

HILL COUNTRY NEWS

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American Outlaws help capture passionate soccer atmosphere in Austin area

Josh Babetski stood silently in the back of Haymaker, waiting for the perfect time to burst into action.

Early in the second half of the U.S. Men's National Soccer Team's game against Martinique last week, when Omar Gonzalez scored a header to give them a 1-0 lead, he jumped at the chance to keep the energy high.

"Oh when the Yanks!," he yelled, with the rest of the packed room repeating his call. "Go marching in! Oh when the Yanks go marching in! Oh how I want to be in that number! When the Yanks go marching in!"

Babetski is the third official president of the Austin Chapter of the American Outlaws, the unofficial supporters' group of U.S. Soccer. He moved to Austin from New York in 2013 and immediately started getting involved with supporters groups.

"As American Outlaws have expanded, we've gotten more infrastructure and tried to create a leadership team instead of just one guy trying to run a chapter," he said. "By periodic shuffling of the leadership, I somehow inherited the president role."

Babetski also runs supportersunion.com, a database of places to watch soccer with other fans and supporters of various clubs from England to Italy and supporting the effort to bring a Major League Soccer team to Austin.

There's a separate group called MLS to ATX focused on getting a professional team in Austin. While there is a lot of overlap of people between the two groups, they are separate entities with different goals.

As of now, the communication distribution of people on the AO: Austin mailing list is in the thousands and the paid membership, shelling out \$25 a year, is between 400-500 people.

Liz Molleur moved to Austin in 2003 for school and never left. She and her husband live in Round Rock and started watching games with the Outlaws from the very beginning. Now, she's the group's treasurer.

"You can find the game locally, but in order to get that atmosphere we had to drive, and that's what we get here," she said. "We kept showing up and nobody's getting paid to be here. When it looked like there was going to be a need for more people we offered to help. It's like a vortex."

American Outlaws was founded in 2007 in Lincoln, Nebraska. Since then the group has exploded with members, launching in 190 other cities and boasting more than 30,000 active members.

The Austin chapter was the 25th chapter to start up when they began watching games at Mister Tramps in 2010. After that, the group moved to Cuatros in West Campus before the restaurant closed in 2013. The group now watches games at Haymaker in East Austin, a restaurant featuring sandwiches and craft beer.

Unlike most sports bars where the walls are covered in jerseys, helmets, and flags, the only sports memorabilia on the wall at Haymaker is the American Outlaws logo board showing upcoming games.

"If it's big game, it's going to be packed with standing room only," Molleur said. "I don't know how the bar staff keeps up with it but they do an impressive job. With a chapter our size, there are typically always people that come through the door that we don't know."

Haymaker co-owner Keith Sandel has a lot of memories when it comes to hosting the Outlaws, but one that stands out was one when his bar and the staff were just beginning to learn what hosting AO actually meant.

When the U.S. played Ghana in the World Cup in 2014, Haymaker was shut down by the fire marshal because there were too many people in the bar.

"We didn't realize how big it would be to have them here for a World Cup," Sandel said. "We got overwhelmed. Someone called the fire department and I'm glad they did. Ever since then, we've had door guys and are taking counts."

Haymaker normally blocks off about half the indoor space for the group, but they also have a patio where they can put TVs outside and make more room to watch games. Bigger games against Mexico and in the World Cup and those on weekends attract bigger crowds.

When Babetski was taking a break from chanting, it was Sandel that started a chant and even walked around the room encouraging other members to join in with the singing. Not many other chapters across the country have that support.

"It's like controlled chaos," Sandel said. "When I was right out of college in the early 1990s, I remember staying up late and watching the U.S. Soccer games. It means a lot. I love this country and it's a lot of fun to hang out with these guys."

The group organizes things outside the friendly confines of Haymaker as well.

A few members went to South Africa in 2010 to watch the World Cup and even more, including Molleur, got on one of two AO chartered airplanes that went to Brazil in 2014. She also went to Panama earlier this year.

"Brazil was an adventure," she said. "We were stuck in an airport and it was a hassle at times. But those are the people you want to get stuck with. We had some AO person from Seattle passing out bottled water."

She said when she travels with the team to games now, without any work of her own, she's guaranteed to meet friends she's made through soccer. When the U.S. is playing in a city like Boston or Columbus, they ask if she's coming to see them.

The Outlaws' goal is to take just a little bit of the passionate, intense, and devoted atmosphere you see on TV during the game and bring a piece of it to Austin.

"At the end of the day, this is a great place to meet people from all walks of life," Molleur said. "You already have one thing in common with them. As a country, we need more places like this where you can just meet new people."