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CELEBRATING CINCO DE MAYO

AS BATTLES go, calling what happened at Puebla, Mexico, on May 5, 1862, a surprise victory would be a monumental understatement. The battle, in which a group of 2,000 Mexican soldiers led by Gen. Ignacio Zaragoza defeated an invading French force, will probably go down as the mother of all military upsets. The Mexicans were outnumbered by a 3-1 ratio. Some of the defenders had only the most primitive weapons -- little more than sticks and rocks. Yet sheer force of will triumphed over superior firepower.

This week Mexican-Americans throughout Northern California will gather to celebrate Cinco de Mayo -- both the military victory and the cultural pride its memory evokes -- with events ranging from poetry readings to parades. Some will walk, some will stroll, some will run, some will march and some will dance. No matter what your chosen mode of perambulation, there are plenty of opportunities to step into the action.

(box) San Jose's Cinco de Mayo celebrations this weekend will center on the American G.I. Forum's annual parade and festival, which are expected to draw more than 150,000 revelers to downtown streets. The parade -- with comedian Paul Rodriguez as grand marshal -- is scheduled to begin at 10 a.m. Sunday at the intersection of Ninth and Santa Clara streets. The marching bands, dance units, charros, color guards and other participants will progress west on Santa Clara to Market Street and south on Market to City Plaza Park.

The festival will take over much of downtown from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday. There are five stages: on San Carlos, San Fernando, Santa Clara and Market streets and on Park Avenue. There will also be booths with food and crafts lining Almaden Avenue, Park Avenue and San Fernando Street. Aficionados of traditional folk arts will want to make the Cultura Stage on San Carlos Street their primary destination. That's where the Ballet Folklorico "Huichol" from Durango, Mexico, and other topflight traditional artists will be performing. Pop fans may prefer the Aztec stage on San Fernando Street, where Yuri (Mexico's top female vocalist), Bertha Alicia (a romantic pop artist) and Ricardo Arjona (a top easy-listening artist) will join a full bill of other popular singers.

There will also be an arts and crafts exhibition, featuring the work of 50 local artists, in the Civic Auditorium at San Carlos and Market streets. In addition to the festival hours, the arts and crafts show will also be open from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Saturday. For more information call: (408) 923-1646.

Los Lupenos de San Jose will perform "La Batalla de Puebla," a dance and drama program based on the fabled battle, at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday in the San Jose Civic Auditorium. Tickets to the family-oriented performance are \$3 children; \$5 adults and are available at the door beginning at 6 p.m. Wednesday. (408) 292-0443.

(box) In Cupertino, De Anza College, at 21250 Stevens Creek Blvd., will present a week full of events. Poet Roberto Duran will read at noon Monday on the college's Campus Center Patio. There'll be an Aztec dance performance at noon Tuesday in the main quad. Wednesday at 11:30 a.m., Dr. Loco and his Rockin' Jalapeno Band will perform on the Campus Center Patio. And Thursday the Mariachi Aztec Folklorico Dancers will perform at noon in the main quad. (408) 864-8756.

(box) On the Peninsula, *Raices*de*Mexico*Ballet Folklorico will perform a free show at 4 p.m. Wednesday at the East Palo Alto Library, 2415 University Ave. (415) 321-7712.

(box) In San Francisco, festivities start early Saturday, with an 8 a.m. run at Lake Merced. The five-mile race, "The Healthy High Five Razathon," is expected to attract several hundred runners. The Mission Economic Cultural Association's big festival at Civic Center Plaza will run 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturday and Sunday and feature music, food, crafts and carnival rides. San Francisco's parade is set for 11 a.m. Sunday. It'll start at 24th and Bryant streets in the Mission District and make its way along 24th Street and Mission Street, eventually winding up at Civic Center Plaza. (415) 826-1401.

(box) Watsonville's Cinco De Mayo fiesta will run from 11:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Sunday at the downtown plaza on Main Street. It'll feature folkloric dancing, crafts, food booths and carnival rides. (408) 763-0905.

CAPTION: PHOTO: GLOBO RECORDS Bertha Alicia will sing on the San Fernando Street stage in downtown San Jose.

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