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For the Love of the Game, or the Gang? Getting to Know *Barras* in Honduras

By Cecilia Kline

TEGUCIGALPA – One of the first questions anyone arriving in Honduras is asked is whether you are Olimpia or Motagua, the eternally rivaling soccer teams. I didn't give much thought to the matter since I had never followed soccer. Kids grumbled at me when I would fail to align myself to one team or another, but I never figured soccer was a cornerstone to understanding threats in the street and violence among kids.

On my first round as a street outreach worker two years ago I asked my co-worker what groups the different graffiti represented, thinking I would become more familiar with gang symbols and territories. I expected to find marks belonging to the dominant 18th Street (*La 18*) or Mara Salvatrucha (*MS-13*) gangs, known as *maras* in Central America. I tried to make out the “ψ” that I knew as a pitchfork from gang graffiti in Chicago. My co-worker told me that it was a fancy “t” represented in “Ultra Fiel,” the fans of Olimpia, one of the two dominant soccer teams. On the next corner, I counted the points of a crown to place it again in my mental category of Kings or Peoples gang divisions. My friend corrected me, explaining that this was a Motagua tag. Five years of gang work in Chicago clearly was not going to help me out here.

I didn't pay much attention to these fan clubs until kids started filling the juvenile detention center, Renaciendo, for crimes related to the “*barras bravas*,” the wild fan clubs. Since August 2008 when the last openly declared MS gang member was transferred out of Renaciendo, there had been no separation of kids based on gang affiliation. Then the “Ultra” arrived. The first group of boys openly claimed their affiliations and lauded the Ultra's power and superiority. Within a day they were separated to prevent any conflicts, or worse, from breaking out.

Former Mayor Giuliani's zero-tolerance

policies in New York were the inspiration for Ricardo Maduro's political platform in the 2001 presidential elections in Honduras. Two years later, Maduro's own version of zero tolerance, the “*mano-dura*” legislation was passed. This legislation permitted police to make arrests for “*asociacion ilicita*,” illegal association, in other words making gang membership illegal regardless of the commission of a crime. Simply having a tattoo became justification for arrest. Reports of police raids quickly escalated into accounts of violence and death squads on the streets and in the prisons of Honduras. Casa Alianza started documenting extrajudicial killings of youth under the ages of 23 in 1998 and documented the sharp rise in deaths, which doubled from 2000 to 2001. During Maduro's presidency Casa Alianza recorded 1,976 deaths of youth under 23-years old due to violence or arbitrary execution, 73 percent of which have gone unsolved. This was a 90 percent increase in these deaths from the previous administration.

Previously gang members were readily identifiable through self-identification, hand gestures and tattoos. Since the repressive and violent measures of the government, for the most part now kids in Renaciendo keep their affiliations to themselves. In February this year a tattoo removal program was initiated in Renaciendo after a number of boys were found burning and cutting their skin off in attempts to remove their tattoos. All but one of almost half the boys in Renaciendo who had tattoos, submit themselves to the laser treatment. The only boy who showed who no interest in the treatment proudly announced his allegiance, “Olimpista to the death!”

RECENTLY, ON MY WAY HOME, my taxi was rerouted because the overpass in front of the stadium en route to my house was blocked off. The driver detoured down Boule-



(left) Graffiti on the juvenile prison walls denoting the presence of Ultra Fiel members. (right) A more personal mark denoting Motagua affiliation. A boy in the juvenile detention center prepares to have the Motagua eagle removed from his leg.

vard Suyapa, a major street bordering the stadium and the public hospital. We had to wait for a line of cars and buses in front of us to pass before our turn to merge into the narrow strip of street left open between the double- and triple-parked cars on both sides of the boulevard. Besides wondering how the parked cars would find their way out (much less how an ambulance pulling into the hospital would get through), my curiosity piqued at the mass attendance and I decided I needed to experience a game.

Even though I worked in prison, on the street or in the red light districts of Tegucigalpa, I wasn't actually concerned for my safety until I had to conjure up the courage to go to a soccer game. After living in the capital for a year and a half I had still not been to a game. I asked my outreach partner, Hector, who is a devout Motagua fan, when the next game was and if I could go with him. He looked at me straight in the face without saying a word. Not knowing how to interpret that response, I told him I would pay for his ticket. "Are you sure you want to go?" he asked. I explained about the kids increasingly being locked up who were affiliated with the fan clubs and my idea to better understand what was going on during the games. He eventually conceded and explained what time we should arrive to avoid problems, through what gate we should enter the stadium, how early we would have to leave before the game ended, again, to avoid any problems and what I should wear to avoid being affiliated with either of the team

clubs. My Chicago days of gang work suddenly seemed relevant again.

The following weekend I experienced my first soccer match in Honduras between Motagua and Real Madrid. Technically, it was not a contentious game considering they are not major rivals. Hector explained that the eight other teams in the league all hated Olimpia, the club with the biggest barra, so the rest were generally at peace with each other. All the same, I would receive an authentic introduction to the rituals of Motagua barra, the Revos, short for Revolutionaries.

As instructed, I arrived well before the start of the





Motagua fans unveil their banners claiming their allegiance to neighborhood barra cliques.

game but the stadium was already surrounded by scalpers and teenagers hanging around waiting for something to catch their attention. I glanced across the street trying to locate Hector when I spotted Ana. My most vivid memory of Ana was during one week in the detention center when she was so medicated that she could not even blink. She had become so aggressive toward others that she was isolated, but then she started cutting herself, so the psychia-

trist gave her a tranquilizer.

She came up, gave me a hug and immediately asked me for money to get into the game. "I don't want to have to steal," she pleaded, trying to appeal to my obvious desire to keep her out of prison. I focused on her blue eyeliner and her friend's Revo insignia, confused. Ana grew up as an 18th Street gang member since she was 12 but she explained to me that the death threats had become too serious so she left the gang and found "something new to get into." I asked her who she was with, and she introduced me to her friends, whose names she didn't know. She had covered her old gang tattoos with tape and was sporting the same dark, tight garb as her new friends and the swarms of teenagers surrounding the stadium. Her shirt had a demonically grimacing face on it whose name she did know. "He's Jack," the Revo mascot, she said.

I told her to stay out of trouble and headed toward the ticket windows.

Walking in, we were subjected to the routine inspection by the security guards at the entrance. I wouldn't have minded being patted down as much if the guard had asked me about the medium-sized, hard, metallic device she touched in my pants, but she was unfazed as she mo-



The young Revos wave their mascot in the air. (Courtesy of El Heraldo)



(above) A row of police chat in an empty neutral section of the stadium.
 (below) Two boys from the Revos consult about their collections.



er barras' banner, which was a common cause for fights and casualties. Walking through their territory toward the neutral sections of the stadium I tried to pick out a face that looked over 18-years old. No luck. Literally hundreds of skinny, face-pierced kids dressed in tight black, skull-laden clothes clustered together. The air grew sweeter with marijuana the deeper we walked into the crowds of kids.

The game started and firecrackers shot off inside the stadium. My heart jumped and my face must have revealed my fright because Hector tried calming me down by explaining that the banners and firecrackers were illegal inside the stadium. This made for perfect irony considering the row of fully-gearred police lining the top of my section of the stadium with their hands in their pockets. During the game I also noticed kids in groups walking the bleachers with empty water containers. They were assigned to gather collections from spectators to fund the barra activities. The leaders of the groups claim the collections are used to buy the banners and rent buses for away games but my friend described the drug business and some prostitution rings affiliated with the barras.

On the way out, Hector and I ran into Ana, who had clearly devised another way to get in. She came over to chat as the mass shoved its way out of the stadium. "Now we're off to fight," she announced without reservation, and skipped off behind the crowd.

MY SECOND GAME WAS THE "Capital Classic." Since Olimpia and Motagua are both from the capital their encounter at the National stadium is one of the most hotly contested and so far one of the most prone to violence—

tioned for me to pass. I wondered silently how easily my camera, which I hide in my pants for safekeeping, could be distinguished from a gun.

The Motagua fans gathered on the south side of the stadium, unraveling their black and blue banners. Two banners that caught my attention read: "Terrorists," and "Warriors." They were all decorated with skulls and the famous image of Che Guevara's face. Another banner advertised their website www.larevo1928.com. Hector told me that barra members were rewarded for stealing another

so potentially violent that my co-worker stood me up to go to the game.

First I heard the chanting. Leaving my neighborhood, my taxi was held up at the main intersection by a band of a couple-dozen teenaged boys dressed in dark colors carrying banners and following a lead flag up a hill. Even though I live a 15-20 minute drive away from the stadium, the commotion had already begun. The cab driver commented, "They shouldn't allow those kids at the games. They are only about fourteen or sixteen years old." The



(top, left) The police presence at the Capital Classic was definitely more marked, albeit from the field level and notably absent in the bleachers. (top, right) A newspaper photo of a previous Capital classic and what happens when someone crosses barra territories in the stadium. (Photos Courtesy of El Heraldo.)



(above, left) A young barra member experiencing police control after a game. (above, right) Even the youngest of fans do not escape the action. (left) The barra fans move in packs before and after the games looking out for any opponents. (Photos Courtesy of El Heraldo.)



The massive numbers of the Ultra Fiel barra was a clear explanation for the scant number of Revos at the Capital Classic. (Courtesy of El Heraldo.)

other passengers chimed in talking about the wave of violence that follows the games and how the situation had spun out of control. "You wear the wrong shirt and you get it!" Another passenger complained, "The police don't even do anything anymore. Before they would go and break the groups up, but now they do nothing." "Its all the politician's fault, if they are the examples the youth have and they are corrupt, how can we expect the kids to act any better?"

Inside the stadium the noise and the crowd were bigger and louder than before. I walked quickly through the Ultra Fiel section to get to the gated-off reporters section. There were even more and seemingly younger kids than before, and even more beer being drunk. The Revos section was about a third as full as it was in the last game. The Ultra Fiel fans filled about a quarter of the stadium in a collage of red, white and blue. The chants and drum-beat from the Olimpia section drowned out the Motagua fans and the announcer. Olimpia scored a goal and all the fans ran down and back up the bleachers like a wave that would wipe out anything in its path. The police, this time in much greater number and with riot gear, watched from the field level with the exception of one double layer of police lining the edge of the Ultra Fiel section.

The game wasn't even close to over when people in the neutral stands started to shuttle out in crowds. The violence usually broke out after the games when the kids poured out in swarms and looked for kids from the opposing team to fight. I followed the cue and slipped out before the barras. The next day I read in the newspaper that a 15-year-old boy was killed after the game.

THE OFFICIAL SOCCER CLUBS were founded in 1912 for Olimpia and 1928 for Motagua and the barras themselves began in the 1990's. There is disagreement as to whether they have reached the level of *barras bravas* or "wild barras" known in other Latin American countries. The origins of these barras bravas are in South American countries like Argentina and Chile. Ultra Fiel had actually

hired barra members from Catholic University of Chile to come train them in the makings of a better barra, from writing chants to stealing banners.

The topic of barras has added fervor to the national concern about public security and delinquency, which arose in the 1990s with the emergence of maras. Many people equate both maras and barra members with juvenile delinquents. Politicians talk about allegiances and collaborations between the different groups. Police talk about joint drug transactions and using members of each other's organizations to carry out robberies, assaults and killing. Even the assistant director at the NGO I volunteer with suggested that gang members were infiltrating the barras.

I interviewed the reporter on the barras from *El Heraldo*, one of the two major newspapers in the country about the subject. He asked me not to use his name. I was surprised to find he was younger than me, but after talking for a few minutes it became clear that his age added to his credibility. Barras were a phenomenon that he grew up with and he was personally familiar with them.

I was curious about the overlap of barra and gang members. Ana had left the 18th Street gang and now associated with the Revos, but her case was different than what people suggested because she wasn't carrying out mara business with the barra. According to the reporter the allegations of infiltration were false. They were attempts by media and politicians to demonize both groups. He explained the distinguishing factors he had found between members of the two groups. Barra members were generally kids in high school, therefore with a higher education level than the gang members who were more likely to have abandoned school. This factor is tied to different socioeconomic backgrounds, given that barra members can be kids in private schools with more economic resources than gang members. Gang members generally view society as against them, criminalizing and discriminating against them, but barra members do not distinguish themselves from greater society. On one Revo website the front page proclaims, "We are not delinquents!" It's an interesting contrast to the content on an Ultra Fiel website detailing the history of fighting for territory in the stadium, sponsors and members. It states by name their "enemies to the death," and song lyrics that incite their opponents as well as the police, hailing drinking alcohol and smoking marihuana.

The distinguishing factors that the reporter suggested seemed more like similarities to me when he described the internal practices of each group. In gangs, members gain respect and status by killing. Barras members gain points by stealing banners and showing courage in *pegadas*, fights with opposing barra members. But this distinction is questionable given that in 2007 there were seven deaths, and in 2008, eleven deaths directly attributed to barras. Gang-related deaths (according to the media) are practically unidentifiable, bodies thrown into deserted areas, blind ex-

ecutions, no identifying markers; while barras leave their mark unequivocally. Pictures the reporter showed me, true to the commonly graphic display of violence and gore used by the media in Honduras, show one case that went so far as to leave a poster on top of a boy's body stating "Murdered by the crazy Revos." In a recent game, a sign left on the stadium stated, *Aquí van a haber muertos*, "Here there will be dead."

The reporter insisted that the gangs were not the source of the violence of the barras, and that they were not affiliating with them. He noted that the barras involvement in drugs was actually a threat to the maras operations. In one neighborhood, the 18th Street gang had put out warnings for the Revos to retreat from their territory.

I asked about the article (Anonymous) he wrote that detailed 16 suggestions to decrease the violence problems with the barras. He smiled and admitted that in reality the problem would get much worse in the near future. He cited the link to private companies, public figures and politicians who used to openly sponsor the barras before they got out of hand, whose now clandestine support continued to protect the barras presence in and outside the stadium.

Do the barras get away with public presence and disorder because of what they are or who they are? Why were barra members not subjected to the same social cleansing brutalities based on illegal association as mara members were? Is it because public officials have a stake in their favored soccer team and vicariously enjoy the rivalries playing out? Is it because the kids in the barras are predominantly from the middle class? Does this allow them to get away with acts that poor kids couldn't? I have no representative study to make valid conclusions, but I did notice how quickly the cases of the boys from the Ultra were processed. They got out of detention in less than two months. One of the boys got an early transfer out because his family got a spot in Teen Challenge, a gang/drug rehab center outside the city. Normally a kid going into drug rehab would not attract my attention except that I had never known a case where the family could pay for the monthly rate at any of the private rehab centers charge.

I asked the reporter why he decided to cover this topic when it was so obviously volatile and potentially dangerous. Given the heated opinions expressed on the barras web-

sites about the media's portrayal of them, wasn't he worried about reprisals if they managed to identify him? His answer was simple. "My brother." His older brother had joined one of the barras and had struggled to get out. His brother and the family continue to endure death threats. While he was able to detach himself as far as his former group was concerned, he was already targeted by the opponents, who didn't recognize his withdrawal. The reporter wanted to make public the nuances of the phenomenon that had captured him and his family.

For a country with an actual Football War¹ on its records, is even the national pastime a lost cause for providing respite from violence? Are the barras and maras really about rivalries or do the kids just not have something better to belong to or occupy themselves? A dirt field on Thursday afternoons provides a glimmer of hope.

THURSDAY AFTERNOONS ARE coveted for dozens of young people who survive day to day on the streets of Tegucigalpa. This is when Casa Asti sponsors a weekly soccer game that they call, "A morning without glue." Anyone working with this population of kids knows, if they want to find the kids from that area, go to Campo Motagua, the soccer field between the bridges connecting Tegucigalpa and Comayaguela.

The street educators and volunteers of Casa Asti gather under the bridge and begin collecting and separating the kids' possessions. In exchange for a uniform and cleats to play in, the kids store their clothes, any merchandise



Young people vie for their moment of glory on during the weekly soccer game hosted by Casa Asti for youth living on the street. (Courtesy of Susana Iriahi, Director of Casa Asti)

1 In 1969 El Salvador troops invaded Honduras during World Cup elimination matches resulting in the four day Football War. However, the war was really about land and immigration disputes between the two countries.

they might be selling and glue bottles in a black plastic bag that an educator individually labels. If a kid worries about the safety of his glue bottle, he will put a piece of masking tape and his name on that also. At the end of the game, all possessions are returned for the uniforms. The educators are transitioning to a system where anyone who shows up with a glue bottle is not allowed to play because some kids are still too high on the solvents to play safely. This has resulted in an angry tantrum now and then but for the most part, the kids respect the rules and appreciate the time free of drugs as much as the game.

For an hour the kids ranging in all ages, sizes and ability run up and down the dusty field under the direct sun. Bordering the field on one side is the Rio Choluteca, flowing thick with sand and garbage, adding to the rotten stench from disposed animal parts, rotten fruit and other garbage in the receptacles from the market in Comayaguela. None of the surroundings

slow down the legs of the kids, who run with shocking energy despite drugs, lack of sleep and nutrition.

Hector, my co-worker who went with me to my first soccer game also coaches the boys in Casa Alianza who, even though they have never won a game, anxiously look forward to their weekend matches. I shared with him an article about players who participated in the Homeless World Cup and the majority of whom were now working and off the street. This led to the discovery of plans for the First Street Child World Cup. In March 2012 street children from eight countries will compete in Durban in an effort to promote children's rights among participant country governments. Casa Alianza Nicaragua is one of the two Latin American teams to participate. While his home-team games remain too dangerous to attend for the time being, Hector dreams of taking a team of kids to a tournament out of the country. □

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