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MULTIPLE MEANINGS

Kicking around Houston 1836

Soccer team sends the wrong message to Latinos

By RAÚL A. RAMOS

By naming the team Houston 1836, the newly arrived Major League Soccer franchise has chosen to identify with a year that may divide the city rather than unite it. While the team intends to highlight Houston's founding along the banks of Buffalo Bayou, the year also commemorates the defeat of the Mexican Army by a largely Anglo Texan militia at the Battle of San Jacinto. Whether by ignorance or design, choosing 1836 has the potential to alienate Houstonians of Mexican origin, a group that is surely a large part of the team's fan base.

The year 1836 was, no doubt, a significant year in history. As a 19th-century historian, I welcome the attention the team name brings to what I feel is a misunderstood era. But choosing 1836 sends the wrong message at the wrong time. Texans of Mexican decent constantly struggle to identify with a place that was created out of Mexican defeat.

Houston stands perched to take its place among the economic

centers of the Americas, thanks in great part to its sizable Latino population. This is not the time to exclude us.

This team name comes at a time of increased awareness of how mascots and names can stereotype or offend Americans. Last year, the National Collegiate Athletic Association scrutinized the use of Native Americans in team names such as the Florida State Seminoles and the Carthage College Redmen (now Red Men). Team names such as the Atlanta Braves and Washington Redskins sound anachronistic to modern ears. Not long ago the Washington Bullets changed their name to Wizards for similar reasons.

Thus it came as a surprise to me, and many of my students and colleagues, to hear 1836. Some thought it was a joke when I mentioned it. Surely the team must have anticipated this response if they knew anything about Texas history.

Lately I have noticed college students taking a more cynical or media savvy approach to explaining these marketing terms. One student in my class thought the name was a ploy to get attention for the team and that the real name would come later. But all of them saw the contradiction inherent in naming the team 1836 while expecting Latino fans to attend games.

Team officials state that 1836 was primarily chosen to represent the city's founding. A team name doesn't have the luxury of explaining itself. The link to Texas secession from Mexico during the Texas Revolution is inescapable.

The team logo compounds the connection by depicting Sam Houston on horseback, leading the charge against Mexican troops. What other conclusion can we draw?

While the year represents Texas independence, it also raises the complicated and sometimes shameful history that came along with it. Initially seen as economic boosters, Anglo American immigrants brought slavery and failed to keep contracts made with state officials. For Mexicans, Texas secession started the process of American conquest culminating in the invasion of Mexico in 1846 and the loss of almost half its territory. Few would disagree that Texas independence was an important chapter in the imperial story of American Manifest Destiny.

Houston has undergone many transformations and reinventions since 1836. Digging the Ship Channel, the Galveston hurricane of 1900, discovering oil and sending a man to the moon all took place since then and all changed the face of the city. Naming the team 1836 smacks of nostalgia for a time when Mexican people were absent or at least knew their place.

Another student in class generously noted that perhaps the team took for granted Latino fans and wanted to increase Anglo interest with this team name. Perhaps soccer is already too identified with Latin America and Europe. Perhaps this is retribution for the vocal support the Mexican national team receives when it comes to town.

A more sinister reading suggests the team wants Latino aficionados, but only on their terms. Those terms are leaving your heritage,

identity and family at the door.

The team has started its relationship with the Latino community off on the wrong foot. Short of changing the name, the team needs to make extra efforts to appear open to Latino Houstonians.

Only then, and by removing Sam Houston from the logo, will the team come to symbolize the promise of a global capital.

Ramos is assistant professor, Department of History, University of Houston.

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