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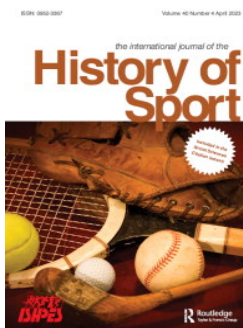
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Recommended Citation

Old, J. R. (2023). Empire at Play: The United States' Cultural Influence on Nicaragua's National Sports' Identity. *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 40(6-7), 497-513.

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To cite this article: Jason R. Old (2023): Empire at Play: The United States' Cultural Influence on Nicaragua's National Sports' Identity, The International Journal of the History of Sport, DOI: [10.1080/09523367.2023.2215700](https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2023.2215700)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09523367.2023.2215700>



Published online: 05 Jun 2023.



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Empire at Play: The United States' Cultural Influence on Nicaragua's National Sports' Identity

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ABSTRACT

'Empire at Play' seeks to contextualize the inception of a Nicaraguan surfing subculture in the first decade of the twenty-first century by situating it within the broader scope of the United States' influence on Nicaragua's sporting history. By weaving together primary and secondary sources, as well as oral histories from expatriate surfers, Nicaraguan nationals, and members from the local indigenous communities, this article shows how international actors from the United States introduced Nicaragua to three of their major sports: baseball, boxing, and surfing—all of which became part of Nicaragua's cultural identity. As these three sports grew in popularity domestically, so too did the infrastructure capable of hosting major international events, subsequently garnering international recognition as authentically Nicaraguan sports. While these activities are merely extracurricular in and of themselves, examining their proliferation as part of the expansion of American empire in the twentieth century helps to underscore the varying forms of American imperialism that facilitated each sport's introduction and popularization—surfing being the most recent of the three.

KEYWORDS

Nicaragua; sports history; US military occupation; neoliberalism; surfing

This is a story about the unintended consequences associated with the expansion of American empire. 'Empire at Play' seeks to contextualize the inception of a Nicaraguan surfing subculture in the first decade of the twenty-first century by situating it within the broader scope of the United States' influence on Nicaragua's sporting history. By weaving together primary and secondary sources, as well as oral histories from expatriate surfers, Nicaraguan nationals, and members from the local indigenous communities, this article shows how international actors from the United States introduced Nicaragua to three of their major sports: baseball, boxing, and surfing—all of which became part of Nicaragua's cultural identity. While I recognize the limitations of oral histories—mainly that it is an individual's recollection of the past—the primary sources used for this article help to substantiate their claims, particularly in the more modern case of surfing. That said, as these three sports grew in popularity domestically, so too did the infrastructure capable of hosting major international events, subsequently garnering international

recognition as authentically Nicaraguan sports. For baseball, it was the World Amateur Championships in 1948 and 1950; for boxing, it was the international boxing bouts in the Estadio Nacional in 1968 and 1971; and for surfing, it was the International Surfing Association (ISA) World Masters Surfing Championships in 2012 that cemented Nicaragua's reputation as a surfing nation.¹

The purpose of this article, however, is *not* to compare the popularity of these sports based on the number of practitioners; rather, the goal is to underscore the varying forms of American imperialism that facilitated each sport's introduction and popularization—surfing being the most recent of the three. With that caveat in mind, I show how all three sports were linked to varying forms of American imperialism: cultural, military, and/or economic. While these activities are merely extra-curricular in and of themselves, examining their proliferation as part of the expansion of American empire in the twentieth century sheds light on the different expressions of neocolonialism, economic hegemony, and cultural imperialism at play at the time of the sport's introduction.

Baseball, for example, represents the expansion of the United States' business interest in the Mosquito Coast during the 1880s. The region had long been of interest to both the United States and Britain, ultimately culminating in the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty of 1850. The treaty established an official agreement wherein the United States and Britain agreed to cooperate on any future canal projects in Nicaragua.² By the 1860s, however, Britain had relinquished control of the Mosquito Coast.³ While not completely independent at that time, by 1894, the Mosquito Coast was part of *La República de Nicaragua* and no longer under the control of the British empire.⁴ It was within this historical context that Albert Addlesberg—an American businessman living in Bluefields, the capital of the South Caribbean Autonomous Region in Nicaragua—introduced the locals to baseball in the late 1880s, after becoming bored from the 'monotony of watching the locals play cricket.'⁵

The arrival of the United States Marine Corps (USMC) in 1912 also played an undeniable role in baseball's diffusion in early twentieth-century Nicaragua.⁶ Deployed initially by the William Howard Taft administration (1909–1913), their goal was to safeguard and protect US interests in the region.⁷ Taft would be the first of six US presidents to oversee the American occupation of Nicaragua between 1912 and 1933.⁸ During the occupation, however, USMC troops stationed in Nicaragua built baseball fields and taught local Nicaraguans how to play the sport as both a form of recreation and cultural expansion. Baseball quickly grew in popularity, eventually becoming Nicaragua's most popular national sport by the mid-twentieth century. The proliferation of baseball throughout the country was an unintended byproduct of twentieth-century American empire building, as Alan McPherson notes in *The Invaded*:

Unobtrusive promotion of other cultural forms yielded even greater imitation, baseball being the prime example. In Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, marine officers organized games among troops to conquer monotony, and those troops in turn played the invaded. Baseball already existed in both countries before occupation, but the sport grew dramatically when the Marines arrived. Spreading baseball among the invaded was not a systematic effort to change fundamental habits or beliefs, yet in Nicaragua the sport practically replaced cockfighting as the national pastime by the early 1920s.⁹

Unlike baseball, boxing in Nicaragua came about solely because of the military occupation. In 1913, as part of a Fourth of July celebration, the marines engaged in several sporting events, which included, among others, boxing.¹⁰ Although initially unfamiliar with the foreign sport, a small cadre of Nicaraguans gravitated toward the physically aggressive sport and eventually learned how to box. Over the next three to four years, Nicaraguans became proficient in boxing, competing against one another and training other interested countrymen, including some baseball players. For example, in 1916, Nicaraguan boxer and iconic boxing promoter, Don José Santo Ramirez, started training Isabel Fernandez, a pitcher from Club New York Yankees de Managua, who went on to become one of the first officially recognized boxers in the country.¹¹

Inspired by the boxing greats from the United States, Nicaragua took on a style of its own, producing contenders that, by midcentury, hosted and invited world champions to Managua to take on the best boxers Nicaragua had to offer. By 1923, Nicaragua had organized its first national boxing championship, which took place on September 16 at *La Momotombo* in Managua. The matchup was between Enrique Leal and Ofilio Simonson, both considered to be two pioneers of Nicaraguan boxing.¹² Leal beat Simonson by a decision in the tenth round and became the national champion.¹³ By the time the United States withdrew its military from Nicaragua in 1933, boxing was well on its way to becoming a national sport.

Surfing, as a popular national sport, came about much later in the twentieth century, following in the wake of a decade-long, low-intensity war of attrition known as the Contra War (1980–1990). Nicaragua's late rise to prominence as a surfing destination is due to the turbulent political history of the 1970s and 1980s, which rendered Nicaragua essentially off-limits to most international surfers during this period.¹⁴

Surfing's introduction in the 1990s, however, was not a consequence of military occupation but rather the market-driven economics adopted by Nicaragua in the wake of the decade-long conflict. The confluence of favourable economic policies, idyllic surfing conditions, and the propensity of travelling surfers to seek out new places to surf, created the ideal pretext for the introduction of surfing along Nicaragua's southwestern coastline.¹⁵ While the first known surfers to explore Nicaragua's coastline date back to the 1960s and 1970s, Florida native James Joseph ('J.J.') Yemma and his first wife Kimberly were the ones who established a surf tourism infrastructure in southwestern Nicaragua, opening Popoyo Surf Lodge (PSL), the country's first all-inclusive surf camp, in 1999.¹⁶ Yemma, after an earlier attempt at starting a surf camp at Playa Popoyo, eventually succeeded in establishing PSL in Playa Guasacate.¹⁷ In addition to starting PSL, Yemma also invested in property on the hillside near the camp with the intention of eventually selling parcels of the land to other foreign surfers. As surfer-investors bought property from Yemma, this led to a phenomenon known as surf settler colonialism (i.e. the establishment of expatriate enclaves along the coast), which started to slowly take shape in the late 2000s.¹⁸ Expatriate surfers and surf camp clients purchased land from Yemma and built homes in the hills adjacent to PSL (e.g. Guasacate Hill) within a short distance to Popoyo Reef—the newest coveted wave for these foreign surfers. The start of PSL marked a defining moment in the surfing history of

Nicaragua, which coincidentally also proved to be the catalyst that engendered an incipient local surfing subculture.

Although surfing was not associated with militarism or military occupation, it was, nevertheless, directly linked to (and a product of) American economic and cultural imperialism—initially perceived as a sport reserved for foreigners or affluent Nicaraguans, rather than individuals from economically disadvantaged coastal fishing *pueblos*. The arrival of foreign surfers followed shortly after the election of Violeta Chamorro in 1990.¹⁹ Chamorro's election marked a major shift in US-Nicaraguan relations, as post-conflict Nicaragua embraced the market-driven economics prescribed by the Washington Consensus.²⁰ The election of Chamorro, therefore, was seen as a return to greater political and economic accommodation with the United States. The foreign investment and tourism-friendly laws legislated in 1991 (Law 127, Foreign Investment Law) and 1999 (Law 306, Tourism Incentive Law), created an economic climate favourable for foreign investors to purchase private property and invest in Nicaragua's nascent tourism industry.²¹ At the coast, surfers proved to be some of the first to take advantage of these investor-friendly laws, establishing an infrastructure and economy centred around the waves. The expansion of surf settlers into rural sectors of post-conflict Nicaragua was also part of a broader regional trend—neighbouring El Salvador offering another example of surfing's cultural penetration.²² Shortly after the introduction of surfing by foreign actors from the United States, the sport gradually piqued the interest of some of the local inhabitants of these fishing villages, engendering a small cohort of local *surfistas* at the turn of the century.²³ While local surfers from these coastal towns constituted a small minority in the beginning, by 2010, however, the surf zones were increasingly more populated by local *surfistas* who had become exceedingly proficient in the sport. This was a recognizable shift in the surfing demographic—a shift that favoured the local residents of these coastal communities, similar to baseball and boxing after its introduction.

Historiographical Engagement

Scholars of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Nicaraguan history paid close attention to the impacts of US hegemony in Nicaragua by focusing on two main areas of academic inquiry: militarism and soft power.²⁴ In the case of militarism, scholars have examined the US occupations and military interventions in Nicaragua and the Caribbean more broadly. In terms of soft power, scholars explore the cultural, economic, and political influence as more subtle forms of American empire building. Historians of this period situate Nicaragua within a broader context of US foreign policy objectives throughout the Caribbean Basin, including bolstering autocratic regimes, safeguarding the region from outside threats, US occupation, and military interventions.

A good point of departure for understanding early twentieth-century US imperialism in Nicaragua is Michel Gobat's *Confronting the American Dream* and Alan McPherson's *The Invaded*.²⁵ Their research analyzes how US imperialism and the two-decade-long Marine occupation contributed to the proliferation of baseball and

boxing in the country. These scholars examine how baseball, for example, was inextricably linked to notions of American power, hegemony, and empire.²⁶ Similarly, sports scholar Eric Wagner's work on 'Americanization' situates the dissemination of American sports within a broader context, examining how *norteamericanos* have significantly influenced sporting culture throughout the Caribbean Basin through what he calls 'ludic diffusion'—Nicaragua providing an ideal case in point.²⁷

Historians of tourism, as it relates to the Caribbean Basin, generally focus on two overarching ideas: First, Mexico's tourism industry and its historic relationship with the United States throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and second, US foreign policy objectives and the promotion of tourism within the region. Denis Merrill's *Negotiating Paradise* offers a good point of departure in terms of understanding the link between US tourism trends in the Caribbean Basin, and its political relationships within the region.²⁸ As Merrill shows, American tourists' interests tend to fall in line with US foreign policy objectives. Tourism, for Merrill, therefore, served as a form of 'soft power', utilized to reshape political and economic relations in the region.²⁹ Such was the case with tourism to Nicaragua in the wake of the Contra War.

In the realm of critical surf studies, Scott Laderman's political surfing history, *Empire in Waves*, provides a good starting point for understanding the role surfing has played in American empire building and the exportation of American culture and sport.³⁰ Through the lens of surfing, his work broadens the way scholars understand US hegemony and America's interaction with the world. Similarly, Isaiah Walker's *Waves of Resistance* is the quintessential surf history of Hawaii.³¹ Walker's research historically contextualizes the rise of *Da Hui*, a native Hawaiian surf group that has historically resisted *haole* (a person of European descent) encroachment in the Hawaiian Islands. His work of Hawaii uses surfing as a lens to view the process of colonization and subordination of the Hawaiian islanders as a direct result of US imperial expansion, starting in the nineteenth century.

This article sits at the confluence of these scholars' work by exploring how the introduction of baseball, boxing, and surfing in Nicaragua are inextricably linked to varying forms of US imperialism and the projection of American economic, military, and cultural power and influence. Thus, 'Empire at Play' contributes to this growing body of scholarship by furthering scholars' understanding of surfing's relationship to US economic and cultural imperialism.

Surf Tourism and the Inception of a Local *Surfista* Subculture

While the first surfers to actively explore and surf the waves in Nicaragua dates back to the 1960s and 1970s, it was the Nicaraguan government's embrace of market-driven economics in the wake of the Contra War that created a scenario conducive to the arrival of foreign surfers.³² In 1990, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro (1990–1997) was elected president, and by 1991 had approved Law 127: A law intended to spur on foreign investment and to integrate Nicaragua into the post-Cold War capitalist economic order.³³ Perhaps overlooked as potential future capital investors, Chamorro's Nicaragua created an environment welcoming to foreign surfers.

This was due to the world-class surfing conditions and the investor-friendly climate of neoliberal Nicaragua. The foreign investment and tourism-friendly laws legislated in 1991 (Law 127) by Chamorro and in 1999 (Law 306), by Arnoldo Alemán (1997–2002) created an environment favourable for the purchase of private property by foreigners.³⁴ Moreover, in 1998, the Arnoldo Alemán administration, under Law 298, relaunched the Nicaragua Institute of Tourism (INTUR) with the goal to be more outward facing. That is, placing a priority on attracting international visitors and foreigners looking to invest in Nicaragua's nascent tourism economy.³⁵ While slow to gain momentum, due in a large part to people's apprehension and reticence about Nicaragua as a safe and viable country for investment, these laws and initiatives helped to position Nicaragua more competitively in the regional tourism market.³⁶ Perhaps unanticipated by policymakers, foreign surfers were some of the first individuals willing to travel to and invest in post-conflict Nicaragua.

Surfer entrepreneurs such as J.J. Yemma utilized these foreign investor-friendly policies to start PSL, marking a watershed moment in the surfing history of Nicaragua—the inception of a surf tourism industry.³⁷ In 2002, Dale Dagger and Lance Moss followed suit, starting Dale Dagger Surf Lodge and Surfari Charters in Gigante Bay and Playa Guasacate, respectively.³⁸ As more foreign surfers arrived in the early 2000s, whether to buy land and live or to stay at the surf camps, they interacted with the residents of the surrounding indigenous communities, leaving behind surfboards and other surfing equipment to many of those working at the surf camps. This also marked the start of a growing local surfing subculture, as gaining access to sporting equip was the first barrier to entry.

As part of this new subculture, young locals were drawn to the surf camps for employment opportunities, as working within this new tourism economy appealed to those looking for a viable alternative to working in the salt flats (*Las Salineras*) and other more traditional jobs. Originally, as was the case with Surfari Charters—a surf camp established adjacent to PSL by Lance and Kristin Moss—and PSL, many of the original surf guides were foreign surfers who spoke English, could drive 4×4 trucks, and were skilled in surfing. In 1999, when PSL first opened, local Nicaraguans who fit these criteria were presumably nonexistent, as they had only been recently exposed to the sport. In spite of this, the camps undoubtedly contributed to the proliferation and popularization of surfing among local indigenous inhabitants of Popoyo, as many of the first-generation Nicaraguan *surfistas* employed by PSL and Surfari Charters began as kitchen staff and other surf-related jobs that exposed them to their surfing clients. As a result, these aspiring *surfistas* found themselves within the orbit of this new and expanding surf tourism industry—an economy that provided them with access to sporting equipment and surfing supplies. By the early 2000s, many of those who worked as kitchen staff, second mates on boats, and other positions closely associated with the surf guides and their guests began surfing, becoming increasingly proficient in the sport.³⁹ Moreover, surfing had grown to such an extent that in May of 2005 Popoyo witnessed its first 'locals only' surfing contest consisting entirely of *surfistas* from the surrounding indigenous communities—the 'Torneo de Surf at Popoyo'.⁴⁰

The surf contest proved successful, with thirty competitors from Las Salinas de Nahualapa, Limón 2, and San Juan del Sur, as well as 250 spectators; this was an

indication of the growing interest in surfing among the local population.⁴¹ The winner of the contest was Jamil Amador, a first-generation local Nicaraguan *surfista* from neighbouring Las Salinas de Nahualapa, who was presented the first place award by its organizers (See Figure 1).⁴² Interestingly, Jamil's family was among some of the first individuals Yemma met when he arrived in Popoyo in 1997.⁴³ Jamil, who, in 2005, worked as part of the kitchen staff at PSL, was an example of one of the early generations of Nicaraguan *surfistas*.⁴⁴ He and the small cadre of surfers from the surrounding communities not only became increasingly proficient in the sport but also became increasingly tethered to the surf tourism economy, working at the surf camps in a wide range of capacities. Their interest in the sport was directly linked to Popoyo's allure as a new surf travel destination. With the increase in surf tourism traffic and the expansion of surf settler communities, surfing equipment became more accessible, aiding in the popularization and diffusion of the sport among local practitioners. The expansion of surfing among the indigenous inhabitants was undeniably a reflection of the colonial process underway due to Tola's exceptional surfing conditions and the favorable economic policies that coaxed surfers to invest in coastal Nicaragua. Erol López, another one of the first-generation *surfistas* from the Popoyo area, offers another example of surfing's impact on the local indigenous population. Like Amador, López (who worked for Moss at Surfari Charters) was a product of the nascent surf tourism economy, becoming a proficient surfer, learning to speak English, driving a 4×4 automobile, and hosting international surf tourists. He eventually founded Sardina Surf School, 'a family-run local surf movement based in Popoyo, Nicaragua,' in 2018.⁴⁵

Surfing as a sport, while only in its inception, was already gaining traction with the youth of the surrounding communities. Playa Sardina's May 2005 surf *torneo*, therefore, served as a litmus test to inadvertently gauge local interest in the sport. Due to its success, it was subsequently followed up in 2006 by the first National Surfing Circuit, which was a series of surf contests held at Playa Maderas (San Juan del Sur), Popoyo (Tola), La Boquita (Carazo), and Las Peñitas (León), organized by its president, Javier Baldovinos ('Baldo').⁴⁷ Within the span of two years (2005–2007),



Figure 1. First official surf contest held at Playa Sardina (Popoyo Reef) in 2005 composed exclusively of local Nicaraguan surfers.⁴⁶

surfing had grown to include surfers from Tola and San Juan del Sur, two municipalities in the Department of Rivas, as well as surfers from the coastal towns outside of Managua and León. It's worth noting that at this time, Mark Sundeen of *The New York Times* published two articles about the Popoyo area, referring to it as a 'new frontier' and an 'off the beaten path adventure for adventurous surfers'.⁴⁸ Sundeen's observations help to contextualize this nascent surf tourism industry and its latent potential for expansion.

At the same time, local surfers had already begun to embrace the sport, as the inception of a National Surfing Circuit in 2006 was indicative of a growing interest in surfing at a national level. Furthermore, the National Surfing Circuit, organized by Baldo, aided in the sport's popularization and proliferation among the rural local residents of Nicaragua's Pacific Coast.⁴⁹ Baldo, as the visionary behind the Surfing Circuit, saw surfing as an avenue to encourage the youth of these rural coastal communities to pursue surfing—not *simply* as an extracurricular activity, but rather as a sport wherein one could aspire to compete at a professional level.⁵⁰

Early on, as surfing was growing in popularity among the local Nicaraguans, advertisements solely depicted white surfers, presumably to cater to the growing foreign interest in surf tourism.⁵¹ This, however, furthered the notion that surfing was a sport reserved exclusively for foreigners. However, by the end of the decade, the demographic of surfers started to shift, with more and more locals occupying the surf space. An article published in 2008 by Nicaragua newspaper, *La Prensa*, titled, 'Los Reyes del Surf', emphasized the increased popularity and growing surf culture along the beaches of Tola.⁵² Thus, as the sport grew in popularity throughout the decade among local *surfistas*, promotional materials also began to reflect this shifting demographic, integrating Nicaraguan cultural symbols and showcasing Nicaraguan surfers more prominently.⁵³

Nicaraguan surfers were also beginning to compete at an international level. An example of the rising new talent who emerged from this nascent surfing scene was Rex Calderón, from San Juan del Sur.⁵⁴ Calderón, like Amador, López, and the growing cohort of local *surfistas*, were products of the sport's cultural impact that started at the turn of the century. In the case of Calderón, he was one of the first Nicaraguans to compete at an international level, representing Nicaragua in the ISA surfing contest in Ecuador and finishing twenty-ninth out of 264 international competitors.⁵⁵

By 2010, surfing was becoming increasingly more *pinolero*, both in culture and in branded surfing material, as noted above.⁵⁶ In that same year, Gray Line Tours, with the support of INTUR, hosted its first international surfing contest, 'Latin Pro Santana 2010'.⁵⁷ This contest, which was held at Playa Santana, was part of the Latin Circuit of the Latin American Surfing Association (ALAS) and proved to be the catalyst for future international surfing championships, such as those organized by the ISA, that Nicaragua hosted throughout the 2010s.⁵⁸

By 2011, INTUR and the Tola Municipality were fully committed to promoting surfing. As the former president of the Nicaraguan Chamber of Tourism, Lucy Valenti stated, '[o]ur objective is to make surfing a national sport'.⁵⁹ Tola rebranded its design campaign to include a surfer riding a wave in its municipal logo.⁶⁰ Prior

to hosting the World Masters Surf Championships in 2012, the Tola Municipality rebranded itself by designing a surfing-centric logo design.⁶¹ The new logo, titled *Tola Incomparable* included ‘Tola’ in colourful letters and a surfer riding a wave inside the letter ‘o’ of Tola—an ‘o’ that resembled a sun (See Figure 2).⁶² This initiative to redesign the Tola insignia undoubtedly helped to position Tola as Nicaragua’s surfing municipality.⁶³

At the same time, INTUR embraced surfing as a growing national sport, particularly among the coastal regions of the country. As such, the insignia began to appear in promotional materials for national and international surfing contests. For example, INTUR helped with promoting and hosting the 2012 ISA Masters World Surfing Championships at Playa Colorado.⁶⁵ This was followed by the ISA Junior World Surfing Championships in 2013 at Playa Jiquilite, the ISA Paddleboard Surfing Championship in 2014 in Lake Nicaragua and La Boquita, and the ISA Open in 2015 at Popoyo Reef (Playa Sardina).⁶⁶

By the time of the 2012 World Masters, surfing was undoubtedly revered as a Nicaraguan national sport, having garnered the support of Nicaragua’s highest-ranking officials—including President Daniel Ortega.⁶⁷ This was reflected in INTUR’s endorsement of surfing and their collaboration with Fernando Aguerre, ISA’s president. From that point, INTUR’s insignia, colour schemes, and slogans, alongside Tola’s surfing logo appeared on virtually all formal surf-related contests throughout the municipality and beyond. This is significant for three reasons: First, it was the first time INTUR helped to host a major international surfing event, bringing the sport more formally into the fold of the Nicaraguan government’s tourism and sporting infrastructure. Second, this internationally recognized event solidified Nicaragua’s position as a surfing nation, establishing surfing as an authentically *pinolero* sport.⁶⁸ Third, it showed that Nicaragua, by 2012, had the accommodations and infrastructure capable of hosting a major international surfing event—it was also a testament to Nicaragua’s wave quality.



Figure 2. Tola’s rebranded municipal logo, Downtown Tola.⁶⁴

The embrace of surfing by INTUR also helped to restore one of the historically indigenous beaches back to its original name: Playa Jiquilite (See [Figure 3](#)). With the INTUR endorsed Dakine ISA World Junior Surfing Championship in 2013, Playa Jiquilite started to appear regularly in promotional materials. While seemingly insignificant, it denotes a significant turning point in Nicaraguan surf history, as this surf break was referred to as ‘Playa Santana’ in promotional material into the early 2010s—with the notable exception of the ALAS Central American Triple Crown surfing event in 2010.⁶⁹ That said, prior to this name change, Playa Santana was the name used by the National Surfing Circuit and other national surfing contests hosted by both local and foreign event organizers.

This decade also led to the proliferation of a local Nicaragua *surfista* culture that included the creation of three surf teams composed exclusively of local *surfistas* from their respective beach *pueblos*: L2 (Santana Surf Team), Club Surfista Astillero, and Popoyo Surf Team, as well as the competitive Nicaragua National Surfing Team.⁷¹ While these surf clubs were initially started and funded by foreign surfers, from the onset, the teams were made up exclusively of local Nicaraguan *surfistas* from their respective communities.⁷²

Nicaraguan surfing was endorsed by President Daniel Ortega, who again in 2013 expressed his willingness to support Fernando Aguerre and his involvement in promoting Nicaraguan surfing.⁷³ Clearly, the nation’s leaders were taking note, as surfing had proven to be a viable generator of tourism revenue. In 2015, tourism, due in large part to surf tourism’s impact, became the number one leading contributor to the overall GDP to Nicaragua, surpassing *carne*, or beef, and other historically significant exports by nearly \$US 100,000,000.⁷⁴

By 2015, surfing was synonymous with the Tola Municipality, known by this point by its branded nickname, the *Costa Esmeralda* (or Emerald Coast), which also included an airport of the same name.⁷⁵ Nicaraguan *surfistas* permeated every area of the surfing space, including surfboard shaper, Giezi Amador—who had already



Figure 3. Municipal sign at the bus stop in Limón 2 at the entrance to Playa Jiquilite.⁷⁰ Note that the sign also includes the new branded municipal ‘surf logo’ (centre), as well as INTUR’s insignia (top right).

shaped his first surfboard from scratch before 2010—and surf clubs exclusively reserved for local Nicaraguan surfers (See [Figure 4](#)).⁷⁶ With surfboard repair supplies presumably nonexistent in Nicaragua, Amador said that to fix a surfboard, the only option was to use the fibreglass used by the local fishermen to repair their *pangas*, or fishing boats.⁷⁷ While this approach successfully repaired the dings and more significant defects, it caused the surfboards to be extremely heavy. Nevertheless, according to Amador, this was the first attempt on the part of the local surfers to repair the boards they acquired.⁷⁸ Once surfboard resins and other materials conducive to repairing dings and shaping surfboards became more accessible in the 2000s, Amador learned how to shape surfboards, successfully shaping his first board by 2010—a testament to the growing interest among local *surfistas*, as well as the feasibility of acquiring materials for manufacturing surfboards.⁷⁹

Between 2012 and 2020, INTUR and *Circuito Nacional de Surf Nicaragua*, alongside their local and corporate sponsors, hosted over ten national and internationally recognized surfing contests. As surfing garnered endorsement as a national sport, the perception of the sport as something reserved for outsiders changed. Over the course of three decades (1990 to 2020), surfing popularization grew exponentially along Nicaragua's Pacific Coast—with the waves along the Tola Municipality (by this point known as the Emerald Coast) taking centre stage. With INTUR, the National Circuit, the National Surf Team, and the creation of local surf clubs, surfing by this point was perceived to be an authentically *pinolero* sport—among the ranks of baseball and boxing.⁸¹ Originally, dominated by foreign surfers, by the 2010s, the surf habitus was increasingly more populated with Nicaraguan surfers who were asserting themselves as the 'kings of the waves', that is, as the *true* locals.⁸²



Figure 4. Local surfboard shaper Giezi Amador in his surf shop in Limón 2, Tola. Oral history interview with Jason Old.⁸⁰

The United States' imperial reach has left an indelible mark on Nicaragua's sporting history. From the 1990s to 2020, surfing evolved from a sport associated with expatriates, *turistas*, and affluent Nicaraguans to a sport appropriated and dominated by the local surfers of the coastal pueblos. This included codifying surfing as a national sport under Resolution 20-10-2020 in October 2020, which created an organizing body for surfing, bringing it under the purview of the Nicaraguan Institute of Sports (IND).⁸³ Much like its predecessors, baseball and boxing, surfing's introduction was rooted in American imperialism. While it was the US military occupation of the early twentieth century that aided in the proliferation of baseball and boxing, it was the economic imperialism of the post-Cold War era that facilitated surfing introduction into these historically rural peripheries along Nicaragua's Pacific Coast. Nevertheless, each sport, in its own unique way, was adopted by the Nicaraguans and took on a *pinolero* character, and over time, evolved into three of the country's most practiced sports. While the impact of American imperialism on Nicaragua's sporting history is abundantly clear, these three sports, nonetheless, are perceived to be authentically Nicaraguan, even though they also serve as remnants of the United States' cultural and economic influence—surfing represents the most recent consequence of American empire.

The Future of Critical Surf Studies and Sports Research in Nicaragua

Using surfing as a lens through which to examine the United States' history of engagement with Nicaragua provides an ideal frame through which to analyze and better understand the expansion of tourism along Nicaragua's Pacific Coast. While a small group of interdisciplinary scholars continue to engage in meaningful and significant research on the impact of tourism in the Tola Municipality, there remains a myriad of ways to study the proliferation of surfing and its economic, cultural, and environmental impacts on the residents along the Pacific Coast of Nicaragua.

While this article engages some of these themes (notably culture) there is still significant space for other historians to analyze the impacts of surfing on the local indigenous culture, particularly, the younger generation of *surfistas*, who by the 2010s had undeniably embraced surfing as something authentically theirs. This has now come to include local surfers (and all-inclusive surfing outfits) in not just the Department of Rivas (Tola and San Juan del Sur), but rather it has come to include the Departments of León and Chinandega.⁸⁴ Applying a similar analytical lens in new surfing locations, such as those along the central and northern coasts, will probably boast similar outputs. Moreover, a more exhaustive, country-wide history of surfing's proliferation would be a welcomed contribution, as very little attention, if any, has been paid to these newer locations. This will also help to place the Department of Rivas within a broader scope regarding the introduction and proliferation of surfing and tourism. Perhaps more research could be done into extrapolating surf tourism's impact on other areas of Nicaragua such as Granada, León, and even the Island of Ometepe. Another suggestion for labour historians is a comparative study of the economies in these rural sectors. This could include the entire surfing corridor along Nicaragua's Pacific coastline. Personally, I would envision this study including the agro-industry of the 1960s and 1970s, the state-run

enterprises of the 1980s, and the surf tourism economy, starting at the turn of the century.

Notes

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16. James Joseph Yemma III, interview by author, audio recording, conducted at La Virgen Morena, Tola Municipality, Department of Rivas, Nicaragua, February 22, 2022; Carlos Deshon, WhatsApp conversation with Jason Old, June 8, 2022; See also Jason R. Old, 'Transnational Surfistas and the Development of Nicaragua's Emerald Coast', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 38, no. 8 (May 24, 2021): 829–48.
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 22. See Briana Marie Iatarola, 'Stoked in El Salvador', *Americas Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (2016): 68–71; Briana Marie Iatarola, 'Surf Tourism: Social Spatiality in El Tunco and El Sunzal, El Salvador', *The International Journal of Sport and Society* 3, no. 3 (2013): 219–227.
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 42. NSR Staff, 'Nicaragua Surf Report for May 22, 2005'; Las Salinas de Nahualapa is also written as Las Salinas de Nagualapa; *Surfista* is Spanish for surfer. Surfistas is the plural version of that noun; included in this cadre of first-generation *surfistas* is Johnny Mena, who was the first known local from Las Salinas de Nahualapa to acquire a surfboard and learn to surf, starting in 1992.
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Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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