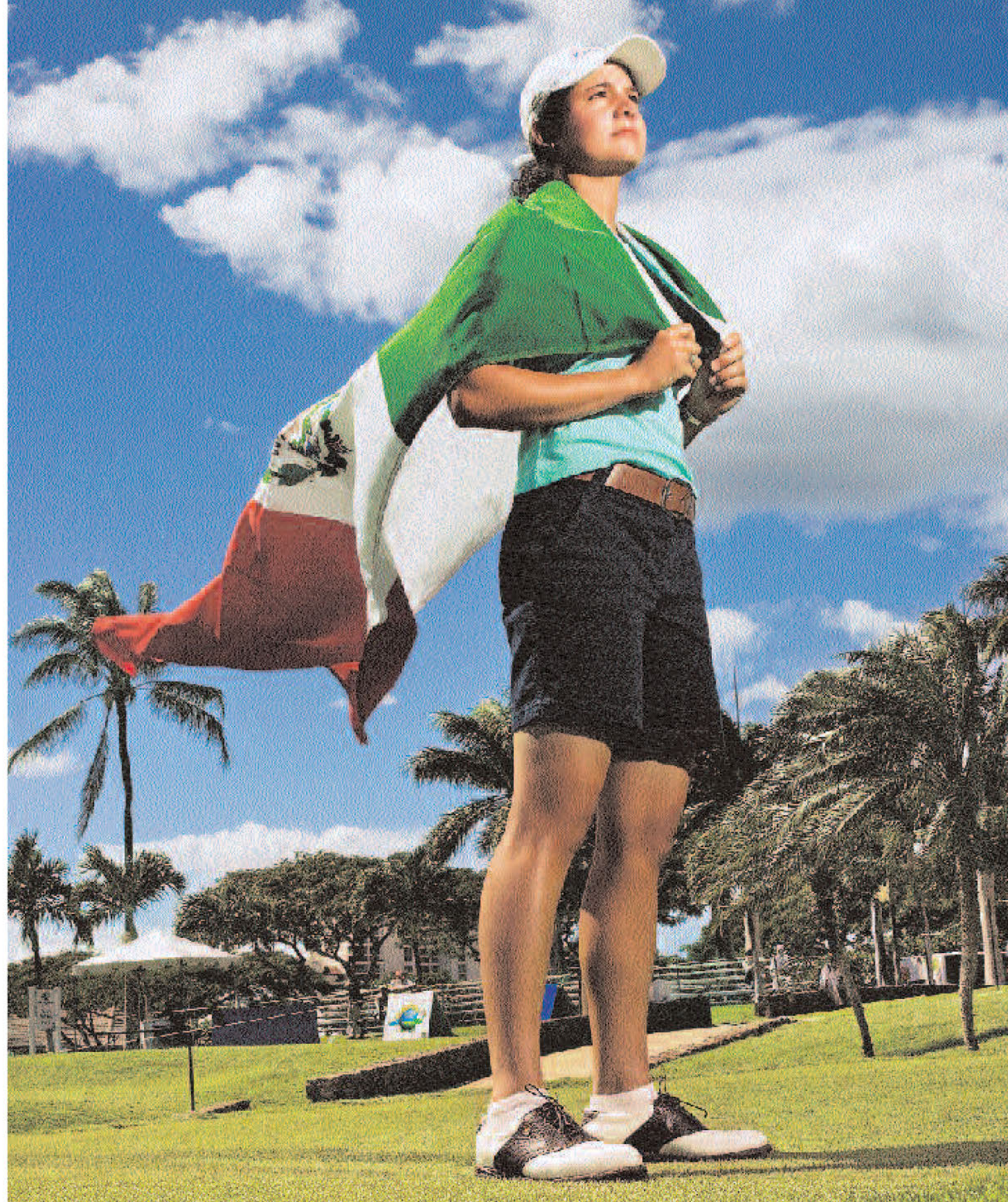


TO
KNOW
HER
IS
TO
LOVE
HER

SO SAYS **LORENA OCHOA'S**
WEBSITE. FUNNY THING IS,
IT JUST MIGHT BE TRUE

BY LINDSAY BERRA
PHOTOGRAPHS BY NATHANIEL WELCH



"¿Ya tomaste tequila?" asks Javier Ochoa, and you'd better say sí. This is a celebration, after all, and in Mexico, a party just isn't a *fiesta* without Jalisco's finest, even when the revelers are the blue-blooded, blue-blazered set at the Guadalajara Country Club. They've gathered this evening to toast one of their own: Javier's daughter, Lorena. The temporary shrine in the GCC lobby attests to her accomplishments: Hundreds of trophies, pictures and plaques borrowed from the bookshelves and windowsills of the Ochoa home are displayed in glass cases near the club's entrance.

Lorena Ochoa has been bringing home the hardware since the tender age of 6, when she learned to play golf on the greens of Guadalajara with men old enough to be her grandfather. She set a record by winning five straight Junior World Championships in various age groups—Tiger Woods won six, but only four straight—and ever since, her triumphs have filled members here with *orgullo*. Pride. The feeling, as they say, is mutual. Ochoa rarely goes a day without

Nor does the average Mexican grasp just how mighty Ochoa's 2006 LPGA season was: six wins, six runners-up and 20 top-10 finishes in 25 starts, with total winnings of \$2,592,872. Ochoa, who led the tour in birdies, eagles, rounds in the 60s and greens in regulation, was named both Rolex Player of the Year (the first time in six years that the award didn't go to someone named Sorenstam) and AP Female Athlete of the Year. All that's missing? *Un major*.

But tonight, the 25-year-old golfer isn't thinking about that hurdle. And neither are any of the 300 guests clamoring to get close enough to give her a hug, offer *felicitaciones* and wish her *buena suerte*. Many, like club president Pedro Martinez Negrete, have known Ochoa

ranking—property of Sorenstam since the system was introduced, in 2004—could be within Ochoa's reach. "To catch Annika is my dream," says Ochoa, who at 14 told her coach, Rafael Alarcon, that she would be the best in the world someday. "I want to be where she is."

In one way, Ochoa has already passed her childhood idol. Sorenstam, despite her links dominance, never quite wiggled her way into the collective heart of Sweden the way Ochoa has in Mexico. For starters, Annika lives in Florida. Ochoa, who still lives with her parents in Guadalajara, is already several years into a national love affair. The connection is even more surprising given her sport's history in Mexico—or lack of it.

"TO CATCH ANNIKA IS MY DREAM," SAYS OCHOA, WHO AT AGE 14 TOLD HER COACH THAT SHE WOULD BE THE BEST IN THE WORLD SOMEDAY. "I WANT TO BE WHERE SHE IS."

South of the border, golf is even more elitist than it ever was in the U.S. Mexico has fewer than 200 courses, compared with more than 18,500 in the U.S. All are private, and all cost around \$100,000 to join, giving the vast majority of Mexicans little or no chance to acquaint themselves with the game. Mexico's sports-mad culture revolves around soccer, which is played and followed by rich and poor alike. Every morning, most people in this country of 107 million pick up their newspapers and turn directly to the sports section. That's especially true in Guadalajara, where the pages of *El Informador* are splattered with the exploits of the city's two soccer teams, Atlas and Chivas. Six and a half years ago, when Ochoa started at the U. of Arizona, Sergio Humberto Navarro, a reporter for Guadalajara's *Mural*, was sent to cover the little *golfista*. His first question: "What's golf?"

Navarro learned with the rest of the country, as Ochoa's 12 wins in 20 starts as a Wildcat—including seven consecutive wins as a sophomore—earned her NCAA Player of the Year honors in 2001 and 2002, along with above-the-fold headlines in *El Informador* and virtually every other paper in Mexico. "I'm lucky," says Ochoa, whose image at home wasn't harmed by the green, white and red handle on her putter. "I've gotten a lot of good attention from the media, so even though many people have never tried golf or may not even know what golf is, they know me." And they like her well enough to approach her on the street, saying, "You're the one who does this," as they mime a golf



Fans in Mexico aren't afraid to shower Ochoa with their love.

telling someone how proud she is to represent Guadalajara, Mexico's second-largest city, with five million inhabitants, or how proud she is to be introducing golf to her country, a country of people who, for the most part, don't know a 9-iron from a sand wedge.

since she was a kid with too-big clubs, honing the trait that would take her from Guadalajara to the LPGA. "Coraje," Negrete says. Courage.

Which is pretty much what it takes to tug on Superman's cape. Or in this case, Superwoman's. Annika Sorenstam has lorded over the LPGA for more than a decade. In addition to all her Player of the Year awards (eight), the Swede has won 10 majors and 69 tournaments. But if 2007 shapes up at all like 2006, the world No. 1

SUPPORTERS HAVE ADAPTED SOCCER CHANTS TO CHEER ON THEIR GOLFISTA: CHIQUITI BUM, A LA BIM, BOM, BA, CHIQUITI BUM, A LA BIM, BOM, BA, ¡LORENA! ¡LORENA! ¡RA, RA, RA!

LEFT: LISA BLUMENFELD/GETTY IMAGES; RIGHT: STYLING, HAIR AND MAKEUP BY LELA GENTRY; SHIRT PROVIDED BY LACOSTE; ALA MOANA CENTER, HAWAII LOCATION; KOOLINA GOLF CLUB ON OAHU, HAWAII (WWW.KOOLINAGOLF.COM)



swing before asking for an autograph and a picture.

Ochoa's website explains it succinctly: "Those who encounter her, love her." And the boast appears not to be too much of an exaggeration. For some fans, just glimpsing her on TV is enough. At 5'6" and 115 pounds, Ochoa is a pixie. She simply looks like an underdog. Then you see the 280-yard drives, built from her raw athleticism, and the incongruity of it all reels you in. (In her spare time, Ochoa climbs mountains, waterskis and runs half-marathons.) The smile helps too. David Beare, a 53-year-old retired cop from Connecticut, saw Ochoa flash a mischievous grin after making a tricky shot in 2005; in 2006, he traveled to 14 tournaments to catch a glimpse in person. Tom and Chris Henry from Orlando met Lorena at the 2004 State Farm Classic. As Chris went through three breast cancer surgeries, Lorena kept in touch via e-mail, offering support and prayers. "She's just an angel," says Tom. "A beautiful person."

No other player on the LPGA Tour, or any tour,

families, meet their spouses, kiss their babies. In return, they line the course with Mexican flags, singing *fútbol* songs to Mexico's favorite daughter:

Chiquiti bum, a la bim, bom, ba. Chiquiti bum, a la bim, bom, ba. ;Lorena! ;Lorena! ;Ra, ra, ra!

The words themselves are nonsense, but to Ochoa and her fans they speak of acceptance, of pride, of love for Mexico, a love which Lorena evidences in ways big and small. Although she's had many opportunities to get an American coach and a place in the States, she says she will always return to Guadalajara—now to recharge her batteries between tournaments, later to raise a family and her sport's profile. To that end, Ochoa Sports Management, started in 2002 by Lorena and her older brother Alejandro, has opened Ochoa Golf academies—public golf schools—in both Guadalajara and Mexico City, with a third on the way in Monterrey. Alarcon, a former PGA pro, can't train teachers fast enough to accommodate the rapid rise in enrollment.



Ochoa hated this tabloid parody—that's someone else's body—but it's just one sign of the Mexican media's infatuation with her.

"You have to control your thoughts and use your body and your mind. Everything comes together in golf."

Today there are seven courses within Guadalajara's city limits and more than 300 young girls learning the game. But even with Ochoa's schools, the majority of those hoping to follow her to the LPGA are still the daughters of Mexico's middle and upper classes. Two of them, Sophia Sheridan and Violeta Retamoza, are Ochoa's friends from junior golf. "I could give you a list of things I've learned from Lorena," says Sheridan, who earned a chance to play on Tour at the LPGA Q-school in December, "from the way she manages herself on the course to how she makes decisions and goes about shots and handles the media. And she's taught me to always be grateful."

WHEN OCHOA STARTED AT ARIZONA IN 2000, THE MEXICAN REPORTER SENT TO COVER HER ASKED, "WHAT'S GOLF?"

for that matter, boasts a gallery quite like Ochoa's. Her fans come back again and again, mostly because they feel appreciated. Each time they're likely to be greeted with a hug, a kiss on the cheek and an earnest "How are you?" from their favorite golfer, who always lingers long enough to hear the answer. In the U.S., where two-thirds of LPGA tournaments are played, the majority of course workers are Hispanic, many of them Mexican. At every event, Ochoa takes time to visit the maintenance shed and the kitchen, to buy the workers breakfast or lunch, sign whatever they want signed, ask about their

"My goal is to make the sport more popular in my country and to make it so that everyone can play," Ochoa says. "It should be like in the United States, where you can pay a few dollars and hit some balls."

Golf has already grown since Ochoa was young, when there were just three courses in Guadalajara and she was the only little girl on the range. Ochoa was competitive in tennis, basketball, volleyball, track and swimming, but Javier said she had to pick one sport if she wanted to excel. The choice was easy. "In golf, you have to be a perfectionist," Ochoa says.

Grateful even for her mistakes. When Ochoa first got into position to go head-to-head with Sorenstam, she folded. At the Safeway International in March 2005, Ochoa blew a four-shot lead, finishing tied with Sorenstam, then hooked her tee shot into a lake on the first playoff hole. Three months later, at the U.S. Women's Open, Ochoa arrived at the 18th green with the lead, three under for the day. She hooked her first drive into a water hazard, then knocked her second into the rough on her way to a quadruple bogey. Birdie Kim won the tournament with a chip-in; Ochoa tied for sixth place. The media buzz began: Ochoa can't finish; Ochoa can't handle the pressure; Ochoa just isn't tough enough. "I wouldn't change any of it," she says. "I took it in a positive way. I had a chance to win the U.S. Open on the 18th hole,

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but I made a mistake. I'm glad it happened in my first couple of years. It's not going to happen again."

So far she's been right. In 2006, Ochoa developed a reputation for a steeliness under pressure that rivals Tiger's. Although more comfortable coming from behind, she learned to play aggressively with a lead, going for birdies rather than playing it safe. "I had to learn to play both ways," she says. "The competition is so good that even if you're two strokes up, it's a good idea to think that you're two down."

At the Corona Morelia Championships in Mexico in October—the LPGA has moved two tournaments to Mexico in response to Lorena's success—Ochoa held off Paraguay's Julieta Granada, who surged to within a stroke, and won the tourney by five. "Morelia was the only time I've seen a different Lorena," says Dave Brooker, Ochoa's caddie. "But it was more eagerness and adrenaline than nerves." The course that day was jammed with Ochoa supporters, wearing red caps with her logo (an L inside an O) and singing *fútbol* songs.

Those without tickets parked their cars in the surrounding mountains and leaned on their horns. On the 18th green, Ochoa was flooded by

supporters—friends, family, even her dog—then doused with champagne and draped in a Mexican flag. "For me, the tournaments in Mexico are like the majors," Ochoa says. "Winning in Morelia was one of the most important days of my career."

A week later, at the Samsung World Championships in Palm Desert, Calif., Ochoa trailed Sorenstam by three strokes heading into the final round. She shot a seven-under 65, beating Annika in a perfectly crafted come-from-behind victory. It was her second of three consecutive wins in the season's closing weeks.

In 2007, nearly all of Ochoa's tourneys will air live on Mexican TV. From Juarez to Huatulco, a lot of people who otherwise wouldn't care a lick about golf will be holding their breath, hoping that Ochoa will become the first Mexican to win a major. Or two or three. Should it happen, there will be no more excitement than in Guadalajara. When Chivas won the Mexican League Championship for the 11th time, in 2006, more than 50,000 people flooded the intersection of Avenida Lopez Mateos and Avenida Vallarta. There, *la fuente de Minerva* serves as ground zero for the city's biggest celebrations. "They say when I win a major, they will do that for me," Ochoa says. And they will wave Mexican flags and sing *fútbol* songs for their *campeón*.

And back at the GCC, the tequila will be on the house.

Will Lorena win a major this season? E-mail us at post@espnmag.com.



Ochoa was even younger than these fans when she started winning trophies.

RIGHT: DAVID MONREUTERS