

# HOPE KICKS ETERNAL

No team from Mexico, Honduras or the U.S. has ever won the World Cup.

**Is this the year?**

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Jared Wells (left) helped create the American Outlaws, a club of U.S. Men's Soccer National Team supporters with chapters across the country.

## Is there a God? According to Mexican writer Juan Villoro there is. He's a soccer ball.

In his book "God Is Round" ("Dios es redondo," Planeta, 2006), Villoro captures the devotion to this deity and how it culminates every four years in the world's biggest celebration of sport – the World Cup.

Villoro might be right. No other sporting event draws more fans, incites more passion or has more ritual. No other epic unites people as soccer's greatest championship.

For teams around the globe, it's the end of a two-year drama for qualification: Passion. Joy. Despair. Life and death playing out on the pitch. Some stumbled then failed or got up and fought on. Others squeaked by. A few marched triumphantly into the last round.

In the end, 32 countries have assembled their best men and drawn up game plans for the first global sporting event to take place on an African stage: the 19th World Cup in South Africa.

New cleats. New uniforms. New stadi-

ums. New hope. Past struggles must be buried. It's time for the final act.

This June, Honduras, Mexico and the United States will represent the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football (CONCACAF) when they travel to South Africa to compete. Many fans will join them. But those who cheer from afar will gather with family and friends, sport their team's jersey and black out calendars for the first round games.

Not one of those games is to be missed, especially for fans of Mexico. They open the cup against host South Africa at the Soccer City Stadium in Johannesburg on June 11. Millions will be watching and asking, "Who will win it all?"

Brazil is a favorite once again, and so are traditional powerhouses like Germany, Italy and England. Many say Spain is the team to beat with their blistering speed and stalwart defense that won them the European title two years ago. Many even give Diego Armando Maradona and his

squad from Argentina a chance despite the fact that they limped into the final round. After all, they have Lionel Messi, the best footballer in the world. [SEE SIDEBAR]

Each of these teams, save Spain, has at least one star etched next to the crest of their national jersey. These are the small but powerful symbols that boast and tally how many World Cup titles your country has won. Few have them. In fact, no team outside of Europe and South America has ever won a World Cup.

That fact does not diminish hope for some local fans of *Los Catrachos* (Honduras), *El Tri* (Mexico) or The Yanks (United States). They all have strong teams, though depth and experience might determine just how far each of them goes. Their fans hope for a championship or at least for their team to compete well – to gather all emotion, energy, skill and national pride and place them on the field, making the rectangle of grass into a sacred space.

It certainly is for Honduras.



Game parties are a constant at José de Jesús Cantero's home (front left) and this World Cup will be no exception.

**THE TEAM OF HOPE**

If God is round, then for Honduras he has also been a healer. Getting into the World Cup has been a salve for the wounds of last summer's coup and the subsequent political turmoil. *Los Catrachos* have been a unifying force, a team of hope.

Indeed, this is only the second team that Honduras is sending to a World Cup. It last happened in 1982.

first round, that would be great, then you never know what might happen."

They have a solid backbone: The goal-scoring instincts of Carlos Costly and David Suazo, the experience of goalkeeper Julio César de León, and the midfield work of Wilson Palacios. Honduras may not be one of the favorites, but with these seasoned players on the squad, some of whom have European experience, they could be a dark horse.

For regional rival Mexico, the story has been different, but no less inspiring to a country with its own struggles.

Last year, El Tri climbed from chasm to mountaintop. In a repeat of his 2002 feat, coach Javier Aguirre returned to save the team. Under the direction of Sven-Göran Eriksson, they floundered and were in danger of elimination. After a 3-1 loss to Honduras, Eriksson was canned. Aguirre transformed the team: He sent insubordinate players packing and called on the leadership of former Chicago Fire star, Cuauhtémoc Blanco.

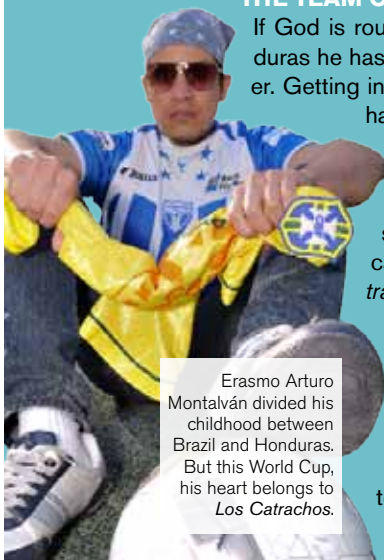
Aguirre blended youth and experience

into a cohesive unit. Thus, Mexico went on to win the Gold Cup by beating the United States 5-0 on The Yanks' home turf, an impossible feat during a span of 10 years. Days later, El Tri beat the United States again, 2-1, before some 100,000 fans at the Estadio Azteca in Mexico City. They slowly secured a spot in South Africa and fans want more.

"They have a really good shot," says José de Jesús Cantero. The 31-year-old financial analyst for Illinois-based Motorola Inc. says his passion for El Tri may have grown during college, but it had its roots at home. His parents have always been soccer fans, and with his renewed passion they are again following the team.

"Following Mexico connects me to where I'm from and to my family," says Cantero. Game parties are a constant at the Cantero home and many are planned for this summer.

"[The team] can go far if they keep their heads and play hard. They have young players up front and experience in the midfield and the back," he says. "Reaching the final would be magic!"



Erasmus Arturo Montalván divided his childhood between Brazil and Honduras. But this World Cup, his heart belongs to *Los Catrachos*.

For Erasmus Arturo Montalván, 28, a half-Brazilian, half-Honduran teacher at Erie Elementary Charter School in Chicago, it's been a miracle. And though he divided his childhood between Honduras and Brazil, he supports *Los Catrachos*. "Brazil has it all, and I support them, but my heart is with the underdog," Montalván says. "If we [make it through] the



Jared Wells believes the U.S. national team can beat England in the first round.

## God is round, but hope and

### CHEERLEADING OUTLAWS

A mix of magic with some amnesia is what fans of the United States are seeking. Arguably one of the best teams in the CONCACAF region, The Yanks must leave 2006 in the past. Their last World Cup performance was a washout. The United States was sent home after a miserable first round: two losses, one tie.

But now, they want to build on last year's success at the Confederations Cup in South Africa. Although they struggled in the first round, the team went on to beat Egypt, then Spain, and had Brazil on the ropes before *A Seleção*, the nickname used for the Brazilian national team, came back to win 3-2 in the second half of the final. Many say the team is ready – and hungry.

Jared Wells agrees. Supporting this new run for a championship is one of the reasons why Wells helped create American Outlaws, a club of U.S. Men's Soccer National Team supporters with chapters across the country. The 1994 World Cup in the United States sparked Wells' love of the national team, and after returning from the World Cup in 2006, it

## love are too...

became stronger.

"It was just great to be in that environment and see our team and all the fans. I wanted to do more here," says Wells.

One of their goals is to organize fans to cheer for the U.S. squad for games shown here, where supporters of other countries usually outnumber them. But, it's really about a love born early in life for the 26-year-old Nebraska native. He has been playing soccer since the age of five and plans to follow The Yanks in South Africa.

His prediction: "Oh, we'll get out of the first round. We can beat England, and if Oguchi Onyewu, Charlie Davies and other players fully recover and are 100 percent, we can go really far," Wells says.

Villoro is right. God is round, but hope and love are too, and all will meet on the fields of South Africa and in the hearts of *hinchas* across the globe this summer.

Fans might be divided in team loyalties, but they're united by their love for the game. Only a force beyond our understanding could do that.



Oscar and Rosario Delgado cheer for different teams in Argentina's First Division, but when it comes to the World Cup, there is only one team they cheer for: Argentina.

PHOTO: DANIEL MILES PEREZ

### SOUTH AMERICA'S CHANCES

"Argentina," Oscar Guzmán predicts. "No other team has their offensive power."

The sports anchor for Telemundo Chicago says followers of the game should look at the Argentinean team more closely before making their predictions. This team shares some characteristics with the 1986 team, when they last won the championship. They struggled to get into the contest, as they did then when they had Maradona, the best player in the world – as they do now with Lionel Messi.

The Barcelona forward is on pace to net more than 40 goals this season. "He has an incredible offensive power and he's not all they have," says Guzmán. Carlos Tévez, Gonzalo Higuaín and Diego Milito will all probably score 20 goals or more, if they haven't already with their respective professional teams. When combined with veteran Martin Palermo, "they can tear any opponent apart," says Guzmán.

It doesn't matter who plays, under what circumstances or when: Bra-

zil will always be in the fight for the world title. "When at their worst, they make it to the final game," Guzmán says chuckling. "Hey, they have like 57,000 great players." Robson de Souza, known as Robinho to fans around the world, will be the player to watch.

Many say Chile will make history in South Africa. "They are the best team; they play the best as a unit. I place them above Spain in that regard," Guzmán says.

Uruguay, the host country of the first World Cup in 1930, is a dangerous team though they have not done much in recent cup history. Guzmán says that could change because they have "a good offense and they don't back down." The team is known for its trademark style of "eating" the ball – or keeping it from opponents.

"Paraguay will be there to participate, but not much else," Guzman says. "They lost a lot when they lost Salvador Cabañas."

And who will Oscar root for? Mexico, but only at work or home alone. He doesn't like sports parties. "I'm all about the game," he says.