

Would L.A. fans pull for the Chargers?

By [Peter Rowe](#) [\(/staff/peter-rowe/\)](#) 8:42 p.m. March 12, 2015



Raiders fans Ace Okeke, left, and Robert Cote, at right, hang a Raiders flag at the rally. — *Charlie Neuman*

CARSON — At a rally in this Los Angeles suburb Thursday, it was clear that Carson is ready for some football.

Some Raiders football.

The rally, which began with about 100 people, was called so locals could sign petitions urging the city to approve a joint stadium for the Raiders and the Chargers. Everyone who signed was entitled to a new Chargers or Raider hat.

People voted with their heads, and it was a landslide. Within two hours, the Raiders caps were gone, while the Bolts caps were still seeking takers.

“The Raiders were here in the ’80s,” said Carson councilmember Albert Robles, who provided the first of the 8,041 signatures required on the petition. “The Chargers were in L.A. for what, a year? And that was before I was born.”

Robles pledged to support both teams, should they relocate to Carson.

Of course, moving teams is one thing — moving loyalties, something else. The Chargers have a cadre of committed fans in San Diego, the franchise’s home since 1961. How will followers respond if the Bolts bolt? Could the team build a larger and richer fan base in L. A.?

Chargers die-hards in Los Angeles County insist they’ll support this team no matter where it relocates, whether Carson or Corpus Christi.

“I don’t particularly care where they play,” said Mason Inocentes, 29, a Sweetwater High graduate who lives in Lakewood. “They can play in Texas, as far as I’m concerned and I’ll still be a Chargers fan.”

Yet transplanting a business — especially one that stirs deep emotions, like a professional sports franchise — can be tricky.

Some potential issues facing the (Fill in the Blank) Chargers:

Location, location, location

The L.A. area is the nation’s second most populous region, inhabited by 18 million people. That’s a lot of potential fans, but winning their affection will take more than just setting up shop in Carson.

“You are taking a brand that is well-loved and moving it to a new market where there is some awareness but not the same affinity,” said Denise Lee Yohn, author of “What Great Brands Do.”

“One way to connect to a community is by picking a really great location.”

The proposed Carson stadium is freeway-close — Interstate 405 runs right past the 168-acre site — which seems to be an advantage.

If you are unfamiliar with L.A. traffic.

“The 405 is a disaster,” said Mike Whitmore, 37, a Santa Clarita resident and Chargers fan who often rides the train and the trolley to Qualcomm Stadium. “For me to go to a game in L.A. would take more time than it does for me to get to San Diego.”

Still, an iconic new stadium surrounded by gleaming shops and other attractions could ease the pain.

“Look what happened with Petco,” Yohn said. “L.A. could position their choice of Carson, and really see this as a way to reinvigorate Carson and make it an attractive destination.”

Jack Factor

In the global capital of the entertainment industry, L.A.’s sports franchises wrap themselves in tinsel.

“At Lakers games and Clippers games, you see this star and that star,” said Justin Keller, 31, a lawyer from Playa del Rey and founder of Los Angeles Area Chargers Fans. “People here pay attention to that.”

Call it the Jack Factor. Jack Nicholson courtside, cheering on Kobe Bryant, J. Lo at Dodger Stadium applauding Clayton Kershaw — celebrity fans give teams an attractive aura.

“There is definitely some potential to leverage a celebrity voice,” Yohn said, “but it would need to be done carefully. You don’t want it to come across as artificial.”

The Chargers may already have at least one A-list follower. A few seasons ago, Oscar-winning actress Anne Hathaway was spotted wearing the jersey of Charger receiver Danny Woodhead, while walking her dog.

Bandwagon worthy?

If the Chargers move, the front office may want to sign more superstars.

“The best way for them to gain a large following, to make the people of L.A. like them and embrace them — they would have to win a championship,” said Jaime Jovel, 25, an L.A. native who has been a Chargers fan since childhood. “A lot of people say L.A. has bandwagon fans, and it’s very true.”

Mike Haynes, a 61-year-old Carmel Valley resident who spent seven years of a Hall of Fame career with the Los Angeles Raiders, agreed. “If you win, L.A. will get behind you and support you.”

Yet the Chargers would begin at a significant disadvantage to the Raiders. The latter team has notched three Super Bowl wins, one with Haynes playing a starring role; the Chargers, zero.

We’re Number 3!

While the Chargers, Rams and Raiders were all based in the City of Angels, the Bolts tenure was the shortest (one year) and most distant (1960).

This year, Los Angeles Times readers were asked which team they’d like to see return. The Rams were the front-runners, at 61 percent; the Raiders were next, 33 percent; and the Chargers last, 5 percent.

Robert Cody, 42, whose job with as a cable company project manager takes him across the L.A. region, scoffs at those figures.

“I don’t see one person wearing a Rams hat, but we still have Raiders stores here that sell Raiders gear,” said Cody, president of Bring Back the Los Angeles Raiders. “I do see some Chargers fans, mostly in Orange County. But the majority of fans I see are Raiders fans.”

Facebook tells a different story, although not one that will encourage the Bolts.

The “Back the Los Angeles Rams” page has 48,000 likes.

“Bring Back the Los Angeles Raiders” page has more than 4,900 likes.

“Bring Back the Los Angeles Chargers” had 126 likes as of Thursday evening.

Still, Whitmore notes that last season’s Chargers-Broncos game drew four busloads of fans from L.A. “And I take the train down there,” he said, “and after games those first two trains are full of Chargers fans.”

Family friendly

L.A.'s Chargers faithful say that, when it comes to attracting new fans, the Bolts appear more family-friendly than their piratical rivals.

"The Raiders may have a bigger fan base, but now would be the perfect time for the Chargers to come," said Elisa Garcia, a Downey resident. Garcia, her husband and their three children all love the Chargers and — is hate too strong a word? — passionately dislike the Raiders.

Ditto, Janice Schaefer. The Carson resident and Buffalo Bills fan wants to see the Bolts relocate to her city — but is leery about the team's potential partner. "I would be a Chargers fan if they came, but I could never be a Raiders fan," she said. "They've been rivals and enemies of the Bills and their fans' behavior worries me."

Luis Cruz's outfit seemed to back Schaefer's argument, with his black-and-silver T-shirt reading "Los Angeles Rioters."

Yet Cruz and other Raider Nation members argued that their team's bad boy reputation is outdated and inaccurate.

"This is a different era," said Alex Carranza, a Carson resident whose right bicep is tattooed with the Raiders' emblem.

Still, can the Raiders and Chargers truly coexist in Carson?

"If the Jets and Giants can do it," Carranza said, citing East Coast rivals who share a New Jersey stadium, "why not us?"

© Copyright 2015 The San Diego Union-Tribune, LLC. An MLIM LLC Company. All rights reserved.