

## Goal! Connecting Brands with Hispanics via Sport Sponsorships



By Tony D'Andrea, PhD – Director of Research and Planning – The San Jose Group

Whenever Latinos gather for a TV party, chances are they are watching a soccer game or a fight (boxing, wrestling or mixed-martial arts). If their background is Caribbean, then they may be up for baseball. As Nielsen ratings demonstrate year after year, three out of the top seven Spanish cable TV channels are sports-only: Fox Deportes, ESPN Deportes and Gol TV, besides Univision's Galavisión which dedicates a good chunk of its time for sports events. Mexican, European and MLS soccer league games rule on Spanish cable TV, whereas other sports (boxing, MLB, NBA, NFL) are predominantly watched on mainstream TV. It is not just about the convenience of TV. Borrowing from an old homeland tradition, Latinos also glue their ears to the radio to listen to a World Cup match, and are growingly following sports on digital media as well.

Sports provide a powerful way for brands to connect with Hispanics, particularly the male population. In any specialized poll, over 90% of Hispanics are sports fans compared to less than 80% of the general population. Yet, what is striking is the passion that Latino males demonstrate toward sports. While half of Hispanic males claim to be "avid fans", around a fifth are "superfanáticos", meaning, these are the ones who are regularly playing, watching, and consuming a sport of some kind.

An emerging trend among Hispanics is mixed-martial arts (MMA). Fox Sports and UFC have recently announced the broadcasting of MMA fights across 18 Latin American countries. Its growing popularity is not surprising, as recent history indicates. In 2008 AT&T tapped into this relationship and hired Lopez family Olympic Tae-Kwon-Do champions to appear in TV commercials. While resonating with Mexican wrestling tradition's of boastful competitiveness, MMA actually is a 1960s Brazilian invention. World-renown Gracie family used to promote bear-hand "anything goes" contests to prove the superiority of Jiu-Jitsu, now an almost mandatory modality among octagon gladiators. Leveraging MMA fighters to endorse products is one obvious way to promote brands, either by driving consumption among male consumers or by positioning brands along attributes of aggressive skillfulness as valued by a younger generation of Latinos across the Americas.

But let's face it, to talk about sports among U.S. Hispanics is to talk about soccer in the male segment. Spanish TV ad spending on soccer alone stands at about 250 million dollars a year, as playoff matches harness a viewership ranging from 300,000 to 1.5 million Latinos and

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more than triples during the World Cup. As an index of masculinity, main categories sponsoring the “beautiful game” either at national or local levels are: cars and auto-parts, beverages, fast-food, electronics, home improvement and telecommunications. Soccer pundits have claimed that the future of U.S. soccer will be driven by the Hispanic consumer base. In fact, some MLS clubs already show over 40% of Hispanics in their fan base (e.g., Dynamo Houston, San Jose Earthquake, and the LA branch of Chivas). Ironically, it has also been noted that the most popular soccer team in the U.S. is the Mexican national team, as they yearly tour the U.S. backed by AT&T, Coca-Cola, and McDonald’s. Likewise, in decades to come, U.S. vs. Mexico soccer matches will grow as the epic classic in the North American sports landscape.

In using sports to market brands to Hispanics above and below the line, communication strategies must be relevant, unique and culturally sensitive. We beg to differ from advertising colleagues who say that soccer is stereotypical. The reality is that it is execution that must go beyond clichés and awe fans in original ways. As a general rule to connect with Hispanic sports fans, in addition to traditional media, it is increasingly important to integrate grassroots and events marketing with digital assets (social media, website, and mobile). For example, street guerilla in Hispanic neighborhoods can promote sponsoring brands and sponsored club by calling fans to action via contests or sweepstakes culminating in announcements during stadium games (and the Chicago Fire, e.g., may fly winners to a rivalry match in LA or New York). The brand can be showcased in special parks located outside the stadium and have it displayed in electronic billboards during breaks and, why not, in the heat of the game: “Goooal! Let’s celebrate with Corona!” blasting from loudspeakers... The visceral emotions of soccer among Latinos can be amplified and channeled by means of a well-crafted marketing campaign.

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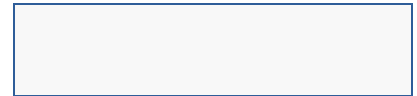
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