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The Aztecas of South Santa Cruz County

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By JESSICA LUSSENHOP Tue, Nov 10, 2009

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Gina Castaneda stands along the sidelines inside the cavernous Soccer Central Indoor Sports arena in Watsonville, shouting to the teenage boys in the purple

An Aztecas power forward drives a wedge in the opposing team's defense. Photo by Felipe Buitrago

uniforms tumbling back and forth on the field. "Buena, buena, Jesus!" she yells. "Baja las manos!" It's the first game of the team's late summer season, and the clamshell arena glows yellow in the long July daylight. As one of the boys on her team runs past, Castaneda frowns suddenly. "He's wearing red shorts," she says. He runs past again. Sure enough, underneath a pair of baggy black soccer shorts he's wearing a second pair, a red flash as he sprints by. Wearing red, the color of the Norteño street gang, is strictly forbidden on the team. So is wearing blue, the color of the rival Sureños. "That'll be something I'll talk to him about," she says. "They do the subtlest things and think I won't notice."

Castaneda is good at spotting these small acts of rebellion. For the last four years, she's been a deputy probation officer for Santa Cruz County, working with juvenile offenders who live in the Watsonville area. Her team is made up of a small handful of the 400 youths currently on, or at least in contact with, county probation, some of them from rival gangs. That means something as minuscule as a pair of poorly hidden red shorts can break the truce that Castaneda brokered in order to form the Aztecas soccer team a year and a half ago. In a symbolic show of neutrality, the team wears purple—red plus blue. Despite the red shorts and a short flurry of carding in the second half, the Aztecas finish the game on top—the final score is 6-4. The boys gather near the exit along with Castaneda's husband, who herds their three daughters back together, a few adult mentors who play on the team and some parents. Despite the victory, Castaneda has some words for the boys.

"I don't want no 'W' hats, I don't want red and blue," she yells over the echoing din of the next games. "Not tights, not underwear, I don't care what it is—no red or blue. I don't want to have to keep on repeating it." Even without their colors, the team that is gathered around her does look different from the other adult men's teams that play every Monday evening. They are much younger, between 15 and 19. A few of them decidedly lack the posture of athletes; they saunter rather than walk down the AstroTurf. And tucked into a couple of pairs of black knee socks is the square bulge of an electronic monitoring bracelet. The soccer games are one of the few places those players are allowed to go. **Story continues below slideshow.**

Photos by Felipe Buitrago.



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As the boys dissipate outside the arena, a cluster of three—one wearing the forbidden 'W' hat ('W' is for Washington Nationals, the initials of the Watsonville Norteños) turned backward—groan as Castaneda reminds them to come to the Thursday practice. Once out of her earshot, one says to the other, "Are you gonna play again?"

"Nah, fuck that," the boy replies.

That's just par for the course with a team of juvenile offenders. For the 20 youths that have stepped on the field wearing Aztecas purple since 2008, the results vary. Castaneda says her husband ran into one of their former players, now an adult, picking up recyclables. He was homeless. Some have abandoned the team and returned to gangs; still others live a kind of double life. "They are still walking the fence: 'Do I want to be a soccer player or do I want to be a gang member, or can I do both?'" says Castaneda. "We have some kids on the soccer team who have done very, very well, who've gotten off probation, have set goals for themselves, are looking into college. We have the whole spectrum here, and it's really, really interesting."

(Story continues below video.)



Sal

Castaneda warns that her players may not talk to a reporter. Those who are still involved in gang life will be the most resistant, she tells me. But there's one clear exception, 18-year-old Salvador Garcia, one of the founding members of the team. "He's our success story," she says.

Garcia is a stocky teenager with soft but serious features. He's quiet and speaks with a heavy accent. When Castaneda first took on Garcia's case, he was on track to be placed in a group home as a ward of the court. "He had an extensive criminal history and was escalating very quickly in our system," she says. At the age of 11, Garcia's parents moved their entire family to Watsonville from Michoacán, in southern Mexico. "It was hard for me," he says. "I was telling my parents that I didn't want to go to school because I couldn't understand, like, nobody."

By the time he entered eighth grade, Garcia says his English had improved dramatically and he was starting to make friends. Without knowing it, however, he had surrounded himself with boys with ties to the Sureño street gang, a Southern California gang with origins in the Mexican Mafia. Garcia says rival gang members, the Norteños, who have ties to the Northern California gang Nuestra Familia, took notice. "It was telling me stuff like, 'Why you hang out with them, are you scrap or something?'" he says, using the derogatory slang term for Sureño, which essentially means "piece of trash." The threats were accompanied by increasing pressure from his friends to align himself with them and retaliate. "My friends were like, 'It's time to tell them what's up,'" he says.

His parents, who both worked long days in the strawberry fields in Watsonville, were not around to monitor his increasingly risky behavior. It started out with street fights against the Norteños who'd been hassling him, but soon enough he and his friends also began skipping school. At 13, he says, he tried drinking and marijuana for the first time, and within the year, moved on to cocaine, then to smoking meth and finally smoking heroin. "We were getting high and getting drunk almost all the time, almost all days in the streets, not coming home. Just sleep for a little bit, then go back out," he says. By the time Garcia was in the 11th grade, he'd been locked up in the Felton juvenile hall three times.

But for some reason, the third time for Garcia was the charm. "My parents had a lot of stress because of my problems, so I started to think about it, and I thought this life that I was going through wasn't good for me," he says. "So then I met Gina when I got on probation. She was the one that told me I could get involved with soccer. At first I didn't want to, but she made me."

Aztec Empire

Castaneda got Garcia on two soccer teams in order to take up his time. On her caseload, the name of the game is, to some extent, distraction.

"We strongly believe in rehabilitation. So it's all about making sure the youth has counseling, that they're doing community service, they're giving back to the community, they're enrolled and attending school, you're trying to get them in pro-social activities, jobs," she says. "People don't necessarily know that you do that much."

This approach is an important piece of why Santa Cruz County enjoys a prestigious reputation as one of the best juvenile probation programs in the country. At present, for example, only 22 youths call the juvenile hall home. The goal is placement outside of the hall, in programs and activities like the Aztecas, with close one-on-one work with officers like Castaneda in cases of medium- or high-risk youth.

Garcia says he was surprised by how much he enjoyed playing. By that time Castaneda had gotten five of her boys on different soccer teams as their "pro-social" activity. "They'd continue to ask me to come to their soccer games, and it was taking a lot of time out of my life," she says. "My husband said, 'Why don't you put them on one team and you could coach it?'"

In April of 2008, Castaneda scraped together \$400 worth of startup money and let the rest of the probation officers know that their kids could join the team. She recruited her husband to play, along with a handful of other adult mentors and probation officers.

There was just one problem with the response. Some interested boys were in warring factions of Sureños, and others were Norteño. "We were doing kind of like peace treaties, gang treaties, between them, making it clear they couldn't be involved in any gang stuff while they were playing soccer," she says. "The kids that didn't agree were asked not to play."

The first official meeting of the Aztecas was nerve-wracking, with eight players from three rival gangs in the same conference room of the South County probation offices, but the original Aztecas agreed to leave their gang affiliations off the field.

The transition was not smooth. Two rival Sureños clashed, a Norteño and a Sureño who had previously fought in the streets got into it on the field, and even their parents—Castaneda insists that parents attend all games and practices—began a screaming match over the boys' heads. But through her mediation, Castaneda says eventually things calmed down. "They were able to get along after that. And when I say get along, I don't mean become best friends," she says. "But they weren't mad dogging each other, they weren't threatening each other, there weren't no more issues when they saw each other on the street. They kind of just ignored each other. They didn't even give each other high-fives after scoring goals."

But she says there were signs that the team was having the desired effect. After stress from the birth of her third child left her pondering whether to end the Aztecas soccer team for a season, Garcia spoke up. "He said, 'If the team goes away, I will dive right back into what I was doing,'" says Castaneda. His fervor surprised her, and she stuck it out. "I haven't let it die. I see how impactful it is."

For the Garcia family, the team has taken on a critical role in their lives. Even though Sal injured his knee before the start of this season and is unable to play, he is a fixture at every game and practice, along with his mother and girlfriend—who is several months along with Garcia's baby—who like to sit on the top row of the bleachers and wave a huge clacking noisemaker after every goal. Garcia says he's been sober for 18 months and is now in his final year at Escuela Quetzal in Santa Cruz, a high school for teens in recovery. But that doesn't mean his struggle is over.

"Right now, I'm down to kick with the Sureños again. I'm down to roll with them and do bad stuff," he says. "But I'm kind of thinking, because my girl's going to have a boy or a girl pretty soon, I'm just being with my family."

Jorge and Jesus

Because the team is constantly strapped for cash, Soccer Central sometimes donates the team practice time on Thursdays, which usually costs \$75. The expansive fields of Ramsay Park are just outside the arena, but because of concerns about gang retaliation, the boys can't be seen together in the open. "They could be targeted for violence, the adult members of the team could be targeted for violence—anyone could," says Castaneda.

As the first practice of the late summer season begins, she sticks out her hand to one of the players, 16-year-old Jorge (who asked that his last name not be used). He had just finished his six-month probation sentence. "Congratulations," she says. He grins. His 18-year-old brother Jose watches the exchange silently.

Jose is an impressive player, a powerful and aggressive forward. With the exception of a few speeding tickets, he's never been in any trouble. It's his brother Jorge—the team's best (albeit reluctant) defenseman, an expressive young man with big, dark eyes—who led them to the Aztecas.

Like Garcia, the brothers moved from Michoacán with their parents and eight older siblings. Jose was eight and Jorge was six. They lived in the migrant camps during the growing season and spent the rest of their time in Mexico. "It was weird, we were just traveling back and forth," says Jose, who, as the elder, is the more verbose of the two. "I didn't know no English, so it was hard, [but] we were really poor over there, in Mexico, so it was a good opportunity."

Then, about a year ago, Jorge formed a group of new friends in the migrant camp. "It was just, like, going around with bad friends and doing bad stuff. They put me on the bad way," he says. "Then it happened quickly, the problem."

Jose says the "problem"—a non-drug offense that neither brother wants to discuss—tore apart his parents' friendships with other migrant working families. The family moved to a two-bedroom apartment in Castroville. After a string of court appearances, Jorge was finally placed on probation, a relief since he says the charge was a felony.

The incident threw Jorge into emotional turmoil, until his probation officer suggested he join the Aztecas. Castaneda agreed that Jose could play too.

"[Jorge] was always like, 'I want to be close to you because you're my older brother, and I want you to be close to me in this time,'" Jose recalls. "So I just started playing."

For Jorge, the team has had many positive effects, and the brothers decide to remain for the season, even though Jorge's probation is over. "It helped me a lot, because it kept me out of the streets. Gina's a wonderful coach," says Jorge. "She never asked me [what I did], but if she would have I would have talked to her. I used to hate the police. I still hate the police, but she's different. She's like a friend."

Jesus

Castaneda is not always everyone's friend. By late August, the Aztecas are doing well, with four wins and a tie. But another regular player, 17-year-old Jesus, is conspicuously missing from one of the games. At a following Monday game, as people are leaving, I glimpse Castaneda near the exit of the arena, peering up into Jesus' face as he stares at the ground. It's clear from her stern expression that they are not having a friendly chat. Behind her is another probation officer.

"It feels horrible," he tells me later on. But he's not talking about guilt. "They're always checking up on you. I don't like that. I don't like people being like, 'Oh, how are things going, are you doing good? Oh, you been doing drugs or you been smoking or something? You been drinking?' Aw, c'mon. All teenagers do that now."

Jesus is another top scorer for the team. He's bigger than most of the other boys, with the hang-dog good looks of an unlucky rebel. He says he was originally sent to juvenile hall for breaking into a house. "I was just trying to get money," he says with a self-conscious smile. "The police was outside. I guess someone called it in. I was just all in shock, like, damn."

Jesus joined the Aztecas three seasons ago, and his mother, a cannery worker from Sinaloa, in northwestern Mexico, is often at the games. He was doing well, he says, until he skipped a meeting with Castaneda. (For her part, Castaneda can only say cryptically that she wouldn't give him a violation just for skipping one meeting.) He gestures at his ankle, where a small black electronic monitoring device is strapped. He'll have it for a month, and besides school and soccer practice, he isn't allowed to go further

than 100 yards past his front step. "It's boring being at the house, not being able to go outside, join parties and stuff," he gripes. "Now that I'm on probation, I feel like I get myself more into trouble. I don't know. Probably because they pay attention."

Gina

Castaneda understands the boys on her team better than they might think. "I would say most of them don't know," she says of her past. "You want them to learn from your experiences, but sometimes you don't know if you can share them or not."

The origins of the team lie in Castaneda's story. Her stepfather, a foreman on a large strawberry farm in Watsonville, built a soccer field for the employees he managed and coached a team, the Aztecas, after which Castaneda's team is named. She says she often found herself on that field, practicing with her stepfather's team. It was an escape from what was going on back home. "We grew up in a family where being a gang member was the norm. You're taught to walk a certain way, to talk a certain way," she says. "In my family, you can't wear a certain color or you'd get beat up. And it wasn't like you'd get smacked. You'd get punched, socked, people wouldn't stop hitting you until you were on the ground, rolling around." Castaneda says her mother and older brothers were heavily involved in gangs and substance abuse, and regularly took their tempers out on her and her little sisters. Castaneda and her five siblings all have different fathers, and she remembers a household that would regularly fall into chaos. She says her stepfather's encouragement was one of the few positive things she remembers. "He would say to me, 'Don't listen to your mom, you're a good kid,'" she says. "The one positive thing that came out of it was love for sports."

But when the relationship between her mother and stepfather fell apart, things deteriorated even further. After the breakup, Castaneda and her mother lived in a car until it broke down. They began sleeping in abandoned homes, in parks and on the street. Castaneda was 11 years old.

One of her most vivid memories is the night she couldn't find her mother when she got back to their normal meeting place, the Watsonville Plaza, after school. "I finally sat down at a bus stop in front of El Mundial on Main Street and broke down," she says. "My brother's homeboy, or his gang friend, walked up behind me and said, 'Gina, is that you?' He just sat with me all night. The next morning he took me over to the gas station and he bought me two chili dogs. He said, 'Here's two bucks, go to school. If you can't find your mom, I'll meet you here again.'"

Her brother's friend eventually did find Castaneda's mother for her, but she remained homeless until she was 16 1/2—old enough to get a job at Subway and con her way into an apartment by telling the landlord she was a Cabrillo College student. She also says she never stopped going to school, if for nothing else that it was a warm place where she got fed, but her soccer skills earned her the title "athlete of the year" and a cover story in the Santa Cruz Sentinel.

The story caught the attention of a county worker who suggested her to Salud Para La Gente, where she was offered a job as an HIV peer educator, distributing condoms and discussing clean needles with migrant working men at bars, eventually moving on to form a teen women's health group and a family planning clinic. She began working on gang issues as a gang intervention specialist in local high schools and a counselor at juvenile drug court. It was there that another probation officer made a suggestion.

"She said, 'We need people like you to become probation officers,'" says Castaneda. "I thought, 'Not me. I'm never going to be law enforcement.'" But on a whim she applied anyway and got the job.

Despite her history, Castaneda says she still doesn't like to tell her charges. "In law enforcement you're taught not to share anything personal," she says. "One time, a father said, 'How could you even want to give information to his PO?'—it was because [his son] had gotten in trouble—'when you know what it is to live on the streets?' The father wanted to manipulate it so I would feel bad."

Nevertheless, there are echoes of her personal experience in the way she treats her players. "[While Jesus was in juvenile hall,] I called him to check in on him. He said, 'Do I have to turn in my uniform?' and said 'You don't have to turn in your uniform. As long as you want to play on the team, there will be a spot on the team for you,'" she says. "I'm not going to turn them away like everyone else in their lives has."

The Finals

Come the end of September, the Aztecas have made it handily to the men's division 4 final championship round with eight wins, a tie and only one loss. Aside from the usual bickering over playing time and who gets stuck playing defense—no one ever wants to play defense—the season has been relatively drama-free. "I think we can win the whole thing," says Castaneda outside the arena.

The team parents use the increased crowds come playoff time at Soccer Central to the team's advantage, setting up a fundraising taco stand outside the doors and selling carne asada, chorizo and al pastor tacos for \$1.50 each. In the past, the taco stand has raised half of the team's \$600 league fee, with the rest coming from places like the Lions Club. Sal Garcia's mom and girlfriend Erica do most of the cooking over the hot gas-powered disco. By now Erica is massively pregnant. It's a boy, Sal tells me, due Nov. 11. They're naming him Daniel.

The team has made it to the playoffs the last six seasons, but never further than the semifinals before. The quarterfinal was a nail-biter against La Florida, in which the boys spent the entire first half losing before surging ahead in the second to tie the game at 7-7 ("My stomach hurts," Castaneda groaned on the sidelines). One of the adult players scored the winning goal with just a few minutes to spare.

The semifinal the next day, a foggy Tuesday night, was a hard-fought battle against El Huracan, the only team that beat them this season. The boys asserted themselves early, but knowing they've never made it further than this round had emotions running high—there was an abundance of carding and several tense minutes when an El Huracan player went down and had to be carried off the field. In the end, the Aztecas clinched a clear victory, 5-3. "Eat healthy, get rest, and no smoking or drinking," she told the boys afterward, to the usual snickers and eye-rolling.

"I'm extremely proud of the boys," she said breathlessly in the parking lot. "This is the best I've ever seen them."

That Friday, at 7:50pm, the boys arrive at the arena. It's dark and foggy. The late game gives the lighting inside the arena a different character, like stage lights. "I have to be nervous, 'cause it's the final," says Jorge as he laces up his shoes. "It's going to be hard. But we probably will beat them. Win the championship."

"Really nervous," Jesus sums up the moment. "Exciting."

Castaneda is nervous too. All but one boy—another house arrest—are there on time, an atypical way for

them to spend a Friday night. Two of the three players who'd groused at the first game are there, though their friend in the "W"-hat is not. The arena is packed, and the boys are nervous and drawing attention to themselves. At one point, Castaneda runs into an old soccer buddy who asks her who the "gangster kids" are. "They were posted up and mad dogging and seeing who's around them," she says. "This is not normal for them to be at a soccer arena, in a championship game when there's, what, 250 people? It's really uncomfortable for them."

The rival team, Chelsea, enters the field in neon yellow jerseys. Castaneda nervously sets up the players, giving out positions and advice, all while her 5-year-old daughter obliviously trails her, pleading for 50 cents. "I think I'm more nervous than you guys are," she says just before the first whistle starts the game. Early in the first half, both Jose and an adult mentor score, and it's 2-0 thanks to multiple flying saves by adult goalie Jose "Belly" Barriga.

But by the second half Belly's luck runs out, and the score quickly climbs to a tie, 2-2. At 11 minutes, he gives up one more at close range, then another at the high right pocket. "We're not going to lose," snaps Castaneda as the boys' chatter in the box turns negative. "It's not over, Aztecas." Minutes later, Castaneda's husband scores, and the energy on the field takes on an almost frenzied pitch. With three minutes left, Jose passes back to Castaneda's husband, who taps it in to tie the game.

In what seems like a flash, the final minutes tick down on the half. The game enters a five-minute sudden death, and with a couple extremely close shots by Jose, Castaneda's usual coaching tips are reduced to breathless gasps of disappointment. The crowd, which is almost entirely Chelsea supporters, is getting bloodthirsty, cheering when Belly momentarily falls to the ground holding his face. But the score sticks stubbornly at 4-4 through two five-minute rounds. "This is it," says Castaneda.

First up, Jose put one away easily in the far left corner. Belly dives for the right pocket, deflecting the first Chelsea kicker. Jorge takes the second shot, but it bounces just outside the far left hand side of the goal, and he buries his face in his hands. "It's OK, it's OK," Castaneda yells. "Jorge—lift up your head." The next two shooters make the exact same mistake, until the third Chelsea player makes it with a hard shot to the lower left side. The score is tied, 1-1, and Jesus is up. "Esta bien, esta bien," Castaneda hollers.

Jesus steps back, winds up and trots toward the ball. The shot glances off the goalie's left hand and in. Jesus throws a fist in the air and smiles, high-fives Jorge, and instead of running back to the center with the other boys, jogs up and hugs Castaneda. "Good job," she says. "Si se puede, Aztecas, si se puede!" The final Chelsea shooter winds up and shoots—it's wide. "That's it! We won! We won! It's our game!" Castaneda yells. Belly grabs Jesus in a headlock, the brothers hug Castaneda, everyone high-fives. "Nice job out there, nice playing," she says hoarsely to one of the boys. "I can't believe we won." She sighs, grinning. Then it's right back to business as she turns to one of the players and asks: "Why were you late?"

Fall

In some ways the win is anticlimactic. The boys are nonchalant, allowing Castaneda to take them out for pizza, where they play Street Fighter II and pose for unsmiling photos with the tall gold trophy. But just like that, it's over. The fall season starts the very next Monday.

A few major changes have occurred by the fall. Jorge and Jose announce they'll be playing for their high school team and can't play with the Aztecas anymore. Jose starts making tentative plans to go to college. Garcia, as he prepares for the arrival of his son, graduates from his comprehensive probation program. All he has left to do is pay restitution to one of his victims to get off probation for good, but he's not as eager as one might think, according to Castaneda. "The other day, he showed me enough money to pay off his restitution. He just chooses not to. He's making small payments towards it," she says. "He's afraid to let go. We've had several conversations with him about how we can still be supportive to him, but this is what he chooses."

As for Castaneda, she allows herself only a short beat to react to the win. "I went home and I cried," she says. What set her off, she says, was something Jesus said right after he scored the winning penalty kick. "He said, 'Thank you for believing in me.' I *thought* he said, 'Thank you for believing in me, that I could score.' But at least two or three more times at the pizza place he kept coming up to me and saying thank you," she says. "I thought, it's more than just a penalty kick."

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