

World Cup Gives Mexicans A Break From the Campaign

Presidential Candidates Look to Score With Sports Fans

WASHINGTON POST

JUNE 17, 2006

MEXICO CITY, June 16 -- Tens of thousands of fans swarmed across El Zocalo, this city's massive downtown square, on Friday to watch Mexico's second World Cup game on stadium-size screens, but many of them also said they came to escape. Politics is what they were running from -- mudslinging, smash-mouth politics.

The tournament has given Mexicans entranced by the fortunes of their hard-luck team all the excuses they needed to blissfully tune out a Mexican presidential campaign growing nastier by the day. Griping about political smears is out. Gossiping about Oswaldo Sánchez, Mexico's heartthrob goaltender, is in.

"Look, we need a distraction," said Gerardo Rodriguez, a candy seller who steered his two sons, each dressed in bright green replica jerseys, through the crowd. "No one is talking about the campaign -- that's all garbage. It's pure soccer now."

Not exactly.

With only 16 days before the July 2 election, politics has found its way into even the World Cup. Candidates are angling to capitalize on the tournament, or at least not to get hurt by it. They squeeze into Mexican team jerseys and pose. They use soccer balls as their preferred props at campaign rallies.

Each of the major candidates is identified with a sport. Roberto Madrazo, the lean and angular candidate of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, is an avid runner. Andrés Manuel López Obrador, of the Democratic Revolutionary Party, plays baseball most Thursday nights when he's in Mexico City.

But Felipe Calderón, of the National Action Party, is the soccer guy. He screened Mexico's first World Cup game -- a 3-1 victory Sunday over Iran -- at a rented bullring and awkwardly kicked soccer balls into the crowd.

Calderón was ridiculed by some people here in March for slipping his far-from-athletic frame into a campaign T-shirt and playing soccer.

"That could have been his Dukakis-in-the-tank moment. It was really sad," said Mexican political analyst Dan Lund, recalling a famous photo of Democratic presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign.

Calderón also riled some sports fans by posing for photographs with the Mexican team shortly before it left for the tournament in Germany and taking away time from one of its last practices for a short campaign speech. He also made a suspect choice when he secured

the endorsement of Francisco "Kikín" Fonseca, a marginal player who became front-page news for feuding with Mexico's coach over a lack of playing time.

"There's great risk for politicians aligning with sports figures, but they're drawn as the moth to the flame," said Lund, who conducted polls for López Obrador in the late 1990s but has been neutral in the presidential race.

Madrazo's campaign aides have sneered at Calderón, saying, "We don't like to contaminate politics with sports, like some of the other candidates."

"It's just not polite," Ady Garcia, a top Madrazo aide, said in an interview.

Political analysts have busied themselves arguing over theories about how the Mexican team's fortunes could dictate the nation's political fortunes. The vote is expected to be extremely close, especially between front-runners Calderón and López Obrador.

The prevailing argument holds that Calderón, who represents the same party as outgoing President Vicente Fox and has accused López Obrador of a "dangerous" political affinity for Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez, would benefit from a strong showing by the team because people would be happy and unlikely to vote for a change. A poor performance in Germany, the theory goes, would help López Obrador because people would be dissatisfied and want to vote out the political party leading the country.

Others argue that a strong showing would benefit López Obrador -- who has accused Calderón of steering government contracts to his brother-in-law -- because it would energize the poor Mexicans who form his political base and the bedrock of support for Mexico's soccer team. Still others say the Cup, which will feature quarterfinal games two days and one day before the election and finals seven days after, will have no effect.

Of course, none of the back-and-forth about balancing soccer and running for president registered with the fans who painted their faces red and green and then waved flags at El Zocalo on Friday. While everyone was pushing to get closer to the big screens and watch Mexico tie Angola's team, a tent López Obrador's campaign had set up on the square was empty.