

The stands at the Jack Allen Southwest Recreation Complex hold almost 2,000 fans.

The bleachers at field level hold another 500 or so.

On Sunday, those weren't nearly enough as an estimated 3,000-plus horn-blowing, flag-waving, cheering folks watched Duke University's women's soccer team from Durham, N.C., defeat the Mexican national team 1-0.

It appeared that at least five out of every six spectators at the international exhibition match were Hispanic.

There were certainly more Mexican flags than American ones.

"It's great," said Decatur resident Carlos Perez, 19, a native of Mexico. "I couldn't even imagine seeing your team from your country coming to play in a small town. It's actually great."

It was Mexico's third game in five days in Alabama against college teams. Mexico previously defeated Auburn 2-0 on Wednesday and beat North Carolina 1-0 on Saturday at Birmingham's Legion Field.

Scott Spencer, director of coaching for the Alabama Youth Soccer Association, said his organization picked up the cost of the trip for Mexico, paying for meals, hotels and travel. The AYSA also helped Duke with travel expenses.

When the Mexican national anthem sounded from the stadium speakers in Decatur, the crowd sang it in unison. The same can't be said for the U.S. anthem.

However, Maria Chavez, who came to the United States from Mexico more than 20 years ago, said just the fact that no one sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" doesn't mean they don't love the country.

"We are very excited, and we're here to support them (Mexico)," Chavez, 40, said. "We can say 'Viva United States,' too, but our heart is Mexican."

Those in attendance were happy to have Decatur host the Mexican team, even if immigration reform currently is the hot topic in the country.

The Senate on Friday rejected the latest attempt to update immigration laws.

Chavez favors allowing immigrants already in the country to gain residency, as the bill proposes.

"Everyone is here for an opportunity to improve their lives, and the reason they move to the United States is to live better for their children," she said. "We are good workers. We're responsible. We like to do right."

She added: "We support the United States economy. I cannot imagine this country without the people who work specifically in the field."

What's happening in regard to immigration didn't keep people from enjoying a sunny Sunday afternoon of soccer, though.

"We're really fans of soccer," Perez said. "When I heard the Mexican soccer team was coming here, I just wanted to come to the soccer game."

And that's why people like Susana Velacquez went to watch the match.

"It was very cool," the 13-year-old said. "It was the first time to have people from outside the (United) States come play in Decatur."

Spencer helped bring the game to Decatur after Julianne Lowman, the marketing director for Decatur Parks and Recreation, showed him the brand new facility near Cedar Ridge Golf Course.

"The complex is absolutely state of the art," Spencer said. "You're not going to have anybody come to that complex and not be blown away by the quality of it."

Bradley Handwerger  
The Decatur Daily Staff Writer  
April 10, 2006