

MAKING IT WORK;

In This Club, Some Runners Run For Their Lives

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Byline: By SARAH KERSHAW

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Body

THE 12 men took their places on the running track in Red Hook Park, already breaking a sweat under a scorching afternoon sun. From the front of the pack, a runner shouted, "Vamos!" From the back, another made the sign of the cross over his chest and asked the Virgin Mary to bless his tired legs. With that, the Mexican running club was off for a speed workout of laps and 800-meter sprints.

Racing along in the cluster of immigrants, most of them from the Mexican state Puebla, was Guillermo Pineda, 23, who was concentrating on getting his 5-kilometer (3.1-mile) time back down to 17 minutes. Both his 5-kilometer and 10-kilometer times were too high, he said, because he had missed a month of practice while he was held at a Federal immigration detention center in Louisiana.

In April, he was arrested in a raid on a Manhattan garment factory suspected of hiring illegal immigrants, like Mr. Pineda. He was ordered deported, but by late May he had been released and was back in New York, making bicycle deliveries for restaurants -- and running.

Zippering past Mr. Pineda on the track was Pedro Medina, 25, who said he had recently returned from Mexico where he helped his wife and infant son get to Tijuana and cross the border. Mr. Medina said he had obtained a visa that allows him to enter the country to run races. After moving from one dishwashing job to another he recently found a construction job, although he said he did not expect it to last. "Sometimes when I feel bad or scared or kind of nervous about my life," Mr. Medina said in Spanish, "I put on my sneakers and I let the problems go. It cures you mentally."

Five years ago, when six runners from Chinantla, a village in Puebla, formed the Club Atletico Mexicano de Nueva York, the goals were simple: stay in shape, win a few races. But as word spread around the city, the club has grown to about 100 members.

These runners, who are mostly in their 20's, 30's and 40's and include a handful of women, have woven themselves into a familial support network, bonded by the shared experience of life as an immigrant in the city. For many, it is a life of temporary labor and long working hours, risky border crossings and the looming fear of arrest. "I'm very proud of my runners," said Adam Lazaro, 42, the club's president, whose 17-year-old son, Adams is a member. "I'm strict. The runners must have discipline. But we help those who come to us."

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Newer immigrants often rely on the veteran club members for help with paying for running shoes, legal advice and tips on housing and jobs and written requests to employers for time off to run. Mr. Lazaro, who came to the city 27 years ago and works as a bell captain at the Princeton Club, said runners often miss practices or races, sometimes disappearing for a month or more because of their constantly changing work schedules or run-ins with the Immigration and Naturalization Service. Some return to Mexico to see their families or to run races and never make it back.

Absent at the workout in Red Hook Park was Antonio Bautista, whom no one had seen since he lost his dishwashing job a month ago. Mr. Lazaro was worried. "Any word from Antonio?" he asked the runners, who responded by shaking their heads.

When Mr. Pineda was arrested and sent to Louisiana, Mr. Lazaro said he contacted a friend of his at the Mexican Consulate in New Orleans and lobbied for Mr. Pineda's release. Mr. Lazaro wrote to the Immigration and Naturalization Service, which turned the case over to an immigration judge who turned out to be a serious runner. Mr. Pineda recalled that when he went before the judge, the first question was, "What's your time in the 5K?" The judge suspended the deportation order and released Mr. Pineda on \$1,500 bail -- part of which was raised by his fellow runners -- and transferred the case to New York, where it is pending. Mr. Pineda said he believed his running helped persuade the judge to let him go.

The club, which placed second among teams competing in last year's New York City Marathon after the West Side Runners, is ranked fourth among about 50 city running clubs that accumulate points in various races. The club won second place last Sunday in a half-marathon in the Bronx and is to compete today for the annual five-mile Club Team Championship in Central Park.

FOR the Mexican immigrants, the most meaningful run of the year is one from a church in Bushwick, Brooklyn, to a church in Chelsea in Manhattan that Mr. Lazaro has held for the past two years to duplicate a tradition of his native village, Chinantla. Each January, runners form a 300-mile relay from Mexico City to Chinantla to celebrate the day, more than 100 years ago, when a life-size statue of Jesus was left in a village church by traveling missionaries who were suddenly unable to carry it. A few years ago, the church burned down, but the statue, called Padre Jesus de Chinantla, survived.

The running club practices five times a week, alternating days devoted to speed training and distance training, with runners encouraged to go on solo runs on the other two days, all year long.

Other runners seem impressed by the success of the Mexican club. "We have lawyers who work 60- and 70-hour weeks and run in the clubs, but this seems to be a different kind of stress," said Andy Kimerling, co-chairman of the club council of the New York Road Runners Club. "And some groups have a neighborhood that keeps them together, but the Mexicans have a pretty powerful common bond."

Two days after the speed workout, as the runners gathered for a distance workout around the perimeter of Prospect Park, Mr. Lazaro was relieved when Mr. Bautista appeared at practice. "Antonio!" he said, patting the runner on the back. "You're back. Did you find work?"

"Yes," Mr. Bautista said, noting that after searching for weeks, he had landed a three-day-a-week construction job that pays \$50 a day. "For now."

Mr. Lazaro leaned on Mr. Bautista's shoulder for balance, folded his right leg into a stretch and called to the group: "Vamos!"

Graphic

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Photo: Long **working** hours often precede practice for members of **Club** Atletico Mexicano de Nueva York, a local **running club**. (Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times)

Table: "**RUNNING**: Vamos! On the Track With a Mexican **Running Club**" lists the top **runners** and their best times at the **Club** Atletico Mexicano de Nueva York.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Subject: IMMIGRATION (90%); **RUNNING** (90%); BORDER CONTROL (89%); EXERCISE & FITNESS (89%); ARRESTS (88%); TERRITORIAL & NATIONAL BORDERS (76%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (75%); DEPORTATION (75%); POLITICAL DETAINEES (75%); IMMIGRANT DETENTION CENTERS (75%); GARMENT WORKERS (72%); TEMPORARY EMPLOYMENT (67%); INFANTS & TODDLERS (65%)

Company: **CLUB** ATLETICO MEXICO DE NUEVA YORK

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Industry: GARMENT WORKERS (72%); CONSTRUCTION (67%); RESTAURANTS (66%); APPAREL MFG (53%)

Geographic: NEW YORK, NY, USA (70%); NEW YORK, USA (73%); LOUISIANA, USA (72%); MEXICO (94%)

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