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Culture of competition: Latinos making impact on local scene

In sports lore, the names are familiar: Oscar De LaHoya, Lisa Fernandez, Lorena Ochoa and Albert Pujols.

More than the knockouts, wins, birdies and hits the aforementioned are known for, they have continued to pave the way for Latino athletes in America. They've influenced the way their respective games are played, as much as their foundation-laying predecessors like Pele and Roberto Clemente did years ago.

While not household names, high school athletes of Latin American descent are paving their own path as well and in some cases raising the level of competition.

The boys soccer teams at Gainesville, Johnson and West Hall each made state playoff appearances out of Region 7-AAA in 2009. Of the 62 players that made up the rosters of the three teams, 79 percent were Latino.

"Hall County is one of the most competitive soccer regions in all of Georgia as far as pure talent is concerned," Johnson boys soccer coach Brian Shirley said. "That just goes to show the type of influence (Latinos) are having on the game."

The numbers are there: Nine of Flowery Branch's 17 players and 16 of Chestatee's 26 players were of Latino descent in 2009. But it's more the quality they bring than their quantity.

"Soccer's a culture for them," said Chestatee boys coach Michael Herrin. "They have a passion for it, and even as kids constantly played it.

"Their style is fast and they want to score a lot and it makes the other kids rise to the challenge," he added. "They like playing at a higher level and when you're playing against largely Latino teams, you have to play at a higher level."

The higher level of play has translated into success for Hall County teams, to the tune of three state semifinal and two state finals appearances in the last four years.

With senior forward Juan Arbelaez leading the way, 2009 Region 7-AAA champions West Hall was the latest Hall County team to make a state finals appearance.

"Soccer is the most popular sport in the world," Shirley said. "And that is finally being brought here.

"This past year we had tremendous school support because of the energy (the Latin community) brings to the game with it being part of their communities and culture. And the speed and excitement of their style of play they've brought along too — it's putting soccer on the map, and their play is forcing other guys to be more creative."

For Herrin, that's especially true in more rural areas.

"The schools in the smaller classifications are really making names for themselves," he said. "In the more rural parts of Hall County and other areas where there's been an influx of immigrants, the participation of the sport and the caliber of the play has increased."

Daniel T. Griswold, associate director of the Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute in Washington D.C., in an article about immigration and its influence on America said: "Immigration is not undermining the American experiment; it is an integral part of it. We are a nation of immigrants. Successive waves of immigrants have kept our country demographically young, enriched our culture, and added to our productive capacity as a nation, enhancing our influence in the world."

On the local sports scene, an expanding Latin American population has also managed to raise the local popularity of the world's most popular sport.

"Soccer doesn't draw the same crowds as football and basketball," Herrin said. "But it draws energetic crowds because for most in the stands, it's part of their culture.

"They bring the noise, and it's great to be out on the field, turn around and see a kid from Chestatee painted up for one of your games."

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