two distinct versions of football; one whose code permitted the handling of the ball (rugby) and one that did not (association football). Both versions were imported to the US and by the 1860s many universities on the eastern seaboard were utilizing a hybrid version of the recently crafted rules of the English Football Association (1863) to organize their own intercollegiate soccer competitions. For example, the references to the first college ‘football’ game in the US between Princeton and Rutgers (1869) was actually a contest more resembling the sport now known as soccer. The influx of British migrants to the Midwest and Pacific Coast prior to the twentieth century further increased the number of practitioners in the US creating pockets of soccer influence such as St. Louis, Missouri.

By the late 1800s and early 1900s the rugby football code had morphed into ‘gridiron football’ and, alongside baseball, gained mainstream attention from the emerging American print media as well as with the population in general despite the controversies surrounding the game’s physical brutality. On the contrary, soccer football was promoted by some as a more ‘scientific’ and appropriate means by which to develop a ‘well-rounded gentlemen.’ Yet, because soccer was also closely associated with immigrants who had previously been exposed to the game abroad it was branded ‘un-American’ and reduced to the margins of the American sporting landscape. Despite this cultural barrier, soccer thrived in certain immigrant gateway cities and regions in the US during the late 1890s and throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. In particular, soccer leagues thrived in the Midwestern cities of St. Louis and
Chicago as well as throughout the Northwest, Northeast and Mid-Atlantic regions with Fall River, Massachusetts being a particular center for soccer among English migrant mill workers.

The first professional soccer league in the US was organized in 1894 by owners of National League baseball franchises in Boston, Brooklyn, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC. Despite the touring efforts of the Pilgrims and Corinthians of England in the first decade of the twentieth century, soccer went through a stagnant developmental process during the 1910s. However, many amateur and professional leagues flourished throughout the northeast after World War I. In particular, the American Soccer League (ASL; 1921–9) was able to lure some of the top players away from teams in Europe by offering higher wages. Additionally, some of the most prominent international clubs toured North America during the decade and these matches yielded large crowds of paying spectators that rivaled, and in some cases exceeded, the figures of professional gridiron football at the time. However, the abundance of leagues prompted a nationwide ‘Soccer War’ (1928–9) among governing bodies for jurisdiction over the sport in the US. The dispute was eventually resolved by introducing a merger of the top ASL teams with the best Eastern Soccer League franchises. Although the newly created Atlantic Coast League included the most proficient teams in the northeast, a lack of financial stability stemming from the Great Depression would lead to its collapse in 1933.

Soccer suffered further setbacks in the US during and following World War II when a heightened sense of xenophobia and fears of communism influenced many Americans to be suspicious of all things considered foreign. It is within this context that the US achieved perhaps its greatest World Cup feat ever. At the 1950 FIFA World Cup in Brazil, the US defeated England 1–0 yet this achievement went largely unnoticed in the US because of a lack of print media coverage there. However, an important milestone did take place during the 1950s that would eventually help fuel the US soccer boom two decades later. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) recognized soccer as an official sport and instituted a national championship tournament for the first time in 1959. This prompted a rapid expansion in the number of universities sponsoring teams in the decades ahead.

During the 1960s and into the 1980s a number of professional soccer leagues emerged and folded within the highly fragmented entertainment market in the US. The most prominent of these leagues was the first edition of the North American Soccer League (NASL), which was created in 1968 as a result of the merger of the FIFA sanctioned United Soccer Association (USA) and the ‘outlaw’ National Professional Soccer League (NPSL). From the onset, stability plagued the league. Teams entered and exited the league frequently as franchises struggled to minimize their financial losses. The late 1970s is regarded as the marquee period for the NASL as the arrival of international superstars provided the league with the celebrity and glamour it needed and the league peaked with respect to the number of franchises at 24 in 1980. Pelé’s much celebrated arrival at the New York Cosmos in 1975 created a soccer-induced media frenzy that would not be surpassed in the US until the arrival of David Beckham 32 years later. Other international superstars to play in the NASL in the late 1970s and early 1980s included Giorgio Chinaglia of Italy, Brazilian Carlos Alberto, Germans Franz Beckenbauer and Gerd Muller, Dutch legend Johan Cruyff, George Best of Northern Ireland, and England’s Gordon Banks. However, declining attendance figures, rapid franchise expansion, poor television ratings, and the absence of salary cap restrictions proved to be insurmountable and the league folded following the 1984 season. Despite its collapse, the NASL effectively exposed the sport of soccer to the North American market. Many youth across the region began playing and consuming the sport in mass numbers as a direct result of the NASL and the grassroots efforts by its member franchises. Further, the introduction of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 created unprecedented sporting opportunities for girls, many of whom ended up
Football in North America

in newly created recreational, interscholastic, and eventually collegiate soccer programs. Consequently, the sport quickly became the largest participation sport for the nation’s youth and spawned a generation of soccer enthusiasts.

Following the collapse of the NASL in 1984 and a brief rebirth of United Soccer League (1984–5) the remaining noteworthy outdoor soccer leagues in the US for the remainder of the 1980s were the Western Soccer Alliance (1985–9), the Lone Star Soccer Alliance (1987–92), and the third edition of the American Soccer League (1988–9). Interestingly, the highest level of professional soccer existed indoors as many of the former professionals of the defunct NASL signed with Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL) franchises. Although the MISL drew respectable attention from the media and fans it was not adequate in the eyes of the international and domestic governing bodies for the sport. As part of its bid to host the 1994 FIFA World Cup, the US Soccer Federation pledged to re-establish a proper outdoor league if it were granted the right to host the tournament. After being granted the rights to the tournament by FIFA and later successfully hosting it, MLS was launched in 1996 as the top-level professional soccer league sanctioned by United States Soccer Federation.

After struggling to keep the inaugural ten teams fiscally afloat during the league’s first decade, MLS adopted the “Designated Player Rule” in 2007 and its teams and their host cities have continued to invest in purpose-built stadiums at a rapid pace. On the heels of these recent developments, MLS appears to have survived the early turbulence that threatened its existence. By 2013 the league had expanded to 19 teams (with plans for further expansion in Orlando and New York City in 2015), enjoyed unprecedented league-wide attendance figures that topped those of the National Basketball Association and National Hockey League, and achieved record-breaking franchise values. The last hurdles MLS is faced with include improving its poor television ratings and comparatively meager player salaries with respect to the global market. These barriers will likely remain until the soccer market in the US matures to the point where revenue streams permit teams to retain and attract the best domestic and international talent. This maturation process appears to be on the horizon as a 2012 research poll indicated 25 million people in the US identified themselves as MLS fans. Other indicators of soccer’s growth and revenue potential in the US are the number of cities planning stadium projects in hopes of luring an MLS franchise (i.e. Atlanta and Minneapolis) as well as the increase in monetary awards associated with tournaments and cup competitions.

The introduction of Title IX of the Education Amendments Act of 1972 resulted in unprecedented levels of organized competitive sporting opportunities for women and girls in the US. Participation rates for young women in a variety of women’s sports, including soccer, have surged over the past 40 years as new recreational, interscholastic, and collegiate programs were developed to satisfy the new federal legislation. Thanks in large part to this wave of change aimed at mitigating gender inequity as well as the popularity and past grassroots development efforts of the former NASL, soccer has become the largest participation sport for the nation’s youth. Today, as youth participation rates in other forms of organized sporting activities stagnates, recreational and elite-level soccer leagues for young girls and boys continue to expand at a fever pitch.

Competitive collegiate soccer programs for women have followed a similar trajectory. Administrators have long understood that the relative low cost of sponsoring women’s soccer programs and roster sizes of nearly two dozen players could efficiently and effectively mitigate the issue of gender imbalance. While women’s soccer matches among a small number of colleges took place in the 1950s, the first varsity women’s collegiate soccer program was started at Brown University in 1977. However, finding enough competitive teams to schedule matches against proved so problematic that Brown was forced to look north to Canada during that
inaugural season. The sport soon expanded across US college campus and by 1982 there were enough varsity teams to warrant the creation of a women’s NCAA national championship. At the close of the first decade of competition, legendary coach Anson Dorrance and his North Carolina Tarheels emerged as the dominant collegiate program, winning seven out of the first eight NCAA tournaments.

Certainly, many women’s collegiate varsity programs were in operation by the mid to late 1980s; however, in 1993 the issuance of Title IX guidelines resulted in an explosion in the creation of women’s collegiate soccer programs across the US throughout the 1990s. This development dovetailed with the excitement of the US hosting the 1999 FIFA Women’s World Cup, a tournament in which the US Women’s National Team would capture the hearts of the nation as well as the attention of the media and corporate America on the way to a dramatic penalty kick victory over China in front of a sold-out crowd at the Rose Bowl stadium in Pasadena, California.

This watershed moment along with previous and later success by the US Women’s National Team has inspired women of all ages and abilities to participate in soccer. Unfortunately, this spike in participation has not translated into consumption patterns sufficient to sustain a professional league. Despite the star power of the 1999 US Women’s National Team players, deep investor pockets, media contracts, and opening day attendance figures that easily surpassed those of MLS, the Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA) suspended operations in 2003 after only three seasons due to a lack of funds. In the aftermath of the WUSA suspension, competitive women’s amateur and semi-professional teams across the US continued to grow in number but talent concentration and lack of compensation rendered these competitions unattractive to the many former WUSA players (domestic and international) interested in developing their skills. In 2009, one year ahead of the FIFA World Cup and two years in advance of the next FIFA Women’s World Cup, a new professional women’s league was launched in the US. Though qualitatively different from its WUSA predecessor, Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS) also folded after just three seasons of play, despite attracting the world’s top domestic and international players (e.g. Cristiane and Marta of Brazil and Japan’s Homare Sawa) to play alongside the popular US Women’s National team players. Two years later, four teams from the now defunct WPS joined four new professional teams to form the newest incarnation of a women’s professional soccer league in the US. After a strict allocation process and an orchestrated collegiate player draft, the eight-team National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) played its inaugural season in 2013. Led by US national team players Tobin Heath and Alex Morgan as well as Christine Sinclair of the Canadian national team, the well-supported Portland Thorns FC emerged victorious over the Western New York Flash in front of nearly 10,000 spectators. With a pledge of financial support from the US, Canadian, and Mexican soccer federations many are optimistic about the long term viability for the NWSL given these financial backers have interests beyond profit margins, including developing their talent pools and growing the sport at the domestic and regional level.

While some may argue the appeal of women’s soccer in the US may be firmly rooted in the sport’s participatory qualities rather than its appeal to spectators, the US Women’s National Team has been successful at capturing domestic interest during major international competitions. The ratings for the 2011 FIFA Women’s World Cup final against Japan (ESPN) and the 2012 Olympic Gold Medal rematch (NBCS) drew television ratings in the US of 13.5 million and 4.4 million viewers respectively. To put these numbers into context, the former figure rivals recent viewership numbers for Major League Baseball’s World Series while the latter is comparable to the 2012 NHL Stanley Cup Finals cup-clinching game 6. Of course, critics point out the temporary appeal is because of the “stars and stripes” uniforms worn by the US Women’s
National Team and that in the absence of nationalism driving interest the fate of the NWSL appears grim.

The success of the US Women’s National Team (three Olympic Gold Medals and three FIFA Women’s World Cups), the subsequent promotion and exploitation of soccer by the mass media and corporate America, federal mandates aimed at mitigating gender inequity, and widespread grassroots development efforts at the local level have resulted in an unprecedented growth in interest and participation in women’s soccer in the US. Today, females represent half of the nation’s 18 million soccer players and current projections suggest this ratio will hold as total participation rates continue to rise in the twenty-first century.

The women’s national team continues to strengthen with tremendous support for the USA women’s team at the 2015 World Cup. The USA won its third World Cup title in spectacular style defeating Japan 5–2 in the final to avenge their 2011 loss in the final to the same team. Just after the World Cup, the Portland Thorns, boasting three national team members drew the largest crowd to date for a women’s professional league match with nearly 30,000 in the stands. Viewer numbers for the 2015 Women’s World Cup exceeded those for the NBA Finals and, amazingly, the baseball World Series.

The US boasts one of the world’s largest soccer consumer markets and it is growing rapidly. The world’s most prestigious clubs routinely tour the country throughout their off season in hopes of capitalizing on US fans’ global soccer interest and purchasing power while also providing competitive pre-season matches ahead of European league competitions. In 2012 summer exhibition matches associated with the ‘World Football Challenge’ featured, among other teams, Liverpool, Roma, Chelsea, Real Madrid, AC Milan, Celtic, and South American giant Boca Juniors. The following year the tournament was rebranded as the ‘International Champions Cup’ and showcased teams such as AC Milan, Inter Milan, Juventus, Chelsea, and Real Madrid among other teams. Stadiums routinely sell out for these matches. For example, in 2011 the Manchester United vs. Barcelona exhibition drew 81,807 fans to FedEx Field outside Washington, DC, despite the absence of superstars Lionel Messi and Chicharito Hernández. While the appearance fees the international clubs receive to participate in these matches are attractive, the exhibitions are integral to their broader fan and business development plan. In 2013, Manchester United and Real Madrid played in front of a US record of near 110,000 at the University of Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Soccer fandom in the US, however, is not reducible to economics alone. The top professional league, MLS, features dedicated and passionate supporter groups on par with the rest of the world. Many of these supporter groups have been around since the creation of MLS in 1996 (some even date back to the NASL clubs of the 1970s) and several new supporter groups emerge on an annual basis. While some groups are certainly the construction of the teams themselves, many are purely organic grassroots groups who organized themselves in support of their local side. Like in other parts of the world, most MLS teams enjoy support from multiple and separate supporter groups. For example, DC United boasts four different supporter groups, with two of the four having nearly 2,000 active members each. The style of support the groups display varies not only from team to team but also within the clubs themselves. This variety of supporter styles is reflective of the cultural diversity of soccer fans in the US, many of whom come from migrant communities from Latin America or Europe. Finally, it should be pointed out that MLS supporter groups are typically categorized as non-profit civic organizations which, beyond tailgating, singing, designing TIFO displays, and otherwise supporting the team during matches, are also actively involved in a number of community outreach and charitable fundraising efforts in their respective communities. Of course this level of commitment does not go unrewarded as teams often provide perks to the groups in exchange for the support,
including preferential seating, dedicated entrances, relaxing the fan code of conduct regulations, and exclusive access to players and coaches. MLS teams, as well as the league itself, are increasingly becoming financially dependent on these groups given they make up a large percentage of the teams’ loyal fan base and revenue stream (i.e. ticket sales, merchandising, concessions). Thus, it should come as no surprise that the league and individual clubs have co-opted the groups in an effort to establish some form of control over their actions.

To date, only a few minor altercations between supporter groups have occurred. This is mainly due to the distance separating the league’s clubs, which essentially creates barriers that discourage supporter groups from easily traveling in mass to away matches (though away-supporter travel does occur in small numbers). As the league expands, however, the likelihood of opposing fan interactions will continue to escalate as teams increasingly become closer to one another, particularly in the northeast and northwest parts of the country. With the MLS clearly promoting ‘derbies’ or local and regional rivalries, however, increasing tensions have been appearing between arch-rival teams, for example: Portland v. Seattle in the Pacific Northwest; Red Bull New York v. New York City; LA Galaxy and Chivas USA also in Los Angeles.

**Mexico**

Soccer is well established in Mexico and is considered to be the national sport. In the late 1800s, Mexico, with the encouragement of influential and powerful people (i.e. President Porfirio Díaz), emulated the sports of its North American neighbor and those of Europe as a means to portray itself as a modern nation. Consequently, baseball and soccer, among other sports, were viewed as a means to demonstrate progress. Soccer was being played for recreation in the mid-1890s, and in 1900, British miners in Pachuca established the nation’s first formal soccer club, Pachuca Athletic. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a number of clubs were formed by British expatriates and the first championship of the Mexican Amateur Association Football League was held in 1902. The game began to spread outside the clubs and their English, Scottish, and Irish players as upper-class Mexican schoolboys attending foreign mission schools in Mexico City were introduced to the game. In 1912, Club México became the first predominantly Mexican side to enter the fledging amateur league, which was predominantly made up of British clubs alongside a handful of Spanish, German, and French teams.

Following the exodus of British migrants from Mexico during and after World War I, Spanish expatriates further developed the sport and rose to dominance in the local league. By the 1920s, additional soccer clubs had been established across the country in places like Mexico City, Vera Cruz, and Guadalajara, though many of these, such as Club Atlas, were made up mainly of upper-class Mexican boys. During the 1920s, soccer indiscriminately spread throughout Mexican society and began to shed its upper-class connotation as working-class participants took to the game. This process was aided by Mexican corporations and the government itself, which provided subsidies to the clubs. Because of its popularity and increasing need for organization, the Mexican Federation of Association Football (FMFA) was created in 1927. The FMFA would send a team to the Amsterdam Olympics in 1928 and to the first FIFA World Cup in 1930.

Over the next several decades, soccer began to gain ground on the more popular sports of baseball and boxing. Again, aided by local governments and the increasing number of labor unions, Mexican clubs grew in number and size, particularly in the large urban areas of Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Puebla. An influx of Spanish exiles fleeing Franco’s advances boosted the number of and support for Spanish clubs, and this fueled a number of club rivalries based on competing national identities. In the 1940s, government restrictions on the number of foreign
players eligible to compete for Mexico’s club teams resulted in an increase in participation and support for the domestic league. Also aiding the increasing interest in the sport was a reorganization of the league itself, which opted to adopt a professional structure rather than retaining amateurism.

In the decades after the onset of professionalism, print, radio, and television began to capitalize on soccer’s popularity. Teams also began to take on regional and local identities, and rivalries became based on these rather than on Spanish or Mexican heritage. In Mexico City, Club América became associated with Europe while Guadalajara promoted its working-class and Mexican nationalist identity by prohibiting foreigners from competing for the club. This image remains to this day and fuels arguably one of the most intense sporting rivalries in the Western Hemisphere.

Today, soccer is clearly the most popular sport in Mexico, particularly when it comes to the passion of ‘El Tri,’ the name given to the national team for the nation’s tricolor national flag (green, red, and white). Mexico’s national team has a long history of competing in major international soccer tournaments, including the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics and the 1930 inaugural FIFA World Cup. The team’s popularity grew exponentially after Mexico hosted the 1970 and 1986 World Cups. Today, Mexico’s national team enjoys support outside Mexico, particularly among the many Mexicans and Mexican-Americans living in the US. The team serves as a source of pride and cultural bridge for these migrants, expatriates, and multigenerational immigrants residing in the US. Although its best finish at a World Cup is the quarterfinals, many consider El Tri to be the most consistent, if not the best, team from the CONCACAF region.

Currently, the FMFA oversees four distinct professional divisions, the most popular, of course, being the top-flight Liga MX. These divisions differ in the number of teams; thus, league formats differ as well. Following the 1995 season, the Liga MX went to a short-season schedule of play, where two separate tournaments are staged within the same calendar year. This format is used elsewhere (e.g. Argentina) and its strength is that the championship is significantly shorter thus the magnitude and importance of each match are high. At the end of the season, the three winners and top two teams of each of the three divisional groups compete in a play-off to determine the league champion. This play-off format is popular with fans, particularly for those whose teams would have otherwise been eliminated in the traditional cumulative point total system used by England, Spain, Italy, and others. However, as in the US, fans are skeptical of television and print media involvement. The teams that qualify for the play-offs are seeded with the influence of the media. Given television’s central role in team ownership and its interest in ratings-based revenue streams, the integrity of the play-off process has recently come under fire.

Another interesting element regarding the structure of professional soccer in Mexico is that, unlike most of its South American counterparts, teams are not typically organized as social clubs; hence, much of the Liga MX ownership structure is corporate or for-profit entities. For example, most of the teams in the Liga MX are owned by telecommunications companies, breweries, manufacturers, etc. Therefore, the structure of professional soccer in Mexico differs from that of most Latin American countries and bears more of a resemblance to the professional leagues in the US. This type of structure, with its pursuit of profit, yields a scenario where players earn respectable salaries. Consequently, the Mexican league is one in which comparatively fewer players are exported, and many of the top players in the Western Hemisphere who do not win European contracts are often drawn to the comparatively high salaries Liga MX teams are willing to pay in an effort to offer the best product for consumption in a competitive market.
Finally, a unique and advantageous component of the league structure in Mexico is that teams are permitted to sell their own television rights to media outlets within Mexico and abroad. This has created a scenario where Liga MX matches are dispersed across a number of networks as teams seek to maximize their revenue potential. In Mexico, the most prominent media outlet airing league matches is Televisa, which coincidently owns the powerful Club América. The network’s international interests, controversial political ties, large financial holdings, and ownership of Club América (which has a unique cosmopolitan identity) fuel many rivalries among soccer clubs with distinctly Mexican nationalist identities.

In general, more than 60 percent of Mexicans consider themselves soccer fans, and in a market with a population exceeding 115 million, the demand for the sport is high. Beyond commercial potential, soccer fans in Mexico are among the most passionate and animated in the world. The scene at the Azteca Stadium for a national team match is filled with oversized sombreros, the constant buzzing of horns, and the chanting and singing of more than 100,000 Mexicans eager to celebrate and assert their national identity. This level of fan support has helped Mexico achieve a near-flawless home record for international World Cup qualifying matches in the Azteca Stadium (68 wins, 1 loss, and 7 draws). Mexican fans also travel abroad in large numbers to support El Tri, and they often transform the atmosphere of the opponent’s home ground into a distinctly Mexican carnival.

Although such passion is admirable and entertaining, there are some elements of Mexican soccer fandom that draw the ire of many. For example, more than one opposing player has complained about projectiles, such as coins, beer, and bags of urine, being tossed at them when playing international matches in Mexico. Another element that has drawn the criticism of journalists and fans alike is the frequency with which homophobic slurs are directed at opposing players. The most obvious of these slurs occurs each time the opposing goalkeeper puts the ball back in play. Upon striking the ball the entire stadium erupts with an easily discernible “Puto!” The closest English translation is “fag,” though anthropologists have clarified that a more accurate translation is “homosexual male whore.” Despite FIFA’s crackdown on verbal racial attacks against players and coaches, there appears to be no action to curtail this particular discriminatory practice. Further, in the midst of global communications expansion and because of a large Mexican–American soccer fan base in the US, this traditional component of Mexican soccer fandom has recently emerged with the fans of the Houston Dynamo of MLS. In terms of stadium safety, Mexico’s soccer league is not generally regarded as being plagued with violence; however, authorities have recently been forced to deal with a few isolated cases of fan aggression at league matches.

Mexican fans exhibit a high level of passion for their club team, though for a variety of reasons. The teams with the largest base of support also happen to be the most successful. These include Club América, Cruz Azul, and UNAM Pumas of Mexico City and CD Guadalajara in Jalisco. Each team has a clearly identifiable brand or identity that fans gravitate toward as a means of demonstrating solidarity with a particular ideology. Chivas is believed to have the largest base of support across Mexico, though this is largely based on conventional wisdom rather than statistical figures. The popularity of Chivas stems from the club’s traditional nationalist identity, which contrasts with the perceived (and real) cosmopolitan brand associated with some of the Mexico City teams. Club América is commonly regarded as culturally cosmopolitan, with particular influences from Europe and North America. Given the club’s association with political and economic power, supporting América is considered a means to associate with high culture and achieve upward social mobility rather than an expression of an authentic Mexican, religious, or class-based identity. Many fans are drawn to Cruz Azul’s association with Mexico’s working class. This is rooted in the team’s direct link with the
construction industry, given that it is owned and named after the Cruz Azul (Blue Cross) cement company. Finally, the UNAM (National Autonomous University of Mexico) Pumas represent a commitment to the nation’s youth as evidence of its ‘puros jóvenes’ slogan. The club’s philosophy is to assemble teams of young players, most of whom are not proven stars, rather than acquiring high-priced players through expensive transfers. This strategy, in theory, lends itself to an undisciplined and creative style of play similar to that of Argentina. In fact, the ideology of juvenile soccer was introduced by an Argentinean, Renato Cesarini, in the 1960s. Consequently, fans of UNAM tend to be the youngest demographic and tend to be the most creative and artistic fans in Mexico. Though the construction of these identities dates back many decades, some teams have recently begun to strengthen their own distinct brands. In 2011, Santos Laguna and Celtic FC of Glasgow, Scotland, formed a partnership that not only allows for the transfer of players and dissemination of technical knowledge but also aligns and packages the mutual ethos of the clubs for consumption by fans in the global marketplace who identify with the brand.

The aforementioned categorization certainly does not exhaust the nature of fandom across all of Mexico. However, it does provide a useful profile of some of Mexico’s most popular clubs while also illustrating that, more often than not, geographically based identities are not the sole factor determining soccer fandom in Mexico and beyond. Finally, even with the existence of strong ties that bind fans and clubs, match attendance figures have begun to dwindle. This is attributable to the impact of the global recession, the encroachment of high-profile clubs in other countries into the Mexican consumer market, and an escalation in fan aggression in and around the stadium.

As in many Latin American countries, women’s soccer in Mexico continues to be hampered by a cultural mentality that discourages women’s participation. Currently, there is no formal professional national league and only a small number of amateur women’s teams exist inside Mexico. Consequently, most of the country’s top players have historically played in foreign leagues during the year and reconvene ahead of important tournaments and friendlies as part of the women’s national team. There are, however, a number of soccer clubs inside Mexico that support women’s soccer at the youth level across various age ranges and these teams compete in a variety of youth tournaments, such as the Copa Telmex.

The first women’s national team in Mexico was put together in the early 1970s as part of a corporate effort to host a ‘little’ World Cup. The event itself was more akin to a side show in support of a larger festival, which featured a variety of novel games and contests. For purists, this team and the competition adversely affected the development of soccer in Mexico. Two decades later a FIFA initiative aimed at growing the women’s game encouraged federations around the world to organize women’s teams ahead of the first-ever FIFA Women’s World Cup in 1991. The Mexican federation provided minimal support for their women’s team and the results reflected it. Mexico was crushed by the opposition, including embarrassing shutout losses to the US. Mexico failed to qualify for the 1995 FIFA Women’s World Cup, but in the run-up to the 1999 tournament, Leonardo Cuéllar, former captain of the men’s national team, took the reins and embarked on a bold initiative to make the women’s national team into a respectable side. With a team largely comprising imported players of Mexican descent from US colleges and universities, Mexico qualified for the 1999 FIFA World Cup. Though they suffered lopsided losses and were eliminated early in the tournament, the coach and federation continued on the path toward development. The Mexican federation provided additional support by creating national programs aimed at developing youth talent in addition to the senior women’s team. This decision paid off at the 2004 Olympics, where Mexico advanced into the second round following a narrow defeat to Brazil and a draw with China in the group stage.
Summary

The US and Mexico have achieved much success in global soccer. Canada has been less successful but is now integrated into the MLS and this should also enhance the quality of soccer throughout the country. As part of CONCACAF, Mexico, Canada, and the US compete with Central American nations such as Costa Rica, Honduras, and El Salvador which also field excellent national teams. Though the North American and Central American teams have not achieved levels of international success seen by European and South American teams, the region produces soccer of highest international standards with professional leagues in the USA and Mexico being among the leading leagues in the world. The US women’s team is the most successful in international women’s soccer and the emergence of a new league suggests North American women’s soccer will continue to gain strength. The 2015 corruption crisis in FIFA has hit CONCACAF leadership hard, but reform should lead to more robust governance structures for the future.

References