

Lucha libre using immigration to attract U.S. fans

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Defiantly waving an Arizona state flag, the self-described American patriot leaps into an octagon-shaped ring amid blaring music and loud boos from an overwhelmingly Latino audience, who hold aloft signs in Spanish supporting his masked Mexican opponents.

"My name is RJ Brewer and I'm from Phoenix, Arizona," the wrestler proclaims in a video of a recent match provided by the promoter. Taunts from inside the arena get louder.

He proceeds to rail against Mexican beer and to demand that people speak English. Then he points to the message painted on the backside of his red trunks: "SB1070" — a reference to Arizona's controversial immigration law. The crowd, some wearing masks of their favorite Mexican wrestlers, shrieks ever louder. He then brags that his "mother," Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, is helping "save" America by pushing policies that limit immigration (he's not really her son).

When his masked opponent in a red cape appears, the crowd erupts into cheers.

Lucha libre — or "free wrestling" in Spanish — is a brand of Mexican wrestling that dates to the 1930s. The sport came north to the United States, along with Mexican immigrants, and over the years spawned clubs in some larger U.S. cities with large Latino communities.

More recently, as the sport's promoters target growing Mexican immigrant and Mexican-American markets, they and their wrestlers' fictional personas have begun to adopt a more overtly political storyline revolving around immigration. It's a move akin to what U.S. wrestling promoters did in the 1980s and 1990s, when they took on race and the Cold War, but with one key twist — now, the American is the bad guy.

One lucha libre promotion is leading the charge away from the slapstick and simple storylines with a tour in U.S. cities with sizable Latino populations, including events in Reno, Nev., and San Jose, Calif., this week. It's using the recent events in Arizona as a backdrop while pitting popular masked Mexican wrestlers against American "bad guys."

"It's something that we've been building in our TV shows and we've gotten a lot of positive reaction to it," said Steve Ship, CEO of Lucha Libre USA, which this week is launching a

"Masked Warriors" tour that will also stop in Phoenix, Los Angeles and Houston. "So we are bringing it right to our audience."

SB1070, signed by Gov. Brewer in 2010, requires all immigrants in Arizona to obtain or carry immigration registration papers and requires police, while enforcing other laws, to question people's immigration status if there is a reasonable suspicion they're in the country illegally. The law is being challenged by the federal government and has sparked protests and boycotts against Arizona by Latino advocates around the country.

On shows that have aired on Spanish-language stations and MTV2, RJ Brewer — whose real name is John Stagikas and works as a real estate agent in Massachusetts — advocates for deportations and calls on Americans to support laws that target illegal immigrants.

"This is different than any other program I've been involved with because usually I have to work really hard to get the audience to hate me," Stagikas said in an interview with The Associated Press. "With this, I just walk in with the Arizona flag and the audience boos before I even say a word."

Popular Mexican luchador and immigrant hero known as Blue Demon, Jr., who is RJ Brewer's main opponent, said he enjoys the role as the hero and getting people to rally against a "big mouth" like RJ Brewer. He thinks the rivalry will draw more needed attention to the immigration debate.

"I represent the Latino people. We are human beings," said the wrestler, who wears a mask and whose name is not publicly known, from his Mexico City home. "I support the immigrant people no matter what country they come from."

Lucha Libre USA is pushing the immigrant storyline as its main draw on websites, social media, on Spanish-language television and through YouTube videos. Just how many new fans the tactic will draw isn't yet known. So far, ticket sales range from 3,000 to 6,000 at venues on the upcoming tour, according to Ship.

"It sounds like clever piece of theater," said Tatcho Mindiola, director of the Center for Mexican American Studies at the University of the Houston. "It may have the effect of solidifying that sense of community (among Latinos) since most can identify with what's going on Arizona. But I don't think it will result with rallies in the streets."

Mindiola said focusing on the immigration debate is smart since the issues dominate coverage on Spanish-language media and resonate with many U.S.-born Latinos.

To be sure, politics and professional wrestling often have mixed. Dave Meltzer, editor of the Wrestling Observer, a newsletter that follows professional wrestling, said during U.S. foreign affairs flaps, the "foreign menace," whether it was the Iron Sheik during the Iran hostage crisis or Russian bad guy Nikolai Volkoff during the Cold War, always played roles in giving hero stars a heel everyone could hate.

And in the 1980s, the popular Junkyard Dog, played by the late Sylvester Ritter, who was black, helped break down racial conflicts by acting as the ultimate good guy in southern states where racial tensions were still present.

Even in smaller lucha libre promotions in Tijuana, Mexico, and south Texas border towns, promoters used American border patrol heels to fight masked good guys to build rivalries, Meltzer said. But usually those storylines remained simple since the smaller promotions didn't have big television contracts to develop conflicts and characters. Typically, rivalries were based on well-known characters shifting allegiances, wrestlers making fun of each other's body types, or they were simply based on personality differences.

With Lucha Libre USA, the character of RJ Brewer has been built around promotional videos in which he openly shows disdain for anything "foreign." In one video, Stagikas is shown "patrolling" the Arizona-Mexico border after his mom tipped him off that some Mexican luchadores were about to cross over illegally.

Blue Demon, Jr., is shown as the protector of immigrants and a wrestler who is fighting for a larger cause.

Still, Meltzer said Lucha Libre USA was taking a big swing by booking large venues in major markets, especially because pro wrestling overall is suffering due to the economy.

"I don't know how they are going to do it," said Meltzer. "Lucha libre is even having a hard time in Mexico."

Ship said it's a risk he's willing to take. He said he has no problem rolling the dice at putting together the multicity tour packed with lights, fireworks and high tech effects because that market hasn't been tapped.

"The Hispanic market is a growing market that few are going after," said Ship, referring to the growing U.S. Latino population. "In many cases, we are seeing multigenerational families coming out to cheer for their luchadores. So, I think we'll be expanding in the future."

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