

# DALLAS MORNING NEWS

## Ciudad Juárez football squad plays for massacred teammates

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CIUDAD JUÁREZ, Mexico — Near halftime, the game already looked lost. The quarterback, Raúl Parra, glanced at the scoreboard and mumbled to himself, “Nothing to be ashamed of, we had a great season.”

That’s when football turned into more than just a game for the team, the coach and Parra, who played with the scars of three bullet wounds in his left leg, a vivid reminder of the most tragic night in memory in this violent border city.

With another football season underway, the boys from Ciudad Juárez are practicing with the same ragtag, hand-me-down uniforms, stitched-up shoulder pads, borrowed helmets, an unpaid coach and playing a game — football — that’s seen as inferior to the national pastime, soccer. They’re also defending champs.

How the team achieved that come-from-behind victory in the Mexican Division III college championship back in May is a little-known story that says as much about the game of football as about the team itself.

“This wasn’t about resources, tools,” said Parra, 21. “This was about heart. Who had more heart, who wanted it more, who believed in it more.”

### *Mistaken identity*

At a football field here, the last rays of summer fall on an odd assortment of players from throughout the city, all united by one memory. Their inspiration can be found near the field: the busts of two fallen players — Rodrigo Cadeña and Juan Carlos Medrano — who were killed in January 2010 in what’s known as the massacre in Villas de Salvarcar, a working-class neighborhood on the outskirts of the city. The two teens were among 15 young people gunned down by gang members who had the wrong information and, instead of killing rival gang members, murdered the students and others celebrating at a birthday party.

Parra and three other players were in the crowd that evening. A lone child raised by a protective single mother, this was his first social outing. He remembers dancing, the music interrupted by a burst of gunfire. He remembers falling and lying next to Medrano

and others, all with serious gunshot wounds. They crawled into a car and headed to a nearby hospital. He held Medrano in his arms and screamed to the heavens for God to save their quarterback and team leader, a boy nicknamed “Coraje” — Courage — for his fierce determination and leadership on and off the field. Medrano died during surgery. Parra called his own mother.

“He wouldn’t tell me much other than to head to the hospital, but I could hear in the background, the boys screaming and asking, ‘How many bullets did you take?’” recalled Marisela Godoy, 42. “I arrived and saw mothers wailing, covered in blood.”

### *Turning point*

The massacre became a turning point for Mexico, as critics of then-President Felipe Calderón began to question his battle against organized crime — especially after the president suggested that the victims of the massacre were probably gang members themselves. For the families, the massacre was their wake-up call to strengthen their community. American football was a way to heal and find solidarity.

On the field that night back in May, a long season was winding down in Chihuahua City, home of the Borregos del Tec de Monterrey, a much bigger, wealthier college with a 52-member team. On the line was the regional championship. The Jaguares of CBTIS 128, as their school is known, shouldn’t even have been in the game. The last time the two teams played, Los Borregos had sent them packing, 34-0, and in the first half in May they played like they didn’t belong, in part because many on the 30-member team were injured.

Parra is still not sure when or how things fell into place. Maybe it was when he walked off the field and realized he was lucky just to be walking and playing on a leg and mangled toes scarred by those three bullets, or the promise he made to Medrano and Rodrigo: win a championship. Whatever it was, the realization crept in that they were playing for something else.

The next two quarters still feel like a dream. Down 14-0, the team rallied for nine points as halftime was ending. For some, having scored nine points felt like a consolation. Not for Coach Pedro Daniel Gallegos, 25, who had known the players for years and



*Raul Parra, the Jaguares quarterback, was shot three times in the leg in the 2010 massacre. Two teammates died.*

considered them teammates and friends. During halftime, he huddled the team and looked everyone in the eye.

“I normally cry during and before most games,” he said. “Not that moment. I reminded my players we were playing for more than just ourselves. We had to leave it all on the field.” The room fell silent. Determination took over.

### *Inspiration*

“We could feel Medrano’s determination and Rodrigo’s humility in the room,” he said.

“I’m convinced they were there with us because the next two quarters we played with a purpose, humility and determination.”

Suddenly, players who were injured volunteered to play, one, two, three plays, enough to make a difference. Parra, who wears a T-shirt with the faces of his fallen friends, kept patting his jersey, touching their faces. Other than a field goal, Los Borregos didn’t score again.

“They were a different team, that’s for sure,” said Lupita Davila, Rodrigo’s mother and, along with her husband, Adrián Cadeña, the team’s biggest boosters. “The energy, everything was different. They played with no mercy for the opponent.” The Jaguares won, 31-17.

Despite Juarez’s proximity to Texas, football gets little respect here. Players share practice fields with soccer players and constantly lobby school administrators for practice time. The team is once again seeking donations to travel, with mothers calling everyone they know on both sides of the border, soliciting funds for equipment, footballs — anything to keep their dream and team alive.

And the pain lingers. Parra still wakes up in the middle of the night, sobbing, consumed by guilt and reminded of the debt he has with his team to the fallen players. Just win.

His time in the hospital, weeks, persuaded him to seek a career in nursing because he wants to help others live. He’d also like to someday coach, teach younger players.

“I’d like to teach them that football is much more than just a game,” he said. “It’s about coming together and playing in unison for something you believe in, something bigger than you.”

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