

Turf Wars

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Co-reported and written with Brendan Joel Kelley.

BY DAVID HOLTHOUSE

Same day, October 19. Fireworks pop over Sun Devil Stadium and 74,947 fans cheer as Arizona State University kicks off to the University of Southern California. Four miles east, another football game is about to begin, this one with considerably less fanfare.

Today, the Chandler Varrío Locos are scheduled to play La Victoria Loca at Escalante Park, deep in the heart of Victory Acres, or "La Victoria," the oldest barrio in the East Valley.

Escalante and all of La Victoria is La Victoria Loca territory, and has been for more than 40 years. According to police, LVL is one of the largest, most powerful Chicano gangs in the state. The Chandler Varrío Locos are much smaller, with not as much history behind them. The CVL are the underdogs in this afternoon's match-up, the second game of the season in the Inter-Barrio Football League, an attempt by the leaders of LVL and one freelance activist to transform a sporadic tradition into an organized means to promote peace and unity among Chicano gangs in the Valley.

Normally, the CVL would never venture this far into La Victoria in such numbers. About 20 of them are circling next to the wall of a nearby elementary school, warily eyeing the 50 or 60 LVL stretching and taping their ankles along a chain-link fence on the other side of the field.

Most of the Chandler players are wearing blue bandannas, sports jerseys or tee shirts with airbrush art and decals of lowrider cars, the gang's letters, and the phrase "Mi Vida Loca." The LVL members are also sporting their colors—maroon shirts with gold and white Old English lettering that spells out "Victory Acres," "Uno Mas de La Victoria," and nicknames like Pee Wee, Rascal, Cisco, and Silent.

Manuel, 18, a monster LVL lineman at six-foot-three and 345 pounds, points to a group of Chandler late arrivals walking across the cracked blacktop of the school's basketball court. "You see that fat guy? I'm gonna put my head in his fuckin' stomach and see what he had for breakfast."

A few feet away, the bald-headed, goateed LVL spokesman and team quarterback Payaso towers over a little boy munching Chee-tos, and Payaso passes out yellow wristbands to several LVL wide receivers. Printed on the bands are pass patterns, with corresponding numbers. "That's for our

hurry-up offense," explains Payaso ("clown"). "No huddle, you know? I call a number, the receivers look at their wrist and do what it says."

Once he's finished, Payaso calls over community gang counselor Gabe Munoz and backhand waves at the CVL. "Go tell them we're ready," he says. "Kickoff's in ten minutes."



Ten days before the Chandler game, Payaso sits on the couch at his friend Joey's house in La Victoria, eating fish sticks and watching the cheeseball comedy *Billy Madison* with Joey's family. Payaso is supposed to meet with Munoz and a representative from the Chandler Varrio Locos in about 30 minutes at a Chandler youth center where Munoz volunteers at night. The agenda is terms for the upcoming game. Payaso asks Joey to drive. "I don't know, man," his friend responds. "I heard Derrick [a Chandler gangbanger not affiliated with the CVL] still has a bullet for me." Joey's 16-year-old sister turns away from the TV. "He and his brother got shot two weeks ago," she says. "They're dead." Joey shrugs and smiles. "All right, then, let's hit it."

Outside, Payaso slides into the back seat of Joey's black, 1972 Lincoln Continental, all cherried out with chrome and leather. The image of a *charrito*, a buxom Mexican bandit queen wearing bandoliers and brandishing twin six-shooters, is sealed between two panes of thick glass in the rear window. "Riding in style tonight, eh, bro?" says Joey.

Payaso arrives at the youth center ten minutes late to find that Juan, the CVL's ambassador, has just left to get food. Payaso and Munoz agree that's no problem, really, because tension between the Tempe and Chandler gangs is relatively low.

"It should be even lower after they play," says Munoz. "Usually, if guys from different barrios run into one another on the street or in a mall, the standard greeting is, 'Hey, where you from?' See, that's negative right there. That's confrontational. But after they've played football against one another, hopefully they'll be more like 'Hey, I remember you from the game, what's up?' Hopefully, they'll become Eduardo and Mark to one another, instead of Tempe and East Mesa. The whole idea is to get them to distinguish beyond the gang affiliation."

Barrio-on-barrio football in the Valley is nothing new—barrio elders say La Victoria started playing football against other neighborhoods almost 50 years ago, when today's gangbangers with bandannas and Mac 10s would have been pachucos with zoot suits and switchblades. Occasionally, according to sociology studies of Valley barrios and longtime residents of La Victoria, pachucos from one barrio would rumble with another, usually over some inter-barrio dating scandal. But the violent provincialism among Valley barrios wasn't as severe then as it is now. Not even close. Guys from one barrio still partied regularly in other neighborhoods, and a casual Friday-night challenge

would turn into a football game on Saturday or Sunday, when entire barrios would turn out to watch their young men play.

As later generations of those young men began to shoot one another with alarming regularity in the late '70s, however, the football games took on a deeper meaning, and became less frequent. Some years, when tensions were particularly high, only one or two games were played, and then only to settle specific disputes before they erupted into gang warfare.

Traditionally, LVL has set up the games, and five years ago, Payaso took over the responsibility. Until this year, LVL played only a small handful of games against two or three other barrios. Their most frequent opponent over the past 15 years was LCM, a Phoenix gang LVL has developed and maintained cordial relations with, primarily through football.

Over the summer, Payaso says, he decided to work against Chicano gang violence by formalizing inter-barrio football. "It's a way to get to know one another besides fighting on the streets, and it's a way for barrios to gain mutual respect," he says. Payaso knew Munoz from an inter-barrio basketball program Munoz started last year called "Barrios Unidos," and asked for his help.

Munoz, a 24-year-old social work major at ASU, is known in Valley barrios as "the preacher."

"That's because I preach a lot," he says. "I preach against the violence. These guys are fighting barrio against barrio, La Raza versus La Raza, and I want them to realize they're the same. It's a gradual process, but sports is a good way to gain yards in the right direction. There's a field and a hoop in every barrio, you know?"

Munoz says he didn't grow up in a barrio, and was never gang affiliated. "When I was a kid, my mom told me, 'Don't go into La Victoria,'" he says. "Now, I go there all the time." Because he is respected in most barrios but aligns himself with none, Munoz helps Payaso organize the football games as an arbitrator and a messenger among gangs. So far, LVL is scheduled to play ten other barrios this year. "Next year," says Payaso, "we want all the lines to cross. We want everyone to play everyone."

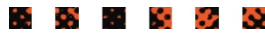
Some games are still used to defuse specific disputes. For example, about two and a half months ago, a group of younger La Victoria Loca got into a scrap with several bangers from Gilbert Brown Pride at a lowrider car show. There was talk of escalation on both sides, so Payaso got word to the Gilbert gang via Munoz that the two barrios should just have it out on the football field. Gilbert sent back a message that it wanted to talk to Payaso face to face first, in Gilbert.

A few days later, Payaso went unarmed and alone to a liquor store in Gilbert's barrio, where he met with Brown Pride representatives to discuss the conditions of the game (basically, the Gilbert gang wanted Payaso's word that LVL would not bring guns). Payaso says he wasn't scared at the meeting,

". . . only a little more cautious than normal. Those guys knew if they did anything to me, they would start something really, really bad. It would be all-out, and there are a lot more of us."

The two gangs met on neutral ground in a Mesa park the next weekend, and played football before a crowd of 60 or 70 family members and girlfriends from both neighborhoods, four Mesa police officers (who were invited) and four members of the GITEM state anti-gang task force (who were not). LVL won, 7-1.

Inter-barrio football rules are simple: 11-man teams, 100-yard fields, a touchdown counts one point, games go to seven, and losers buy the winners a keg. Munoz marks yardage and mediates disputes, but most penalties are called on the honor system. The gangs play tackle, and no pads are allowed. "Pads are for pussies," says Lil' Villain, an LVL linebacker. "Shit, I know I'm supposed to agree with all this positivity talk . . . but the chance to slam one of those motherfuckers from another barrio is a big part of why we play."



"Chicano Inter-Barrio FOOTBALL Game!" screamed the electric yellow fliers, liberally posted in several East Valley barrios to promote the CVL versus LVL match-up. "Come support something POSITIVE among our barrios. Mi Raza Primero! Remember, it's all about Brown Pride, Unity, and PEACE."

On Escalante field, however, it's all about barrio pride, rivalry and vicious hits. Shortly after the kickoff, a CVL receiver catches a pass for a substantial gain, but when an LVL safety pancakes him, the La Victoria sideline erupts into cheers and taunts like its team just scored a touchdown.

La Victoria has lost only two football games in the past 40 years, both to LCN three and four years ago. "Really, we only lost one," says Payaso. "They called a bogus penalty that cost us the winning touchdown in the second game." More important, LVL has never lost on its home field, and when Chandler draws first blood with an end run, the mood on the LVL side of the field turns dour. As usual, the quarterback gets more than his share of the blame. "Yo, Payaso, you're not fuckin' Dan Marino, man, you can't be throwing the ball all the time."

Play by both teams is surprisingly clean—late hits and blatant holding fouls are not common. A couple of hard blocks on an LVL sweep spark a shoving match, but it's quickly broken up by Payaso and Freddy, CVL's captain.

LVL scores on a long screen pass by a lanky, white-gloved player named K, then takes the lead 2-1 on the next possession with the gang's infamous trick play "The Sleeper," where a wide receiver

stands just barely inbounds so that he looks like he's part of the sideline crowd, then goes long once the quarterback takes the snap.

Afternoon traffic around Escalante Park is heavy. A police car cruises by three times in 20 minutes, the officer inside tapping his siren at least once during each pass. "Yeah, we see you," calls back Mahoney, La Victoria's resident comic. "Oink, oink, Mr. Piggy." A powder-blue Acura with gold rims creeps up to a stop sign across from the park and idles. The passenger-side window rolls down, and a hand shoots out, flashing the sign for the Mesa Homeboys, another gang. Three or four LVL members advance toward the fence. "Don't even," one of them shouts, and the Acura squeals away.

Dozens of other cars drive along the LVL side of the field, with honks and shouts of "Viva La Victoria!" Some pull into the school parking lot, and families with children get out with baskets of food, blankets and lawn chairs. An hour into the game, there are about 50 spectators on the La Victoria sideline, and maybe 20 on Chandler's.

One of the LVL fans is Ramon "Munchie" Bello, a short, white-haired man in his mid-60s who has lived in La Victoria since his early childhood, when the area around the barrio was mostly cotton fields, and Chicanos could only swim in the Tempe public pool on Saturdays.

Bello says that soon after WWII ended and several neighborhood men returned from battle, a Lebanese man who owned most of the property in Victory Acres—which then stretched from what is now Price to Dobson between Apache and University—threw a party for the whole barrio. A bull was slaughtered, and wine was plentiful. At the fiesta's peak, Bello says, some neighborhood men started shooting their pistols in the air and shouting "Viva La Victoria!" The neighborhood has been called "La Victoria" ever since.

Bello remembers playing football in dirt lots against teams from other barrios when he was a teenager. After the games, both sides would sit together on the bank of a canal and drink beer. "Back in the day, you know, it wasn't about gangs," Bello says. "There wasn't so much fighting between barrios. Things are bad for kids now."

Today, LVL claims more than 530 members, ranging in age from 9 to 70, "counting the old guys in jail," says Payaso. Like other Chicano gangs in the Valley, LVL members use the words "barrio" and "gang" interchangeably. "If you want to call 500 people looking out for each other a gang, then we're a gang," says Payaso. "But really, we're like a stronger version of a neighborhood-watch program. You don't have to worry about your kid getting snatched or raped if they wander off here. We take care of our barrio, because we are our barrio. If you could just brick everything up in here and put in a mall with a movie theatre, we wouldn't leave the fuckin' place."

Most members of LVL have extensive tattoo work done in a precisely detailed, black-ink style that originated among Chicano prison gangs. A common tattoo is one or more tears dripping from either eye. Some of the tears, gang members say, are for dead family members. Others represent confirmed street kills.

"We don't go out of here looking for trouble," says Payaso. "But sometimes trouble comes looking for us. If you come into La Victoria acting all bad, you're going to get a chance to prove how bad you really are."

Strangers who wander into the barrio, Payaso says, may draw hard stares, but will not be in danger as long as they don't "start shit." Invited guests are guaranteed safety. "If you're here with us, you're probably safer than you are in your own neighborhood." Nevertheless, some of La Victoria's guests are a little sketched out the day of the Chandler football game. About an hour into the game, a brawl breaks out among the players on the field after a Chandler running back is brought down by his neck. Both sidelines rush toward the melee, ready to back up their home boys. "This is fucked up," one CVL says to another. "There's too many of them. Go get our shit."

The short, heavysset Chandler gang member heads for the parking lot. By the time he returns with two handguns under his shirt, the fight on the field has been dispersed and the game is back under way. "Yo, go put them back," his friend says. "They didn't go to their cars. It's cool." Neither of them knows a video-camera bag on the LVL sideline holds three pistols. The Chandler gun pigeon shrugs and turns back toward the parking lot. When he returns a second time, several LVL players demand he be searched before the game continues. One of them quickly pats him down. "Okay, he's cool."

The score is 4-2, LVL's favor. La Victoria scores again a few plays later with a 20-yard pass over the middle, but Chandler comes right back, and yanks LVL's lead back down with a sharply executed "flea flicker" trick play.

To some degree, LVL's greater size is working against it. Only 15 or 20 members of the gang practice football regularly as a team, but on game day, more than 50 guys show up to play. "We do a lot of trading players in and out, and when everyone on the field knows the plays, our offense really comes together," says Payaso. "But a lot of these guys don't have the plays memorized, because they don't come to practice. I get on them about it, but it doesn't do any good."

Two weeks before the Chandler game, 18 LVL members held a practice at Escalante field. They ran a couple of short pass drills, then broke into two squads and scrimmaged, each side practicing one of about a dozen standard plays in LVL's book. Suddenly, a light-colored sedan came around a corner about 200 yards away and someone inside fired four shots from a small-caliber handgun at the players on the field. Because of the distance, the drive-by was interpreted as more of a symbolic

gesture of disrespect than a serious attempt to kill anyone. LVL later heard that a small Phoenix gang called Happy Holmes was responsible.

At practice the next week, six days before the Chandler game, a Happy Holmes member and three friends showed up and stood along a chain-link fence, one of them casting insults into the wind. "Fuck Victoria," he called. Five or six LVL members suddenly broke from the line of scrimmage, charged and launched over the fence. The interlopers scattered, and LVL members focused their chase on the loudmouth, whom they later said was the shooter from the previous week. Two blocks into the barrio, they caught the Happy Holmes member, gang-beat him and threw him into a garbage can. "Yo," one LVL member called out, "just put in the paper that practice was called due to rain."



Third and eight. Payaso takes the snap and fades back as Manuel holds off a CVL pass rusher with each beefy arm. K streaks downfield, white gloves flashing as he pumps his arms and starts to look back over his right shoulder. His defender is toast, straggling behind about five yards. Payaso sees the open receiver and unloads a beautiful 40-yard bomb. Most of the LVL quarterback's passes have been a little wobbly, but this one is a perfect spiral and right on the money. K catches it in full stride and crosses into the end zone. LVL 6, CVL 3.

Chandler refuses to roll over, and gains three first downs on three successive running plays. There's a scuffle on the field, and Manuel squares off against a much smaller CVL lineman, whose mother runs out onto the field and begins shoving the massive LVL nose guard in his stomach.

"Uh oh," Mahoney calls out on the sideline. "We have a Chandler moms on the field. Can we get a Victoria moms, please?"

Manuel's mother gets up from her chair on the sideline, straightens her shirt and walks onto the field. "Stop pushing my son," she orders. The two matriarchs exchange words as Manuel and the CVL lineman look on, slightly aghast, then return to their field positions.

Two downs later, Chandler scores on a breakaway draw play. K is hell on the field, however, and returns the kickoff all the way for the winning touchdown. The LVL crowd goes wild as the Victoria team forms a circle for a group yell in celebration. After they break apart, both teams shake hands.

Payaso walks over and invites Freddy to the LVL victory party. "You won't get no shit, man, I guarantee it." The CVL captain declines. "Nah, we got our own thing going."

Munoz, meanwhile, is busy collecting the keg money from the Chandler team. Once he hands it over to LVL, Payaso tells several LVL members to move their cars, which are strategically parked to block most exits from the neighborhood. La Victoria is a labyrinth of twisting, dead-end streets and cul-de-sacs, which LVL members say has often worked to their advantage.

Fifteen minutes after the last touchdown, the keg is tapped in the yard of a house two blocks from Escalante Park. Several barbecue grills are fired up, and neighborhood moms churn out hamburgers and hot dogs to feed the throng of celebrants spilling into the street. There are more people at the victory party than were at the game. Children weave in and out among LVL members holding cups of beer, and their girlfriends, who sip at bottles of fruit-flavored malt liquor. An exquisitely detailed purple Cadillac lowrider cruises by, the driver flashing an LVL gang sign and dropping the car's hydraulics so it tilts dramatically to one side.

Teerz, a 40-year-old LVL *veterano* and the tattoo artist who does most of the gang's work, grabs a reporter and sweeps his hand at all the families. Several of the middle-aged fathers have prominent LVL gang tattoos. "You didn't think it would be like this, did you? See, people think the barrios are only about young dudes walking around in bandannas, packing guns, but it's one big family.

"We're poor Mexicans, but that doesn't mean we don't care about our kids getting shot. Everyone here knows we need to stop the madness."

Teerz's friend Kelcher, 30, gets his licks in: "One more thing—the young guys from the barrio won't tell you this, but last year, the veteranos, me and Teerz, and some other old guys, we played them in football and we won. No shit."

A thunder of yells sounds off inside a nearby house, where the living room is crammed with LVL members watching the ASU football game. The Sun Devils have beaten USC 48-35 in double overtime.

Munoz comes out of the house smiling. "Ah, what a good day," he says. Ten minutes later, just after the keg runs dry, a fight breaks out. Evidently, a brother-in-law visiting from Orange County, California, started "talking shit" about La Victoria, and got into it with Loco Bird, a gawky white youth who lives in the barrio. A second fight starts between the brother-in-law's family from La Victoria and other LVL members, then a third, then a fourth. From the center of the action, it looks like a hurricane of fistfights. Munoz is still smiling. "See what happens when alcohol is involved?" he says. "Don't worry, this isn't that bad. No one's really going to get hurt here."

Payaso's mom charges out of her house and gets between two scrappers. "Stop fighting!" she yells. They obey, but already more fights are breaking out, for no readily apparent reason. "A lot of this stuff is old family shit from the neighborhood," Joey explains later. "It's complex."

A police car cruises by the fracas. The officer starts to get out, then gets back in and turns on the car's loudspeaker. "All right, everyone inside, now." Payaso's mom was much more effective. No one listens to the cop, although the fights taper off. The Orange County brother-in-law is pushed into a car and drives away. The cop pulls to the end of the block, where he's joined by another officer. They wait and watch for about ten minutes, then leave.

Another ten minutes go by, and the Orange County car comes back. The brother-in-law and his LVL friend get out, looking for more. They get it, and within minutes several more fights are beginning, the brawlers going through the ritualized bravado of tough talk and shoving that seems always to precede actual blows in this neighborhood. "Yo, take this shit away from my house," Payaso yells, sitting barefoot in a chair on the sidewalk in front of his yard and nursing a sore knee. "Take it to the park."

The combatants move to the basketball court, where Mahoney scoops up the brother-in-law and body-slams him to the pavement. After one more fistfight in the grass, the orgy of pugilism seems finally to be over. Back in his yard, Payaso laughs it all off. "That's just La Victoria, man. It's happened before, it will happen again. There was no danger of death, you know? None of these guys was going to shoot the other. Everyone was just fired up from the game, drinking beer. They'll all be friends tomorrow."

Payaso winces a bit as he shifts his left leg. He says his knee was severely injured in a game two years ago when Manuel fell on him scrambling for a fumble, and it hurts like hell whenever he plays. "See, we have heart. We play hurt. I'm just trying to do some good here. I'm tired of going to the mall and having people look at my tats and think of me as just some fucking lowlife gang member. I'm a human being. I want to have a barrio football championship game, and play it somewhere nice, with bleachers and lights. We'll charge admission and give all the money to charity. We'll buy some toys and take them to the kids at St. Joseph's Children's Hospital. I'll dress up like fucking Santa Claus and go down there on Christmas, you know what I'm saying? I'll make a good Santa Claus."