

## Banner day in Mexico

Tagliabue seeks more international games after 103,467 cheer NFL

By Anthony Cotton  
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**Mexico City** - You could barely take a step at Estadio Azteca on Sunday evening without running into Ben Roethlisberger, Troy Aikman or Randy Moss. A couple of players familiar to fans in the Rockies, Terrell Davis and John Elway, walked through the gates hand-in-hand.

Once inside, all the NFL stars - fans who donned their jerseys for the historic game between the Arizona Cardinals and San Francisco 49ers, part of a crowd of 103,467, the largest for a regular-season game, created a din loud enough to make you wonder what the energy and intensity would be like for something they truly cared about. Like futbol.

The cheers reached a different level when highlights of the Mexican national team's 3-0 triumph over Brazil in the title game of the FIFA 17-and-under world championships were beamed onto the big screens.

Even so, the sights and sounds prevalent throughout the Cardinals' 31-14 victory - as well as all the NFL-licensed merchandise in the stands - were ample evidence of commissioner Paul Tagliabue's assertion that, even before the first ball was snapped, the league's first regular-season venture onto foreign soil had been a success.

"When we came here on Friday, we thought it was just another road trip," Niners president John York said. "By Saturday, we knew it had evolved into something else."

Besides the outpouring of love for the spotted round ball, there were other indications this wasn't a typical NFL game. There was the barbed wire fencing that separated the fans from the field, a reminder of the passion that often emerges during important soccer matches like the World Cup finals, which have twice been held here.

Also, immediately after the opening kickoff, the football that was used was presented to the Pro Football Hall of Fame for display.

Hispanics familiar with "futbol Americano," like Cardinals offensive lineman Rolando Cantu (who was inactive for the game) and former NFL kicker Raul Allegre, insisted visiting players would be surprised by the knowledge of Mexican fans.

More often than not though, the head was overcome by the heart. The crowd consistently expressed disappointment in any decision that could be perceived as a lack of machismo. When Arizona return man Reggie Swinton didn't run out a kick from 5 yards deep in the end zone, he

was booed. Similarly, throwing a ball away to avoid a sack or interception, or not going for it on fourth down - whatever the distance needed - brought cascades of boos.

If Tagliabue has his way, there will be ample opportunity to educate fans around the globe; the commissioner indicated international games likely will become a regular occurrence.

"That would be the goal," Tagliabue said. "The key is to institutionalize it, to let teams know that once every 16 years they would have to commit to playing a game internationally, that they would perhaps be giving up a home game every eight years."

Sunday morning, Tagliabue had breakfast with the mayor of Dusseldorf, Germany. Asked later about the possibility of placing a franchise outside the U.S., Tagliabue said, "I've thought about putting an NFL team in every country in the world."

He might have been joking.

"I think there's a great interest in the game internationally," Tagliabue said. "Ultimately, seeing the genuine article up close is very important for fans. It deepens the passion, but just as important - or maybe more

important - it gives great credibility to what we're doing in those markets."

Tagliabue said if logistics could be worked out, he would like to have another ultimate away game next season, adding that teams have contacted him about the possibility. Canada, which was represented among the U.N.-like delegation of officials here this week, would be the most likely location. Germany would be another, albeit more far-fetched, possibility, as it is hosting the World Cup finals next summer.

"But that's in July. Our games are played in September, so who knows?" Tagliabue said.