

MEXICO

Vergara shakes things up at Guadalajara

Mexico's 2002-03 season resumed after the holiday break with a new team, new players and coaches for many teams — and new hope for Guadalajara.

The Mexican season is split into two championships — the Torneo Apertura ("Opening Tournament") won by Toluca in December and the Torneo Clausura ("Closing Tournament") that kicked off in January.

For the second straight year, a team moved at midseason. Irapuato moved to Veracruz and was renamed Tiburones Rojos ("Red Sharks") at the beginning of 2002, and Celaya has moved to Cuernavaca for the 2003 Torneo Clausura and been renamed Colibries ("Hummingbirds"). (The Tiburones Rojos moved to Chiapas last summer and was replaced by Veracruz's Second Division club, which won promotion.)

The split season was intended to double the interest in the Mexican championship, but the unintended consequence of the move was that it has given clubs a second chance to make roster changes and coaching moves.

More than 40 players were transferred. The big signing was UAG's acquisition of Bolivian teenage sensation Jose Alfredo Castillo, who was once on MLS's radar screen. The 19-year-old Tahuichi product scored 42 and 44 goals in the last two seasons at Oriente Petrolero.

Club America signed Mexican international Antonio De Nigris from Monterrey to replace veteran striker Ivan Zamorano, who moved to Colo Colo in his native Chile.

Four clubs signed new coaches, including Yayo De la Torre at Guadalajara. De la Torre's hiring was the first move by new owner Jorge Vergara in his bid to rebuild Chivas, arguably Mexico's most popular club.

Guadalajara, founded in 1906, has won more league titles (10) than any other club, but it has won only one championship in the past 15 years.

Vergara, who made his fortune selling vitamins, is sticking to Chivas' policy of fielding only Mexican players, but he has set his sights high.

Vergara wants to build a 100,000-seat stadium to replace the famous Jalisco Stadium, a World Cup venue in 1970 and 1986. Of more immediate concern, he offered Chivas players a million dollars if they win the Clausura.



Jair Garcia celebrates after his goal for Chivas against archrival Club America.

For Chivas' second match of the Clausura, the *Superclásico* against archrival Club America, Vergara offered to bet America president Javier Perez Teuffer \$50,000 on the outcome of the game.

"If he wants to gamble, he should go to the book-makers," Perez Teuffer replied.

Club America players responded by saying they would not exchange jerseys with Chivas after the game.

Chivas striker Jair Garcia, who silenced the crowd of 110,000 at Mexico City's Azteca Stadium with a 20th-minute strike, and Guadalajara earned a 1-1 tie to give it four points after two games.

Chivas goalie Oswaldo Sanchez was outstanding. He was one of three Guadalajara players, along with defender Joel Sanchez and midfielder Ramon Morales, called up for Mexican national team coach Ricardo Lavolpe's debut Feb. 4 against Argentina in Los Angeles.

The Chivas players will play leadership roles on a Mexican team featuring eight uncapped players.

The game is the Tri's first since a 2-0 loss to the United States at the 2002 World Cup, ending its longest break between games in 20 years.

HENRY ROMERO/REUTERS