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FOR RELEASE AT WILL

WHEN IS A CHIEF A CHIEF?

WHEN HE'S A SON OF A CHIEF

The ability to make the impossible look easy seems to be hereditary in the de la Cruz line.

And Chief José Villanueva de la Cruz is the latest in the family to prove it.

The ranking head of the Totonac Indian tribe of Paplanta, Mexico, he's the latest in a line of rain dancers that traces its origins back more than four centuries, into the Aztec past. Chief José is a direct descendant of that first chief -- and he's training his son to take over after he gets too old for tribal leadership.

What the men in the family have in common is a special skill in performing the elaborate, and dangerous, rite that solicits the favor of the rain god, Tlaloc, toward his people.

One of the oldest rituals in the Latin American pantheon, the ceremony requires Totonac braves to whirl through space around a ceremonial pole -- while the chief balances on a sky-high pinpoint.

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Despite the fact that the religious significance has long since disappeared from the dance, the pageantry remains -- as visitors to HemisFair '68, where the flying Indians are easily the most spectacular entertainment, can testify.

If anything, the modern ceremony is even more demanding than it was in pre-Columbian days. Instead of reaching toward the heavens by climbing the tallest tree trunk in the area -- usually about fifty feet high -- today's Totonacs compound the danger by using a 114-foot steel pole, measuring only 21-inches around the base and a mere 4-inches at the top.

It's at that highest point that Chief José balances -- on a twenty-inch disk that sways as his fellow-tribesmen lunge into space and "fly" to safety around the pole.

Training for the topmost spot starts young among the Totonacs. Chief José, whose only language is a tribal dialect, used an interpreter to explain to Frito-Lay/Pepsi-Cola -- sponsors of the dancers' appearance at the San Antonio World's Fair -- that young boys start their competition for membership in the troupe when they're only nine years old.

The ones who show the necessary prowess gradually work up through the ranks -- starting as processional attendants and appearing as human pin-wheel Hua-Huas before graduating to the high pole.

What does an athlete eat to keep himself fit for so demanding a performance? The Totonac diet is much the same as four centuries ago: nuts, seasoned rice, fruits and berries, with an occasional wild bird as a delicacy.

As for the girls: with the exception of the few who participate as "sacrificial" princesses, Totonac women content themselves with raising heroes, who can carry the fame of the tribe to the gods by participating, themselves, in the ancient rite of the rain.