
Cuba's Soccer Fans Ready for the World Cup

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Cuba will be one of the more than a hundred countries that won't have its national soccer team playing in the World Cup in Russia, but that won't stop soccer fever from taking over the island's sports enthusiasts.

Traditionally, Cuban fans mostly choose to support Argentina and Brazil, because of the Latin blood they share apparently, but over time support grows for the teams of Germany and Spain, who have done well in previous events, as well as France and Holland, although Holland didn't qualify for the Russian competition.

Fans of the different teams form groups to come together and cheer their squad as already happens with the different teams in the other national and continental soccer leagues. When the World Cup comes along you can see special initiatives to enjoy the matches.

This weekend, official Real Madrid and Barcelona clubs in Havana played a friendly game at the Eduardo Saborit sports center, to make it clear that even though they support different teams, there's no bitterness between them. It was also a mixed affair as each team had to sign up one woman to their team.

Anyway, getting back to the World Cup... some places in Havana have already advertised to fans to come and enjoy their favorite team's matches there; for example, restaurants 1830 and La Chorrera, whose managers are fans of the German team are planning to gather all their fans together there. Restaurant 1830 also has the German Embassy in Havana for support and will be the kind of "official" for their fans.

Tony, a Bayern Munich and German football fan, told us that he won't miss one of the matches. "I go to 1830 a lot to watch Bayern matches throughout the year, especially on the weekend because of work. Now, I'll also try to go every time Germany plays, if work allows me to. A group of people that we've all known for some time meet up there and we really enjoy the games."

Meanwhile, another Bavarian supporter, Alfredo, told us a little bit about his expectations. "Germany hasn't been playing very well in the lead up friendly matches up until now, but that's because they've been up against big teams and they've played with a lot of different line-ups. When the World Cup starts, things will be different and I predict that they'll finish first in their group. Afterwards, in the knockout stage, everyone knows that it's very hard to beat them, so I think they can be the champions again."

Raulito, an Argentina fan, has a very different opinion: "This World Cup belongs to (Lionel) Messi. It's about time that Argentina won a tournament. It was really close to winning in another World Cup and in the Copa Americas, so I think it's time has come. Messi needs the team to keep up with him more because he can't do it all on his own."

"This is a never-ending story, my brother," Alfredo tells him. "It's time you look for another team. Those Argentinians don't have what it takes to win. When it counts, their legs get soft and nobody scores. That (Gonzalo) Higuain needs his head checked: he misses the easiest goals when it's the final, and the same thing happens in the Champions League, both when he was at Real Madrid and now at Juventus."

"I believe that Argentina is considered a favorite just because of Messi," Alejandro says. "Because the truth is that as a team they aren't that extraordinary. They at least need to put (Paulo) Dybala on the field and put aside that foolishness that he can't play alongside Messi, because if they don't, Argentina won't go anywhere."

"Forget about Argentina," Ulises interrupts. "This World Cup is Brazil's and the

Golden Boot award is Neymar's (da Silva). No other team has the Brazilians' skill and they have been unbeatable for a while now, ever since Dunga was let go as trainer because they weren't going to go anywhere with him. Neymar definitely doesn't get rattled when the time comes and I'm sure he'll be a champion with this team. Plus, they're coming back with a vengeance after they lost in 2014, so I don't think they will lose."

"It's true, Brazil is good," Julita says, "but don't forget Spain, who are also making their mark in the friendlies and kicked Italy out in the qualifiers. This team is also very good, with star players playing nearly every position. What they need is for Diego Costa to score goals with Spain like he does when he plays for Atletico, because if he did there's no one who could beat the Spanish."

"Guys," Abelito says, "don't forget about France. If we take a look at each and every player, I think they are one of the best bets and they have also really stood out in the exhibition matches, in spite of the line-up having been changed quite a lot."

"But, it's the same with France like it is with Argentina," Alejandro cuts back. "If they weren't able to win the UEFA European Championship at home, against Portugal which isn't a particularly great team, and they didn't even have Cristiano Ronaldo playing that day, then do you really think they can win the World Cup?"

In my opinion, that (Antoine) Griezmann is a lot like Higuain, when the game gets critical, he gets nervous and they can't win the World Cup like that."

This improvised group didn't end up agreeing, like what normally happens, and they each passionately bet on their own teams, just like they used to when they discussed baseball in the old days. We will see who's right as time goes on, or there might even be a surprise and an unexpected team makes it all the way. In this sport, you never know...
