We Play Too
Latina Integration through Soccer in the “New South”

PAUL CUADROS
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

The migration of Latino immigrants to the rural South is now well documented. The creation of cultural spaces for immigrants and their families on soccer fields is flourishing throughout the region. These fields, long a bastion of male leagues and games focused on men, are now being integrated by Latina women with their own teams and leagues. This field note provides the personal perspective of three young female soccer players as they are pulled between the traditional expectations for women in their culture and their desire to be athletic and competitive in sports. The stories of the women reveal that Latinas are integrating into the society and challenging norms as well as developing a new Latina identity.

It is early Sunday morning and the cars begin to pull into the Tienda Diana soccer fields in Siler City, North Carolina. The fields are located on the outskirts of the small poultry-processing town that was one of the inspirations for Mayberry, the quintessential small Southern town depicted on the Andy Griffith TV show. These fields are in constant use on Sundays when the poultry workers let off steam from a hard week of work. Soccer on Sundays is the one thing the men look forward to during long work days.

But the men are not the only ones who are showing up with their cleats on Sundays these days. This morning, it’s women, Latinas, dressed in bright uniforms that step out of the vehicles. They are accompanied by their husbands, boyfriends, and fathers and many have brought their own children.

The “futboleras” are a mixed bunch of women who range from teenagers to women in their mid-thirties with families of their own. They come from all over Latin America but most are from Mexico. The younger players were born in Siler City. All over the Triangle and Triad regions of North Carolina, Latina women soccer
leagues and teams are sprouting up. Hundreds of Latinas are playing soccer expanding the limits of traditional female roles and perhaps transforming the norms of femininity in their own families and in their communities.

This article examines how three Latina players, each with different immigration statuses, broke through traditional roles in their families in order to become athletes, and how soccer has helped them to grow and become stronger and more independent.

I coached each of these players through high school, and even after graduating the women have continued to play in new adult women soccer leagues. These leagues, or ligas, were traditionally created for Latino men and represent a familiar cultural space, one that allows men to be free and reaffirm who they are within this society. These leagues and the cultural space they provide are well documented in the study, “Soccer and Latino Cultural Space, Metropolitan Washington Futbol Leagues,” by Marie Price and Courtney Whitworth (2004).

The women’s leagues represent a new space alongside and within this existing one among Latinos in the U.S., one where Latinas can also find greater freedom, crush cultural stereotypes, and define a new dynamic in the Latino family. The impact of these athletic pioneers remains to be seen, but the daughters of these players are seeing that Latinas can be determined, physical, and winners. The soccer field becomes the first and perhaps the only place where many young Latinas can step away from the kitchen and the home and related responsibilities.

SOCCER CITY

Today, Siler City, North Carolina is more than 50 percent Hispanic, according to the 2010 census. Siler City has been at the forefront of Latino migration and demographic change in the Southeast for more than 20 years. In 1990, there were only 184 Hispanics out of a total population of 4,808. By 2008, that number had risen to 2,740 out of a population of 8,564, or 39.3 percent of the population, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

The majority of Latinos in Siler City come from Mexico, but there are also many Central Americans, people from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador. And there are a number of Latinos who are U.S. citizens and have moved from such cities as Los Angeles and Chicago.

The explosive growth of the Hispanic population was due in large part to the recruiting practices of the poultry-processing industry, the largest employer in Siler City. Siler City was home to two processing plants, and the county is home to some 300 chicken farmers. Manufacturing is the major employers in Siler City, with sales, shipments, and receipts in excess of $400 million and an annual payroll of $69 million for employing 2,684 employees, according to the U.S. Census Bureau's 2007 Economic Census of the town. The poultry-processing industry became a gateway industry for Latino immigrant workers to come and work in the South (Cravey 1997).

Like many small rural communities in the South, Siler City has had a difficult time adjusting to the influx of newcomers. That tension between long-time residents and the newcomers resulted in a series of confrontations with regard to Latinos in Siler City. The first was a letter the county
commissioners sent in 1999 to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, asking that they send agents to deport Latino immigrants who had no papers. The second incident was a contentious school board meeting in Siler City where it was proposed that Spanish-speaking Latino children be moved out of the elementary school to their own school where they could learn English. And, in February 2000, the town endured an anti-immigrant rally at its City Hall that featured David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan.

I wrote about these struggles in my book, *A Home on the Field, How One Championship Team Inspires Hope for the Revival of Small Town America* (Harpers 2007). I helped to lead the fight to create a varsity soccer program at Jordan-Matthews High School, the only high school in Siler City. In 2002, the school formed the first women's varsity soccer program. This team was predominantly Latina and remains so today. I have coached the team for more than nine years. The high school team was the first organized women's soccer team in Siler City. A middle school girls' team soon followed.

Five years ago, Carlos Gumucio, a local Latino businessman who owns the Tienda Diana, a Latino food store, bought land outside the town and created three soccer fields for Latino leagues to use. These soccer leagues were male leagues and are the best-organized competitive sports for Latinos in town. On any given Sunday, hundreds of Latino families go to the “Diana Fields” to watch the men play all day. But there were no women's teams.

This summer, Gumucio created a league for Latinas. He charged each team a registration fee of $150 for the season. In addition, the teams must pay $50 to the referees directly for each game. This is the traditional way that the male leagues are organized.

“I created the league because I saw that women were playing futbol in other places like Sanford, Greensboro, and my daughter said, ‘we could do the same here with our fields and the league here,’” Gumucio said. Gumucio is originally from Mexico but has lived in the U.S. for many years. He is a naturalized citizen and his wife is Peruvian.

The new women's league in Siler City has only five teams with about 100 women. Each team plays the others during the season and the champion is eventually awarded with a trophy. Figures 1 through 3 illustrate some of the dynamics of these women's leagues.

“YOU HAVE TO BE STRONG”

The players are neatly dressed in blue jerseys and white shorts with matching white socks. They look impeccable. To say this women's soccer team is well organized is an understatement. Every player knows her position on the team, and they all arrive on time. They know better than to show up late for a game.

All the Latina players know about Amelia or have heard of the pint-sized Guatemalan with the uncanny ability to clear balls from the backfield. Amelia is fearless, tough as nails, determined to win at all times, and as demanding of her players as she is of herself. She is quick to anger, opinionated, bright, overly confident.

I first met Amelia when she tried out for the Jordan-Matthews women's soccer team five years ago. She did not make the team her freshman year. Undeterred, Amelia tried out again the following year and made the team. By her junior year she
was a starter and a stalwart in the defense. She was a captain of the team by her senior year.

On this Sunday, she is off the field and on the sideline. She is sitting out due to a red card suspension she received the previous week. She stands on the sidelines shouting instructions and admonishing her teammates if they flinch when the ball comes at them. Amelia does not flinch at anything.

“I love it,” she says not taking her eyes off the game. “Sometimes I think of not playing, but I keep playing. I tell my sisters to do sports, to not to get into trouble.”

The “trouble” that Amelia speaks about is what many young Latinas find themselves in when they turn 15 and begin dating. I have coached several girls who have gotten pregnant during their freshman year only to return to the team as a mother the following season.

Amelia graduated from high school two years ago. Today she works at a printing plant, inserting subscription cards into magazines that are distributed all over the country. She works with other Latina women on her line. They are considered the lowest of the workers at the plant. She makes $8.75 an hour.

Amelia had plans to go to community college but those plans fell through right before graduation. In May 2008, the North Carolina community college system barred access to undocumented students, based on the recommendation of the state Attorney General, according to the sys-
tem’s office of public affairs. The system had previously allowed individual colleges to decide for themselves whether to admit these students. A clarification by the Department of Homeland Security upheld the ban. In 2010, the system’s board of governors changed its position and recommended admission for these students. The State General Assembly is currently considering a new bill that would ban access to all community colleges and state universities to undocumented students. Meanwhile, students like Amelia wait for a final ruling so they can go to school.

Now Amelia works all day making sure people get those ads that slip out of their magazines. But soccer is never far from Amelia’s mind. She knows that soccer has helped her become a stronger person and given her more confidence.

“I do feel empowered sometimes,” she says. “I think you learn to express yourself better. All that I learned from fútbol is it helps to defend myself at work.”

Amelia explains the company provides food for workers but the Latinas are always forced to take their turn last, after everyone else has picked through the food. “That was not just. I told the manager they should rotate the order so everyone got a chance to be first. We’ll see what happens. You have to defend yourself. You have to be strong.”

Being strong is what Amelia’s young life has been all about. Her family is from the little town of Candelaria, Guatemala,
where they raised corn and rice on a small farm. The family consisted of six children. When Amelia was 10, her parents left to come to the U.S. to seek a better life for their family and found their way to North Carolina. The family was separated for three years.

“We missed them terribly,” she recalls. “They called every Saturday and we had to travel 30 minutes to talk to them by phone.”

When Amelia’s parents saved enough money they brought her and her siblings across the border through Arizona. She was 12. “We were in a big group of people, maybe 30 people. Walking all day and night. It was hard. It was hot and we were afraid the migra might get you.”

From Arizona, the group piled into a van and made their way across the country to North Carolina. “We stopped in a lot of states. It was like it would never end,” she says. At last, the van stopped in Fayetteville, North Carolina, where her father had arranged to pick her up. “At first I didn’t recognize him, but when he came up to us a lady said it was him. My mom recognized me and I recognized her right away.”

Siler City was a strange place for Amelia. “At first it was very hard for me,” she says. “I didn’t know English, I was frustrated all the time, I wasn’t angry, just sad.” Amelia was happy to be reunited with her family, but she missed Guatemala and her family and friends there.

“I didn’t know any people. So I started...
to play with my cousins and I started to make friends and so I played more.”

For many migrant children, the one familiar thing they can do when they come to the U.S. is play soccer with other kids. Soccer becomes that little piece of home they find here. For many of the kids, the school teams become their first experience with organized soccer.

“It helped me,” she says recalling her days on the high school team. “It helped me to organize my time and to get to know more people. My style of playing was better too.”

In Guatemala her parents had not encouraged her to play soccer. They were afraid that she might get hurt. But here in the U.S., they did not stand in her way. She could play on the high school team as long as she met her obligations at home and at school. “At first they didn’t want me to play because they thought it would affect my studies, but then they learned it was a positive thing.”

But Amelia missed practices because she had to take care of her little brother. I have found many Latina girls often miss out on extracurricular activities for the same reason. They feel tethered to the house, frustrated because they want to participate in activities or just hang out with their girlfriends.

“My mom told me to decide which days I could practice and which days I needed to be home to take care of my little brother. I wanted to play, so I would always fight with my mom, more with her than my dad, but they had to get used to the idea,” she says.

Coaches have to be flexible when it comes to Latina girls’ schedules. Allowing them to stay home some days to accommodate their responsibilities meant they could still participate with the team. This was important in providing that connection to their school and a space where they could be with their girlfriends, sharing an experience and relieving the pressure of growing up in a strange country.

“Soccer is a place to get away from the routine,” she says. “Sometimes a team is the best place to get rid of feelings that bother us.”

Amelia had a stellar career in high school, making “All Conference,” a distinction only given to a select few players. She was equally excellent in the classroom, but her plans to attend community college ended when the system barred the doors to students without papers.

So, Amelia stayed home for a while, taking care of her younger siblings and helping out. With each year of not being able to study, Amelia’s choices diminished. She decided she needed to get a job and start contributing to her family. She found the factory job.

“My life is not complicated,” she says. “I go to work and I play soccer on Sundays. I have been going to a new church. Everyone in my family goes. My mom said, ‘Do you want to go to church on Sundays or play soccer?’ So we picked a church where we could go on Saturdays.”

Amelia’s life now reflects the lives of the men in Siler City. They work hard all week at a menial job and then let off steam on Sundays, playing soccer all day.

It is Sunday and Amelia is dressed to play. She has her dark hair pulled back tightly and her fingernails are painted crimson. She formed a team for the new Siler City women’s league. Amelia finds the new Siler City women’s league more convenient than some of the other leagues. There is a league for women in Sanford,
another in High Point, and another in Raleigh.

Amelia has carefully selected her new team. She has several family members, four white women from Sanford, two African American women, and the rest a mix of Guatemalan and Mexican players. There are 22 players in total, with the majority of the players coming from Siler City. Six of the players are in high school, but the rest are women who work nearby. Some are single, and some with husbands and children of their own.

“Everyone speaks in English, sometimes a mix of English and Spanglish,” she says. The team meets one day a week to practice and work on conditioning.

On game days, the team has tremendous support from the men in their lives—boyfriends, husbands, fathers, and brothers. The women’s games are more of a family affair. Amelia has seen little machismo about their playing soccer.

“I hear about some mothers and fathers who say only men have the right to play, but then I hear many say it’s a good thing because it’s healthy,” she says. “Maybe if we were back in our home countries it would be different because I don’t remember ever women playing like this here. But here it’s different. It’s more liberal and free.”

Amelia does hear some men run them down. She admits the support is halfway there. “I hear it sometimes. The guys say, ‘Hey, you kick the ball like a woman.’ That’s bad. They feel superior playing fútbol. They have the tendency to look at who is stronger but some of the girls can really play equal to them.”

The Latina women’s game has also been helpful to the families, says Iris Moreno, who owns and runs the Federacion de Fútbol de Sanford and the women’s league there. She says it has helped some relationships and marriages.

Moreno says there are a lot of breakups because of soccer, because the men spend their one day off playing all day long. “The women resent it. So this is a way for families to come together and do something together as a family,” she says.

Last year Amelia and two of her friends decided to try coaching kids in the Siler City parks league. She coached kids between seven and 10 years old. Female coaches in sports are rare and for these Latinas to volunteer to coach was a big step toward taking a leadership role in the community. In contrast, none of the boys who played for the school have ever coached youth sports.

“The first day? A few obeyed, some were rebellious, but after a while they got to know me and what I wanted,” Amelia says. “I learned a lot, how to understand kids more, how to form a team, to have harmony. It was a nice experience for me.”

Amelia took that experience and incorporates it into her new team. Soccer is the one place where she can be herself more fully, where she can express herself and feelings more openly. “With the women you have to be more strict,” she says. “If you motivate someone you can get them to progress. In the game, I let it all hang out, all those things in life I don’t let out. I am nice off the field, but in the game I am not. I am there to win.”

BETWEEN HOPE AND FEAR

Rachel was resplendent in white and sequins. She took a turn around the smoke-covered dance floor as the caballeros lined up to pin five and 10 dollar bills to her veil, and have a chance to waltz with her before
someone else tapped them on the shoulder. She was beautiful, her makeup simple and tasteful, her strapless wedding gown elegant. Rachel took turns dancing with the men, chatting and nodding her head before someone else stepped in with a bill and a pin.

Rachel's wedding was vastly different from many of the Latina marriages in Siler City. First, having a wedding at all was a bit of a novelty. Many Latinas get “married” by simply hooking up, or getting “juntada,” with a man in a common-law marriage. Fancy weddings are rare because of the cost. And it was unprecedented that Rachel would have her wedding at the Siler City Country Club, a place that once upon a time never saw any Latinos or African Americans celebrating in its clubhouse. The Country Club is the top of the pyramid for Siler City society and for Latinos to rent it out and use it was a rarity. But that was Rachel. She had broken a lot of ground growing up and playing soccer. Rachel would rather wear a pair of cleats than high heels.

I have known Rachel for five years since she tried out for the high school women's soccer team. After every practice her father would show up and the two of them would spend an extra hour working on shots and dribbling. Rachel was her own toughest critic. Even when she excelled in the game her senior year and became a captain and a top goal scorer, she would criticize herself and her game. No amount of praise would inspire Rachel. She had to be challenged. By the end of her high school career she was All Conference and All State—one of only two Latinas at the school to become All State.

Dressed in a sky blue jersey with white piping and dark blue shorts and white socks, Rachel is getting her team ready to play a team from Asheboro, North Carolina, about 30 miles west of Siler City known as “las Borrachas,” or the “the Drunkards,” because two of the women always show up after drinking or hung over. Rachel is the manager of her team, known as Alemania, or Germany, despite not being German or having any connection to Germany. Rachel said the team chose the name Germany because they admired the style of game the Germans played. The team is a mix of Honduran and Mexican women.

The women all love Rachel. They know Rachel can play. Her new husband, Jose, walks up and down the sideline meeting and talking with the other men. Her father sits on the sideline quietly.

The game begins and Rachel is a bit sluggish. But as the game progresses, she picks up her pace and has excellent chances to score a goal. At the final whistle, she has kicked two goals past the Borrachas goalkeeper to win the game. Rachel says that she would never have scored a goal in her life if she and her family had stayed in Honduras.

Hurricane Mitch forever changed the lives of many people in Honduras in 1998, including Rachel's family. Rachel's family lived in the capital, Tegucigalpa, in a little neighborhood called Bella Vista. From her house she could look out the window and see the tall Jesus Cristo statute with his arms held out low in El Picacho Park. Rachel's house was a two-story structure made of bricks and stones with a dirt floor and a pupuseria on the bottom floor window where the family sold pupusas to customers. Multiple families lived in the house.

“We had a dining room, a sala, and a kitchen,” Rachel says. “We all slept in one big room, mom and dad and me and my brother.”
After the hurricane struck, Rachel's family moved to the U.S. Her parents left the ravaged city first leaving her and her brother behind with an aunt. Later, the family brought Rachel and her brother by plane. “This all happened right after Mitch. The school was closed and I never finished the second grade,” she says.

Hurricane Mitch caused the deaths of nearly 6,500 Hondurans and displaced 1.5 million, due to heavy flooding and mudslides. Tens of thousands of homes were destroyed, with an estimated $5 billion in damage incurred, according to the 1998 report, “Mitch: The Deadliest Atlantic Hurricane Since 1780,” by the National Climatic Data Center of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. Rachel’s house survived the storm, but the city had been devastated. When she arrived in Siler City, Rachel was struck by how everything was neat and clean. “Where I lived, if you reached 14 you were married and with a kid, and by 18 you had two kids. I never saw anyone that age with a high school diploma.”

And Rachel never saw any young girls kick a ball or play soccer. But in Siler City she could play, and she wanted to play. Rachel is defined by a fierce sense of equality, of wanting the same opportunities that men or anyone else has. But playing soccer has not been easy. She has had to take on the one person in her family she models herself on: her mother.

“It has been like World War III,” she says. “It’s not just your family though, but your friends, everybody. I know if I was in Honduras I would not even touch the ball. It’s the culture. Here it’s more liberal and parents get over it, not allowing you to play, too.”

But getting her mom to accept her desire to play and to keep on playing has not been easy. Rachel says her mother was raised in the “old way” and her values reflect that. She wanted Rachel to be at home.

“She said I shouldn’t be playing outside because I’m a girl. She said that I would get kidnapped, raped, or hurt. She said that by playing with boys it was like putting myself in danger. She thinks that girls are not capable of playing soccer to that level.”

Rachel remembers coming home from playing at Chatham Middle School when she injured her ankle and couldn't walk well. When she got home she didn’t dare tell her mom. She went straight to bed and covered her swollen ankle. When her mother came into the room and asked her to do something the ruse was up and Rachel had to explain she was injured. “She said, ‘You see what happens when you play that sport! I told you! I hope you learned your lesson.’” Despite her ankle swelling to the size of a softball, Rachel kept playing.

Rachel explains that her mom barely made it to the sixth grade. She had to work. She was not treated well by her family, and married young. She says her mother looks at everything that could go bad, instead of the potential of things.

“Ella es muy cerrada, she is very closed off. She’s even closed-minded to me going to college. She was not in agreement with that. She wanted me to work. But I want more.”

Many young Latinas have to fight with their mothers against the traditional values and roles for girls. It’s the mothers who generally do not want their daughters to stay after school and participate in clubs or sports. They want them home helping
to take care of the little ones and staying in the house for their own safety.

Rachel has succeeded on the field and off because of the unwavering support of her father, who taught her how to kick a ball and practiced with her for hours. Her father always supported what she wanted to do. She did very well on her high school team and also excelled in the classroom.

Rachel is studying to become a nurse. She has a special immigration status called Temporary Protective Status, which the federal government bestowed on survivors of Hurricane Mitch from Honduras. She has to get the status renewed every 18 months but she has a driver’s license, a social security number, and she can study and work in the country.

Temporary Protective Status is granted to eligible nationals from designated countries following a natural disaster like Mitch or designated wars. People with TPS cannot leave the country but can travel freely in the U.S. They can obtain work authorization, but cannot attain permanent residency status through TPS, according to the U.S. Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, a division of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. There are currently 70,000 Honduras with TPS status in the U.S. due to Mitch. Other nationalities with TPS are from other Central American countries: El Salvador and Nicaragua.

But many people and schools do not understand what TPS status is. And so when Rachel applied to the University of North Carolina at Greensboro she was incorrectly rejected as being undocumented, when she is not. She is also not eligible for federal financial aid, said Marty Rosenbluth, staff attorney for the Southern Coalition for Social Justice and an immigration attorney.

She decided to go to Sand Hills Community College and work toward her nursing degree there. But that was also a struggle because the admissions people at Sand Hills didn’t know what to do with her TPS status. With some legal help, Rachel was able to make the school understand that she was lawfully in the country and the community college had to admit her at the in-state tuition rate. But dealing with the school’s ignorance regarding her status has been difficult. This past semester, she was unable to sign up for her classes because she was waiting on her renewed TPS status to come through.

“Every time I try to stay positive something bad happens,” she says through tears. “But at least I can go to college. I killed myself in high school so I could go to college.”

Rachel is finding that working and going to school are difficult, but mostly her problem is convincing her school that she is a lawful resident. She doesn’t want to drop out because of her immigration status. “If I flunk out of nursing school, okay, I can accept that because it was me, it was my fault—but not because of this, not because of them and my papers.”

But this is not the only thing weighing heavily on Rachel’s mind. Several months ago, Jose, her new husband, was arrested for a DWI in Alamance County. Alamance is one of several North Carolina counties that runs a special federal program called 287g, which allows local law enforcement to check someone’s immigration status. Jose was found to be undocumented by the Immigration Customs and Enforcement division of the Department of Homeland Security. He is now facing deportation to Mexico.

The 287g program allows local and
state law enforcement officials to partner with ICE and authorizes them to detect, detain and deport unauthorized immigrants. There are 67 such partnerships between local law enforcement and ICE across the country, according to DHS. North Carolina has the most jurisdictions, eight, of any state in the country. The program was initially created in 1996 but was little used until recently it was meant to help local authorities catch violent felons who were undocumented, but in practice it has been used mostly after minor traffic violations. A study of the program found that most of the people caught under the program were not dangerous or violent criminals (Gill and Nguyen 2010).

Rachel does not know what she will do if Jose is forced to leave the country, but her feelings about the U.S. have soured. “I don’t want to live here anymore in the U.S., but I don’t want to live in Mexico or Honduras either. I was thinking we could live in Canada,” she says wistfully. Rachel and Jose have been thinking of moving north because they have heard you can become a citizen of Canada more easily. “I left my family in Honduras so I have done it before,” she says. “My parents made a tough decision for their family. I can make one too.”

For now, Rachel says she lives in the moment, in a frozen piece of time bookended by hope and fear. “It’s having hopes, that’s what you live on.”

But there is one place where all these problems are chased away. The soccer field is a refuge away from all her problems, the one place where she can be who she wants to be based on her own guts and talent, a place where the field is level for everyone, where papers don’t matter. “It’s something I have fought for all my life. I’m still up for it. It’s where I can express myself and improve myself,” she says. “It’s like a career. Most of my friends are not as passionate about it as I am. They take it as a hobby. I take it as part of my life. I would have chosen this as a career. It’s all about fútbol.”

“LA GRINGA”

Javiera still remembers the moment when the Latina girls started calling her “la Gringa.” They were all gathered around the middle school soccer coach who had asked the girls to return tryout forms in order to play. All the white girls had their forms filled out. None of the Latina girls had brought theirs. Only Javiera handed hers in. One of the Latina girls said, “Oh, see, she’s a gringa,” and they laughed. The name stuck.

I heard about Javiera before I met her. There was a lot of talk by the Latina soccer players on the high school team about la Gringa and how good she was. When I met her, she was a short, stocky player with a wide smile and enormous dark eyes. Javiera was so good, she started as a freshman.

During her first game ever with the high school team, she collided with another player and ended up with a black eye. I thought for a moment that would be the last time we would see la Gringa. It was a test to see how much she loved the sport and whether she wanted to play at this level. She showed up to practice the next day with a nice shiner.

Javiera was born into a family of six in Santa Barbara, California. But there weren’t any jobs there and families were doubled up in homes, sharing rooms and trying to get by. Her father picked up the
family and moved to Siler City because he had friends and relatives who told him there were jobs in North Carolina.

“When I came I had all white friends,” she says smiling. “I hardly had any Latino friends. Back then in Siler City there weren’t that many Latino families.” Javiera is 19.

Javiera grew up very differently from Amelia and Rachel. She mixed and hung out with white kids learning their culture. But she was never invited into their homes. She spoke mostly English and her Spanish was fading.

The one constant that Javiera had in her life was soccer. Soccer became her life because her dad loved the sport. Her father formed a youth team for kids and Javiera played there.

“My dad taught me the basics of soccer,” she says. “He was very laid back. He made us feel like even if we didn’t win it was okay. I think that’s why we had so much fun.”

Javiera got better and soon she was dribbling circles around the boys and other players in middle school. “I would practice on my own, dribbling, tricks, I would say to my dad, ‘let’s go and head the ball,’ and we would kick together. That’s why I became so close to my dad. I was not a typical Latina, I was not at home. Most of the time it was me and him.”

As Javiera grew up her world began to change. Her friends changed from being mostly white to being mostly Latina. She played on the middle school team and dominated the games.

In high school, Javiera continued her career, becoming All Conference three years in a row and All State in her senior year. When she graduated, she had become the top female goal scorer in Jordan-Matthews’ history.

But in her senior year, tragedy struck. She was driving to school one morning with her father when ICE agents stopped their car. They told her to get out and searched her father and her. They had an order for deportation for her father. The agents then drove to her house and arrested her brother. A month later her mother and brother moved back to Mexico, leaving her to live with a sister and her husband and child. That senior year, Javiera lived alone, with no parents, no support other than her sister, and she missed her dad terribly. Many Latino immigrant families in the U.S. live in mixed-status households, where some members of the family are U.S. citizens or lawfully in the country and others are not.

“That was hard. I lost my dad. He was my rock. We did everything together,” she said.

After graduation, Javiera was accepted to a nearby college where she is studying criminal justice. She wants to be an FBI agent. But putting herself through school alone has been hard. Because her parents still have assets in the U.S., Javiera receives little financial aid for school. She works full-time as the manager of a local fast food restaurant, to pay for books and make ends meet. Last year, she took a semester off from school to save money for tuition and other costs. She’s back at school this year and looking forward to the challenge.

While Javiera faces obstacles with her education, she is in better shape than Rachel and Amelia. Her U.S. citizen status allows her to pay in-state tuition rate and she can receive financial aid. Her future is more open than that of the other women. Rachel has a tougher road. She can go to school, but she has to find a way to pay for it and she has to educate school administrators about her
special status. And there is the added cost of paying tuition at a four-year university without financial aid. Amelia, on the other hand, has little chance of receiving a four-year degree. Right now she can’t afford to pay the out-of-state tuition cost at a community college, let alone pay to earn a degree at a four-year school.

Javiera continues to play soccer on a women’s team in Raleigh. The level of play is more competitive than in the new Siler City league.

“I feel alive when I play,” she says. “It boosted my confidence and I learned how to be more social with the other girls, how to connect with them. I learned how to be strong and be able to overcome barriers. Even though you’re a woman, we can play the sport as good as the guys. It doesn’t matter what sex you are, you can achieve great things.”

CONCLUSION

While all three of these players are very different from one another and face different challenges in life, they are all united by their love of soccer and their struggle to find acceptance as athletes. Their love of sport clashes with the model of what a young Latina woman should be. This is a prime example of their personal struggle to transcend cultural constraints in the U.S. and in their home countries. It has helped them cope with the political and legal issues they face due to their uncertain and temporary status.

I believe we are just beginning to appreciate how the Latina identity will be transformed by women like these. They are strong, athletic, skillful, fast, winners, and champions. These are new metaphors to describe Latina women. We know from various studies that girls who participate in sports during adolescence have greater self-esteem, do better academically, and are healthier (Zimmerman 1998). Their status as athletes elevates these women beyond their traditional role in the home. In addition, this new status in their communities is a powerful indicator of socio-cultural integration in the U.S. Women’s soccer in the U.S. is big, with large numbers of young girls playing in youth leagues, women playing in college, and even a professional women’s league—not to mention the U.S. women’s national team, a perennial power in world soccer. Latinas are now taking initial steps to get on the field. What is interesting is that they are taking these steps first in their own cultural spaces, in their own leagues and fields.

Soccer has taught them to overcome adversity. This resilient attitude plays out in their lives and everyday interactions. Amelia could not have challenged her boss without the leadership skills she learned from the pitch. Rachel could not have had the perseverance to go to school without the discipline from soccer. And Javiera could not have the independence to live her life alone so young without her experience on the field.

One of the things to consider about each player is how prominent they are among their people. Soccer and its fields are an important cultural space for the Latino community. But it has been a man’s game until now. The men have been the heroes, the women spectators. Now the roles are reversed. This cultural space, this space where the community can come together express itself freely in its own way with its own rules and organization, is becoming more equal and inclusive.

Perhaps equally important is that
women are finding a place in their lives where everything is equal. Where their achievement is solely based on their own work and performance. There is no language barrier on the field. There are no papers required to play. You don’t have to be a man to play soccer. Women can play, too.

“It says, not only do good players come out of the guys, but that girls are capable of competing with the guys, that way the guys will have respect for the girls,” Rachel says. “They will consider you an equal. It feels good, you expect me to be bad because I am a girl, you expect me to suck, but then they find out I am good.”

REFERENCES


---

PAUL CUADROS is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27514. E-mail: cuadros@email.unc.edu. Cuadros is the author of *A Home on the Field* (Harpers 2007) and his research interests focus on the emerging Latino community in the South.