

# Cards' big star south of border

Cantu minor player for Arizona, but a celebrity in Mexico

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TRIBUNE

Rolando Cantu leads a double life.

In Arizona, he is a fringe player for the Cardinals, a practice squad offensive lineman desperately trying to make the active roster.

But in his home country of Mexico, his celebrity outstrips that of any other NFL player.

"Let me put it this way," said Luis Zendejas, a Mexican native and the Cardinals' director of community relations, "if I had an autograph session in Mexico with (Patriots quarterback) Tom Brady and Rolando Cantu, I wouldn't want to make Tom Brady go, because everybody would be in line for Rolando."

The Cardinals will head to Mexico today for their Sunday night game against San Francisco at Mexico City's Estadio Azteca. But the biggest star will be a guy who won't even play.

## CANTU: Works to bring game to Mexican kids

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For the Mexican people, Cantu — the first Mexican-born player to stick with an NFL team — is more than just the hometown boy. He represents the possibilities of American football for the entire country.

"Being from Mexico and representing not only my family and my friends but a whole country, it's definitely a great responsibility," Cantu said. "It means going back home and giving back, putting on some events that when you were a kid you would want.

"If we want to succeed (with football) in Mexico, it has to be from the Pop Warner leagues (and up), so we want to put more players in, let them be able to dream."

Having a larger-than-life star doesn't hurt the cause.

The well-spoken, outgoing Cantu, all 6-foot-5 and 360 pounds of him, is perfect for the job. He took a bunch of his

teammates to his hometown of Monterrey in February for four days to run a kids' camp. There, his more famous teammates, like receivers Anquan Boldin and Larry Fitzgerald, saw what Cantu is all about south of the border.

"Dude is big time," said a smiling Boldin, recounting the police escorts and VIP treatment Cantu enjoyed. "He runs the city, man.

"They showed him love, they really did. We came back and told some guys, now everybody is trying to sign up to go next year. I told him, since I went the first time, I get dibs on going back."

Cantu even has his own staff, probably a first for an NFL practice squad player. Three people in Mexico City and two more based in Monterrey help Cantu organize sponsorships and other details while he helps bring the game to children across the country.

Right now, the trend is

toward flag football, an inexpensive way for children to play. Cantu recently hosted a national flag football tournament in Mexico City. More than 300 teams participated.

Cantu's goal is to advance the sport enough that talented young players will have an easier road to becoming professionals. Cantu, who played in college at the Institute of Technology and Advanced Studies in Monterrey, didn't get the best tutelage growing up.

It took a season in NFL Europe and participation in the NFL International allocation program just to get a chance with the Cards.

"He dreamed and pushed himself," Zendejas said. "Now, (Mexicans) look at him getting all this knowledge and how they can use that so they can get the game down there to the next level."

Cantu will make the trip this weekend, although there has been disappointment

among the Mexican fans and media that he was not put on the active roster.

"They think that way, but it's a serious game," Zendejas said. "If we were playing in Philadelphia, you wouldn't activate a guy just because he went to school there."

Cantu agreed, saying he respected the coaches' decision and wanted to make sure the Cardinals have their best chance to win. He'll instead play the role of ambassador, signing autographs and giving interviews.

Starting tonight, he'll slip away from being an anonymous practice squad guy into his alter ego as Mexican football star.

"He cares about the people back in Mexico," Boldin said. "I never expected that many kids to be interested in football in Mexico. For him to give the kids hope, that is big."

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