

11-2-2017

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Recommended Citation

Rodríguez, George. "Costa Rica's Soccer Hooligans are Using Games for Crime Sprees." (2017).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10477>

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Costa Rica's Soccer Hooligans are Using Games for Crime Sprees

by George Rodríguez

Category/Department: Costa Rica

Published: 2017-11-02

For the past two decades, Costa Rica's soccer teams, especially major, top-league squads, have been backed by barras or fan clubs, most of whose members usually identify themselves with team t-shirts, hats, matching makeup, and musical instruments, and often chant encouraging slogans, sometimes insulting rival squads ([NotiCen, Dec. 8, 2016](#)).

The most popular and largest are the barras of the historic Club Sport Herediano, known as El Team; Deportivo Saprissa, known as El Monstruo Morado (the purple monster) because of its colors; and Liga Deportiva Alajuelense, known as Los Rojinegros (the red and black), also because of its colors.

Herediano's support group is La Garra (the claw), Saprissa's is La Ultra Morada (the purple ultra), and Alajuelense's is La 12 (the 12th), since its members consider themselves their team's additional—or twelfth—player.

But some barra members have begun displaying increasingly violent behavior during and after games, more recently also committing crimes inside stadiums, such as theft and drug-dealing, activities that have earned the hooligans the label of barras bravas (bravas meaning aggressive), and has forced security and soccer authorities to seek solutions to the problems they have created.

According to recent data from the security ministry, the Ministerio de Seguridad Pública (MSP), on the days games are played, an average of 20 barra members are arrested for crimes such as selling drugs, carrying weapons, disturbing public order, or disobeying authority.

Efforts aimed at eradicating this violence include a law for the prevention and punishment of violence during sports events approved in 2013 and known as the Ley para la Prevención y Sanción de la Violencia en Eventos Deportivos.

Measures derived from the legislation include a photo data bank of violent barra members to help team and stadium authorities, as well as police and private security personnel, prevent those persons from attending games. But group aggression has not been rooted out.

Violence in Cartago

One of the most violent incidents took place on Aug. 27 in the central city of Cartago, 23 km southeast of San José, after a game between the local Club Sport Cartaginés and the visiting Herediano. Angry members of La Garra went on a rampage around the city stadium, and one local fan was attacked with particular viciousness by several Herediano sympathizers.

The young man unsuccessfully tried to run from his attackers, but when he tripped on a sidewalk that was being repaired, he was surrounded by about a dozen Herediano fanatics who punched and kicked him for several minutes. At a certain point, one of the attackers picked up a large, uneven

cement block, and after gesturing to a group member to give him space, he threw the rock at the man, hitting his head and left shoulder.

After stripping the victim of his team t-shirt, the group fled down the street. The victim was taken to a hospital with a severely fractured skull. He underwent emergency surgery and was left with a speech disability.

Some of the attackers were eventually arrested. The main aggressor turned himself in to the police, and all face charges of attempted homicide.

'Lost values'

Violent incidents are not uncommon in soccer worldwide, and Costa Rican Security Minister Gustavo Mata told Latin America Digital Beat (LADB) that his country is working to counter the phenomenon, which in his view stems both from an erosion of principles and a copycat attitude derived from the globalization of information.

"Historically ... there wasn't such an aggressive behavior by the barras," he said, adding that the problem is a generational issue, with young people in the 15-to-30 age group as the principal actors. He called them "a population segment that ... has lost the values that ... our parents taught us."

"We see a confusion between going to a stadium to back a team and going to a stadium to attack people," Mata said. "We've even seen that, besides the violent act against a person, they also take the opportunity to rob—they take people's watches, they take people's wallets," he explained, adding that the criminals use the barras as a cover-up and enter stadiums to make money by mugging and robbing people.

Mata, a former assistant director of the investigative unit Organismo de Investigación Judicial (OIJ) and a former interior vice minister, said authorities are working closely with Costa Rica's soccer leadership to combat the problem.

"We've made important efforts, coordinating with the country's clubs, and we're working very, very well," he said. "I'd expect that, with the coordination that's being implemented, we'll have greater control of the barras."

He said soccer clubs have been asked to create a register, in order to know whether someone "is a guy who goes to stadium to annoy people" or to use drugs.

"Those people have to be barred from entering a stadium, because they are going to place the safety of the public at risk," Mata said. He mentioned the Cartago incident, which he described as an "attempted homicide" by "a caveman grabbing a stone and bashing a poor youngster's head."

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