

# Mexican soccer clubs draw 15,087 to downtown Fresno

By Angel Moreno

The smell of bacon-wrapped hot dogs wafted through the streets of downtown Fresno, a hint of something tasty to come.

Vendors hawking jerseys, flags, soccer balls, noisemakers, food and more confirmed that a sea of people were headed that way for a Mexican League exhibition between popular clubs Leon and Cruz Azul on Friday night at Chukchansi Park.

By the time night rolled in, a standing-room only crowd of 15,087 nearly filled the stadium as fans clamored, cheered and jeered nonstop for the 90 minutes of game action. Supporters clad in Leon's green and Cruz Azul's blue joined forces and created two epic rounds of *La Ola*, or "the wave," that engulfed the stadium bleachers midway through both halves.

Supporters traveled from as far as San Diego, Watsonville, Long Beach and Inglewood, and as near as around the block to watch another edition of Mexican club soccer at the downtown stadium.

Hanford's Javier Arredondo, 25, didn't hear about the game until a few days ago. When the lifelong Cruz Azul fan went to buy tickets Wednesday, he was left with \$76 VIP tickets as his only option.

That didn't stop him. He bought three: one each for himself, wife Blanca and 2-year old son Javier.

The three sported matching jerseys and arrived an hour early to beat the rush and watch the teams warm up. His biggest thrill was watching his favorite player, La Maquina forward Christian "Chaco" Gimenez.

"I'm excited," Arredondo said. "This is my first time ever seeing (Cruz Azul). I've been a fan since I was a kid so I've been waiting for this day for a long time. There was no way I was going to miss this."

For a few fans at the game Friday night, it was only the beginning of a soccer-filled weekend, as they planned to travel to Los Angeles for Saturday's FIFA international friendly between Mexico and Ecuador at Memorial Coliseum.

Gaby Cortes and Alejandro Ortega, both of greater LA, made the drive up with a caravan of Leon supporters known as the *Locos de Arriba California*, ("Crazies from Northern California,").

The group of about 50 carpoled from Los Angeles and claim to go to nearly every game in support of *La Fiera* (Leon's nickname, aka "The Beast,").

"We're everywhere," shouted Ortega. "We'll go to Tijuana, San Diego, Stockton, Sacramento, Oregon, Fresno. Wherever! We're Leon until the day we die."

At that moment, his friend Jose Ulises Navarro Villanueva rolled up his left pant leg and right sleeve, revealing two large tattoos showing his love for Leon.

The one on his arm was a Lion and the one on his leg was the team's crest adorned with seven stars signifying the club's seven league championships.

"League games, exhibition, or international, we go to support Leon," Cortes said.

Cortes and Ortega said they are both fans of the Mexican national team, but mostly excited to see Club Leon selection Jose Juan Vasquez.

It was tough luck for The Beast, however, as The Machine came out victorious Friday, cruising to a 3-0 win.

Cruz Azul midfielder Ismael Valadez had a hat trick, scoring first in the 40th minute and twice more after halftime.

A brutal collision and headbutt between Leon's Cristian Torres and Cruz Azul's Alejandro Vela in the 50th minute forced the two to be subbed off because of injury. Torres walked off under his own power, but suffered a cut on the top of his head. Vela appeared to show signs of a concussion and had to be carried off the field by a group of trainers.

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