

Ready for Some Futbol?



Speedy Gonzales, the famous cartoon star of the fifties and sixties, has been in the news again lately. It seems the image of the “fastest mouse in all Mexico” was evoked recently at the boys’ 5A state soccer championship, pitting the nationally ranked Coppell Cowboys, from North Texas, against the Porter Cowboys, from Brownsville, the southernmost city on the U.S.-Mexico border. In an effort to belittle their opponents, the Coppell fans held up a poster showing Speedy Gonzales about to be squashed by a large shoe. The sign read “Stomp on Brownville!” (And no, that’s not a typo.) When officials forced them to remove the sign, the Porter fans continued cheering for their underdog team with

Don’t tell me that the soccer stars from Brownsville’s Gladys Porter High—my alma mater—aren’t as American as they come.

the chant “*¡Sí se puede!*” (“Yes, we can!”), a call to action recovered from the era of Cesar Chavez’s marches with the United Farm Workers of America. The Coppell fans answered this with their own chant of “USA! USA!” implying that the Porter players and their fans were not citizens of the United States. And when that didn’t work, one of the fans called out, “You suck, you beaner!” In the end, though, their taunts were as effective as Sylvester the Cat’s were on Speedy Gonzales. Porter won 2–1 in overtime.

Interestingly enough, this was all happening while Congress debated an immigration reform bill, including the possibility of a seven-hundred-mile wall along our southern border (one end of which would pass about a mile from Gladys Porter High School, my alma mater), and while hundreds of thousands of undocumented immigrants and their supporters marched in cities across the U.S., also chanting “*¡Sí se puede!*” Soon, several thousand National

SPEEDY DOES IT: The Porter Cowboys’ faster-paced soccer won them the state championship.

Guard troops would be deployed to assist the Border Patrol in certain areas, including South Texas.

What the fans and the players on the charged soccer field probably didn't realize was that their reaction toward a group they assumed was not American was hardly new. One of the most concentrated efforts to rid the country of illegal immigrants occurred in 1954, when the U.S. government officially passed Operation Wetback, a mandate to expel all illegal workers, particularly those from Mexico (as the name may have clued you in to). Led by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and aided by the municipal, county, state, and federal authorities, as well as the military, the operation resulted in a massive sweep of Mexican American neighborhoods and random stops of "Mexican-looking" people.

A year earlier, when these bitter feelings were already escalating, Warner Bros. introduced a new cartoon character named Speedy Gonzales. The original Speedy debuted in a cartoon titled *Cat-Tails for Two*, where his character looked more like a rat, mean and sleazy and with a gold tooth the animator must have thought would add a touch of realism. Speedy Gonzales then disappeared for a time, only to make a comeback in 1955, in what could be described as a more assimilated version of the original drawing. Warner Bros. had fixed his teeth, worked on his English, expanded his wardrobe—from an old T-shirt, barely covering his privates, to white campesino pants and shirt, both finely pressed, and a red bandanna he kept neatly wound into what looked like a bow tie—and then added a bit of panache with the sombrero, worn slightly askew, that would soon become his trademark. Later that same year, Warner Bros. won the Academy Award for Best Short Subject with the cartoon *Speedy Gonzales*.

Yet how strange that the Coppell fans would choose to taunt their opponents with a poster of a mouse known for running circles around his enemies. What started out as mockery quickly turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy, as the little guy used his speed to even things out against a bigger, more physical competitor. And along the way, the Porter team would prove the game amounted to more than just some name-calling. Because for all questions of nationality, this actually turns out to be the classic American story: Underdog sports team from a small, remote town defies the odds and earns a bid to play in the championship game, where its players must face a formidable opponent in a match that forces them to look inward if they hope to win.

Gladys Porter High School is located on International Boulevard, about two miles from the

Gateway International Bridge, which crosses into Matamoros. The school is also only a block from Southmost, historically one of the poorest areas of town, where at one time it was said that even the cops wouldn't go after dark. Locally, Porter was known as the school that couldn't win, in the classroom or on the playing field; it seemed the only people who believed in Porter were from Porter. The school has changed dramatically since I left some twenty years ago—it is now the district's magnet school for engineering and technology, and in 2003 the football team came close to capturing the district title—and it has gathered an almost cult-like following of fans, collectively known as the Porter Nation.

A few days before the big game, the Porter soccer players loaded their equipment onto the school bus that would take them the 370 miles from the border to Round Rock, just north of Austin, the site of the state championship. Now they just had to wait for the drug-detection dog to inspect the vehicle. The Brownsville Independent School District has a policy of bringing dogs to check any bus that is scheduled to leave the region; according to James Kizer, Porter's athletic coordinator, the searches are done to prevent any "surprises" later. The argument could be made that the inspections are in the best interest of the team and the school, as a preventive measure, should there be a player who decides to smuggle illegal drugs and run the risk of serious charges. But in a way, the searches are not so different from the ones the players would be subjected to if they were down the street at the bridge, trying to enter the United States from Mexico.

Once the team passed the inspection, it was clear to leave. That is, until the next inspection some ninety miles later, near the King Ranch. By law the bus driver was required to stop at the Border Patrol's Sarita checkpoint so federal agents and their drug-detection dogs could search the vehicle. To facilitate the process, the players wore special tags that identified them as student athletes en route to a competition. (These tags prevent the sort of incident that occurred earlier this year when another team from the area made it through the checkpoint only for it to be discovered later that some of the passengers were not actually with the team and had slipped away from the bus during a stop.) The Porter players were used to stopping at the checkpoint on their way to tournaments, including the semifinal match that had led to the championship game. Still, there is something disconcerting about being in your own country and having to identify yourself to a federal agent.

This time around the Border Patrol agent happened to be female. As she boarded the bus,

another agent led a dog around the perimeter of the vehicle. The players knew the drill: Sit up in your seat and give the agent your full attention.

“Everybody U.S. citizens?” she asked, stepping into the aisle.

The coaches and players all nodded and said yes.

“Where are you coming from?” she asked.

“Brownsville,” one of the nearby players answered.

“Which high school in Brownsville?”

“Porter.”

“Hey,” she said, “I went to Porter!”

After so many such inspections during the season, the players were more than happy to meet another member of the Porter Nation and hear her wish them luck. These warm feelings lasted only until the following afternoon, when they walked onto the field and fully realized the level of competition they were up against. The Coppell team was ranked second in the nation, with three of its players already having been recruited to play at the collegiate level. This was also Coppell’s third straight year to compete in the state championship, including 2004, when it won the title. As if this weren’t enough to contend with, there was also that Speedy Gonzales poster waving in the stands.

Coppell fans may have noticed one thing about the Porter team that was less than American. Spectators in this country are used to watching the type of soccer showcased during the recent World Cup, which tends to be more physical (even when the players aren’t giving each other headbutts in the sternum). But Porter plays a faster-paced soccer that focuses on shorter passes, in what some people might describe as more of a Mexican style. It certainly isn’t the kind of soccer most kids grow up with across suburbia. The quicker technique makes sense because of the smaller size of the players in the Rio Grande Valley. Porter’s approach to the game is actually quite common in this region of Texas, as well as on the other side of the river, because until recently, crossing over to Matamoros was the only way for boys to play on leagues year-round.

These contrasting styles just added to what was already happening in the stands. As the game wore on and the tension grew, Coach Luis Zarate, who himself grew up playing on both sides of the river before becoming a place kicker for the University of Houston, called a time-out to center his team and deal with the slurs. “Focus on your game. At the end of the day, people are going to be talking about who won the game, not about these other things,” he said, probably in Spanish, since his players are bilingual and this is the common language of soccer along the border.

What Coach Zarate wanted more than anything was to impress upon his players that they had fought hard all season to make it to this final game and earned every right to be on the field. “You’re here. You belong here!”

He repeated this until it began to sink in. “You’re here. You belong here!” Here at the state championship, here in Texas, here in the United States. They had traveled all the way from Gladys Porter High School, in the shadows of a proposed anti-immigration wall, to the 5A state championship, and they were exactly where they should be. “You’re here. You belong here!” His words held an immediacy, but they also managed to echo a message his players could carry with them off the soccer field.

Jorge Briones, whom his coach describes as “a scoring machine,” went on to make the two goals that won the game, and the Porter Cowboys became the first Rio Grande Valley team to win a 5A division title in any sport. The team returned to Brownsville to a hero’s welcome. Everyone, from alumni dating back thirty years to local politicians, lined up to publicly offer his congratulations. What no one could offer the players, though, was a way to afford the \$300 championship rings. The University Interscholastic League, the governing body for most high school athletics programs in the state, sets limits on what gifts a team can receive from its school or school district. Eventually, the business community came together to offer the players jobs at various car dealerships in town. Briones spent a couple weeks washing cars at Marroquin Motors, a used-car dealership along the freeway, so he could earn the money for his state MVP ring.

When I called Coach Zarate on his cellphone, he and his team happened to be the guests of honor, along with a few Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, at the grand opening of the new Walmart Supercenter in Brownsville. The store manager had just donated \$1,000 to go toward the team’s funds for next season. I spoke to Coach Zarate a few minutes before he asked if I wanted to talk to Briones. Then he turned to his star player and in Spanish told him there was a guy from a magazine who wanted to ask him some questions.

“Can I talk to him in Spanish?” I heard Briones ask.

“Sure,” the coach said. “He’s from down here.”

Then Briones came on the line and I congratulated him, until it got so loud at the grand opening that he could hardly hear me. It sounded as if there were a pep rally going on.

“Can you wait a minute, sir?” he asked.

And then we both stayed on the line, listening to “The Star-Spangled Banner” playing in the background. 🇺🇸